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Marriage in the Novels of Vikram Seth

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The objective of the present paper is to analyze the significance of marriage in human life though it may be in American, Indian, or European society. For this purpose Vikram Seth's all the three novels — *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music* have been taken into consideration. All the three novels are set in three different countries — America, India, and Europe respectively but one common aspect of marriage lies in the common victory of marriage and family over passion and love. All the three heroines of these novels accept the pious bond of marriage rejecting their passionate love. This brief research paper will analyze a comparative study of the concept of marriage, its rituals and traditions in the societies of these three countries.

Indian English fiction has its own history of its emergence, flowering, and peaking. The tradition of Indian English fiction has begun with Bankim Chander Chatterji's novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). "It began in early 19th century and has continued ever since, acquiring much newer and much larger dimension after Independence, and particularly in the last two decades of the 20th century" (Mohanty: 2007, 1). A sudden flowering of Indian English fiction came up during the Gandhian era (1920-1947) and during that period the 'Big Three' — Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao contributed a lot in the flowering of Indian English fiction by their invaluable social novels. Many social, political, and historical novels are written in this period. The 1980s witnessed efflorescent emergence of new Indian fiction in English heralding a new era of change in its content, tone, and tenor, with an impressive array of young novelists as — Amitav Ghose, Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, and Vikram Seth. Vikram Seth has his own formidable place in the field of social realism as he has depicted the real picture of the American, Indian, and European societies in his novels — *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music*.

Vikram Seth, a famous poet, novelist, travel writer, librettist, children's writer, biographer, and memoirist was born on June 20, 1952 at Kolkatta in the house of Prem and Leila Seth. He got his schooling at Dehradun Public School, his graduation at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and enrolled himself in Stanford University in California, U.S.A. for Ph.D. He could not complete his research as he devoted himself to *The Golden Gate*. The literary inspiration intervened or rather overwhelmed his interest in economic demography, and eventually his thesis, as he himself put it, went out of the window. He confessed in *Two Lives* that "my dissertation work fell by the wayside, and I devoted myself to *The Golden Gate*" (Seth: 2005, 35). Seth is a polymath who has lived in Asia, America, and Europe and written in a variety of genres — poetry, fiction, non-fiction, travelogue, and libretto. His world-wide travel has

given him the tremendous advantage of a wider exposure of life and communication across cultural background — Indian, European, Chinese, and American. He has studied several languages as Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu, and Hindi. Vikram Seth is known for his novels, though he has characterized himself as a poet first and a novelist second.

Vikram Seth is a versatile writer. He has written three novels and all the novels have their own speciality. *The Golden Gate* (1986) is written in verse, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is the bulkiest novel in English literature, *An Equal Music* (1999) depicts the minute descriptions of the Western music. He has written beautiful poems, travelogue *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983), Children's book *Beastly Tales From Here and There* (1991), a libretto *Arion and Dolphin* (1994), a memoir *Two Lives* (2005), a non-fiction family memoir presenting his family background and his grand uncle and aunt. Vikram Seth has got recognition around the world because of his amazing artistic insight and bagged many prizes and awards in his literary career as: *Thomas Cook Travel Book Award*, *Commonwealth Poetry Prize*, *Ingram Merrill Fellowship*, *Guggenheim Fellowship*, *Sahitya Akademi Award*, *Irish Times International Fiction Prize*, *Commonwealth Writers Prize*, *Emma*, *Order of The British Empire*, *Pravasi Bhartiya Samman*, *Padam Shri Award*, *The 25 Greatest Global Living Legends In India*.

Vikram Seth is a social writer and in his all the novels there is a preference for marriage over passion. Marriage is regarded as a means of stability and satisfaction in human life. Marriage is a “legal relationship between a husband and wife” (Hornby: 2005, 941). Marriage is a kind of mutual contract between two persons who swear wedding vows during their marriage ceremony to live together and help each other for the whole life. Marriage is a relationship that provides sexual, emotional, and mental satisfaction. It is a social check on illicit and illegal relationships and provides identity to the children it produces. It is the beginning of the new life full of responsibilities, adjustment, co-operation, tolerance, sacrifices, and bliss. Marriage creates new relationships by uniting two unknown and unfamiliar families of the husband and wife. It is the carrier of values from generation to generation through children. It is the institution where people learn many good qualities and moral values as: co-operation, sacrifice, adaptability, belongingness, forgiveness, tolerance, sympathy, moralities and many other virtues that are essential for the well-being of a person, family, and society. Marriage is a social institution and it has received social approval and sanction in all the cultures and times. The institution of marriage pre-dates reliable recorded history, many cultures have legends concerning the origin of marriage, and various marriage practices are existing throughout the world.

There are three types of marriage — love marriage, love-cum-arranged marriage, arranged marriage. Love marriage is the best from the couple's point of view but it is acceptable to neither parents nor society. Love-cum-arranged marriage is the best from the couple's point of view as well as from the parents' point of view. The third type of marriage is the most common type of marriage and in this type of marriage the couple is the responsibility of the parents of both sides. If there is any dispute, clash, misunderstanding, difference, problem in

their married life, the couple can ask their parents to solve or support them in their days of misfortune. But in love marriage it is the responsibility of both the husband and wife to retain their love throughout their lives and to bear the responsibilities because they may or may not have the helping hands of their parents and family members. But it does not mean that there is no love in arranged marriage but in this type of marriage love develops solely after meeting life partners on parents' consent.

In all the novels of Vikram Seth, marriage occupies a considerable place and he regards it a sacrosanct ritual. As Seth's all the three novels are set in three different countries so he has made the readers to be familiar with the rituals and traditions of marriage prevailing in these countries. Marriages vary considerably in terms of religion, socio-economic status, age, commitment, geographical factors, purpose, and many other things. In the United States there are three basic models of marriage: the historic Judaic-Christian marriage model, the romantic model, and the rationalistic marriage model. The historic Judaic-Christian model views marriage as a very special gift from God that should be used for the benefit of men and it is a true service to God. According to this model the purpose of marriage is "to have companionship, to love each other, to help each other in daily struggles of everyday life...to have children and be an outlet for sexual expression (https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php/title=Marriage_in_the_United_States&oldid). In the romantic model, two individuals are drawn together by love and there is every possibility of their relationship being impermanent. In the rationalistic model, two individuals are drawn together by both love and common traits. It is based on fidelity and one of its goals is the pure happiness of the people involved. The traditions and rituals of American marriage vary from place to place and region to region. Traditionally, U.S. wedding takes place in a religious building such as church, with a religious leader officiating the ceremony. During the ceremony, the bride and groom vow their love and commitment for one another with church provided vows, they exchange rings, the couple is pronounced husband and wife publically, and they share their first kiss as a married couple and thus seal their union. Besides it, the bride wears traditional white dress.

Marriage is a sacramental union in the Hindu faith. Marriages in India are full of rituals and celebrations like pre-marriage, in-marriage, and post-marriage customs. It is an occasion of festive celebrations. "The traditional Indian wedding is about two families being brought together socially, with as much emphasis placed on the families coming closer as the married couple" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_in_India). The matchmaker plays an important role in finding a suitable match according to family background, economic position, general character, and family reputation along with other matters. Horoscope matching by a perfect priest also holds an important place in Indian society. The ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations of Indian marriage differ from region to region and religion to religion. Indian brides decorate themselves with gold and diamond jewellery, apply henna to colour hands and feet, wear red-coloured bridal clothes, and undergo various bridal rituals. The bride and groom exchange garlands and to complete the pious bond they walk in circle around the sacrificial fire and exchange marital vows as to look after each other, to be

affectionate and friendly, to have a courteous and tolerant attitude, to have faith in each other, etc.

The European countries have their own pattern of marriage. European Marriage Pattern includes three features as: “a high age of marriage for both men and women, the second being ‘neolocality’, and the third a very large number of singles that never married at all” (http://www.collective-action.info/_THE_MarriagePatterns_EMP). There is high age of mothers during child-birth in Europe and such a high age at child birth, however, can be seen as a direct consequence of the high age at marriage. The average age of marriage for women is 23 and for men is over 26. There are substantial number of women who get married for the first time in their thirties and forties. There is high proportion of wives who are older than their husbands. After marriage man is the head of the household, he has to leave the parental household and join in the formation of the new household. In England there are different types of marriage practices as: civil marriage, marriage according to the rites and ceremonies of church, Marriage according to Jewish and Quaker (the Society of Friends), and according to the religious rites. In Europe, marriage may take place in register office; approved premises such as hotel; building of church; a registered building; navel, military, and air force chapels; in certain circumstances at the residence of someone who is housebound, detained or terminally ill. Marriage may take place at any of the above mentioned places but the bride and groom must say the words of declaration and contract to each other in English or Welsh. The Church of England affirms that marriage is a union for better or for worse, till death to part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children.

The Golden Gate is a novel of manners, narrating the conjoined stories of five main characters — John, Janet, Liz, Phil, and Edward Dorati (Ed). It portrays the inter-personal relationship of these characters who belong to each other because of romance, love, marriage, and homosexual relationships. In this novel two types of marriages are seen — the traditional marriage, as the marriage of Mr and Mrs Dorati; and the love marriage, as the marriage of Phil and Claire. The marriage of Phil and Liz is a kind of revolt against the passionate love of John and his over-powering or dominating and disbelieving nature. Though the marriage of Mr and Mrs Dorati is arranged traditionally, yet they lead their life happily and satisfactorily. On the other hand, the marriage of Phil and Claire is the outcome of their passionate love, a decision made in haste, bound to disastrous end in divorce because of social and economic disparities between the couple. “A good wife ought to be interested in all her husband’s activities” (Narayan: 1958, 107) but Claire has lack of this type of interest in Phil’s activities and they get divorced within six years of their marriage. Claire represents the average American woman who is too emancipated to be tied down by any rules, “and if her quest for freedom and self satisfaction entails leaving in her wake a trail of broken marriages, broken homes, maladjusted children, then it is a small price to pay” (Gupta: 2005, 43). Phil feels that the rings encircling their fingers, like love encircling their lives, were not made of steel but of soft gold so they could not maintain their marriage for a longer time and he wished, “Our rings were not soft gold but steel” (Seth: 1986, 3.18). Their marriage falters because it was not based on belief which is the main foundation of love as well as marriage. Besides it,

Claire gets fed up with this social relationship and the responsibilities of married life within six years and goes away leaving Phil and five year old son, Paul. It is said that “...relationships especially marriage is one such relation where accepting each other with their imperfections is the key” (*Daily Excelsior*, 17 February 2013) but both Phil and Claire do not fulfil this requirement and suffer the disastrous result of being divorced. Phil gets nothing but unrest, sorrow, desertion, and divorce out of his marriage with Claire.

The main motif of marriage in the United States is to fulfil the desire of having children, love, companionship, commitment, continuity, permanence, social status, economic security, and family. It seems that the main purpose of the marriage of Liz and Phil is to have companionship, children to fulfil her mother’s desire, permanence, and family. Liz gets a permanent companion in the form of Phil and on the other hand, Phil also gets a mother for his son Paul in Liz and they form a happy family. In regard to basic models of marriage in U.S., the marriage of Phil and Liz falls in the rationalistic marriage model because their marriage is not the result of love but they are drawn to each other by liking and common traits as there was much common between their behaviour and attitudes. They choose each other because of personal and social traits and their relationship is based on fidelity with the goal of getting happiness in their life. On the other hand, the marriage of Phil and Claire is based on romantic model of marriage as it was the result of their passionate and fleeting love, bonded to impermanent relationship. They are drawn together by love and find themselves lacking in bearing the social responsibilities of their panting relationship and could not continue their crumbling relationship for a longer time. The marriage of Mr and Mrs Dorati is based on historic Judaic-Christian marriage model as it is neither the result of love nor common traits but it is sacramental union with the purpose of having companionship, to love each other, to help each other in daily struggle of everyday life, to have children, and to be an outlet for sexual expression.

According to the categorization of marriage into love marriage, love-cum-arranged marriage, and arranged marriage, the marriage of Phil and Claire is love marriage as there was no participation of their parents in it and even Claire’s parents were against it. The marriage of Mr and Mrs Dorati is arranged marriage and love develops there after marriage. The marriage of Phil and Liz is love-cum-arranged marriage as it takes place at the choice of the couple and their parents though Phil’s mother does not approve it for some time. Liz marries the married, divorcee, and pragmatic Phil over passionate, romantic, and volatile John because “she understood that in the game of life what will last is steady affection rather than a passionate, romantic relationship” (Mohanty: 2007, 238). Seth advocates arranged and traditional marriage over love marriage. He has presented Mr and Mrs Dorati living happily in co-operation and love and they hope to face the future together, living in love. He speculates the same hope for Liz and Phil but he has presented the marriage of Phil and Claire as a moral to avoid love marriage. He has depicted the pitiable condition of Phil and Claire who get married in haste, falling in raptures of passion, physical attraction, and short-living love and could not adjust themselves in marital bond, get divorced, and have to repent for their hasty decision.

A Suitable Boy is written against the background of social, economic, political, and cultural upheaval of newly Independent India. Seth has depicted the socio-political situation of India of the early nineteen fifty's when the new born India was struggling with age old practices of untouchability, caste system, Hindu-Muslim intolerance, and other prejudices. "Well acquainted with both the high and lower strata of society in India, he portrays the mid-twentieth century society in all its diversity" (Mukherjee: *IJELLH*, March 2015). It is centred on the theme of marriage in new emerging India governed by norms and taboos, where violation always results to bad results. But Seth has not allowed the elopement of Lata, the protagonist of the novel, with Kabir to maintain the dignity of traditional Indian culture. In the same way, Seth has not allowed Haresh to elope Simran to make them not to blot the prestige of traditional Indian culture. Two types of marriages are seen in this novel — marriage for love and marriage for tradition, family, and security. Lata falls in love with Kabir, a Muslim boy and wants to marry him but she has to submit before for mother and decides to marry for tradition and family. In the same way, Haresh falls in love with Simran, a Sikh girl but decides to marry Lata for tradition, family and security.

As this novel is written against the background of India in 1952 so Seth has described about the prevailing tradition of arranged marriages in Indian society. Seth's 'marriages' are mostly arranged ones, where the relationship and love flowers after the ceremony gets over and where it is not arranged one, it is only a mockery of all those values on which this lifelong and pious bond is based. *A Suitable Boy* begins with the arranged marriage of Savita and Pran and ends with the marriage of Lata and Haresh. In this novel all the marriages, except the marriage of Arun and Meenakshi, are arranged marriages. Through the love marriage of Arun and Meenakshi, Seth, as a moralist, tells that "it is far from being an ideal marriage, in spite of all that passionate attraction between the two" (Mohanty: 2007, 176). Arun and Meenakshi represent the dark side of love marriage where both husband and wife do not seem satisfied with each other and involve in extramarital relationships. Seth has glorified arranged marriage over love marriage and proved that love marriage is governed by passion that can last for a few years, but arranged marriage is governed by affection and it can last for lifetime. All the couples who get together through arranged marriage are described living happily though they have to struggle to adjust in this marital bond but they try their best to make their relationship a lasting bond and do not waver from it like Arun and Meenakshi.

Marriage is a turning point in the life of a girl, especially in Indian society, as she has to lead a life full of restrictions, limitations, and even has to suppress her own desires for the welfare of her family. Almost all the women characters in this novel have to lead a life of restrictions after marriage. Veena and Priya suffer in the hands of their mothers-in-law and in a revolt they compare their mothers-in-law to witch and scarecrow. Priya has to live in the four walls of her house and showing the bars on the balcony to Veena she says, "And look at these bars on the balcony. The monkey can't come in, and I can't go out" (Seth: 1993, 244). All the women live in the four walls of their home and there is no description of any working woman in this novel. The pitiable condition of the rural women is also described here through the wife of Kachheru who is no better than a caged-bird or a prisoner. She is not allowed to see the world beyond the boundaries of her house. She knows two villages, the village in which

she had been born and the village into which she had been married. It seems that Vikram Seth also shares the views of the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson who has favoured woman's place at the home and written in *The Princess*:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (E BOOK#791, 2 August 2008)

Vikram Seth has not only described about the Hindu marriage but the marriage and the condition of women in the Muslim community also. The Muslim women have to lead a very pitiable life in the constrained society which is full of restrictions and limitations. The Muslim men can unilaterally divorce a legally wedded wife without any fault of her own by merely pronouncing *talaq* thrice and the fear of *talaq* "hangs like a sword over their marital status" (*The Tribune*, 24 September 2015). Besides it, a woman, in Muslim community, has to live in the world of *purdah* after marriage. Zainab, though an educated girl, disappears into the world of *purdah* after marriage and suffers silently the infidelities of her husband. Through the character of Begum Abida Khan, Seth has provided a ray of hope for the Muslim women to revolt against the age old tradition of *purdah* and try to get a position equal to men. She also lived in *purdah* for many years but she feels there suffocating and show courage, stands against time-ridden old customs and traditions, comes out of it, breaking all the traditional customs and becomes a member of legislative assembly and is known as "the firebrand of the legislature" (Seth: 1993, 321). She is presented as the incarnation of Luxmi Bai, the famous and courageous woman warrior of the first revolt for freedom in 1857. Seth has depicted almost all the women living in the boundary of their homes. Except Abida Khan, Malati Trivedi, and Illa Chattopadhyia, rest of the women absorb themselves in family issues. They adjust themselves in the existing environment of their family and society and do not revolt or grumble for the inconveniences. They have understood that true bliss of married life can be acquired by some divine virtues as: sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, adjustment, co-operation, and trust. The stability of marriage also depends on these pillars of moral virtues or good qualities.

Seth has also described the trend of remarriage in the Muslim community. Baba had three wives, and his grandfather had four wives one after the other. When Maan could not believe Saeeda Bai's accusation of Rasheed's being in love with Tasneem, Saeeda Bai asks Maan, "Has Dagh Sahib forgotten that men have not forgotten to count four in our community?" (Seth: 1993, 806). In Muslim community, there is no freedom for girl to choose her life-partner as Tasneem is not allowed to decide about her suitor out of three lovers of her. Saeeda Bai takes the initiative and rejects them one by one. The elders play an important role to decide the marriage of their children. The decision of Rasheed's marriage is taken by his mother and he has left no charm and attraction for marriage as his life is already constrained by the promise he had made to his dying mother and that has tied his life down even before he had begun to taste freedom. He has to marry the widow of his elder brother who has met

his death in a train accident leaving his wife and a child behind to face the cruelties of the world. Rasheed has to accept them to keep his difficult and binding promise made to his dying mother. Rasheed's dissatisfaction over the destiny imposed upon him by his mother is seen in his thoughts: "If I had any choice, would it ever have been a woman like her whom I would have chosen as my partner and companion through this life?" (Seth: 1993, 648-649). The marriage of Rasheed with his brother's widow is neither love marriage nor arranged marriage but it is a kind of imposed binding or an unbearable burden which he has to carry. He feels unable to carry it for lifelong and in frustration commits suicide on the bank of the Ganges.

An Equal Music is set against the background of enchanted and romantic world of Vienna and Venice. It is centred on the ill-fated love affair of Michael Holme, a thirty-seven years old second violinist and Julia, a pianist. It is "an unforgettable tale of love, lost and nearly regained" (Mohanty: 2007, 153). The novel deals with Michael's passionate relationship with music, his violin Tonini, and his love for Julia he loses twice over. Though this novel is related to the minute description of music as Seth weaves the novel in a realistic web of musicians, agents, critics, concert halls, rehearsals, details about music and musical instruments, different records of Western music, disparities between the musicians and their mutual understanding and co-operation, yet it also deals with the theme of marriage in the European society. In European countries, the condition of women is not better than the other countries of the world. The women are dominated by men in this patriarchal society and some special duties are assigned them to perform as: to take care of the family, give birth to children and rear them in best possible way, to do domestic works and other petty errands. In this regard Majumdar says, "The western countries being mostly followers of Christian dominated the status and position of woman as indicated by their religion. Hence in most of them till quite recently women were given very low status in comparison to men. The Christians considered the woman as temptations of the world of flesh and of the devil" (2004, 22). In European countries, men had access to everything and women confined to themselves to domestic work and outside home they had no role to play. In the novel, Seth has presented Michael's mother as a devotional lady who nurses her ailing husband in such a way that she ignores her health, falls ill, and dies away. As Michael tells: "After two or three years, about the time I got into the Royal Northern College of Music, my father...fell ill with a series of bronchial ailments. My mother exhausted herself trying to nurse him, to earn a living working as a dinner lady in a school, and to fight the case. Though it was he who was ill, it was she who died — quite suddenly, of a stroke" (Seth: 1999, 27).

Seth favours the arranged marriage in *An Equal Music* also. "Arranged marriages are meant to avoid the risks associated with the freedom of choice, as they designed around entirely practical grounds such as alliance formation or rank, which in certain societies may be beneficial to the couple or the associated kin groups" (Sorrell: *Nebraska Anthropologist*, 1 January 2005). The marriage of Julia and James is arranged marriage and love develops between them after marriage. They enjoy the bliss of their married life and have a son. Though Julia establishes physical relationship with her former lover after being married to James, yet she recognises her guilt very soon and returns back to her loving and caring

husband. “Arranged marriage brings with it inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance. These three prime characteristics are required for lifelong commitment” (Jayabharathi: *Language in India*, December 2013). All these virtues are present in James as he understands Julia well, tries to adjust with her in all the situations, and tolerates her physical affliction and sexual relationship with Michael and accepts her despite of these imperfections.

Seth reiterates the foundation of marriage which goes beyond mere physical gratification. “It is a commitment of inter-personal trust, faith, concern, caring and sharing in life” (Sinha: 2007, 134). After marriage Julia suffers from the problem of deafness and it is James who helps and encourages her to come out of physical affliction, to bear this loss with courage, to continue with her music and to be a famous musician what she aspires to be. He understands the true meaning of marriage and proves himself the best and perfect mate for Julia. On the other hand, Julia also understands the value of marriage and family and wavering for some time she realises that she cannot reside in the passionate world of Michael forever and she has to face the stark realities of life and bear the responsibilities of her family which is the unending source of security and happiness. At last Seth has made Julia to understand the purity, sanctity, and value of this social relationship, called marriage and to come back to soothing and caring arms of James. Julia tells Michael that “I feel as if I am a prisoner in my mind and in this room...you are too much here, and everywhere else in my life. I have to learn peace again, for my own sake — and for Luke, and for James, who looks lost and tired” (Seth: 1999, 324).

Marriage brings with it many changes in the life of a person in European countries. After marriage he has to leave his parental household and join in the formation of a new household with all the responsibilities to manage his family. As a result of this tradition, there is no reference of joint family or a bride living in her in-law’s home. James and Julia live separately bearing all the responsibilities of household and child-bearing and rearing. There are a number of people in European countries who do not like to be bond in marital relationship and do not marry at all. Michael is already 37 and unmarried despite of his intense and passionate love for Julia and romantic and physical relationship with Virginie. Being deserted by Julia, he remains lost in her thoughts and love of Julia and there is no hope of his being married.

In all the novels of Vikram Seth there is a preference of marriage over romantic passion and love. There is victory of arranged marriage over love marriage. All the heroines of his novels though fall in love passionately, yet they all marry to someone mature, sensible, and understanding persons deserting their passionate and romantic lovers. In *The Golden Gate*, Liz falls passionately in love with John but marries mature Phil; in *A Suitable Boy*, Lata loves Kabir passionately but marries sensible, and practical Haresh deserting romantic Kabir; in *An Equal Music*, Julia is in love with Michael and establishes physical relationship with him even after her marriage with James but very soon understands the value of marriage and returns back to her caring husband leaving Michael heart-broken to lead his life in his own way.

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