



Cultural Consciousness in Vikram Seths' Novel

KEYWORDS

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The title "Cultural consciousness in Vikram Seths novels" is aimed at bringing out the different thematic concerns in the novels of Vikram Seth. Vikram Seth is one of the interesting and leading novelists on the Indian literary horizon. He received the prestigious prizes and awards by Common Wealth Writers prize (Overall Winner, Best Book- *A Suitable Boy*), Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and Padma Shri award.

Vikram Seth's work is characterized by the innovative recuperation of "unfashionable" and "traditional" forms such as the realist *roman-fleuve* and the novel in verse. Such recuperation goes against the current of cross-pollination between genres and stylistic experimentalism which characterizes other writers like Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh, to whom he is often compared. His books reveal a sophisticated yet unselfconscious return to realist narrative and formal poetic flavor.

The present thesis tries to evaluate the novels of Vikram Seth from a thematic perspective. Vikram Seth has gained reputation as a serious writer with a tremendous potential. Most of Seth's protagonists are educated and animated men and women mostly exposed to western ideas. The emotional upheavals in the minds of these characters and their reactions to various issues, who are caught between tradition and modernity, east and west, are susceptible to treatment from a very humanist and sympathetic perception.

Reading of Vikram Seth's novels reveal a deep understanding of a human psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle class men and women. Seth is an outstanding Indian English novelist with three volumes of Poetry, three volumes of Novels, one volume of Children's books, one volume of Librettos, one volume of Travelogue and two volumes of Non-Fiction and others to his credit.

Vikram Seth is perhaps the only Indian author, who has made a bold attempt to give voice to the frustrations, disappointments, tragedies and horrors, man and woman relationships as well as man and man and woman and woman relationships. In each of Seth's novels, and in much of his poetry there have been central or peripheral gay or bisexual characters. None of Seth's novels, *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music* are an exception to this. However, his three novels, *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*, set in three different continents, enter the 'ethos and mental climate' of each location with such ease and confidence that it becomes pointless to attempt to put a national label on him. Transcending of boundaries or dismantling a given format is something that Seth does with elegance and precision.

Vikram Seth has written three novels to date which have been chosen for the present study – *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*. The thesis is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter *Introduction* traces the growth and development of Vikram Seth and his place in the Literary World in general and Indian writing in English in Particular. His creative insight and creative achievement could be considered as one of the finest in the post-1980 *Indian English Literature*.

The second chapter discusses the thematic concerns of the novel *The Golden Gate*. The theme of *The Golden Gate* is entirely about American ethos and it portrays the forming and breaking up of personal relationships, romantic love, heterosexual and homosexual affairs, loneliness, disappointment in family and so on. The characters are in search of self realization. Human relationship plays a very vital role in the novel. It is with human relationships, the story of the novel entangles and disentangles and proceeds towards its end. The first of his novels, *The Golden Gate* (1986), is indeed a hybrid 'novel in verse' and the novel is written entirely in rhyming tetrameter sonnets after the style of Charles Johnston's 1977 translation Aleksander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. The verse novel received wide acclaim and *Gore Vidal* dubbed it *The Great California Novel*. The novel contains a strong element of affectionate satire, something occasionally missed by Seth's more earnest critics, as with his subsequent novel, *A Suitable Boy*.

The third chapter examines the 1471-page novel *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth's first prose novel is a four-family saga set in post-independence, post-partition India, and alternatively satirically and earnestly examines issues of national politics in the period leading up to the first post-Independence national election of 1952, inter-sectarian animosity, the status of lower caste peoples such as the Jatav, land reform and the eclipse of feudal princes and landlords, academic affairs, inter- and intra-family relations and a range of further issues of importance to the characters. It has been considered by critics and reviewers as a return to traditional ways of writing, particularly after the 80's, a decade of experimentation in the novel. The novel was purposely presented as an alternative to both post modern playfulness and recourse to magic realism, common in some of the novelists of former British Colonies.

The fourth chapter analyses Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. Set in contemporary Europe, the novel focuses on the lives of classical musicians and their music as well as their emotional survival. It is a story of pure music and musicians, of the relationships that makes music the hard won harmonies

of life that makes life rhythmic and worth-living. The two central characters, Michael and Julia, who are lovers move apart, meet again after ten years and then part again. Almost every relationship between the characters has a professional aspect and an emotional one. One also gets a deep insight into the world of the deaf, how the deaf feel and manage things. It shows that the deaf have been among the best musicians in the world. Probably, they are more introspective and innovative and are less bound by traditions or by external forces. Paola Isotta, one of Italy's most significant music critics, wrote in the influential newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* of the Italian translation that no European writer had ever shown such a knowledge of European classical music, nor had any European novel written earlier managed to convey the psychology, the technical abilities, even the human potentialities of those who practice music for a living.

The fifth Chapter describes the narrative technique of Vikram Seth. The most striking characteristic of Seth's style is his capacity for linguistic innovation and collocation. Seth seems to be a highly creative artist as he has abundantly used the lexical sets and words in his artistic expressions. To quote A.K.Singh, "Vikram Seth is a juggler with words and with immense control over them. Vikram Seth's verbal patterns mainly include lexical items, carnages, collocations, deviant collocations, the use of verbs, the use of modal auxiliaries, emphatic patterns, punctuation patterns, and omissive patterns and so on".

The last and the final chapter sums up the research deliberations of the earlier chapters operating within the frame work of an imaginary, traditional society. Vikram Seth's protagonists who are mostly men and women from urban middle class reflect that they are conscious of their predicament as individuals in the society. In view of all this, Vikram Seth the writer, if certainly not 'one thing', still more 'some things' than others? A tentative answer is that Seth's perspective is increasingly that of a globalised Indian, viewing the modern world through a prism that may be multicolored but is, ultimately, made in Asia. His first book, the tale of an Indian in China, today seems uncannily predictive of current geopolitical and economic trends, with the twin ascent of India and China now a key theme of the emerging century. By now, he clearly feels entitled to interpret the West, to both Western and Eastern readers, with a confidence and authority that betoken an Asia and an India that no longer consider themselves subordinate.