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VIKRAM SETH: A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth is a postmodern Indian writer who is a master of many genres. He is a transnational writer having written his immense variety of literary works while living in three continents. He is a writer of the world whose works address different countries and locations. He is a master of his art and can write polished poetry with the same ease as he writes a novel, a travelogue, a libretto or a children's book. Although he writes standard international English but he is a multilingual polyglot who is equally at ease with a variety of languages like Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, Urdu and Hindi. For him the world is his stage and its people his characters no matter to which nation, colour or background they belong. Seth is not just restricted to themes of cultural displacement, search for roots or diasporic dislocations but is a universal writer and writes as the muse takes him. He once said, "if you are tapped on the shoulder and inspired to do something, you don't say, 'my training isn't in this'. I just let the imagination work". (Gupta p. 11)

This article is an attempt to highlight Vikram Seth as a citizen of the world. His international image is reflected in the variety of his works and diverse themes. His works reach an audience beyond geographical or ideological boundaries. His is the world and he belongs to the world.

Key words: Multiculturalism, transnational, multilingual, nostalgia, polyglot.

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The Indian Diaspora comprises of a variety of writers with a multiplicity of religions, languages and cultures. The forms of writing by the writers in the large literary commonwealth of diasporic Indian writing cannot be homogenized. Geographic borders have always been considered as points where different national identities used to interact and immigration posts were used to check their identities. But today the writers within the new global migrancy are in need of redefining the spaces they are living in. To understand the identity of any writer who has experienced global migrancy one

needs to go through the life history and geographic movement of that particular writer.

Vikram Seth is an internationally renowned writer. He first introduced himself to the world as a poet with *Mappings* (1980). He came into prominence with his next collection of poems entitled *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985) for which he was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia. *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990) and *Summer Requiem: books of poems* (2015) are also amongst his famous collection of poems. In 1986 he published his very popular novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, a novel consisting of 590

tetrameter sonnets with the rhyme scheme aBaBccDDeFFeGG which was inspired by Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. His other major works include the following:

A Suitable Boy (1993), a tale of a Hindu family looking for a suitable husband for their daughter. The setting is post-independence India of the 1950's. This is the longest single-volume novel ever published in English.

An Equal Music (1999) is European and is completely steeped in the tradition of the British novel which Seth has written as a cultural insider.

From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983) is a travelogue which won him Thomas Cook Travel Book Award.

The number of awards he has achieved adds to his highly acclaimed status as a writer. Among these are Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) for *Humble Administrator's Garden* in 1985, Sahitya Akademi Award for the *Golden Gate* in 1988, Irish Times International Fiction Prize for *A Suitable Boy* in 1993, Commonwealth Writers Prize for *A Suitable Boy*, WH Smith Literary Award for *A Suitable Boy*, Crossword Book Award for *An Equal Music* in 1999, Order of the British Empire, Officer in 2001, EMMA (BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award) for Best Book/Novel for *An Equal Music*, Pravasi Bharatiya Samman in 2005, Padma Shri in Literature and Education and The 25 Greatest Global Living Legends In India in 2013.

His multicultural milieu adds to his artistic skills which has helped him in bringing his English writings on to the stage of World Literature. Seth is a master of many genres. He writes a polished poetry as easily as he writes a children's book, a libretto or a travelogue. To add to his account is a book of translation of Chinese poems and various essays. He is a master of his art.

In the very beginning of his career Seth has objected to being categorized. In a television interview with Meenakshi Mukherjee he said that he was just a writer, not an Indian or a Commonwealth or any other kind of writer. (Prasad p. 15)

His works are based on and address different locations. To understand his true identity one needs to have a look at his life history and get an idea of the extent of his mobility. His works gives

a feel and rhythm of a particular place at a particular time. Seth could easily move from medieval Chinese Poetry to San Francisco Yuppie-dom and from the Hindi belt in North India to the world of Britain and Vienna. This is the essence of his multiculturalism. If *The Golden Gate* is pure California, *A Suitable Boy* is North Indian and *An Equal Music* is British. He is a genius; his is the world and he belongs to the world. To quote Seth,

"The wish to write about is such a rare and mysterious feeling that it is pointless to pre-empt or constrain it by notions of subject or geography or genre... For good or ill, one must take one's visions as they come and be thankful for those that survive". (Gupta p. 11)

Transnationalism is an important aspect of his writing. He is not obsessed with the theme of cultural displacement, diasporic dislocations or search for roots. He is one of those privileged people who are fortunate enough to travel and make the world their own. He is the first truly transnational writer. He writes in standard International English and writes it well. Seth has experienced a significant amount of inter-cultural mobility. Seth has lived in three continents and has written a variety of literary works. As Seth says, "*I have been quartered between California, China, India and England*". (Gupta pg. 8) His interest in these cultures is not of a mere observer who only wants to write but it is rather of an interested learner who wants to get into the essence of all.

Vikram Seth takes his writing as a challenge and enjoys writing about diverse themes and places.

"I know from an editor's point of view or a publisher's point of view it's easier to slot me into a particular niche. But I know that I would be bored unless I wrote a book that in some sense was a challenge. And this might mean I vary the form by writing a poem or a play or a novel. Or set the stories in different countries or write in the first person as opposed to the third or in the present tense as opposed to the past or a very long novel as opposed to a short one". (Mohanty p. 248)

His novel *An Equal Music* (1999) comes under the category of international literature. This novel is set in England which is outside his natal order. Through this novel Seth eschews his localized status and set himself as a writer of transnational identity. The story runs through London, Vienna and Venice but the essence of the novel is music. It is a story of a musician Michael Holme and his recovery of the self. The novel is about the philosophy of universal humanism. The novel does not talk about the cultural gaps or explore the issue of ambivalence. Rather *An Equal Music* could be read as an attempt to interconnect different boundaries of nationalism.

According to Bikhu Pareikh, "*the Indian migrant can share and co-exist in several homes simultaneously, and therefore distances need not necessarily lead to sense of fragmentation and loss*". (Prasad p. 176). These lines challenge the traditional view of geographical rootlessness leading to alienation. For instance in the case of Vikram Seth one could find him taking pleasure as a cultural traveler, he enjoys his experiences of having multiple homes. He is a universal writer and is honest enough to follow his inspiration. Seth once pointed that, "*If you are tapped on the shoulder and inspired to do something, you don't say, 'my training isn't in this'. I just let the imagination work*". (Gupta p. 11) He is a writer of different genres and writes as the muse takes him.

Namita Gokhale asserts that Vikram Seth is international and 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 . . . His genius should be evaluated in his control over his material, and in creating a credible world-in-itself which he can co-habit and explore" (qtd. in Prasad: 183).

Vikram Seth seems to be at home at any part of the world. His account of travel from his famous travelogue *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* is an apt example of him being a citizen of the world. Ascending into the lost caves in Chinese temples or wading in to underground canals, playing basketball with officials or Frisbee

with waiters, getting tranquility from the Chinese shrine and mosque and enjoying the picnic with the Tibetan family. All these instances show and address him as a person who can easily assimilate with the world and make it their own.

He wrote this travelogue on his journey to his hometown Delhi from Beijing via Tibet in 1981. Before setting out to Beijing, he enjoys a valedictory meal with a friend which includes some Californian wine. This makes him nostalgic for California and he recalls:

"...I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of England, where I ate dalmoth and dreamed of Delhi. What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias." (Seth p. 35)

Besides the literary value and the intrinsic details he has given in his travelogue, one could also find his crafty observations which are very charming. The following lines bear ample testimony of his human bonding irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity or creed:

Here we three, cooped, alone,
Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues. (Seth p. 98)

The concept of 'home' is different for international writers as they are caught in a different social construct of a new world.

"Today's identities are no longer about passports and birth certificates. In a world without barriers you belong to where you are" asserts Namita Gokhale. (Pandurang p. 21)

Makarand Paranjpe argues that Seth "*is an international writer who has been both an NRI and RNI (resident non-Indian) but whether he has ever been just an Indian is rather doubtful*". (Pandurang p. 23). He cannot be labeled as a writer of a particular genre or nation. His international image, reflected in his creative works doesn't allow us to do

so. When he was accused of not having found his voice, he replied, “*the fact is that at different stages of your life and under the influence of different inspirations you write different things.*” (Gupta pg. 11)

His next work, *Two Lives* which is mostly biography and partly autobiography is set mostly in Germany and England. It chronicles the lives of two of the relatives of Seth, his great uncle Shanti Seth (Shanti Uncle) and his German-Jewish wife Hennerle Caro (Aunt Henny). The book inhabits an intercultural space (Anglo-Indian-German). Shanti and Vikram Seth belongs to Indian culture by birth, to British and German culture because of language and residence; Henny is German Jewish by birth and native language, British by residence and adoptive language and Indian by marriage. The multi cultural and multi-lingual go hand in hand. *Two Lives* can be seen as a work of literature which affirms the vital need of coexistence and understanding of individuals and peoples no matter to which nationality or ethnicity they belong. Seth closes his *Two Lives* with these lines;

‘May we not be as foolish as we are almost bound to be. If we cannot eschew hatred, atleast let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other.’ (Seth p. 499)

Seth’s perspective is that of a globalised Indian. He views the world through a prism which may be multicolored but is one. He himself is a polyglot and a multi-lingual. He has a mastery over a variety of languages such as Welsh, German and French, Mandarin, English, Urdu and Hindi. He no longer perceives his writing as Third World, subaltern or post colonial but a literature of the world. Seth treats the world as his stage and all the people in it as his characters. He doesn’t care to which nation, colour or background they belong. His work reaches an audience beyond spatial or ideological location. With each work he has moved to a different geographical and cultural location. He is an international writer who belongs to the world and thus can be called a citizen of the world.

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