



# Vkiram Seth: The Master of Art and Narrative

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## Abstract:

Vikram Seth is the master of art and narrative. He is a n outstanding story – teller. Seth has an immense creative variety. He is a man of varied mood. His range of writing cannot be limited to one or two subjects. He combines various parts of the story skillfully. One part comes to another very naturally. Simplicity and vernacular use of language are among the factors which attract mostly in his narration. His description has pictorial quality. In his stories as well as in his novels, there are descriptions from common human life of market, journey, temple, music, party and from nature and weather like scenes of day break and evening. To write an epic - narrative on India, he chooses the conventional mode and style of the Victorians. He wrote an epical novel ‘**A Suitable Boy**’, on the vast Indian canvas while for presenting the ennui and loneliness of the American and European societies. He wrote medium sized novels using verse form and interior monologue respectively in **The Golden Gate** and **an Equal Music**. Verse form was used to show the fast life of the Californians, and for describing the dull lugubrious life of western musicians. He used an appropriate prose form ‘interior monologue’. In his travelogue from **Heaven Lake**, he adopted vocative technique. This technique is varied and lucid. We find glimpse of all the aspects of life in Seth’s writing. He shows pleasant and unpleasant, beautiful and abhorrent aspects of life. His novels are not only for entertainment, they have special art form. These novels are integrated in form and everything which is superfluous is carefully avoided. Seth’s use of language in his novels is also unique. All his works employ flawless English but with and Indian subject in **A Suitable Boy** he used translation of words with very local dialect. In this way, a witty narrative based on heightened passion displays Seth’s unique hold on his subject and his medium.

## I. INTRODUCTION

No doubt, Vikram Seth is an outstanding story teller. He is a conscious and intelligent writer. To write an epic narrative on India, he chooses the conventional mode and style of the Victorians. He wrote medium size novels using ‘Words form’ and ‘Interior monologue’ respectively in *The Golden Gate* and *An equal music*. In his travelogue *From Heaven Lake*, to portray the inner and external realities of China and Tibetan culture, he adopted photographic technique. This technique is varied and lucid. Seth has an immense creative variety. He is a man of varied moods. So his range of writing cannot be limited to one or two subjects. The variety of levels which we see in his description is expressed by him:

These things now affect me more powerfully than I could ever have

Imagined, small blue hedgeflowers of a type I recognize but cannot

Name, Ian tana bushes, sal forests; water buffalo, trucks, copiously

Ornamented with religious symbols and hoelessly over – loaded with Worldly goods... Khaki - clad policeman ... the bright clothes

and familiar features of the people; a woman selling cucumber and

chutney to the passengers at a bus stop.<sup>1</sup>

Seth combines various parts of the story skillfully. One part comes to another very naturally. He is a very skilful artist and narrator. Simplicity and vernacular use of languages are among the factors which attract mostly in his narration. His description has pictorial quality. In his stories as well as in his novels, there

are descriptions from common human life of market, journey, temple, music, party and from nature and weather like scenes of day break and evening. The picture of China and Tibet projected by Seth in his book *From Heaven Lake* is true. He did work on rural folk and minority areas of both China and Tibet. His novel reflects both the good and bad side of China and Tibet, with its life and language. He gives a vivid description of the Grand Mosques in Xian this novel. This mosques is constructed in half Arabic and half Chinese style. Seth’s novel is not dealing with great and philosophical truths, it is dealing with day to day situations of common life. He presents the grim pictures of Cultural Revolution so daringly that readers are compelled to face this ultimate reality. One feature of Seth’s novel is his familiar experience with the historical consciousness which runs consistently through it. Describing the Cultural Revolution, Lamaism (Tibetan religion) and Buddhism, we get moment of historical consciousness. Seth describes family grief, sorrow and dejection. *From Heaven Lake* is an environmental fiction. An environmental fiction is one that deals with man’s social conditions, environment and nature. It is a relationship between man and nature man is always dependent on nature he cannot live without it. We find glimpses of all the aspects of contemporary life in Seth’s writing. He shows pleasant and unpleasant, beautiful and abhorrent aspects of life. The sufferings of the poor, their wretchedness, their inherent sympathy and social consciousness are portrayed in a real way. His novels are not only for entertainment, they have special art form. These novels are integrated in form and everything which is superfluous is carefully avoided. His range of craftsmanship and extraordinary felicity with descriptions, make him one of the finest writers of Indian English literature of today. The tourist

must play a role of tourist. He should accumulate and provide material evidence for later memorialization of the trip. Seth did the same at one point he says, “ I sometimes seem to myself to wonder around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias.” He also utilizes his role of traveler to speculate on India’s conditions. Seth established his status as a writer with his book. *The golden gate*. It is composed in verse and has a fresh sensibility and realistic imagery. It is an artistic and narrative triumph. As a novel of plot and characters, *The Golden Gate* is very thin indeed, in essence being little more than a succession of musical beats. The medium, Seth has chosen for this novels is sequential sonnets. Due to its very nature, it calls for a certain dignity of approach. Though the form of *The Golden Gate* is not in the nature of a deliberate about – turn from tradition, the choice is a natural choice, in view of the fascination of poetry over Seth. Being himself a poet, it was natural for him to turn to a poet for inspiration. The pioneer of the novel in verse was Byron. *Don Juan* written is picaresque novel in verse. Pushkin acknowledges Byron as the model for his *Eugene Onegin*, and likewise, Seth acknowledges Pushkin as the model for his *The Golden Gate*. “*Eugene Onegin* – like champagne/Its effervescence stirs my brains.” This novel in verse is an extraordinary book about ordinary life. “Award Citation comments, “In characterization, felicity of language, ingenious use of fantasy and above all a judicious manipulation of material, the work has acquired an outstanding stature as an English novel by an Indian author of our time.” In this novel Seth himself appears three times, twice as Kim Tarvesh, a marginal and rather mournful party – guest, graduate student (as in his actual life). But on the occasion where he makes an appearance without the nominal cover of an anagram, at the party given in his honour as the author of a Tibetan travelogue (From Heaven Lake) the editor of a publishing house holds him eagerly by the arm and says.

“Dear fellow.

What’s your next work?” “A novel” . . . “Great!

We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth”

“ . . . In verse.” I added. He turned yellow

“How marvelously quaint.” He said,

And subsequently cut me dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Seth used Shelleyian style in this novel to express loneliness, in varied moods and tones. Like Shelley, the hero of this novel John says, ‘I die! I fall! I faint! I sink!’ it reminds us of the line of Shelley, ‘I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed’. Seth used the sonnet form of Pushkin in this novel. Like Pushkin he used verse paragraph, the rhyme scheme, terminating in the witty way, telling end – couplet. The same sonnet form was used by Pushkin in his *Eugene Onegin*. It would be better to say if *Eugene Onegin* is compared with Champagne then *The Golden Gate* is compared with Californian wine. One can call *The Golden Gate* and encyclopedia of San Francisco which tell us what happens in California today would happen in the rest of the country tomorrow. And the is what Seth has done for the multiethnic, multi – faceted California (or America). The picture of ordinary life always present its joys and sorrow, pleasure and pain, but above all love including sexual love and those frustrations and thwarting of love which are expressed by bitterness, confusion, spiritual barrenness sometimes in tasteless, degrading sensuality, but more often in painful regret or pure

longing. One has to delve into Seth’s metrical and prosodic achievements in order to understand *The Golden Gate*. The most obvious things about the sonnet form of the novel is that it is not a classical sonnet. It is a sonnet like poem written in iambic tetrameter. It reduces the handicap that Indian English poetry often harbours under. It is difficult to write with meter in Indian English, it is equally difficult to write in free verse because free verse depends more on departure from regularity than conformity to it. The traditional sonnet was written in pentameter and the rhyme scheme employed was either abba abba cde cde (Petrarchan) or ab ab cd cd ef ef gg (Shakespearian). Seth’s rhyme scheme goes ababcc in the octave and eff egg in the sestet and this is rare in the sonnet form. Also, unlike the Elizabethan sonnet, which ends with a concluding couplet, in *The Golden Gate* there are times when the sentence does not end with the couplet. Rather, the sonnets functions as structural units marking one small step ahead in the narration. Seth’s use of verse as the staple means of expression in *The Golden Gate* could appear as a *tour de force*, but it appears to be the outcome of a deep choice. In term of an individual such as John that Seth takes upon himself to enact in his narrative in *The Golden Gate* is a drama of the self – conscious suffering of human mind. He is the best example of the dilemma of modern man. He has all material acquisitions yet he is lost and lonely. In tone, the novel lighthearted and parodic. In this novel parody is present in the choice and elaboration of form and then, in style, treatment and technique. In a verse narrative, the writer does not give emphasis on characters. He gives emphasis on the sequence of events but Seth does the opposite. He makes his character life like and interesting. He presents the psychological possibilities that shape the behavior of his character in realistic manner. Seth’s *A Suitable boy* also proved to another landmark in his carrier. It is a presentation of Nehruvian narrative of Indian state and society. He creates a state ‘Poorava Pradesh’ which has several historical features of the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the 1950’s. Seth assumes the role of a mythopoeist and creates new myths to land his imaginary city some semblance of the Puranic antiquity of the cities such Ujjaini, Prayag, Mathura, Kashi and others. In this novel he gives some personal glimpses. He introduces an imaginary young writer Amit Chatterjee who like Seth has already won fame and prizes, and is writing a sprawling novel in the Indian context. *A Suitable Boy* is aptly described by the metaphor of a banyan tree. Like a Banyan Tree, this novel sprouts, grows and spread itself in different branches and roots which go under the ground, appear above the surface and then disappear again. Seth used another metaphor from music to show his concept of novel. Amit says to Dr. Ila Chattopadhyay, “I’ve always felt that the performance of *raag* resembles a novel - or at least, the kind the of novel I am attempting to write.”<sup>3</sup> His views on the novel remind us of *Khayal* in which *Alaap* (modulation of the voice in singing) continues for sometimes. In this novel the story moves quite slowly in the beginning. Gradually the chain of events and stories unfold themselves. It seems as if the novelist has lost control over some of the characters and incidence, but suddenly all complication lead to resolution. In this novel Seth uses the device of ‘translation’ of words and expressions. He uses political slogans in local languages.

‘Baitar ka MLA kaisa Ho?’ cried someone from the podium.

‘Ram lal Sinha Jaisa Ho.’ Shouted the crowd.<sup>4</sup>

He translates the above slogan in to English. To add flavor of Bengali in narrative he uses some Bengali words. Like other Indian writers he frequently ignore the rules of grammar but he gave new words and filled the English language with vivacious pros. *A Suitable Boy* is written in a pros style which is easy to read. It is a monumental work which is clearly said in a socio – historical context. Both the title and the opening of the novel pose a question to the readers mind. Haresh is only one of the suitable boys. Whose Lata choses a suitable boy. In the case of style it is evident that this novel is written with quite an unobtrusive style which Seth attributes to his taste and belief. The search for the perfect groom is the main plot and all the sub plots are artistically interwoven with this plot. Seth says “this novel linear partly because it is multi linear. There are several plots in it, and they help the main plot to stand on firmer footing.” Seth’s *An Equal Music* for its distinctive features characteristics, is surprisingly different from all his previous works. The subject of this novel is Western Europe’s supreme culture achievement: Classical music. This novel is at heart an anxious book, one where the nerve-wrecked world of the key players spills over to create an happiness in the readers own mind. The technique used in this novel is first person narrative. Seth used this technique thinking that through this mode he will get the language of music which is suitable to the point of view of musician. Second, the idea of telling an intense love story in the first person held a great appeal to him. In its musical core, the novel is Eurocentric and each aspect of it such as plot, characterization and theme be speaks of an authorly consciousness that is completely in central of the narrative it commands and constructs. However, despite Seth’s lucid descriptions and extensive detailing, all musical technicalities are not comprehensible to the lay reader. This novel begins with the epigraph from John Donne and the title of this novel is also taken from this epigraph. This epigraph has the word, ‘equal’ repeated five times. Setting the tone for the music of this novel, the sense of equanimity or harmony is used as a major trope. Seth does not treat the musical instruments as lifeless objects. They express their happiness; they grumble and even purr at some suggestions. Even the statue of Bethoven looks as if it is shivering from cold. Michael, the protagonist of the novel, can release himself only through the language of music. It is difficult to polarize love and music in this novel. Through music they perceive, touch, hear, smell and taste the milieu in which they live. Seth’s language of music in *An Equal Music* can covey every minutia of the art form. In this way a witty narrative based on heightened passion displays Vikram Seth’s unique hold on his subject and his medium.

## II. REFERENCES

- [1]. Vikram Seth, *From Heaven Lake* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 173.
- [2]. Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate* op. cit, p. 100.
- [3]. Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 394.
- [4]. Ibid., p. 1173.