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## Ethnicity in the Novels of Vikram Seth

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A writer is designated on the basis of the socio geographical community and culture to which he belongs and whose tradition, life and language he utilizes in his writings. The Indian English novelists of the 1980s are totally assimilated with the western culture and they establish an independent cultural and literary identity exposed to the experience of life in India and abroad . Their writings are of an autobiographical historical nature, primarily revelations of events and episodes, the experience of the place and its ambience.

The 1980s witnessed efficient emergence of new Indian fiction in English heralding a new era of change in its tone and tenor, with an impressive array of young novelists from the corridors of St. Stephen's college, New Delhi – Amitabh Ghosh, Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Seth. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, by the virtue of his education, Vikram Seth qualifies as a member of the Post- Independence generation of economically privileged upper middle class Indians – his schooling at Dehradun Public School, his graduation at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, his doctoral studies at Stanford University. He is a famous polymath who has lived in three continents - Asia, Europe and Australia and written in a variety of genres - poetry, fiction, non-fiction, travelogue and libretto. He has studied several languages including Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu, Hindi and the Devanagari language.

In 1986, Vikram Seth wrote *The Golden Gate*, his first novel, a satirical romance describing the stories of young professionals in San Fransisco throughout their quests and questions to find and deal with love in their lives as well as each other's lives. In 1993, Seth was propelled into the public spotlight with the publication of *A Suitable Boy* , the 1349 page colossal work. It was followed up with *An Equal Music* (1999) and *A Suitable Girl*. Besides his literary and poetic achievements, he wrote a libretto based on the Greek legend of Arion and the Dolphin. In 2005, he published *Two Lives*, a non-fiction family memoir presenting his family background. Vikram Seth is highly sensitive to the glassy undying essence, the true inwardness of Indian culture. In 'The Novel of our Times', *The Hindustan Times*, 27 February 1993, Rita Joshi comments

Vikram Seth has indeed created the novel of our times, immensely readable but deceptively simple, with several layers so that it will evoke different levels of responses in different people. In an age of aggressive intellectualism, Seth has gone back to an older, subtler narrative style of nineteenth century novelists. (4)

Vikram Seth's creative consciousness thrives on the 'pleasure' of having experienced a multiplicity of homes. Having traversed geographical / national boundaries of three continents, Seth's subjectivity is 'migratory' in that it exists in multiple geographies and literary constituencies. World- wide travel has given Seth the tremendous advantage of a wider exposure of life and communication across cultural barriers and cultural background – Indian, English, Chinese and American.

Cultural hybridity is highlighted in *The Golden Gate* (1986) which exposes the postmodern element in contemporary culture the assumptions of ennui and purposelessness in the context of American upper middle class. The central figure John, a young man of twenty six is a blond-haired, good-looking, healthy, employed, sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed but depressed person, aloof and lonely. Throughout the novel, John Brown is engaged in constant change of partners similar to the game of musical chairs. He is confronted with two eccentric candidates for marriage-wasp Bluestocking and Belinda Beale. Both ladies desert him aggravating his feeling of loneliness, giving him a sense of injured pride. Naturally he diverts his attention to Janet Hayakawa, John's former beloved but she too dies in an accident, John is isolated forever, heartbroken and bereft.

Seth unflinchingly presents the malady afflicting modern society, the morbid preoccupation with own affairs to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. Seth has chosen the title *The Golden Gate* with special import. In ancient alchemy, the element corresponding to the emotion of love is gold that is pure and precious in human life. The bridge, capturing the quintessence of modern California, becomes a symbol of love reaching out and connecting the people. The problem confronting modern urban society is that all the things that constitute the very structure of society have been torn down. Seth presents the pathology behind the modern youth who has all in terms of material acquisitions. John is handsome, smart, well mannered, well read in essence but lost in the shackles of matrimony. Seth makes his gentle satire upon urban life in a fast paced culture.

Though a global writer with wider experience, Seth seems to say marriage and family should be the one in which there is consideration for each other and the claims and views of both husband and wife successfully meet and merge. Sarla Palker pertinently observes, 'what Seth seems to prefer is a synthesis of accommodation of western value of individual freedom to the value of relationship in traditional society' (38).

*The Golden Gate* is a novel of manners, narrating the conjoined stories of five main characters, Janet, John, Liz, Phil and Edward Dorati. They are in their twenties forming a part of the university-educated professional milieu in which Seth found himself at ease and with whose social mores he was well acquainted with his own experience at the boarding school in Oxford. Much of the insouciance ease seem in the narration of the story in the backdrop of California is a result of his familiarity with the customs and values of the urban class of society within a particular historical context. In his interview, he admits "I loved the sunshine, the feel of northern California, so beautiful, so diverse ethnically and in terms of lifestyle. The freedom, the sense of ease in the personalities, I learned how to have fun". (45)

Seth portrays the world culture, distilled out of his eclectic reading and moulded by his own personality. *A Suitable Boy* (1993) created literary history with the book's mammoth size and the million copies sales – a story involving a widow's search for a 'suitable' (in the Indian context) bridegroom for her daughter. It is a social novel, not an 'Indian' novel in the sense that Seth does not try to force his ethnicity on the reader. It chronicles a saga of four intergenerational and interrelated families: the Mehras, the Chatterjis, the Kapoors and the Khans. It is the wedding of Savita, the widowed Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter to Pran, a University lecturer and the son of the State Revenue Minister, Mahesh Kapoor. The three other families are the members of the anglicized Chatterji clan, the Khan family of the Nawab of Baitar. The plot centres round the mothers search for a suitable boy for Lata. Rupa Mehra's younger daughter

Lata falls in love with a handsome young Muslim student Kabir Duttani. Mrs. Rupa Mehra horrified by her daughter's rebellious art whisks her off to Calcutta to the home of her eldest born Arun Mehra who is married to the daughter of a Bengali Judge, Meenakshi. Meenakshi's brother Amit Chatterji falls in love with Lata. Mrs. Rupa discovers Harish, a boy from Khan caste working in a leather manufacturing industry. Which of these three suitors will be the most suitable boy?. For Lata, marriage entails stability and prosperity and she accepts Harish not at her mother's behest or her brother's but as an independent decision.

The weddings of Lata and Savita are set in the Pul Mela, the raising of the Shiva-lingam. John Mee analyses *A Suitable Boy* as a historical novel concerned with the transition of India from feudalism to modernity. The novel is alive with the 'detail of north Indian life' and other cultural inter-texts and 'can scarcely said to be privileging Englishness' (Mee 2004: 112). Seth distances himself from anglocentrism in his desire for a modern nation. The novel narrates 'a move beyond colonialism in the possibility of an Indian modernity but it does not look outside an evolutionary narrative that must make that modernity a fulfillment of a universalized narrative of progress.' (117)

Though the novel is about love and marriage, Seth articulates the bewildering political, Cultural and linguistic complexity and diversity of India. In the glittering Chatterji party, the two Englishmen critique the behavior of the Indians:

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....There were a few more items to my litany once, but I had forgotten them. (*A Suitable Boy*, 403)

Khuswant Singh hailed the novel by commenting, "I lived through that period and I couldn't find a flaw. It really is an authentic picture of Nehru's India" (Qtd. in Wikipedia). The novel is quasi-political and quasi-biographical portraying historical and political developments of the 1950s. The Mehra and the Kapoors represent the Hindu middle classes of North. The Nawab of Baitar stands for feudal Muslim aristocracy, his two sons, Firoz and Imtiaz are lawyer and doctor respectively, their career marking the end of the feudal structure. Hares, a worker in the leather industry, considers his work as his religion and disregards caste restrictions and he is the sign of modern ideas of economic progress and social egalitarianism.

Just as historical facts about independent India coincide with fictional experience, the biographical facts of real people and experience merge into fictional characters and situations. Mrs. Rupa was based on his mother Laila Seth, the first woman Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh in India. Hares based on Premo Seth, Seth's father. Amit Chatterji's name is drawn from Vikram Seth who was named Amit as a baby. Lata's elder brother Arun Mehra is modelled on Leila Seth's own elder brother Michibhai.

After getting the enormous popularity literary circles as an international bookseller, Vikram Seth set out to write a novel in Europe in the high classical tradition of music, *An Equal Music* (1999). He effaces his Indian identity and the novel is people of European musicians. Seth has some training in classical music and he was trained under Pandit Amarnath, the renounced vocalist and he was well learned to play the tablas and the flute.

The novel is based on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice that has haunted music lovers through ages. Michael Holme, the narrator and main protagonist, is a violinist based in London. He is in his late thirties and earns his income as the second violinist in the groups by teaching a number of unwilling students. Ten years ago, as a student of the Swedish maestro Carl Kall at Musikhochschule in Vienna, he was in love with a young pianist, Julia, the daughter of an Oxford don and an Australian mother. It is well known that art and music are absorbed without effort or explanation. They become lovers and together with a cellist, Maria, they set up a trio and perform music. That time Michael is badly insulted by his professor's apparent impatience with his style of playing. Julia too supports the professor so betrayed by Julia, broken down physically, Michael flees Vienna and Julia. He flies to London and lives like a fugitive. After two months, he enrolls himself in music and manages to locate a recording of Beethoven: Opus 104 in a dusty drawer of a music shop in London. While returning home, he looks up to find Julia sitting five feet away in another bus. His impertinent cries do not reach Julia who is separated by twin sheets of window glass. Michael goes off the bus chasing her in crowded streets in a taxi only to find her gone and he has left the precious record in the cab. Once again, Julia makes her appearance at a concert by the Maggiore at Wigmore Hall.

Towards the end, Michael learns to his immense shock that Julia has become deaf. She is acting from auto immune disease that has affected her hearing. A musician going deaf in a novel about music is a great idea. Seth weaves the novel in a realistic web of musicians, agents, critics, concert halls, rehearsals, details about music and musical instruments. Love and music are the two operating themes in the novel which run simultaneously and sometimes merge with each other, yielding a perfect equilibrium. It is remarkable to note that Seth's marvellous sense of place which entails the ability to conjure up visual spaces through aural cues. London is represented by the songs of robins in winter and blackbirds in summer. Vienna is conjured up by the sound of Vivaldi. The description of London parks, Venice and Vienna convey the mercurial moods of love and of music as is possible in words. The delicate love between Michael and Julia is bathed in the glow of musical reference to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Bach virtually all great musicians of music because their love has their music which is a metaphor for their love. Seth reiterates his own philosophy of family through music like string trio, quartet etc.

Seth's mastery is seen in reconstructing the remarkable lives of his relatives from his own personal memory, letters, reviews, his experience of growing up besides the narration of their mutual interactions. *Two Lives* (2005) is 'as much a commentary on the ethical issues surrounding biography as it is an exemplary act of biographical writing' (Wilson 2005). *Two Lives* belongs to the chronicles of Dr. Shanti Behari Seth, the brother of Raj Behari Seth, Leila Seth's father and his German wife Henny Seth. Seth is narrating not only their lives but his own life as a narrator and participant in some of the events recorded in the book.

Seth dexterously combines his own maternal family and its social, economic and personal background, a period of great historical consequence in Germany. Shanty Seth went to Germany with the prospect of studying medicine and dentistry in one of the best universities in Berlin, Germany and he had his deepening friendship with the Caros, the beginning of his relationship with his wife Henny that was to last 'five and a half decades' (*Two Lives*, 81). It was the time of Hitler's ascendancy and there is the portrayal of German public life. Interestingly, Seth describes his uncle Shanti watching the Olympic quite very close to Hitler.

I saw Hitler from very close at the time of Olympics. I had gone for a walk in the Grunewald and I saw a few people standing there, with SS men on both sides. No one came to search me or anything. I saw him from so close, not further than that wall there. He had a bridge in his mouth and he was made up with lipstick (96).

But Shanti detaches and shows indifference to political events in Germany. His views on Anti-Semitism are 'based more on impression and anecdote than on historical or social analysis'(92). In the campaign at Monte Cassino, Shanti loses his right arm. Henry made a narrow escape to England from the fate that awaited her mother and sister with the outbreak of war and Nazi atrocities in Germany. Henny's correspondence is a reminder that individuals are not exempt from ethical choices, even when living in the shadow of a totalitarian state.

Despite his disgust and contempt of totalitarian politics, monstrous inhumanity in Germany, Seth is advised that the knowledge of one European language is a necessary condition for the special entrance exam for Oxford. Shanti and Henny decide that the language has to be German and Henny undertakes his education teaching him to write and converse in German, introduces him to German songs. His love for German poetry and song is suffused by the hatred as if the language and culture itself were contaminated by Nazi usage. He ends the book marked by his humanism. 'If we cannot eschew hatred, at least, let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other. May we, in short, believe in human logic and perhaps, in due course, in love'(499).

Seth has continued to be conservative and old fashioned in his choice of subject and form, though combined with cosmopolitanism. He accepts: 'Although my books are set in different countries, I don't feel that it makes me one of those stereotypical cosmopolitans who have a sort of mixed cultures' (Qtd in Kapur, 84). Though he may be termed the first international writer in terms of the locations of his works and the genres, his post colonial perspective is very much Indian. The geographical locations may be different - India, California, Venice, Germany, but his concerns and modes of representation feature diverse culture with the basic concept of love. His writings reveal the complex heterogeneity and multilocational contexts with trans-national mobility.

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