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Postcolonial Reception of Vikram Seth in Marathi

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Abstract:

For a long time Marathi Novel was preoccupied with only artificial characters, superficial subject matter and concocted episodes. It was a product of the colonial anglophile narrow literary culture. Indian independence, World War II and exposure to the literature of America and Europe all combined to expand the horizon of Marathi novel around 1960s. The new novel introduced by Bhalchandra Nemade, Bhau Padhye, Kiran Nagarkar, Uddhav Shelke, and others upheld such principles as 'tolerance, judiciousness, liberalism, personal and moral discrimination'. Nevertheless, this new novel largely confined itself to the depiction of one or the other groups or subgroups of the society. Against this background, Arun Sadhu's translation *Shubhamangala* (1995) of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) was a very bold attempt to bring in the vitality of all cultures inherently woven in the narrative of the source text. The present paper aims at exploring the way Arun Sadhu introduces Seth's postcolonial multiculturalism through his translation in the otherwise community-oriented Marathi literary culture.

Keywords: New Novel, tolerance secularism, multiculturalism, translation

This paper is an attempt to study postcolonial reception of Vikram Seth in Marathi in the context of the Marathi translation of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) as *Shubhamangala* by Arun Sadhu (1995).

Postmodern literature is a form of literature which is marked, both stylistically and ideologically, by a reliance on such literary conventions as fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference. Postmodern authors tend to reject outright meanings in their novels, stories and poems, and, instead, highlight and celebrate the possibility of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning, within a single literary work.

Postmodern literature also often rejects the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and literature, as well as the distinctions between different genres and forms of writing and storytelling. The stylistic techniques that are often used in postmodern literature are Pastiche (taking of various ideas from previous writings and literary styles and pasting them together to make new styles), Intertextuality (acknowledging previous literary works within another literary work) Metafiction (making readers aware of the fictional nature of the very fiction they're reading), Temporal Distortion (use of non-linear timelines and narrative

techniques in a story) Minimalism (using characters and events which are decidedly common and non-exceptional), Maximalism (Disorganized, lengthy, highly detailed writing), Magical Realism (introduction of impossible or unrealistic events into a narrative that is otherwise realistic) Faction (mixing of actual historical events with fictional events without clearly defining what is factual and what is fictional) and Reader Involvement (Often through direct address to the reader and the open acknowledgment of the fictional nature of the events being described).

Many critics and scholars find it best to define postmodern literature against the popular literary style that came before it, modernism. In many ways, postmodern literary styles and ideas serve to dispute, reverse, mock and reject the principles of modernist literature.

For a long time Marathi Novel was preoccupied with only artificial characters, superficial subject matter and concocted episodes. It was a product of the colonial anglophile narrow literary culture. Indian independence, World War II and exposure to the literature of America and Europe all combined to expand the horizon of Marathi novel around 1960s. The new novel introduced by Bhalchandra Nemade, Bhau Padhye, Kiran Nagarkar, Uddhav Shelke, and others upheld such principles as ‘tolerance, judiciousness, liberalism, personal and moral discrimination’. Nevertheless, this new novel largely confined itself to the depiction of one or the other groups or subgroups of the society. Against this background, Arun Sadhu’s translation *Shubhamangala* (1995) of Vikram Seth’s novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) was a very bold attempt to bring in the vitality of all cultures inherently woven in the narrative of the source text. The present paper aims at exploring the way Arun Sadhu introduces Seth’s postcolonial multiculturalism through his translation in the otherwise community-oriented Marathi literary culture.

Though the early phase of Indian writing, i.e. 1858 to 1900, was a bit anglicized, bilingual, self-fashioning and early historical writings the entry in the twentieth century marked and identity in the field of writing in English with its themes related to ethonography, gender and nation with the novels such as *Rajmohan’s wife* and *Anandmath* and immediately followed by the Mahatma and his impact. Later on, in the 1930s a number of Indian novelists began to write in English for whom the art of fiction was an end in itself and not just a means for communicating other kinds of truth. Today, it is clear that it was the form peculiarly suited to the Indian sensibility and one to which Indian writers have made a distinct and significant contribution. The first rank writers in this trend were Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), and R.K.Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* (1935) started the tradition of writing great novels. Later on the post independent novels dealt with the themes like partition, with the novels like *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal and *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa. However, there is no doubt that the 1980s witnessed a second coming for the Indian novel in English. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 brought about a renaissance in Indian writing in English and it influenced the post-modern playfulness, the turn too history, a new

exuberance of language, the reinvention of allegory, the sexual frankness, even the prominent references to Hindi movies also.

Rushdie is not the only novelist standing in this list of postmodernists. We can name some prominent writers such as Allan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan and Anurag Mathur who started expanding urban middle class life and supported the demand of affordable English-language fiction of this new class. To name some important novels and novelists, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Gita Hariharan's *A Thousand Faces of Nights* (1992) and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), Shashi Deshpande's series of novels, including *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadow* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), and *Small Remedies* (2000), and Arundhati Roy's 1997 Booker-Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* and *A Thousand Faces of Night*.

The prominent trend of the novelist can be traced out from a change from Gandhian era to post-Nehru era and from post-Nehru era to the era of the 1980s. The foremost of the list may be Ranga Rao, who in his *Fowl Filcher* (1987) is able to communicate a vivid sense of rural and provincial life, but he still acknowledges that 'the nation itself has moved from the village centrism of the Gandhian era to the city-centrism of the post-Nehru period.'

Vikram Seth, an Indian poet, novelist, travel writer, children's writer, biographer and memoirist is much celebrated for his writings. Born in Calcutta he lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar, Danapur near Patna, and in London. Seth received his early education at Dehradun, spent part of his youth in London studying philosophy, politics, and economics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he developed an interest in poetry and learned Chinese. After leaving Oxford, Seth moved to California to work on a graduate degree in economics at Stanford University.

Seth has published five volumes of poetry, first, *Mappings* (1980), was originally privately published. The other volumes are *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990), *Beastly Tales* (1991), *Three Chinese Poets* (1992), *The Frog and the Nightingale* (1994). As he is much known as a novelist the first of his novels, *The Golden Gate* (1986) is a novel in verse about the lives of a number of young professionals in San Francisco. The novel contains a strong element of affectionate satire, as with his subsequent novel, *A Suitable Boy and An Equal Music* (1999). His other works are *Beastly Tales* (1991), *Libretto, Arion and the Dolphin* (1994), *The Traveller* (2008) and some other Non-fictional works.

A Suitable Boy is set in post-independence, post-partition India. The novel follows the story of four families over a period of eighteen months as a mother searches for a suitable boy to marry her daughter. The novel centers on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange the marriage of her younger daughter Lata, with a "suitable boy". At the heart of the novel it is a love story set in a young, newly independent India. The fictional town Brahmpur, along with Calcutta, Delhi, Kanpur and other Indian cities, forms a colourful backdrop for the emerging stories. Lata is a 19 year old college girl, vulnerable yet determined to have her own way, and not be influenced by her strong mother and opinionated brother Arun. Her story revolves

around the choice she is forced to make between her suitors Kabir, Haresh and Amit. The novel is not simply based on one story. This epic novel covers the various issues faced by post-independence India including Hindu-Muslim strife, abolition of the Zamindari system, land reforms and empowerment of Muslim women. The novel is divided into nineteen parts with each part focusing on a different story and eventually coming back round again. Each part is described by a rhyming couplet on the contents page.

In imposing contrast to the ways in which so many of the recent novels draw attention to history as itself a story stands the classic realism of Vikram Seth's mammoth *A Suitable Boy*. This is set in the early 1950s, formative years of the Nehru period, with the passing of the zamindari abolition legislation and the first election of the post-independence era looming. For all its copious realism, it is difficult not to see this novel too as an allegory of nationhood. Where it differs from Rushdie's other literary children is in the confident way that it subscribes to an idea of Indian history as a progress towards the goal of a secular, commercial society in the image of conventional Western models of national development. The novel is based on a romance plot, the choice of a suitable boy for the heroine, Lata Mehra; but although she shows signs of independence, the novel is ultimately one of conformity and what it represents as the inevitability of bourgeois life. The man Lata chooses is neither the son of Calcutta's high society, nor the Muslim boy whose friendship scandalises Lata's mother, but Haresh Khanna of Prahapore, a man who is foreign-returned but from a British technical college rather than the kind of elite institution which Seth himself attended. Moreover it is the shoe trade for which he is being trained, a business profession which brings with it the spectre of the loss of caste. Haresh would seem to represent Seth's idea of properly bourgeois man emerging from religious superstition and social snobbery. Along with its sense of the inevitability of a particular kind of national development-for Haresh's success is surely intended as a parable for the times-comes a nostalgia for a feudal world of Urdu literature and courtly entertainments. *A Suitable Boy* would seem to affirm the idea that the destiny of middle-class India lies in casting aside an obstructive concern with traditional identities in pursuit of secularism in its liberal economic mode. With such confidence about the future of the nation, what is to be left behind can be romanticise in a nostalgia for a world that it views as inevitably lost.

A Suitable Boy provides a synchronic look at post-Independence Indian life of the 1950s. It aspires to provide an idea of India through a realistic approach. The novel is a secular narrative of the Indian nation, which draws much on Jawaharlal Nehru's nationalist text, *The Discovery of India*. In emphasizing India's multiculturalism and traditions of tolerance towards other religions, Nehru identified secularism as the only approach which would guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation.

A Suitable Boy in every way assumes the form of a social realist novel as Seth takes great pains to give exact documentation of the social facts to get them right, in depicting India in the true sense in its 50s. The author endorses the fact saying, "I soon realized that the novel - which has opened with a grand wedding - now had so many characters whom I was interested in that I needed to take off at least a year to simply understand the varied worlds of law, politics, administration, medicine, farmingeducation, music, religion, and so on..."

S.S. Agarwalla says in *Seth's Magnum Opus* about Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, that other writers like Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Nina Sibal and Partap Sharma have attempted to portray a slice of life but Seth is the only writer who depicts life in totality. He again opines that the novel is all-encompassing, a magnum opus of social comedy in the great tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot and R.K.Narayan. S.S.Agarwalla says, "Each of these writers, with the exception of Seth, attempts to portray a slice of life; Ghosh deals with the impact of science on life in *Circle of Reason* and *Shadow Lines*, Upamanyu Chatterjee deals with the isolation of the hero in *English, August*, Taroor tries to bring in the state of Indian democracy through myths and legends in *The Great Indian Novel*. Similarly, Sibal's novel *Yatra* manifests her search for identity through political events while Partap Sharma's *Days of the Turban* deals with Punjab's terrorism."

In *A Suitable Boy*, the nation is an all-inclusive concept that moves from the individual, to the locality, to the regional state, and arrives to embrace the entire nation. Seth invents a state, Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian dimension is stretched to make it representative of India in its totality. The author constructs an organic idea of India through the microcosm of Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh, in the tradition of R.K. Narayan's invented South Indian town, Malgudi. Seth claims to have based Brahmpur on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya. The move to create typical, rather than specific, North Indian localities recalls the process of nation-forming itself, where it is seen as an idealization and selection of historical events and religious and linguistic traditions, made in order to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness.

A Suitable Boy appears to encompass a staggering variety of experience: it seems to be 'saying everything about India', while in fact its vast descriptive horizon is not infinite, and is shaped by the discourse of the narrator. Realist description is characterized by the interweaving of the aesthetic and referential purposes. The aesthetic purpose has a containing function, in that it directs the description towards the production of a meaning. On the other hand, the assumed reality of the referent prevents the description to turn into fantasizing. This fact becomes very apparent in the crowd scenes in *A Suitable Boy*.

The naturalness of Seth's portrayal of India in descriptions such as this one is a great achievement. It's almost as if the purpose of the walk were to familiarize the reader with the town, which is the main setting of the plot. Such familiarization is a recurrent authorial strategy and is characterized by an informative yet affective tone, calculated to make the reader 'feel at home' in every setting.

Nehru employs a similar naturalizing technique when describing the diversity of the Indian crowds. There is the sense, in both Seth's and Nehru's texts, that the nation is waiting to get out, 'come into its own'. India is assumed to be an undivided subject whose apparent 'diversity' stops at the surface. It is the narrator/protagonist of the text who effects a 'discovery' of an undivided India through his description. The novel's Nehruvian perspective must be seen in context. Published in 1993, when the Hindu right wing steadily appropriated Indian national identity.

A Suitable Boy can be read as a response to the aggressive communalization of politics in the 1990s, by recuperating a Nehruvian vision of the relationship between religion and society. The novel was immensely successful in India, and its translations in Hindi and Bengali met with great critical acclaim, showing that it could be ‘translated back’ into the vernacular languages which are represented in the novel. *A Suitable Boy* thus remains an influential secular and realist narrative of India, whose linguistic creativity and intense engagement with recent history has effectively contributed to its canonical status in the post-colonial literary context.

For a long time Marathi novel was preoccupied with only artificial characters, superficial subject matter and concocted episodes. The three basic trends in respect to the origin and development of Marathi novel leads us to the fact that till the introduction of New Novel by Bhalchandra Nemade, Bhau Padhye, Kiran Nagarkar, Uddhav Shelke, and others in the 1960 and onwards, the novel form has not received any serious critical attention except through some stray articles and problems related to the recent Marathi novel. Bhalchandra Nemade, the famous Marathi writer and critic, refers to the three trends in the Marathi novel: the *Yamunaparyatan* trend, the *Muktamala* Trend and the *Mochangad* Trend.

According to him the forces that have shaped the novel in contemporary society can be identified in their pure form at their source, if we follow the historical reconstruction method and travel backwards in time, relating the cognate qualities of various trends. Nemade is of the opinion that these trends are present in every period, in forms that continue to develop, change and interact. Perhaps the three trends are deep-rooted in the literary culture. Nemade argues that these trends can make us aware of our tradition, and help us in putting together the missing links between the past and the present.

a) The *Yamunaparyatan* Trend:

This trend is manifest in Baba Padmaji’s *Yamunaparyatan* (1857), which is considered to be the earliest of the Indian novels resulting from the interaction between the Western culture and the native Hindu culture during the British period. A novelist selects the theme as a verbal action with a specific moral angle in the context of the multi-faceted relation between the individual and the community. And, in keeping with the theme, style organizes the form through the medium of language using various techniques. Such type of verbal action can be seen in *Yamunaparyatan*. The Padmanji was a perceptive and versatile individual is evident from over sixty books on religious and social topics that he wrote. Whether the fact that the very first Indian and Marathi novel during the Indian Renaissance was action-oriented is a mere accident, or whether it reflects the strongest instinct of the Marathi society on its way to modernization, can be an independent subject for debate. The *Yamunaparyatan* trend has been present in the Marathi novel throughout its history. (Padmanji, H.N.Apte, V.M.Joshi, Sane Guruji, Vibhavari Shirurkar, Bhau Padhye, Anant Kadam, Dinanath Manohar, and so on).

Prose literature is one of the important cultural activities emerging from the interaction between the restless, active British culture and the contemplative, passive Hindu culture during the nineteenth century. The Hindu writers, who had inherited a long tradition

of poetry, found in the novel a new vehicle of expression which offered scope for social characters, themes and incidents. Prose is more open to the depiction of social life and to reason than poetry, and it is more active medium. The nineteenth century gave rise to the feeling that the native culture was being smothered by a cultural encounter of a victor-victim character. Anthropologists call this phenomenon 'Nativism'. Nativism articulates itself either through a sudden irrational explosion or else gradually through reason. The mutiny of 1857 was the former type of expression. When the Marathas realized the foolishness of trying in that direction, they adopted the latter path and organized various movements and activities based on reason. It could be said that the most effective of these was the creation of prose literature. The contributions of the nativistic essayists to this effort is well known (Jambhekar, Lokhitwadi, Gunjekar, Phule, Chiplunkar, Tilak, Agarkar, V.R.Shinde, S.V.Kelkar, Savarkar, Sane Guruji, etc.). The novelists can be seen expressing the predominant dynamism of prose literature through the novel form. The novel has proved the entire world over to be an important vehicle of social thought and dynamic expression. It has been so in Marathi too. However, in order to see why it did not gain in strength, we must refer to the other two trends.

B) The *Muektamala* Trend:

Manifest in Laxmanshastri Moreshwarshastri Halbe's *Muektamala* (1861), the trend has dominated the Marathi novel from the beginning. It is rooted in literary convention rather than in life. Owing to the inactive, affected, entertaining mode which the novels in this trend adopt, they seek the fictitious in or with the help of the real, and present it in a formalistic manner. They avoid action. (Halbe, Risbud, Jorvekar, N.S.Phadke, V.S.Khandekar, G.T.Mudholkar, P.B.Bhave, P.S.Rege, C.T.Khanolkar, Rangnath Deshpande, Madhav Kanitkar, Kakodkar, Yogini Joglekar, Kusum Abhyankar, Chandrakant Khot, Baba Kadam, etc.)

C) The *Mochangad* Trend:

The tendency manifest in *Mochangad* (1871) by R.B.Gunjekar, to create the illustration of a non-extinct reality, has come to be the most popular in the Marathi novel since independence, after a short spell of dormancy. This trend is predominantly imagistic. (Gunjekar, Haribhau Apte, C.V.Vaidya, Nathmadhav, Hadap, Ranjit Desai, V.S.Khandekar, Manmohan Natu, N.S.Inamdar, Shivaji Sawant, G.N.Dandekar, Arnalkar, Dharap, Sinkar, etc.) (Nemade in Devy: 194-195).

The history of Marathi novel, spinning a more than one and a half century, present a picture of immense variety and growth. It began with Baba Padmanji's *Yamuna Paryatan*, reflecting social realities in a bold manner and transited with the novelists and their writings such as V.M.Joshi's ideologies, S.V.Ketkar's social problems, N.S.Phadke's romantic portrait of youthful love, V.S.Khandekar's idealistic romanticism, P.Y.Deshpande's mystic romanticies, Vibhavari Shirurkar's women issues, Sane Guruji's Gandhian values. The recent novelists such as Anand Yadav, Ranjit Desai, C.T.Khanolkar and Bhalchandra Nemade expanded their horizons writing in the modern problems and new sensitivism. Dalit novels also made a strong place in this list. (Banhatti and Joglekar: 263)

The new novel occupies a unique place in the history of Indian novel. It not only produced the genre a novel in Indian literature but also played a vitally important role in the making and development of Indian novel as is evident from *Yamunaparyatan* to its latest accomplishments. While the social novel has dominated the scene in general, the contribution of the historical, psycho-analytical, political and philosophical themes is also not negligible. A fresh whiff of air is brought in by the rural and regional novel, while the Dalit sensibility opens up a hitherto unseen world in Marathi fiction, an effort further reinforced in the metropolitan motifs dealing with slums, alienation and existential angst. The Marathi novel has had its innings of sex and romance; it has also scraped acquaintance with the world of science, mystery, and religion.

Arun Sadhu, a Marathi writer and novelist, translated Vikram Seeth's celebrated novel into Marathi as *Shubhamangala* (1995) hardly two years after its first publication. As mentioned earlier, the Marathi writing tradition post 1980, as new novel in the words of Bhalchandra Nemade, lessened the artificiality in the act of writing and made it realist. Nevertheless, the Marathi writing suffered from such constraints as the regions, languages, castes and creeds, etc. It is Arun Sadhu who introduced *Shubhamangala* into Marathi and made the Marathi writers and readers aware of the broader panorama.

To conclude, Sadhu translated *A Suitable Boy* asking readers to not to stick up with the cast, creed, religion and regionalism. Vikram Seth's postcolonial multiculturalism is aptly introduced by Sadhu's *Shubhamangala* in the otherwise monocultural Marathi literary culture.

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