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Globalization in the Works of Vikram Seth

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Globalization is an often heard term in the contemporary age and it can be seen as the system of interaction among the countries of the world in order to develop the global economy. Globalization refers to the integration of economics and societies all over the world. Globalization involves technological, economic, political, and cultural exchanges made possible largely by advances in communication, transportation, and infrastructure. Sociologists Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King define globalization as "...all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society."(9) Due to globalization the world seems to have come closer. Today a person can communicate effortlessly with another person in any part of the globe. Globalization had its impact on literature too as writers gained knowledge not only about their native culture but also other cultures.

It is because of globalization only that the English language has become so popular and is now being used by the major writers in the world irrespective of the country they belong to. The impact of globalization is profound in the works of creative writers like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and others. The very fact that these writers chose to write in English shows the need in them to reach out to a global audience as English has a far wider reach than any other language. The usage of English language opens their works to a huge international market which is lucrative in terms of monetary benefits as well as prestigious awards. This synonymously leads to a blurring of the national boundaries as their works are being appreciated all over the world. Writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Roy and Seth have created a space for themselves with their unique style of writing and they have influenced a lot of people to follow them, although with little success.

Vikram Seth grew up in India and he had travelled as he was a student at Oxford, Stanford, and Nanjing University in China. His works reflect his in-depth knowledge with these different cultures. Seth as a writer possesses multiple identities and he very easily and effortlessly transcends national barriers. In the works of Seth we find him dealing with different continents and cultures and he takes up different countries like India, China, the United States, and England which reflects his cross-cultural affinities. Each of his works are true to the backdrop in which Seth places them and he negates his self as an Indian when he is not dealing with an Indian theme like in his work *An Equal Music*. In this paper I compare Seth's dealing with two different cultures in his two novels *A Suitable Boy* where he deals with an Indian setting and *An Equal Music* which revolves around London and Vienna. In both these novels he keeps the two settings separate and does justice to both the cultures. Rita Joshi in her essay *The Writer as Traveller: The World of Vikram Seth* states that "Seth

himself is a product of the diaspora, though in his fiction he has chosen to focus on individual countries and their cultures from an observer /commentator point of view rather than on the experience of migration.” Seth conceals his Indian identity when he is writing about alien/foreign countries. In *An Equal Music* which is set in England exclusively deals with European characters and no one can find any clues as to the cultural affiliation of the writer. Seth does not try to criticize the country which had once colonised his motherland. He effortlessly progresses his story of two musicians who were on and off lovers in the backdrop of London and Vienna.

Vikram Seth in *A Suitable Boy* places his protagonist Lata in the backdrop of the quintessential Indian culture. *A Suitable Boy* opens in 1952 with Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s words to her younger daughter Lata, on her elder daughter’s (Savita’s) wedding day: “You too will marry a boy I choose.”(3) The very word implies an uneasy feeling that maternal authority needs to be exercised over Lata, who might be harbouring revolutionary ideas of her own. These words also establish the existing conditions of the structure of Indian society where it is the parents who choose brides and grooms for their children. Lata and Savita are two sides of the same coin which represents the Indian womanhood. Behind this quest for a suitable boy there are the stories of the four families; the Mehra, the Kapoors, the Khans and the Chatterjis whom Seth uses to bring out the different political and social problems of the post-independence India. Mr. Mahesh Kapoor struggles for the abolition of the Zamindari system although it might affect his closest friend the Nawab Sahib of Baitar and the Nawab Sahib too does not hold it against his friend Mr. Mahesh Kapoor. The empowerment of Muslim women is shown through the character of Begum Abida Khan, the wife of Nawab Sahib’s brother. Although Seth shows the Hindu-Muslim riots; he also strives to show the bond between the two communities by depicting the friendship between Maan Kapoor and Firoz Khan where Maan risks his own life to save Firoz from the angry mob. Seth takes the readers to the court where the case for the abolition of the Zamindari system is fought and it is shown in a very realistic setting. Seth also brings forth the issue of the caste system that is prevalent in the Indian society.

Seth is very confident about the different places in *A Suitable Boy* and as the characters travel the readers feel that they actually know the places that Seth describes. When Maan travelled in the train with Rasheed to Rasheed’s native village of Debaria it was as if one was seeing the sights from the train with one’s own eyes. We can see an example of it when in *A Suitable Boy* Seth describes the little stops like Rudhia Junction:

“‘RUDHIA JUNCTION. It’s Rudhia Junction.’ Maan woke up to see several passengers getting their luggage out of the train...Two narrow-gauge lines intersected at Rudhia, that was all...and the words Rudhia Jn on the signs and on the six white-tiled spittoons at the station added to the dignity of the town...A sign in front of the station master’s office announced: Our Goal: Security, Safety and Punctuality...A large, red-leaved tree caught Maan’s attention.”

Throughout the whole novel we find Seth’s fictional canvas is replete with descriptions of different towns and cities of India some of which are imaginary and some real. It is in fact difficult to differentiate the difference between a real and a fictional city for a reader who has no idea of the Indian landscape. The novel is a story of the interlocked upper middle class families in UP, Bihar and Bengal. The setting of the characters seems very authentic. Seth has succeeded in making the imaginative town of Brahmipur come alive. The Indian journalist and novelist Khushwant Singh has said of the novel that, "I lived through

that period and I couldn't find a flaw. It really is an authentic picture of Nehru's India."(Mohanty, 207) The Indian culture with its drawbacks and strengths is fully explored in the novel by Seth.

Seth who paints such an authentic picture of India in *A Suitable Boy* has equally succeeded to create an equally authentic picture of England in *An Equal Music*. Michael Holmes is the protagonist of *An Equal Music* and he is second violinist with the Maggiore Quartet. The novel deals with how Michael reacts when he finds his lost love, Julia, a pianist, after ten long years. Michael and Julia first meet in Vienna where both were studying music. Seth paints a beautiful visual picture of Vienna where the two lovers visit different places as students and again returns after ten years as professional musicians.

Seth intricately shows London and its countryside like Rochdale where Michael was born and brought up. Seth compares the sights and sound of London and Rochdale when Michael in *An Equal Music* says that:

“Besides, as a boy, I was quite happy in Rochdale. Our house was not too far from the edge of town, and once I got a bike I could cycle out towards the moors...Within minutes I would be in the open countryside. Sometimes I would walk on the tops, sometimes just lie in the grassy hollows where I could no longer hear the sound of the wind...Sometimes, when the sun came out after a drizzle, there would be a whole scrum of skylark...”

In London, high up though I am, there is no natural silence. Even in the middle of the 600 acres of the park, I can hear the traffic all around, and often above...Among the water-lilies the fountains play, obscuring any noise that the hedges have not dampened. Squirrels run...pigeon coos...the blackbirds sing.” (28)

Seth in *An Equal Music* places his characters in the contemporary world of music and shows their vicissitudes as classical musicians where in the English schools seldom classical music is taught and chamber music is losing its appeal and string quartets find it difficult to survive. We see an example of the troubled times of the musicians in the novel when even the agent of the Maggiore wants to break up the quartet as individuals are more in demand than a group. The novel is written after much research by Seth and this is evident in the minute details about tunings, of structuring a performance, of violin maker, of the heated arguments amongst the characters regarding the nuances of their performance. The quotation below from *An Equal Music* will give an idea of one of the many discussions that happened amongst the musicians:

“The problem that Billy has just pointed out is easy to state and hard to solve. If the “Art of Fugue” is to be performed by a string quartet in its designated key of D minor and Billy will hear of nothing else some of the passages for the second-highest voice (played by me) fall below the compass of the violin...But in addition, a number of passages for the third highest voice (played by Helen) fall much as a fourth below the compass of the viola.”

Thus, if we compare the two novels *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music* we see how Seth shines as an upholder of the idea of globalization. Both these novels are situated at completely different locations and deals with totally different cultures. Not once does Seth try to overshadow one culture with the other. In *An Equal Music* Seth could have let the Indian culture of classical music creep in but he does not do so. Nor does he let the British culture interfere with his characters in *A Suitable Boy* more than is required in a post-independence

backdrop. He also deals with the Chinese culture in his travelogue *From Heaven Lake* where he allows the natives to voice their concerns and portray their life as it is, rather than Seth commenting on them.

Seth's works are written in a globalized age and he comments on the new face of India and even moves beyond India. The mass migration happening from the villages to the cities is shown intricately in the case of Rasheed in *A Suitable Boy*. Even Arun moves to Calcutta for his job and he takes up a cosmopolitan identity in *A Suitable Boy*. These migration can also be seen in *An Equal Music* where Michael moves away from his hometown in the countryside to Vienna and then to the city of London to pursue a musical career. The characters take up a cosmopolitan identity rather than a pan-national identity and this is one of the traits of globalization. Seth uses different styles and genres which are amply reflected in his works. His poetry, novels, a novel in verse, a travelogue, a libretto, a memoir, all these reflect his inclination to travel on uncharted territories and very few people can claim to have achieved fame by experimenting with such different genres. Even his works reflect a global nature in the variety with which Seth provides his readers. One can only marvel at the length he went to so as to give such an in-depth study in all his works.

Seth is unlike his other counterparts like Amitav Ghosh who thrust their Indian identity on their readers. Ghosh even when he writes about other countries, like in his *In an Antique Land*, he writes from an Indian point of view. It is the view point of an Indian who is dealing with a different culture and finds similarities and dissimilarities in the others culture with his own. With Seth the equation is different as he gets inside a culture and writes from the point of view of a person who belongs to that culture and hence he skilfully hides his Indianness. Seth's effortlessly deals with the characters which are natives of such places like India, China, England, and United States of America. He gives an authentic representation of those settings which he achieves after a rigorous research and this makes him an international writer.

Seth in his writings focuses on different cultures and not on the aspect of creating a national identity. During the time of independence there was a need for the Indian writers to show their nationalism and inform the West about their Indian culture so as to present the actual picture of the country and not as the exotic land it was depicted to be by the West. Seth has gone beyond this need of the novel to depict the idea of the nation and he is not concerned with creating a singular civic identity as his works reflect. So we can conclude with saying that Seth is a global writer and reading him has been a great pleasure.

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