

Vikram Seth: His Protean Genius

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Abstract

Vikram Seth is an Indian English writer who has achieved critical acclaim and several prizes for his body of work. The remarkable thing about Seth is that he has never been limited by genre, and is at ease while writing novels, poems, novels in verse, travelogues, biographies, and even a libretto for an opera. With his commendable literary output he has captured and colonized the fictional space of the West, and along with a handful of his contemporaries, he has put India on the world stage of literary accomplishment. This paper looks into his protean genius, a genius that can lend and adapt itself to the diverse genres aforementioned.

Keywords

Polymath, Global Culture, Immigrant Connoisseur, Protean

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The name Vikram Seth conjures up an image of an erudite cosmopolite, one who also juggles words with such consummate ease that he has almost single-handedly reinvented the contemporary literary scene. As an accomplished artist, the *piece de resistance* of Seth's style is his inimitable blending of what constitutes the common man's bread with literary manna. In a similar vein to the 18th c. gentlemen Addison and Steele, Seth's endeavor has been to free the contemporary novel of its seriousness, its high-brow contempt for the simple passions, its increasingly academic concerns with critics and deconstructionists - in which that unimportant entity, the ordinary reader, is all but forgotten - in order to make literature undauntingly accessible to the general reader. Commendably enough, in spite of Seth's accordingly lucid, almost transparent style, his work easily manages to surpass prevailing literary standards, exhibiting a timeless charm that assures Seth his place in posterity.

As a polymath, Seth is impossible to pigeonhole as a writer, even more so because India has not been for Seth the site for fashioning his identity as an author. Unlike Rushdie, who has quite consciously set himself up as the chronicler of the subcontinent, Seth has followed a very different trajectory. Each of his works represents the culmination of an experience that grows out of his sojourn to a foreign land. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Seth takes time out to absorb a foreign culture before venturing to write about it, and consequently, his writing always rings true, no matter how alien the locale. Even in the case of *A Suitable Boy*, Seth did not take on the subcontinent before he was good and ready, aware that just being an Indian did not make him intrinsically qualified to write about India. In this respect, Seth is quite different from contemporary Indian writers, for he does not demand any indulgence for being Indian, nor does he pander to the West's penchant for lapping up Indian exotica. Seth's writing is also refreshingly free from angst over issues about post-colonialism and neither does it hammer on *ad nauseam* about cultural dislocation, Seth being quite confidently rooted in his rootlessness.

As noted earlier, Seth's traveling has been the inspiration for most of his work. His stay in California was the impetus for *The Golden Gate* (1986), his stay in China spawned both *From Heaven Lake* (1983) and *Three Chinese Poets* (1992), England has been the formative venue for his early poetry, and more recently the setting for *An Equal Music* (1999).

In the travelogue *From Heaven Lake*, Seth harnesses his remarkable power of observation and teams it with the artistic sensibility to take the reader on an enthralling journey through the most mysterious and least explored region of Asia.

Seth's training as an economist imparts an additional dimension to the narrative, for he sees the region not only through the eye of a traveler but also in its wider economic and political significance. Though not consciously modeled with any literary predecessors in mind, *From Heaven Lake* is an ideal piece of writing as travelogues go, delineating the geographical, socio-economic, and cultural features of the region in their totality, without being clouded by issues of identity, which do not matter much to Seth. The travelogue is especially remarkable for exhibiting a perfect balance between the elements that comprise pure travel writing and those that do not, alternating between objective perception and subjective delineation of the sights and sounds encountered during the journey.

In his other book inspired by his stay in China, *Three Chinese Poets*, Seth displays his conscientiousness as an artist, and his remarkable skill in overcoming the difficulties encountered in translating from the Chinese. He takes pains to explain his methodology, cites sources, is faithful to the uniqueness of Chinese pronunciation, adds notes to some of the poems for greater comprehension, and is altogether determined to open up this ancient tradition of poetry to the reader in as verbatim a rendition as possible. The book has been offered to connoisseurs of poetry in a spirit of thanksgiving for the pleasure Seth has received from reading works in translation, a pleasure he now wishes to reciprocate. The poets translated are Wang Wei, Du Fu, and Li Bai, and separated as one is from these poets by a gap of 1200 years, Seth reveals their world to the reader in this exquisite transliteration.

Notwithstanding the fact that Seth has been in the limelight more for his prose than for his poetry, he is by predilection primarily a poet. This is evinced even by his prose, in which there is no mistaking the poetic sensibility: the eye for detail, the narrating of experience as an event, the ability to discern the beauty inherent in even the most commonplace things. His three collections of poetry – *Mappings*(1981), *The Humble Administrator's Garden*(1985), and *All You Who Sleep Tonight*(1990), all have a common thread running through them: they are all intensely personal and subjective, and consequently, autobiographical to a great extent. In addition, they are deeply introspective, and in them appears the only hint of an expatriate sensibility that Seth's writing reveals.

Seth's poetic technique entails an insistence on the directness of utterance and the harnessing of razor-sharp images as a means to achieve cohesion and coherence, making his style uniquely attuned to sensory perception. His keen vision penetrates to the nature of things in their totality, and he is a virtuoso at presenting this knowledge in a few bold strokes, unadorned, yet unspeakably

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beautiful in its bare reality. As a modern poet, Seth has no use for the “poetic inversions of Toru Dutt, the saccharine sweetness of Sarojini Naidu’s verse, or the Miltonian pomposity of Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*. To him, the poem itself is a mode of experiencing language.”¹

Drawing naturally as Seth does on an international milieu, his poetic output is authenticated in its awareness of more than one tradition. Also, he is part of a contemporary trend among poets towards formalism. His stay at Stanford University was influenced by poets Timothy Steele and Donald Davie, as also by Dana Gioia, who was also there at the time and whose “*Can Poetry Matter?*”² heralded the doom of the confessional, anything goes poetry that was being churned out of American Universities. Even a cursory reading of Seth’s poetry will reveal that here is an artist who reveres the art of poetry: as if writing well really mattered. In addition, Seth does not subscribe to the neuroticism most writers display when questioned about their literary influences. He unselfconsciously recognizes and admires his literary predecessors, and his respect for literary tradition would have delighted Eliot.

Seth’s facility with rhyme and meter is evinced again in *The Golden Gate* and in his book of fables, *Beastly Tales from Here And There* (1992). In the latter, Seth appropriates fables from around the world, retelling them in verse in the tradition of La Fontaine. The book is remarkable for its existence on two very different levels: firstly as a collection of fables *per se*, providing delightful reading – amusing, enlightening, and intellectually stimulating all at once, and secondly, as the stories unfold, the tales become metaphors for human life, as the beastly characters inhabiting them display quasi-human traits that take the tales to a deeper level. Seth does not always furnish the fables with a moral, and this makes *Beastly Tales* a realistic mirror in which the ironies of life are apparent – where the slow and steady does not always win the race. Seth makes the tales his own, altering the traditional storyline, bestowing upon these fables his particular brand of contemporary experience, speech, and idiom. These tales grow in stature from being mere fables, as they address the dilemmas of humanity. Yet, and this is their salient feature, they can stand on their own as mere fables, for there is joy and fun within them and animal behavior has been studied and delineated with an amused perception that stuns by its accuracy. The rhymes glue the reader instantly, the stories unfolding almost without the conscious passage of time, which speaks volumes for Seth’s adroit handling of the verse medium. With this collection, Seth has earned his place in the prestigious lineage of Longfellow and Poe.

The novel-in-verse that has been hailed as Seth's *tour-de-force*, *The Golden Gate*, is very far from being a misguided attempt at professional *hara-kiri*. The accolades have not stopped pouring in, fourteen years after the novel has been written, and it is now as much a part of the literary tradition of America as a classic like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The strength of the book lies in the fact that the issues it treats of are of the kind that will not pass away with time: they will continue to speak to each successive generation. In this work, Seth's mastery over style and diction cannot go unnoticed. The unabated popularity of the novel is not due merely to the novelty of its expression – it is in large measure due to the novelty of its telling: the easy, narrative, camaraderie style, the ready admittance, and justification of using an obsolete form, the humor tempered with compassion that bathes the entire work in a gentle light, the sartorial wit, the easy, effortless elegance that permeates the descriptions of even the most mundane turn-of-events. One gets the feeling that there is a writer who is true of our time and yet elevated above it due to his faculty of perceptive farsightedness. Critics deride *The Golden Gate* for being hedonistic but on a closer look, it becomes apparent that not only does the novel argue against a hedonistic lifestyle, it also manages to make good sense of the chaos inherent in every stratum of a fast-paced culture, even suggesting remedial measures.

A Suitable Boy (1993), for many reasons, has been perceived as Seth's *chef-d'oeuvre*, his "three-and-a-half pounds of perfection"³, as Jonathan Yardley, so aptly put it. The chief strength of the book is that in spite of being a literary mammoth at 1300+ pages, it is so accessible to the reader that even after it ends, the reader has not had enough and wants to know what happens next. The narrative is bracketed by two weddings, and in between, Seth *creates a world*, to borrow a term usually reserved for Jane Austen. The sheer breadth of the novel encompasses parliamentary speeches, the trauma of partition, the zamindari abolition bill, communal tensions, and the flavor of India's first general election to the scandalously forward lifestyle of upper-crust Calcutta, university life, the fading world of ghazals, and courtesans, and the comic world of the Chatterjee's and Mrs. Rupa Mehra. Yet, despite the grand scale on which the novel is conceived, Seth's focus is on the search for a suitable boy for Lata, and on the portrayal of family dramas. The novel is mercifully free from the overt nationalism that is the bane of so many other novels dealing with the same theme: life in post-independence India. The political background of the novel is incidental, serving only to furnish the backdrop of the main theme. Seth does not mean *A Suitable Boy* to be The Great Indian Novel in the sense that it is not

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meant to serve as a metaphor for nationalistic sentiments or as a launching pad for a diatribe against colonialism. It is to this freedom from tenseness that *A Suitable Boy* owes its light touch and it is for this reason that reading the novel is far from being the potentially monolithic task it might appear to be.

In *An Equal Music*, his most recent work, Seth takes on Western Europe, writing about a love affair between two classical musicians. The novel is compelling and passionate without being sentimental, and therein lies its appeal. Not every writer is up to the task of tackling the themes of love and music as expertly as Seth has done in this novel.

The diversity and range of Seth's work make him somewhat of an enigma. Ten works, and so many genres in his oeuvre: perhaps his early training in Indian classical music can furnish some clues about his style. Having once mastered the basic formal structure, the *raga*, and an aspiring artist is free, even encouraged, to experiment with variations, and originality, assuming that it is aesthetically pleasing, becomes the hallmark of genius. In a literary context, Seth's innovations with form can be likened to variations of the basic *raga* he has mastered, the art of writing well, whether it be prose or poetry. Although much has been made of Seth's experimentation with different genres, it stands that Seth writes as and how the muse takes him, and the different genres are more a spontaneous unfolding of his protean talent than lucubrated attempts at diversity. The milieu Seth draws from is as wide and varied as his experiences and he writes as and what pleases him, without worrying about his image as a writer. As he says, ".....dear though the reader might be, I'd be silly to cater to what the reader wanted"⁴. It is this fidelity to experience and to predilection that accounts for much of the pleasure in reading Seth. Whatever be the externals, the basic ingredient of his writing is a wholeness that is not easy to miss. He combines the sensitivity of a poetic soul with the narrative dexterity of a skilled raconteur. Another strength of his style is that he does not constantly try to force the reader to appreciate his command over the language.

To sum up, Seth is the immigrant connoisseur who has mastered a world alien to him on his own terms, effectively colonizing the fictional space of the West. He illustrates the act of belonging to a global culture, bearing out Michel de Certeau's conceptualization of *Plural Culture*⁵ as an ongoing struggle against the imposition of a hegemonic cultural norm. For a writer who counts such diverse figures as Pushkin, T'ang dynasty Chinese poets, Chaucer, the Elizabethans, Tennyson, novelists like Hardy, Austen, George Eliot, R.K.Narayan, and modern poets like Timothy Steele and Philip Larkin among

his literary influences, Seth's wide-ranging technique is conceivably not so surprising. And perhaps, like Goethe, Seth would prefer us to say about him that he has no style, only styles.

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