

## WOMAN AS AN IDOL OF LOVE, TOLERANCE, AND SACRIFICE IN THE NOVELS OF VIKRAM SETH

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present Vikram Seth as a novelist who has great understanding of woman and her valuable place and role in the society. For this purpose Vikram Seth's novels *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music* have been taken in to consideration. All the novels of Vikram Seth are set in three different countries – America, India, and Europe. It enables us to appreciate Vikram Seth's deep insight and understanding of women and their well-appreciated role and place not only in Indian society but American and European societies also. Seth has made the readers to be familiar with the miraculous power of woman in the establishment and maintenance of family and society. In all the novels, especially in *A Suitable Boy*, Seth has presented woman as an idol of love, sacrifice, and tolerance. She is presented as a perfect home maker and well-wisher of the family. Besides it, she is described as the pillar of family by Vikram Seth in all his novels. This brief research paper will analyse the role and place of woman in the family and society, both in Eastern and Western societies.

Love is a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes that ranges from interpersonal affection. It is “a strong feeling of deep affection for somebody or something, especially a member of family or a friend” (Hornby 913). The word ‘love’ can have a variety of related but distinct meanings in different contexts. Attachment of parents for their children is love, romantic relationship between husband and wife is also love, intimate relationship between friends is called love, and a person's patriotic feelings for his country or the devotional feelings for God is also called love. Love is a kind of emotion that can be felt but cannot be expressed in words. Love is a kind of fathomless ocean in which a person drowns or merges fully without thinking about its results. Love can also be defined as a kind of madness, craziness or drug that having been fallen in love a person weaves his own world of dreams and wants to reside there forever, away from the stark realities of real world. Love is also defined as “a measure of selfless give and take” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>).

Tolerance means the capacity or power to bear the odd situations, behaviour, or opinions of the society. It is the mental state to accept even oppressing situations. Tolerance is human ability to bear pain; mental distress; disappointments; sarcasm; failure; and societal, religious, and cultural bondage. It is “the ability to suffer something, especially pain, difficult conditions, etc. without being harmed” (Hornby 1615). It is the capacity to accept somebody or something that is annoying, unpleasant, and disgusting without any complaining. Tolerance means to endure criticism, odd remarks, situations, and sorrows without grumbling about it. God has created women over-brimmed with tolerance that makes them to bear all and everything, though

it may be against their wish or interests. To face and endure all the conditions is a divine virtue and this virtue abounds in the women. The women have extraordinary capacity to face and endure the stark realities of the world. They face all the situations and never lose their hearts being confronted with disgusting situations and never think to end their life in frustration. They have made the world to believe in the “miraculous power of women who fight against the worst odds” (Naqvi 22 May 2016).

Sacrifice means to give something for the person you love or like. It may be giving up one’s life for the nation. Sacrifice means to leave one’s comforts, interests, joys, and luxuries for the loved one. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary sacrifice is “to give up something that is important or valuable to you in order to get or do something that seems more important for yourself or for another person” (Hornby 1338). It is the willingness or readiness to do anything for the person whom you are in love. Sacrifice is a feminine virtue and the woman remains ready to give up her comforts to run her family properly. She sacrifices her life for the well-being of her children, husband, and other family members. It seems that she has no existence of her own but she lives only for the welfare of her family. Love, tolerance, and sacrifice are interrelated virtues and one virtue is incomplete and valueless without the others as, love means sacrifice if it true otherwise it leads to hopeless break-up. In love a person becomes ready to sacrifice his own interests and endure all the situations.

Vikram Seth has depicted these feminine virtues in all the three novels. He has created women characters with such an artistic insight that they remain in our heart and mind long after the end of the reading of the novels. Though in *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music* there are limited women characters but they also abound in these virtues. On the other hand, *A Suitable Boy* is full of variety of women characters with distinct status and qualities. There are women from Hindu and Muslim societies, old and young, married and widows, middle-class and lower class women, reputed women and prostitutes, oppressing and oppressed or exploited women but they all have divine virtues of love, tolerance, and sacrifice that they all adjust themselves in the prevailing society and situation, though disgusting and hard to endure. The women characters have proved that “women are the stronger sex” (Naqvi 22May 2016) and they can make the world go round.

In the novel *The Golden Gate* there are some distinguished women characters as: Liz Dorati, Janet, Claire, and Mrs. Dorati. All the women characters except Claire are presented in a favourable light. Liz represents Seth’s notion of love. She proves herself as an idol of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. Liz Dorati reads a matrimonial advertisement in a newspaper and decides to meet John to find whether he will be a suitable husband or not. Liz meets John and falls passionately in love with him very soon of their meeting. Love means “to be delighted by the happiness of another” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>). Falling in love with John, Liz sacrifices her joys for the sake of her lover. She tolerates odd behaviour of John as his hate for Liz’s dear cat Charlmagne and tries her best to adjust herself with John though their romantic relationship could not last longer because Liz marries with Phil in haste and ends her romantic relationship with John. Liz sacrifices her love for John and marries with Phil who is a divorcee and has already a six years old son Paul by Claire, his former wife. Liz proves herself a perfect mother and wife as she looks after Paul lovingly though she is his step-mother. Though romantic love does not exist between Liz and Phil before marriage but it develops between them after marriage and they prove themselves the best couple and Liz gives birth to a baby boy by Phil. Liz endures all the odd situations of her life, does not lose her heart, and adjusts herself in the prevailing situations.

*The Golden Gate* reflects “the place of love in human life, and the sacrifices required before one is entitled to the happiness that love brings” (Gupta 58). Janet is a distinguished woman character in the novel who proves herself as an idol of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. During her college days she falls in love with John. But John finds her love as an obstacle in the freedom of life and they decide to lead their lives in their own ways. In his carefree youth, “John has not given love the attention it deserves, preferring the freedom that bachelorhood connotes to most men to the shackles of matrimony” (Gupta 39). But love can never die if it is true and Janet has true love for John though he had deserted her in favour of individual freedom. Later, when Janet comes to know that being deserted by Liz, John has started to visit cute chicks to sooth his tormented, depressed, foul soul and to have some solace in their company, Janet’s heart pines for John and the flames of her earlier love for John ignites again. She becomes ready to forget John’s earlier negligence and tries her best to bring John out of the charming clutches of cute chicks. She accepts John despite of being deserted and neglected by him earlier. She has a great power of endurance as she controls her emotions when her sculptors were criticised by the critics though she becomes frustrated for some time.

Mrs. Dorati understands the value of love and says in *The Golden Gate*, “It’s love that makes the world go round” (11.20). She proves herself as a loving wife and mother. She leads her life satisfactorily with her husband. She aspires the same happiness and satisfaction for her children – Liz, Ed, and Sue and remains worried to see her children to be settled in their lives in time. Mrs. Dorati leads a happy and satisfactory married life living in love and co-operation with her husband and married life can be happy due to some feminine virtues as love, tolerance, and sacrifice and Mrs. Dorati abounds in these virtues. These virtues are the basic pillars of her happy married life.

In *A Suitable Boy* there are a lot of women characters who are full of rare, divine, and feminine virtues of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. Lata is the protagonist of the novel *A Suitable Boy* and the main plot of the novel revolves around romance, love, and marriage of Lata. She proves herself the embodiment of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. She falls passionately in love with a Muslim boy Kabir without knowing about his religion or community. Lata feels herself unable to resist “his charm and oozing sexuality and falls desperately and passionately in love with him” (Mohanty 175). She is infatuated by Kabir’s charm to such an extent that she becomes ready to elope with him without caring for the honour of her family though her wish is not fulfilled by Kabir. Later, when her mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra comes to know about Lata’s love affair with Kabir, she persuades Lata to meet Haresh and to find him as her would be husband. Meeting Haresh, Lata does not find him attractive. She does not like his way of dressing-up, chewing *paan*, and mismatched shoes, yet Lata tolerates all the odd virtues of Haresh and selects him as her prospective husband. Lata also represents the essential virtue of woman – sacrifice. Though Lata is head over heels in love with Kabir, yet she decides to marry Haresh surprising everybody. Lata sacrifices her deep and passionate love for Kabir for the sake of her family, especially for her dear mother. Lata finds it impossible to shed her love for Kabir and to accept Haresh as her husband whom she does not love or like yet. But Lata represents the woman who remains always ready to sacrifice her own wishes, interests, love, and life for the sake of beloved ones. Here Lata sacrifices her love for her mother so that she could not be worried or upset because of her decision of marrying a boy from Muslim community whom Mrs. Rupa Mehra despises a lot.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra becomes widow in the prime of her young age but she proves herself bold enough to face the cruel and hard realities of her life. She sacrifices her own comforts for

the sake of her children and even sells her jewellery and property to provide her children better education. She rears up fatherless children in the best possible ways as she could do. She tolerates bravely all the hardships of her life as the Almighty God has conferred on her. Mrs. Rupa Mehra loves her children beyond limits and remains worrying about the well-being of them all. It is her uppermost desire to get her children married with suitable partners. She marries her elder daughter Savita with Pran though he is gangly, asthmatic, and lanky. Mrs. Rupa Mehra finds Pran suitable for her daughter as he is an educated, caring, and loving person. Besides it, when her younger daughter Lata falls in love with a Muslim boy Kabir she gets shocked and brings her back from the enchanting spell of love of Kabir and finds a suitable, practical, mature, and pragmatic life-partner Haresh for Lata. She wishes all the happiness and prosperity for her children. She does not let her children to astray in their lives. She takes care of all the comforts of her children and becomes ready to help and serve them in their problems. She takes care of Savita during her pregnancy and looks after her daughter Uma lovingly.

Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is the incarnation of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. She loves and regards her dominant husband as a deity and obeys his all commands humbly. She prays for long life of her husband and even takes fasts for his sound health and prosperity. She does not take food before her husband. It may be her love or regard for her husband that she worships him as a god. She has an extraordinary capacity of endurance as she tolerates all the cruel remarks, comments, and negligence of her husband without saying a single word against him. She sacrifices all the interests of her life for the sake of her family, especially her husband. She is the idol of love also. She loves her younger son Maan to such an extent that she becomes restless hearing about his imprisonment for stabbing Firoz. She persuades her husband to make arrangements for his bail. She could not bear the shock of Maan's imprisonment and dies due to a sudden stroke.

Saeeda Bai, a thirty-five-year old prostitute is also over brimmed with love, tolerance, and sacrifice. At the age of fifteen she is seduced by Nawab Sahib and becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a girl named Tasneem and becomes an unwedded mother. But in the society she pretends that Tasneem is her younger sister. Saeeda Bai rears up Tasneem lovingly and provides her every comfort which is in her reach. She keeps Tasneem away from the bleak world of prostitutes and her own admirers who are just hungers of sex. Saeeda Bai provides the best educational opportunities to Tasneem as she could and arranges Rasheed to teach Tasneem Urdu at her own residence. Saeeda Bai loves Tasneem to such an extent that she does not want Tasneem to follow her profession. She sacrifices her life for the sake of her daughter who is conceived in ignorance in immature and innocent age. When Saeeda Bai comes to know about Rasheed, Ishaq Khan, and Firoz's admiration for Tasneem she does not find them suitable for her daughter and rejects them all for one reason or another. She does not want that her loving daughter has to suffer in the hands of these men and live an insecure life. Though it is the profession of prostitutes to entertain the males sexually and emotionally, yet she tolerates her admirers and entertains them despite of her unwillingness because she has to earn her living in this way so that she could get her daughter away from the gloomy world of prostitutes. Saeeda Bai sacrifices her life for the betterment of Tasneem.

Tasneem is a daughter of Saeeda Bai and Nawab Sahib conceived in drunken state. She feels admiration and liking for Rasheed, Ishaq Khan, and Firoz, each more impossible to get than the last and in each case "she had let her affection grow in silence, and had suffered their sudden absence in silence" (Seth *A Suitable Boy* 1314). Tasneem sacrifices her love for the sake of her

sister Saeeda Bai (actually who is her mother). She does not oppose her sister's decision and obeys her humbly like a gentle sheep.

Veena is the daughter of Mahesh Kpoor. She is married with Kedarnath who trades in shoe-making. Veena has to suffer a lot in the hands of her mother-in-law during her stay in Lahor and India. Complaining about her mother-in-law, Veena says to her friend Priya, "When she sees I'm not miserable she becomes more miserable" (Seth *A Suitable Boy* 245). Veena tolerates all the cruelties of her mother-in-law and adjusts herself in the environment of her family. Veena has to face hard time and she even becomes ready to sell her jewellery to meet the hardships of day-to-day life. Veena proves herself a bold lady who endures all the restrictions of orthodox, rigid, and patriarchal Indian society. She has rare capacity to endure all the hardships of life and she does not lose her heart in any condition. She does not aspire to get what seems her out of reach. She sacrifices her own interests and wishes for the sake of her family.

A woman's life becomes full of restrictions, limitations, sacrifice, tolerance, and adjustment after her marriage. Jayabharthi says that arranged marriage brings with it "an inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance" (153). Priya is the daughter of L.N. Agarwal and married with Ram Vilas Goyal, a lawyer. She is bought up in a carefree environment of her parental home but her life is restricted in her in-laws. She is not allowed to walk over the roof, to go to the market, and even out of the house except on marriage or religious ceremonies. She does not feel herself better than a caged bird. She wants to live independently away from the restrictions of joint family but her husband is not ready for it. She finds herself in a confusing middle position. She could neither live in joint family nor leave her loving and caring husband. Priya displays her rare female virtues of tolerance and sacrifice and endures all the cruelties of her mother-in-law and other female members of the family. She endures all the limitations imposed upon her in her in-laws and lives there in all the crushing situations. She sacrifices her own interests, freedom, and likings for the sake of her family and proves herself a perfect wife and daughter-in-law. Priya proves herself capable of love as she loves her husband to such an extent that she becomes ready to live in limitless restrictions, finding a loving and caring husband around her to support in all the situations. She tolerates all the restrictions, oppressions, and misbehaviour only because of her loving and caring husband. We can imagine Priya's critical situation in her family when she accepts, "If her husband had not been so kind, she would have been gone mad" (Seth *A Suitable Boy* 239). But due to her divine virtues of love, tolerance, and sacrifice she adjusts herself in the new but queer environment of her in-laws and leads her life enjoying the love and co-operation of her husband.

Savita is elder daughter of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. She is married with Pran, the elder son of Mr. Mahesh Kapoor. Though Savita does not like Pran because he is dark in complexion, lanky, gangly, and asthmatic, yet she becomes ready to marry with him because her mother wants her to do so. Savita sacrifices her personal desires for her mother. Though there is no love between Savita and Pran before marriage but it develops naturally after being married and Savita proves herself a loving and caring mother and wife. Other minor female characters like Kachheru's wife, Malati's mother, Rasheed's wife (who was his dead brother's wife), Rasheed's mother, Mrs. Chatterji, Kedarnath's mother etc. all adjust themselves in the existing situations of their family and society. They all show divine virtues of love, tolerance, and sacrifice.

Life of Muslim women is also full of tolerance and sacrifice. They have to live in the dread of *talaq* as there is a tradition that "Muslim men can unilaterally divorce a legally wedded wife by simply pronouncing *talaq* thrice ... that hangs like a sword over their marital status" (Shukla 24 Sep. 2015). They have to live in the bleak world of *purdah* after marriage. Like other Muslim

women Nawab Sahib's wife maintains strict *pardah* throughout her life and she tries her best to adjust with Nawab Sahib who does not prove himself a loyal and true husband as he establishes sexual relationships with Saeeda Bai, a prostitute and makes her pregnant in her fifteenth year. She tolerates all the limitations imposed on her by the patriarchal Muslim society and the illegal relationship of her husband with Saeeda Bai. She sacrifices her interests and happiness for the sake of her family and the rules prevailing in Muslim society. Nawab Sahib's only and educated daughter Zainab "disappears into the world of *pardah* after her marriage and silently suffers the infidelities of her husband" (Pandurang 120). It is only Abeeda Khan, Nawab Sahib's younger brother's wife who, though lived in *pardah* for many years, shows courage, stands against time-ridden old customs and rituals, comes out of them, breaking all the traditional customs and becomes a member of legislative assembly. But all the women are not courageous and revolting like Abeeda Khan. They tolerate the limitations imposed upon them without any complaint and sacrifice their life for the sake of their family.

*An Equal Music* is mainly a novel about music, different notes and instruments of music but at the same time it is also a novel about love, tolerance, and sacrifice. There are mainly three women characters in the novel — Julia, Mrs Formby, and Michael's mother. Julia is the pivotal character in the novel and the story of the novel moves around the passionate and sexual relationship of Michael and Julia. Love is an internal feeling that resides in the innermost part of human heart. Julia and Michael fall in love passionately when they were students of music. They meet in a concert and within a week of their meeting they fall in love. Due to a row with his teacher Karl Call Michael leaves Julia as well as Vienna in a fury and comes to London. Though Michael tries his best to re-establish their romantic relationship when he recognises his mistake, yet he remains empty-handed as he could not succeed to contact Julia. Julia is the incarnation of love and sacrifice. She is head over heels in love with Michael. She enjoys Michael's company in moonlit night and feels it hard to live without him when Michael deserts her and comes to London. When there no hope was left of their re-union, she marries with another person James, an American banker. But she could not get away the memories of Michael out of her heart.

It is a feminine virtue that a woman can never forget her first love. The Almighty God gives them to revive their love after ten years of unbearable separation. Michael sees Julia in a bus for some moments in London and seeing her for fleeting moments, he becomes crazy to get in touch with her, hires a cab to reach Julia but all goes in vain, and he again remains empty-handed. God again smiles on their fate and makes Julia to see and meet Michael in Wigmore Hall where Michael was playing violin. The undistinguished flames of unrequited love rekindle in Julia and Michael's heart. Despite of being married to James and having a seven years old son, Julia attracts towards Michael emotionally as well as sexually. She goes to meet Michael at his apartment where they both enjoy playing music in a sound proof room and enjoy sexual relationships. Julia loves Michael to such an extent that she goes to Vienna and Venice with Michael, along with some other fellow musicians, where they both enjoy each other's company, live as husband and wife enjoying sexual pleasure. But this type of immorality is acceptable neither to Vikram Seth nor to the society so Seth has made Julia to understand her folly and madness very soon and made her to return back to her loving and stable family, leaving Michael to pine alone.

Woman is an idol of love and it is seen in the character of Julia. She loves Michael beyond limits but at the same time she also loves her son, Luke and her husband, James with same passion. While her stay with Michael in Vienna she understands the value of family, love, and satisfaction one gets in a happy family, and the futility of selfish and transient extra-marital

sexual love. It is her love for Luke and James that forces her to return back to her family leaving Michael's sexual, selfish, transient, and passionate love. She finds her son and husband's love more stable, satisfactory, moral, and sacrosanct than the love of passionate Michael. Julia realizes for the best that Michael is her past and "one cannot reside in the past forever" (Mohanty 238).

Julia is also presented as an idol of tolerance and sacrifice. Julia endures Michael's sudden and heart-breaking desertion boldly and has full control over her heart and mind. She controls her emotions and establishes a happy family marrying with James. She does not frustrate herself having been betrayed in love but she faces the hard realities of life and does nothing to end her life. After marriage Julia has to face the problem of loss of hearing but she does not lose her heart and face this problem courageously. She tries her best to cope with this physical ailment or disability. She plays piano marvellously in musical concerts and earns name and fame in the world of music.

Julia is also an idol of sacrifice. In her student life she has been in love with her fellow musician, Michael. When Michael deserts her unexpectedly she marries with another person James. After ten years of their separation they meet coincidentally in London and the flames of their earlier love for each other rekindle. They establish sexual relationships despite of Julia's being married with another person. But very soon of their wandering away from the moral path, Julia understands the value of family and marriage and returns back to loving, soothing, and caring arms of James for security and satisfaction. Julia has to sacrifice her feelings of love and interests twice in her life — when she is deserted by Michael having no fault of her own and later, when she has to leave Michael heart-broken because she feels it impossible to live double life. She finds it impossible to continue her relationship both with Michael and James. She has to choose one of them to have peace of mind. Julia finds Michael demanding, passionate, immature, unstable, and a dreamy person who has not set his feet firmly on the land of reality and who resides in dreams. On the other hand, Julia finds James caring, loving, practical, mature and helpful person and taking a sane decision, Julia sacrifices her love for Michael and returns back to her loving family.

Michael's mother is also presented as an incarnation of love, tolerance, and sacrifice. She loves her son and husband too much. She does all the domestic works and when her husband falls ill and suffers from bronchial attacks she looks after him very carefully and devotionally. She works as a dinner-lady to earn the required money for the treatment of her husband and to run the family. She endures all the cruelties and difficulties imposed upon her by Almighty God or fate. She sacrifices her interests and comforts for the welfare of her family and leaves the world suddenly. The unlimited tolerance and sacrifice and pitiful condition of Michael's mother during her husband's illness have been depicted in the novel where Michael tells that "My mother exhausted herself trying to nurse him, to earn a living working as a dinner lady in a school, and to fight the case. Though it was he who was ill, it was she who died – quite suddenly, of a stroke" (Seth *An Equal Music* 27).

Mrs. Formby is another incarnation of feminine virtues of love, sacrifice, and tolerance. She has no child but she loves her nephew too much that she makes her will in his favour. She also loves Michael whom she gives her violin Tononi to play and later she gives him the ownership of her violin in her will. Mrs. Formby sacrifices her comforts for the sake of her nephew and his children. She makes every possible arrangement for the education of her nephew's children. Her nephew is a selfish and cunning person and he has no regard for his aunt.

His only wish is to acquire her property at any cost. Mrs. Formby is a childless widow who endures all the cruelties of her nephew because she has no other way.

In short love, tolerance, and sacrifice are some of the rare feminine virtues and such virtues are impossible to find in the male creation of God. Almighty God has created woman as the incarnation of these divine virtues. Almost all the female characters of Vikram Seth's novels are over-brimmed with these feminine virtues. Though Vikram Seth is a male writer, yet he has such a deep insight and understanding of intricate female characters that not a single aspect of their character or personality has been remained untouched or unexplained. Seth has presented all types women as: house wives; working-women; old women; widows; women in the profession of prostitution; romantic and attractive women; women deserted by lovers; women over-dominated by their lovers; both Hindu and Muslim women; and women playing their unpredictable roles as a mother and as a wife. In short, Seth has presented woman as the foundation of civilization and society. Seth has proved that it is the woman who keeps her family together due to these virtues of love, endurance, and sacrifice.

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