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## Emergence of Vikram Seth as a writer

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### Abstract

In the present times, Vikram Seth is in the news as the newspaper headlines and articles rave about the emergence of him as a writer. He has experimented his art with different genres of writing, but it is his novels that have brought him undying fame. Seth began his literary career as a common writer. He prefers to write his own experiences of the foreign cultures without being alien to the locale. In Seth's works, the culture of different countries always looks true. It is as a poet that he first made his mark in the literary world. It can be said that his *A Suitable Boy* is not necessarily his first novel, for *The Golden Gate*, indeed, is a landmark of Seth's literary career. Seth's *The Humble Administrator's Garden* is one of the best collections of poems by an Indian in English. However, *The Golden Gate* confirms Seth's arrival as a star in the literary firmament. As an emerging artist, he notices myriad problems which trouble the contemporary society, and so he also feels distress at them. However, he does not criticise them bitterly as is done by Swift, or conjure up pathos like Dickens.

Vikram Seth, as an emerging writer, treats a number of themes which primarily form the universe of his fiction. His preoccupations are varied: loneliness, alienation, love and passion, music, marriage and family, changing times, corruption, realism and nuclear insanity and disarmament, etc. The world of Seth is replete with frustration, destruction and disappointment. As a writer, he seems to be interested in fulfilled love that leads to marriage and family.

This paper deals with Vikram Seth, as an emerging writer, portrays the life in his novels in all its true colours. The diversity of themes, the technical innovativeness and the linguistic virtuosity are the special characteristics of Vikram Seth as a novelist. In deploying the language resource, Vikram Seth is undeniably the most outstanding writer.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, themes and techniques, transnational, polyglot

### Introduction

In the present times, Vikram Seth is in the news as the newspaper headlines and articles rave about the emergence of him as a writer. Seth is a brilliant writer and a master of many literary genres. He is a great writer who is worth reading and paying attention to in spite of the money that he seemingly makes with his writing. He has experimented his art with different genres of writing, but it is his novels that have brought him undying fame. The diversity and range of his works make him a rare writer. Seth has taken modern Indian English writing beyond the range of national boundaries with his appropriation of literary traditions from all corners of the globe. His purpose has been to absorb the best in the world culture and then to unite it into his writing. Seth has been quartered among India, China, England, and California. He has not only lived in these countries but also assimilated the culture of the countries in his personality as well as in his art. This assimilation enables him to successfully venture into the arena of global fiction, soaring higher than just Indian fiction. Seth began his literary career as a common writer, but his creativity caused him to soar higher and higher and reached the pinnacle of success. For Seth, writing is a simple business that has moved from its primitive course by an obsession with style and modernist knowingness. Vikram Seth himself says:

*"I don't read lot of modern fiction, but it seems to me that too much of it is a thesis fodder. Since the rise of the academic critic, writing has had to have an increasing sophistication, as if subjects such as love, ambition and family are worthy only at the airport novel. Writers come out of university courses and carry into their writing academic corners rather than the corners of the general reader."* (Gavron, Jeremy April 7)

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Seth is sure about his priorities as an emerging artist. He prefers to write his own experiences of the foreign cultures without being alien to the locale. His consciousness of this trend makes his work incomparable. In Seth's works, the culture of different countries always looks true, whether it is a tale of Modern America, the world of Europe, or the tableau of Post-Independence India. Seth believes that the characters should ring true to the people's lives they portray. He enjoys imposing qualities of common men's lives in his characters. Being impressed by Seth's writing R.K. Narayan says:

*"I realized, here was a genuine writer with the right values, gift and outlook, not writing in order to blow off steam or to reform society but a genuine artist who takes pleasure in writing." (Interview with India Today)*

His writing is like fresh and pure air, which gives relief from the suffocating style of his contemporaries.

The extraordinary aspect of his writing is his approach to blend the poetic form with the prosaic expression. It is as a poet that he first made his mark in the literary world. It can be said that his *A Suitable Boy* is not necessarily his first novel, for *The Golden Gate*, indeed, is a landmark of Seth's literary career, as it developed a new confidence in him to write novels. In fact, it is responsible for bringing him to the attention of the reading public even if one may believe that *The Humble Administrator's Garden* is one of the best collections of poems by an Indian in English. Indeed *The Golden Gate* confirms Seth's arrival as a star in the literary firmament. It is one of the characteristics of Seth's writings that one cannot label him as anything at all except a craftsman. It is a connecting link between poetry and prose, as Seth remarks:

*"I didn't know I was a novelist until I wrote The Golden Gate." (Writers on Writing Radio Series Transcript).*

*The Golden Gate* is a story about the popular culture of America's Silicon Valley (the great hub of computer professionals) and is written entirely in metered, rhyming sonnets.

After *The Golden Gate*, Seth published three more collections of poetry: *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, and *Three Chinese Poets*. The first and the last ones deal with Seth's association with America, China in addition to India and show in him the signs of maturity. *All You Who Sleep Tonight* deals with Seth's personal themes of love, friendship, memory, detachment, exile and loneliness in a foreign land. This book gave a new turn to Seth's oeuvre, as he expressed his emotions into words.

However, Seth surprised his readership worldwide with his next work in prose *A Suitable Boy*. The monumental success of this work provided him the transition from poet to novelist with seemingly effortless ease and elegance. Epical in size and scale, *A Suitable Boy* is set in the newly independent India of the 1950s, populated by a massive cast of characters – four joint families, their friends, neighbours, acquaintances, servants, lovers and sundry others. Prerana Sinha comments:

*"Seth's actual popularity came through his magnum opus A Suitable Boy, based on India in 1950s...the novel*

*made him a star in the literary firmament. It was an outright success. It made a history of its kind, just as the author had made in his prolific career. However, this intense author had to face lots of difficulties especially with his had which for some time had refused to function along with his laptop and printer which true to its nature would often not behave properly. Moreover he had greatest difficulty with the foreign publishers who were dependent on Penguin India's typesetting and film and the unavoidable delay that was becoming difficult to control from India." (Vikram Seth: The Suitable Writer 23)*

*A Suitable Boy* is a Tolstovian prose epic about the Indian life in the wake of Independence. This mega novel is a work of art *sui generis*, difficult to shelve into a convenient slot. It is a proof of Seth's being "a prose novelist of great strength and vision, a novelist of quality and commitment endowed with a capacity to sweep the great tradition of the novel in English into his broad perspective" (Kaur 202) indeed it is an Austenian fable of love and marriage and a social fable focusing on India's composite culture. As the title shows, the novel is the search of a mother for 'a suitable boy' for her daughter. It also focuses on the effects of the 1947 India-Pakistan partition and the frictions of religious conflict. The novel takes its action in 1951-52 and expresses a careful researched account of political and social life in India after Independence. And it is the year when Seth was born. *A Suitable Boy*, being a mega novel, can be compared with a banyan tree that has numerous roots and shoots. According to Seth, six years were spent in writing this novel and another three to recover from it. (Interview with rediff.com). and it is obvious that he did not write anything else in the years which followed this novel, except the libretto for an opera. This novel fetched Seth a number of awards such as Irish Times International Fiction Prize in 1993, Commonwealth Writers Prize and W.H. Smith Literary Award in 19

As a novelist, Vikram Seth displays a consciousness that synthesizes different cultural encounters. His first novel *The Golden Gate* is purely Californian, his second one, the mega novel *A Suitable Boy* is absolutely Indian, and his third novel *An Equal Music* is European. In this way, Seth has written three novels about three different places and cultures of different countries. This is the hallmark of his genius that the world belongs to him, and his genius belongs to the world.

Though, when one casts a cursory look at Vikram Seth's works, one finds that his writings are authentically Indian yet, like a large number of nineteenth century Indian writers in English, the intellectual and creative milieu Seth has drawn upon is largely of an international variety.

Vikram Seth's animal fables entitled *Beastly Tales from Here and There* add adequately to his list of varied genres and works, pointing to his predilection for an ancient art of story-telling which dates back 200 B.C. It was a time when tales of *Panchatantra* was originated in our country. Quite interestingly, these tales have had an all-encompassing influence over Asian as well as European tales. In fact, his animal fables in verse have had a magical charm on young and old alike. The familiar characters are quirky, comical and always funny. Of the ten beastly tales, two have been taken from India, two from China, two from Greece, two from Ukraine and two as the author puts it, came directly to

him from the 'Land of Gup' i.e. they seem to have been originated in his imagination. This clearly shows that Vikram Seth had versatility as a poet and that he can try on the most exceptional and queer clothes without damaging his poetic quality.

Thus, the above mentioned works of different genres definitely substantiate the craftsmanship of Vikram Seth and establish him as the leading writer of the present times. In an interview, regarding the divergent genres and forms of writing.

Further, in an interview with Meenakshi Mukherjee on television, Seth frankly owns that he is just a writer, not an Indian or commonwealth or any other kind of writer. However, in the introduction to his travel book *From Heaven Lake*, he remarks that he is an Indian. He is an artist who never lets either his culture or his language or any form or his nationality to come in the way of his writings. For example, he not only selects the Indian lexicon characters for his Indian tales but for the American and European backdrop too, he gets success in creating appropriate sensibilities. The central character in the Californian society in *The Golden Gate* is a solitary, melancholic character which is quite unlike the Indian protagonists in *A Suitable Boy*, for they are inextricably linked to the large community, the clan and the family tree they belong to.

### Conclusion

Thus, Vikram Seth is an international writer and therefore he does not restrict himself to any particular location or genre. According to Namita Gokhale, Seth, as an international writer should be appreciated as "a writer about human beings, not as a peddler of Indian exotica...deeply rooted in his specific Indian identity, Vikram Seth is yet a citizen of the world in the best sense," (Cited in Multiple Locations 34)

Nevertheless, for Indians like us, whatever be the location, genre or form of writing, Vikram Seth can be read as a writer, and so, it can be concluded that he is undeniably a writer of Indian Writing in English. In this connection Anita Desai's comment is worth quoting:

"Seth belongs to the generation of practitioners of Indian writing in English, born after the Independence who has attracted attention in India and abroad and even made the reading and writing of novels a respectable pursuit." (Sitting Pretty 26)

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