



VIKRAM SETH'S NOVELS ABOUT ETHNICITY

Dr. Manjit Kaur

Asst. professor in English, UIET, MDU, Rohtak, Haryana

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A writer is chosen based on the socio-geographical group and culture he is a part of, as well as the customs, way of life, and language he uses in his works. The Indian English novelists of the 1980s have completely embraced Western culture and have developed a distinct cultural and literary identity after being exposed to life in India and overseas. Their works are mainly autobiographical and historical in nature, revealing events and episodes as well as the atmosphere of the place.

With a remarkable variety of young writers from the halls of St. Stephen's College in modern Delhi, including Amitabh Ghosh, Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, and Vikram Seth, the 1980s saw the effective emergence of modern Indian literature in English, signalling a new period of transition in its tone and tenor. According to both quantitative and qualitative criteria, Vikram Seth's education—which included attending Dehradun Public School, graduating from Corpus Christi College in Oxford, and pursuing a doctorate at Stanford University—qualifies him as a member of the post-independence generation of economically privileged upper middle-class Indians.

Having lived in Asia, Europe, and Australia, this well-known polymath has written in several genres, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, travelogues, and librettos. Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu, Hindi, and Devanagari are among the languages he has learned. Vikram Seth's debut book, *The Golden Gate*, was published in 1986. It is a satirical romance that tells the experiences of young professionals in San Francisco as they search for and navigate love in their own lives as well as in the lives of others. Seth's 1349-page masterpiece, *A Suitable Boy*, was published in 1993, catapulting him into the public eye. *A Suitable Girl* and *An Equal Music* (1999) were its sequels.

He created a libretto based on the Greek fable of Arion and the Dolphin in addition to his literary and creative accomplishments. He presented his family history in his non-fiction family book *Two Lives*, which was released in 2005. Vikram Seth has a keen sense of Indian culture's brilliant, eternal essence and genuine inwardness. Rita Joshi remarks in "The Novel of our Times," *The Hindustan Times*, February 27, 1993, that Vikram Seth has definitely written the book of our times. It is incredibly accessible yet deceptively straightforward, with several layers that will elicit varying degrees of reactions in various readers. Seth has returned to the more subdued narrative style of nineteenth-century authors in an era of assertive intellectualism. (4)

The "pleasure" of experiencing a variety of dwellings is what fuels Vikram Seth's creative awareness. Seth's subjectivity is "migratory" in that it exists in several geographies and literary constituencies, having crossed the national and geographical borders of three continents. Seth has benefited much from his global travels, which have exposed him to a greater variety of cultures and communication styles, including Indian, English, Chinese, and American.

The Golden Gate (1986), which reveals the postmodern aspect of modern society and the presumptions of boredom and aimlessness in the setting of the American upper middle class, emphasizes cultural hybridity. The main character John, a 26-year-old young guy, is blond, attractive, healthy, employed, solvent, self-made, and self-possessed, yet he is also melancholy, distant, and lonely. Similar to the game of musical chairs, John Brown switches partners frequently throughout the book. Two strange possibilities for marriage—Bluestocking and Belinda Beale—are presented to him. Both women leave him, which makes him feel even more alone and gives him a wounded sense of pride.

He naturally turns his focus to Janet Hayakawa, John's previous sweetheart, but she too perishes in an accident, leaving John permanently alone, devastated, and grieving. The disease plaguing contemporary society—the obsessive obsession with one's own concerns to the detriment of everything and everyone else—is presented by Seth without hesitation. *The Golden Gate* is a very significant title that Seth has picked. According to ancient alchemy, gold, which is pure and valuable in human existence, is the element that represents the emotion of love.

The bridge becomes a symbol of love stretching out and bringing people together, encapsulating the essence of contemporary California. The issue facing contemporary urban society is that everything that makes up the foundation of society has been destroyed. Seth explains the pathology of today's young, who have everything in terms of material possessions.

John is essentially lost in the bonds of marriage despite being attractive, intelligent, polite, and well-read. Seth gently parodies the fast-paced lifestyle of modern living.

Despite being an international author with a broader range of expertise, Seth seems to believe that a marriage and family should be one in which both husband and wife's opinions and claims are successfully met and combined. "What Seth seems to prefer is a synthesis of accommodation of western value of individual freedom to the value of relationships in traditional society," as Sarla Palker notes pertinently (38).

Janet, John, Liz, Phil, and Edward Dorati are the five major characters whose tales are told in *The Golden Gate*, a novel of manners. They are in their twenties and are part of the professional, university-educated environment that Seth felt comfortable in and whose social mores he was familiar with from his time at the Oxford boarding school. His acquaintance with the traditions and ideals of the urban class of society within a specific historical setting accounts for a large portion of the casual comfort with which the narrative is narrated against the backdrop of California.

"I loved the sunshine, the feel of northern California, so beautiful, so diverse ethnically and in terms of lifestyle," he acknowledges in his interview. I discovered how to have fun thanks to the characters' flexibility and ease. (45). Seth's portrayal of global culture is shaped by his own personality and is distilled from his varied reading. *A Suitable Boy* (1993), a novel about a widow's quest for a "suitable" (in the Indian sense) marriage for her daughter, made literary history with its enormous size and million copies sold.

Since Seth does not attempt to impose his nationality on the reader, it is a social story rather than a "Indian" one. It tells the story of four interrelated and multigenerational families: the Mehras, Chatterjis, Kapoors, and Khans. Pran, a university lecturer and the son of State Revenue Minister Mahesh Kapoor, is getting married to Savita, the widowed daughter of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. The three other families belong to the Khan family of the Nawab of Baitar, which is the anglicized Chatterji clan.

The story revolves around the mother's quest to find Lata a decent boy. Lata, the younger daughter of Rupa Mehra, develops feelings for Kabir Duttani, a charming young Muslim student. Disturbed by her daughter's rebellious artwork, Mrs. Rupa Mehra sends her to Calcutta to live with her oldest child, Arun Mehra, who is married to Meenakshi, the daughter of a Bengali judge. Amit Chaterji, Meenakshi's brother, develops feelings for Lata. Harish, a lad from the Khan caste employed in the leather manufacturing sector, is found by Mrs. Rupa. Out of these three suitors, which one will be the best fit for the boy? Lata views marriage as a path

to security and success, and she chooses to accept Harish on her own initiative rather than at her mother's or brother's request.

The setting for Lata and Savita's nuptials is the pulmela, where the Shiva-lingam is raised. According to John Mee, *A Suitable Boy* is a historical fiction book that explores India's shift from feudalism to modernity. The book "can scarcely be said to be privileging Englishness" and is brimming with "detail of north Indian life" and other cultural intertexts (Mee 2004: 112). In his quest for a contemporary country, Seth disassociates himself from anglocentrism. It does not look beyond an evolutionary narrative that must make that modernity a fulfillment of a universalized narrative of development, but it does describe "a move beyond colonialism in the possibility of an Indian modernity." (117).

(*A Suitable Boy*, 403) Despite the fact that the novel is about love and marriage, Seth describes the confusing political, cultural, and linguistic diversity of India. In the glitzy Chatterji party, the two Englishmen criticize the Indians' actions: "But a charming people, I'd say, face-flattering, back-biting, name-dropping, all-knowing, self-praising, law-mongering, power-worshipping, road-hogging, spittle-hawking...."

"I lived through that period and I couldn't find a flaw," said Khuswant Singh, who praised the book. It is a true representation of Nehru's India (quoted in Wikipedia). The book depicts the political and historical events of the 1950s in a quasi-biographical and quasi-political manner. The Hindu middle classes in the North are represented by the Mehras and Kapoors. The feudal Muslim elite is symbolized by the Nawab of Baitar, whose two sons, Firoz and Imitaz, respectively, are lawyers and doctors, signaling the end of the feudal system. Haresh, who works in the leather business, disregards caste boundaries and views his job as his religion. He is a symbol of contemporary concepts of social equality and economic advancement.

The biographical details of actual individuals and their experiences blend into fictitious characters and scenarios, just like historical facts about independent India do with fictional experiences. His mother, Laila Seth, the first female Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh, India, served as the model for Mrs. Rupa. Hares Haws is modeled after Seth's father, Premo Seth. The name Amit Chatterji is derived from Vikram Seth, who was given the name Amit when he was a toddler. Leila Seth's own older brother, Michibhai, served as the basis for Lata's older brother, Arun Mehra.

Vikram Seth set out to create a novel in Europe that adheres to the high classical heritage of music, *An Equal Music* (1999), after gaining immense fame in literary circles as an

international bookseller. The novel is about European musicians, and he asserts his Indian origin. Seth had some instruction in classical music from the legendary singer Pandit Amarnath, who also taught him how to play the flute and tablas. The Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which has plagued music lovers for eons, serves as the basis for the book.

The protagonist and narrator, Michael Holme, is a London-based violinist. He is in his late forties and makes his living by teaching a number of uncooperative pupils as the groups' second violinist. He fell in love with a young pianist named Julia ten years ago while he was a student of Swedish maestro Carl Kall at Musikhochschule in Vienna. Julia was the daughter of an Australian mother and an Oxford don. It is common knowledge that people absorb music and art without effort or justification.

After falling in love, they create a trio and play music with Maria, a cellist. At that moment, Michael is deeply offended by his professor's seeming irritation with his playing manner. Michael runs away from Vienna and Julia after Julia betrays him and breaks down physically. Julia also supports the professor. He lives like a fugitive after flying to London. Two months later, he enrolls in music classes and finds a recording of Beethoven's Opus 104 in a dusty drawer of a London music store.

When he glances up on his way home, he sees Julia seated in another bus five feet away. Julia is separated from him by twin sheets of window glass, so his impertinent cries are not heard. After leaving the bus, Michael follows her through congested streets in a taxi, only to discover that she has vanished, leaving the priceless record behind. Julia appears with the Maggiore for a Wigmore Hall concert once more.

Michael finds out in the end that Julia has gone deaf, much to his astonishment. Her hearing has been compromised by an autoimmune condition, which is causing her to act out. It's a fantastic concept to include a musician who becomes deaf in a music-themed book. A genuine web of artists, agents, reviewers, performance venues, rehearsals, and information about music and musical instruments is woven throughout the book by Seth. The novel's two main themes are love and music, which run concurrently and occasionally combine to create the ideal balance. Seth's amazing sense of location, which includes the capacity to evoke visual spaces using auditory cues, is noteworthy.

The singing of blackbirds in summer and robins in winter symbolize London. Vivaldi's music conjures up images of Vienna. The ephemeral feelings of love and music are captured in the descriptions of Vienna, Venice, and London parks. Because their love has its own soundtrack that serves as a metaphor for their love, the tender love between Michael and Julia is surrounded

by musical allusions to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Bach—virtually all famous musicians. Seth uses string trios, quartets, and other musical genres to reaffirm his own views on family.

Reconstructing the extraordinary lives of his family from his own recollections, letters, reviews, and his own upbringing, as well as recounting their relationships with one another, demonstrates Seth's skill. *Two Lives* (2005) is "as much an exemplary act of biographical writing as it is a commentary on the ethical issues surrounding biography" (Wilson 2005). Dr. Shanthi Behari Seth, the brother of Raj Behari Seth, Leila Seth's father, and his German wife Henny Seth (née Caro) are the subjects of *Two Lives*. As a narrator and participant in some of the events documented in the book, Seth is recounting not just their lives but also his own.

Seth skillfully blends the social, economic, and personal history of his own maternal family—a time of significant historical significance in Germany. In addition to his growing connection with the Caros and the start of his marriage to his wife Henny, which would endure for "five and a half decades," Shanty Seth traveled to Germany with the intention of studying medicine and dentistry at one of the top colleges in Berlin, Germany (*Two Lives*, 81). There is the depiction of German public life during the period of Hitler's rise to power.

It's interesting to note that Seth says his uncle Shanti was extremely near to Hitler while he watched the Olympics. I had a close-up look of Hitler at the Olympics. I noticed some folks standing there with SS troops on either side as I went for a walk in the Grunewald. Nobody showed up to look me over or anything. I was able to see him up close—no more than that wall. He was wearing lipstick and had a bridge in his mouth (96).

However, Shanti distances himself from and displays a lack of interest in German politics. He bases his opinions on impressions and anecdotes rather than historical or societal research when it comes to anti-Semitism (92). Shanti suffers a loss of his right arm during the Monte Cassino battle. With the start of the war and the Nazi horrors in Germany, Henry just avoided the tragedy that would have befallen her mother and sister by fleeing to England. Even under the shadow of a totalitarian regime, people must make moral decisions, as Henny's letters provide as a reminder.

Seth is informed that proficiency in one European language is a must for the unique entry exam for Oxford, despite his distaste and disdain for authoritarian politics and the heinous inhumanity in Germany. Henny and Shanti agree that German must be the language, and Henny starts his studies by teaching him how to write and speak the language and exposing him to

German music. The hostility permeates his love of German poetry and music, as though Nazi usage had tainted the language and culture. His humanism marks the book's conclusion.

"Let's at least avoid group hatred if we can't avoid hatred in general." May we recognize that we may have been born together. In summary, may we have faith in human reason and, eventually, in love (499). Despite incorporating cosmopolitanism, Seth has remained conservative and traditional in his topic and form selection. "I don't feel that it makes me one of those stereotypical cosmopolitans who have a sort of mixed cultures," he acknowledges, as his writings are set in several nations (Qtd in Kapur, 84).

In terms of the genres and settings of his writings, he may be considered the first international writer, yet his post-colonial outlook is distinctly Indian. Although the physical locations—India, California, Venice, Germany—may change, his themes and representational styles highlight many cultures with the fundamental idea of love. His works shed light on the multi-locational settings and intricate variability associated with transnational movement.

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