

## VIKRAM SETH : WRITER OF MULTIVALENT IDENTITY

**Dr. Rajula Albert**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Govt. Deg. College Hatta,  
Damoh (M.P.)

Multivalence according to Postmodern Dictionary means *having various meanings or values*.<sup>1</sup> The term "Multivalence" is derived from chemistry, where it denominates those atoms capable of combining with other atoms in multiple combinations, or having many degrees of valency. Univalent atom possess a single combining characteristic; and the word "ambivalent" has the same etymological root. Univalence in fiction is essentially what we mean when we speak of authorial intrusiveness, or any other device by which a single, unambivalent narrative stance dominates, and thus embodies the values of the book. Narrative ambivalence occurs when several perspectives merge, creating moral confusion. The multiple perspectives on moral reality offered by multivalent art transcend both the sanctity accorded univalence and the frenzied ambivalence of such writers as William Burrough.

One of the notable phenomena of twentieth century fiction is the extent to which it has become extended. Forster gave the term "novel" one meaning when he defined it as a prose work in fiction of a certain extent. But many novels have moved beyond "certain" to become "indefinite". For since the novel has become psychological and open, the novelist who would terminate the stream of his fiction finds that it has no necessary ending, that it goes on multiplying perspectives and possibilities often into several or many volumes.

"Multivalence" as a double edged term is applied equally to multiple ways of viewing and to multiple ways of being seen. Works like the 'Sound and the Fury' or 'Absalom, Absalom!' or 'As I Lay Dying', for example, offers a series of partial views of events and each view is both compelling and undercut to a large extent.

Though employing different narrative techniques, multivalent works offer a multiplicity of unique perspectives. Each perspective is self-conscious and inadequate, but is still possible way of envisaging a reality, that remains in a flux even while one seeks to perceive and define it. The technically least interesting modern novels are either multivalent only in the simplest of ways or else only apparently multivalent. To a great extent, the morally and aesthetically richest are multivalent in both senses of the term.

That there are multiple ways of viewing the multivalent novel does not of course, invalidate any one of them.

Antinomies imply multivalence; not an amoral relativism but a multi-moral, pluralistic flux in which disparate and irreconcilable voices all claim (with some legitimacy) to speak with the rights and perquisites of authorial privilege. In general the modernity of multivalent fiction results from a double self-consciousness that of an engaging and multiply viewed narrator or

implied author, and that of the novel itself seemingly obsessed with its own identity as a work of art and its relationship to those who experience it.

In Lyotard's philosophy according to Dr. William Schultz in *The Ambivalence of our Postmodern Condition* states that,

"the postmodern is ambivalent insofar as its products bring us both good and evil, the technology of nuclear power is not possible without that of nuclear bombs. Secondly, it is ambivalent insofar as Lyotard understands the word 'postmodern' to apply to the whole range of contemporary culture, from everyday social life to Science and Art. Quite often Lyotard writes negatively about the postmodernity of popular culture but positively about the postmodernity of high culture (art, science, philosophy etc). Thirdly, the term seems ambivalent in the sense of a confusion. Lyotard intends to use it the prefix "post" in a way different from the way it is usually used. He insists that postmodern signifies not the end of modernism; it is a new thinking in relation to modernism".<sup>2</sup>

Lyotard's most general and most quoted definition of postmodernism is the "incredulity to metanarratives", the crisis of modernity, the type of thinking modeled on metanarratives or grand narratives and the rewriting of modernity.

Modernism begins to decline or lose its credibility when there is increased communication between different cultures of the world during the nineteenth century. Lyotard seems to be thinking that, even though the weaker and less advanced cultures were always essentially assimilated, the numerous and worldwide struggles with the European grand narratives made them suspect and pointed to their deficiencies which less advanced cultures did not have to suffer.

The end of modernism causes three kinds of social disorder or culture vacuum : loss of community bonds, loss of personal identity and loss of the sense of the reality of objects. The loss of community bonds has been described extensively in various works on modern life. For example the nineteenth century workers still know neighbours; does not travel far to work and feel united to fellow workers in the common cause for better conditions. In contrast, these bonds are broken when the twentieth century workers often do not know the neighbours, travel far to work which reduces the time spent with the family and no longer has the desire to struggle for better working conditions.

A related type of cultural vacuum is the loss of personal identity. Routine work of all kinds destroy initiative, redirects desire away from the product of work and toward money, which increasingly comes to seem arbitrary because the link between labour and reward - the object of consumption - becomes indirect and all but forgotten.

Mala Pandurang questions "*how to label a polymath like Vikram Seth who has lived in three continents and written in a variety of genres?*"<sup>3</sup> A large number of Indian writers in English of the post 1980s boom either live outside the Indian subcontinent or have spent considerable years abroad as part of the diasporic migrancy. The works of such writers open to contradictory interpretations and critical responses are more often than not predicated on extra-literary circumstances. This is particularly so in Vikram Seth's case given the staggering amount of a million dollars which Seth received as an advance for his novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993). The ensuing media hype generated heated debates on the politics of publication and location.

Publicity can however also be counter-productive. Of special interest are debates pertaining to the levels of 'non-Indianness' in Seth's work.

Traditionally, geographic borders have been considered as points where different 'national identities' interacted or collided, and immigration posts were used to police these identities. In view of today's easier cross-continental mobility, and the growing technological challenges to conventional boundaries of the nation state, participants within a new global migrancy are compelled to redefine the spaces within which they operate. Spatial factors of geographic movement are central to an understanding of the identity of any writer who has experienced a considerable degree of global migrancy in the course of his career. We have to turn to Seth's life history for an idea of the extent of his mobility. The consequence of which, the intellectual and creative milieu of his work is of an 'international' variety. Seth is able to move with considerable ease from medieval Chinese poetry to San Francisco Yuppiedom, and from the Hindi belt in North India to the world of Bach and Beethoven in Britain and Vienna.

Identity within the Indian diaspora is predicated upon a variety of historical processes, and participating writers encompass a multiplicity of religions, languages and cultures. It is essential to keep in mind that forms of writing by participants in the large literary commonwealth of diasporic Indian writing in English are multiple, and therefore any attempt at homogenisation would be to oversimplify the same.

While examining critical discussions of South Asian American writing, one finds Seth's name indexed under the categories of 'North American Indian Writers' (Taping, 1992) and 'Contemporary South Asian Americans' (Katrak, 1997). This inclusion is chiefly based on Seth's only text set in a North American milieu - *The Golden Gate*. The first work of the immigrant is generally autobiographic, and recreated instances of youth and family and the story of the nation. The personal need to deal with nostalgia is compounded with a social responsibility. Some indication of the 'psychological violence' resulting from contradictory constructions of social identity and a desire to record history prior to entry into the West can be noted in Seth's earlier poems in *Mapping* (1981). However, in *The Golden Gate* (Set in San Francisco) and in *An Equal Music* (located in England and Europe) Seth de-populates the text of ethnic peoples and immigrant dilemmas. His only novel located specially in India is *A Suitable Boy* wherein the plots the political history of the subcontinent in the 1950s is depicted. In these novels, says Mala Pandurang, "*Seth neither explores the gap between the 'culture of origin' (India/home) and the 'cultures of adoption' (U.K./U.S.A./Other Worlds) nor does he address issues of ambivalence or liminality that come from a conflict of different cultural perspectives*".<sup>4</sup>

Seth is the master of his craft. He writes the most polished poetry as easily as he writes a travelogue or a novel. He writes for the children with the same ease and success as he does in writing a romantic or a social-realist epic, yet he is to make a real critical impact. In the fast forming canons of Indian English fiction or the third world Novel, or the 'English' Novel, or even in the Contemporary Novel (from around the world), Seth has only a marginal position. This lack of place for Seth in the literary canons of the world is an enigma, but it is a mystery that is soon to be solved. The academia around the world prefer novels to fit into categories, and Seth's books do not lead to a life of ease and togetherness on the shelves. He is not bothered about the diasporic dislocations or the search for roots - perhaps he doesn't feel dislocated or uprooted. He writes standard International English and writes it very well. He doesn't seem to address any issues that shake the western world or pander to critical theory. He doesn't even write alternative literature, finding Indian genres and taking patriotic positions. He just writes good readable stuff.

Very early in his career, Vikram Seth objected to being categorized and has consistently done so ever since. In a television interview with Meenakshi Mukherjee has said that *he is just a writer, not an Indian or a Commonwealth or any other kind of writer*.<sup>5</sup> Seth was right - he is one of those human beings privileged and fortunate enough to be able to travel and make the world their own. It is thus that Seth manages to write his brilliant books that seem to come from and address different locations. If *The Golden Gate* is "pure" California, *A Suitable Boy* is North Indian, and *An Equal Music* is European. It is very often only the name of the author on the cover that let's you know that you are reading a book by an Indian. This is the hallmark of this genius; the world belongs to him and he belongs to the world.

Nandini Chandra explores *the world of travel writing in her essay 'A Different Gaze', and tries to analyse 'Vikram Seth's 'Journey through Mainland China' and tries to see if Seth fits the postcolonial hat'*.<sup>6</sup> Seth does not seem to, he may not even want to. In an interesting discussion of what it means to be an Indian travelling in the "Orient" in the late twentieth century, Chandra tries to analyse the text of *From Heaven Lake* and comments that Seth's conscious or unconscious positioning(s) as a (post) colonized traveller looking at China through the high mediation of western viewing glasses. In the opening paragraph of the essay Chandra says "*Travel Writing in some senses is about straddling incommensurate worlds, of bridging gaps, of making sense of the differences in culture. The assumption is that one is reporting from a mysterious (perhaps subaltern) culture, which belongs to "them" to one, which is modern, rational and logical and thus belongs to "us". When meeting new cultures, occasions for reciprocal growth open, but so do spaces for newer forms of violence, enhanced by the imbalance of power in the world. On whether the traveller wishes to dominate or listen to the other depends the trajectory of his/her discovery and explorations*".<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Seth wears his cosmopolitanism on his sleeve is evident from comparisons of bucolic landscapes with Constable paintings or a particular stone fencing with something he had seen in Wales. But the longing and homesickness for Patna of his childhood is as great as his yearning for Stanford. To the extent that these postcolonial travellers, seek to demystify the east and contextualise its history within the larger ambit of post colonial national narratives, they can be said to be more than mere "Participant observers"..

Almost all three novels of Seth are set in different locale, both geographically and culturally. *The Golden Gate* is set in California, a metropolis with all Californian characters. Then is magnum opus *A Suitable Boy* portraying India of 1950s, a traditional family and their search for a suitable boy for their daughter, land reforms or the legislative attempts to change the Zamindari system. Priya Kumar argues "*that Seth deploys the genre of the historical novel in order to make an oblique address to the contemporary intensification of religious intolerance in India*".<sup>8</sup> *An Equal Music* as a novel is completely situated in the tradition of the British novel and written as a cultural insider, but also partakes of the phallogocentrism of the tradition.

Mala Pandurang, "*discusses An Equal Music as located completely in a western (British and European) cultural milieu, a milieu that leaves out in the cold many of its third world readers*".<sup>9</sup> In her paper 'The Complex Case of Vikram Seth'. Questioning the international in *An Equal Music*, she questions this need for "glorification" of the novel, the complete absence of the coloured population in Seth's England. Mala Pandurang problematizes the location of the writer and analyses the results of his conscious avoidance of a political position vis-a-vis globalization and Americanisation of the world. She argues that while Seth is aware of the limits of transnationalism, he does not want to see it in terms of global politics but in terms of the impossibility of entering every culture with intimacy born of close acquaintance while she argues

that Seth cannot be read as a postcolonial diasporic writer, Pandurang posits that his location as a transnational writer seeking a pluralistic audience beyond the constraints of national or cultural boundaries is fraught with difficulties for the critic/reader even if not for the writer.

By setting his latest novel *An Equal Music* in England, and outside the natal order, Seth once again eschews his localised status for a transnational identity. Seth has repeatedly disputed demands made of a writer to inject the right amount of "Indianness" into his work. Seth points out in the introduction to the Penguin anthology of his poetry (1995), that when *The Golden Gate* was published, it was placed on library shelves under American fiction, though occasionally under American poetry. He adds "*Some Indian critics praised me for having disguised myself as a Californian; other denounced me as being deracinated : there was not a single Indian character in the novel and it lacked an Indian sensibility. If a Japanese-American could be one of the protagonist, why not an Indian-American*".<sup>10</sup>

The one nagging question that runs in our mind is - the question of location, where do we place Vikram Seth? Where does he belong and whom does he address? His works give you the dominant feel and pulse of a place at a certain time; he gives you lives led in a particular mode in a specific locale in all detail. It can be the world of the whites or the browns or any other colour. Seth treats all the world that he knows at his stage and all the people there as legitimately his characters. It almost seems that he is an itinerant writer who writes for and about the places that he visits. He picks up tales from here and there and wherever life takes him. In a world where more not less borders are created everyday, Seth's is the ideal world of a certain kind of privilege. If we have problems with this, the more the pity - for our position is constructed by the divisive politics of the world that we live in. But whatever be our location and position, however we read Vikram Seth, he is undeniably a writer among writers, someone who can be called the master craftsman of his generation.

The concept of 'home' derives new parameters for an emerging pocket of 'international citizens' who are caught in a social construct called '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*"<sup>11</sup> asserts Namita Gokhale. Rushdie argues that "*literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address*".<sup>12</sup>

To return to the academic task of 'labelling' Seth as a writer how does one address the credentials of Seth's 'Indianness' on the one hand, and examine the 'international' character of his experience as reflected in his creative output, on the other? Makarand Paranjpe argues that Seth "*is an international writer who has been both an NRI and an RNI (resident non-Indian) but whether he has ever been just an Indian is rather doubtful*".<sup>13</sup>

In Seth's *Mappings*, there are a number of poems, wherein the poet is trying to come to terms with an attachment to his Indian identity on the one hand, and a sense of growing restlessness and feelings of ambivalence towards his family on the other hand. In the opening poem "Panipat", the narrator who is "back home from Inglistan" after studying abroad for a number of years, expresses his nostalgia for the India of his childhood. The poet draws attention to the complex combination of identifiers and spatial connectors that are responsible for the migrant's state of a multivalent identity. He relates to familiar spatial connectors (Punjab, Pandits, Panir/Panipat and Pan/Family, Music, Faces/Food, Land, Everything/Drew me back). He hears the song of the Koyal and simultaneously, the natural landscape of England encroaches upon his consciousness. This poem shows the poet's concern for two worlds, the one here, at present, his own and the other in the past, the foreign, and the poet's attempt at adjustment with both.

*The Golden Gate* is in depth exploration of society, specially American society. With a surgeon's precision Seth examines the fabric of contemporary American society and pinpoints the factors that are tearing it apart.

London publishers Orion, published Seth's *A Suitable Boy* in 1994, and Seth created literary history, with the book's mammoth size and the million copies sales. *A Suitable boy* was conceived by a very Jane Austenish shred of overheard conversation : "You too will marry a boy I choose [ . . . ]". For Seth this theme proved to be irresistible and he set out to write a story involving, a widow's search for a "suitable" (in the Indian context) bridegroom for her daughter.

*An Equal Music* marks a breaking away from Seth's earlier self-controlled and distanced style of writing. The reason for this becomes clear when Seth reveals how for him music acts as a refuge from the tensions of work, how he found it difficult to reconcile himself to the thought of writing about it. Music amounts to a passion, almost an obsession with Seth, and this is evident from the style in which *An Equal Music* has been written - so different from Seth's previous works.

These works currently make up Seth's Oeuvre, and from the above it becomes evident that a peripatetic lifestyle has moulded the themes and shapes of most of his work. As Seth says, "*I've been quartered between California, China, India and England*".<sup>14</sup> An apt analogy, but Seth's interest in these four cultures is not that of the detached observer content merely to portray, the exotic - it is rather that of the studious, interested learner sent on apprehending the essence of them all. Much has been made of Seth's experimentation with different genres but Seth writes as and how the muse takes him, and the different genres are a spontaneous unfolding of his protean talent rather than lucubrated attempts at diversity. Seth has been unjustly accused of not having found his voice, and he counters with "*the fact is that at different stages of your life and under the influence of different inspirations you write different things*".<sup>15</sup>

Seth also points out, rather astutely, that "*If you're 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*".<sup>16</sup>

He further says, in his precise, poetic way:

*"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"*.<sup>17</sup>

Vikram Seth still remains something of a mystery. No too books of his have been alike . He is a poet, a novelist, a travel writer and the author of a libretto. Unlike most Indian writers of Indian origin, whose works are obsessed with the sub-continental, Seth seems to home everywhere in the world. This lends him a multivalent identity.

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