

MARRIAGE AS THE ULTIMATE END OF THE NOVELS OF VIKRAM SETH

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Abstract

The objective of the present paper is to analyze the everlasting significance of marriage in human life and society, though it may be American, Indian, European or any other society of the world. For this purpose Vikram Seth's all the three novels — *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music* have been taken into consideration. All the three novels are set in three different countries — America, India, and Europe respectively but one common aspect of marriage lies in the final victory of marriage and family over passion and love. At the end of the novels all the major heroines of the novels accept the pious bond of marriage rejecting their passionate love. This brief research paper will analyze marriage as the ultimate end of all the novels of Vikram Seth.

Marriage is a sexual and emotional bound between husband and wife. It provides legal and solid base for society and civilization to flourish. Marriage is a kind of mutual contract between two unknown persons who swear wedding vows during their marriage ceremony to live together and to help each other for the whole life. Marriage is a “legal relationship between a husband and wife” (Hornby 941). When two persons of opposite sex are brought together after performing some social or civil ceremonies is called marriage. It is conciliation of not only two bodies but two souls also. It exists “to bring a man and a woman together as husband and wife and to be father and mother to any children their union produces” ([http://www.brooklaw.edu/~media/PDF/Law Journal](http://www.brooklaw.edu/~media/PDF/Law%20Journal)).

Vikram Seth is a versatile writer and he has not left any aspect of the society untouched in his novels. He has superb understanding of the society and its customs against which he has set his novels. Marriage is one of the vital social customs of the society since time immemorial so in his all the novels Seth has depicted the custom of marriage, its piousness, and even disastrous consequences if someone does not maintain the sanctity of this religious and social bond. The theme of marriage remains in the centre of his novels and all the novels of Vikram Seth, directly or indirectly, revolves around the issues related to marriage. Seth has described not only distinct marriage ceremonies and rituals in Eastern and Western societies but the changes it brings in a person's life also. He has depicted that marriage brings a lot of changes in a woman's life and makes her life full of restrictions, responsibilities, adjustments, co-operation, sacrifice, endurance, and loyalty. Marriage is considered as a second birth for woman as she has to adjust herself in a strange and new environment of her in-laws. Chandra Nisha Singh says that “marriage is her main stay ... she judges her personal fulfilment through its strength” (53).

In *The Golden Gate* John feels lonely because he has no suitable life partner. He gets published an advertisement to find a suitable partner and out of many responses he selects Liz Dorati suitable for him. Very soon of their meeting passionate love develops between them and even they establish sexual relationship before marriage. John wants to marry Liz as soon as possible to kill his boredom but she does not show much interest in marriage as she says that there are much works to do beyond marriage. It is true that a person becomes jealous in love and John is not an exceptional case. One day he gets a letter from Phil for Liz and burns in jealousy and starts to accuse Liz for having an illegal affair with Phil. Liz pleads him not to abuse her in such a rude way but John was burning in anger and jealousy to such an extent that he leaves Liz at once and goes away. Surprising everybody, Liz takes a heart-shaking decision to marry Phil despite of being passionately in love with John and marries with Phil within fifteen days. Liz takes a sane decision and accepts divorce, and bald Phil rejecting passionate John. She finds John dominating, frantic, immature, and unsuitable to be getting married. On the other hand, she finds Phil mature, sensible, understanding, practical, and caring person who has all the qualities of a good life partner. Vikram Seth has propounded his theory of ultimate victory of marriage over passion and romance. Liz rejects dashing, charming, young, passionate, and loving John for security and safety she hopes to get in the arms of Phil.

Mrs. Dorati remains concerned to see her children – Liz, Ed, and Sue well settled in their life and to get married in proper age. She asks her children time and again to get married as soon as possible so that she could see her grandchildren before going to the final abode of human beings. She becomes sad when Sue tells her that she cannot marry for two years and Ed says that he has no time for being married. It seems that the main concern of Mrs. Dorati's life is to get her children married. She herself has got married in proper time and enjoyed the bliss of married life living in love and co-operation with her husband and wishes the same happiness for her children. Mrs. Dorati thinks about, "married love, the ripening years, / The boon of children, how she's yearning / To see the same joys settle on / Their lives as well (GG 10.29).

Janet and John falls in love when they were students but they do not continue their relationship and it ends in smoke before it could develop in marital bound as they find it a means to curtail their freedoms. Later, they again get a chance to revive their relationship when being deserted by Liz, John goes to cute chicks to have solace and sexual satisfaction and Janet brings him out of the clutches of these call girls. Their earlier romance rekindles again that had not yet extinguished altogether. They continue to meet, go for walk, and enjoy dinner outside. They want to settle their life together after binding in pious relationship of marriage but before they could express their love and liking for each other the Almighty God had wished something different for them and John has to lose Janet in a car accident and their wish to be one remains buried deep in their hearts. The earlier and later relationship of John and Janet revolves around the theme of marriage.

"Marriage is the union of minds and not only physical self" (Ganjoo 3). The institution of marriage deteriorates badly if there is no mutual understanding between the couple. Claire and Phil fall in love very soon of their meeting being attracted by each other's charm and beauty and they want to develop their love into stable bond of marriage. Though Claire's parents do not approve their relationship but Claire and Phil do not give heed to them and get married in haste. They live happily for about six years and have a son but inevitable conflicts develop between them and the pious bound of their marriage comes to an end with divorce. Claire divorces Phil and goes to another man, leaving Phil as well as her five years old son Paul.

Liz meets John after reading a matrimonial advertisement and very soon of their meeting she falls in love with him. When their relationship was about to flourish into marriage disbelief enters their relationship that destroys it badly. Being deceived in love by John, Liz gets married with Phil who is already married and has a six years old son. Though Liz denies John to be getting married soon and asks John to give her more time to think about it but when she is deserted by John she gets married with Phil within fifteen days without considering about its results. Liz finds marriage as a means of security, stability, and satisfaction. Being hurt by John, she finds marriage more charming than passionate love of John though she gets married with Phil without falling in love with him.

It seems that the ultimate end of all the characters is to find a suitable life partner and being married to kill the boredom of life. The main purpose of Liz and John's falling in love is to have a suitable life partner and to get married. The chief motif of the love relationship of Phil and Claire is also to get married though they could not sustain their relationship lifelong. Phil repents over his marriage and wishes, "Oh God, I wish I'd never seen / Your face—I wish I'd never been / Married—Clair" (GG 3.15). Liz and Phil's relationship develops into lasting bond due to marriage and they prove it a stable bond as it was based on understanding, respect, and maturity. Besides it, Mrs. Dorati enjoys the bliss of married life and aspires for the same bliss and happiness for her children. Every relationship revolves around the motif of marriage.

A Suitable Boy is a novel about marriage which begins with the marriage of Savita and Pran and comes to an end with the marriage of Lata and Haresh. Marriage is one of the prominent themes of this novel. This novel is not only conceived as a tale of marriage and love, which is considered as the basis of marriage, but it also abounds in married couples and describes about their married life. Lata the protagonist of the novel falls passionately in love with a Muslim boy Kabir, being unaware about his religion. She roams with him at the banks of Ganges, dhobi ghat, and goes for boating to see the reflection of Barsat Mahal in the water. She even asks Kabir to elope her away from the restrictions of her family, especially her mother but Kabir taking a sane decision does not fulfil her wish and asks her to wait for two years till he may realize his aim of life. On the other hand, her mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra tries her best to bring Lata out of the enchanting spell of the love of a Muslim boy and selects Haresh as a suitable boy for Lata. At last Lata makes her mind to marry with Haresh finding him mature, practical, pragmatic person though she does not like his way of dressing up and chewing *paan*. Rejecting her love for passionate, attractive, and dashing Kabir, Lata marries with Haresh and they both set their sail in the calm pond of life. Lata realizes for the best that "romantic love is not necessarily the best prelude to marriage" (Pandey 119).

Maan, his views about marriage, and his attraction and passion for Saeeda Bai is one of the major themes of the novels. Marriage has a different meaning for Maan who is a jolly kind of son of Mahesh Kapoor. In his carefree youth he establishes relationships with many charming girls from Brahmipur. Later, he establishes sexual relationship with Saeeda Bai and falls passionately in love with her despite of being engaged with a girl of her father's choice from Banaras. Maan has no interest and liking for that girl as he does not find her charming and attractive. Besides it, Maan thinks that his marriage with the Banaras girl would restrict or curtail his visits to his beloved Saeeda Bai. Maan has to pay a lot for his infatuation for Saeeda Bai as, he has to loss his mother and even has to go to prison for an attempt to murder Firoz. By depicting the character of Maan Seth has made the readers aware of the mentality of young generation towards marriage who finds marriage as a means of physical attraction and sexual satisfaction and has to pay a lot for this negligence.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra becomes widow in the prime of her young age and has to bear the responsibilities of rearing up four fatherless children. The main concern of her life lies in the better settlement of her children and to get them married with suitable life partners though her elder son Arun marries to Meenakshi falling in love with her. But their love marriage and its aftermath is introduced to show Vikram Seth's preference for arranged marriage over love marriage. Mrs. Rupa Mehra selects Pran as a suitable match for her elder daughter Savita though he is gangly, asthmatic, and dark in complexion. Mrs. Rupa Mehra acts as a perfect and alert mother and does not allow the love of Lata and Kabir to develop further and nips it in the bud. She remains worry to find a suitable husband for Lata and according to her suitable means a boy belonging to her caste and religion. Her struggles bear fruit when she finds Haresh suitable for Lata and marries her with Haresh. Mrs. Rupa Mehra also concerns for her younger son Varun and tries him to get away from the clutches of Kalpana Gaud though she treats her as her daughter but she does not approve her as her daughter-in-law as she is elder than Varun. It seems that the main concern of Mrs. Rupa Mehra lies to find suitable life partners for her children and to get married them according to the customs and rituals of Indian society.

Marriage is the ultimate end of the novels of Vikram Seth. In *A Suitable Boy* both love and arranged marriages are depicted and through the depiction of love and arranged marriages Seth has proved the superiority of arranged marriage over love marriage. As *A Suitable Boy* is set in the background of typical Indian society of 1952 and no one can imagine of love marriage in that society. Despite of it, Vikram Seth has introduced love marriage in this novel to show its bad consequences. In this novel Arun and Meenakshi are only two characters who get married after falling in love passionately. But they do not maintain the sanctity of married life and establish extra-marital sexual relationship with Shireen and Billy Irani respectively. Even Meenakshi goes to such an extent that she conceives a baby by Billy though she gets it abort later. Meenakshi and Arun present "a dark side of marriage where both husband and wife involve themselves in extramarital relations" (Ganjoo 6).

Marriage is considered as a social and pious ritual in Indian society. It is treated "as an alliance between two families rather than a union between two individuals" (Narula 25 Feb. 2013). Through the character of Veena, Vikram Seth has described about the restrictions, limitations, cruelties, oppressions, and discriminations imposed on an Indian bride in her in-laws. Veena complains to Priya about the cruelties of her mother-in-law and says, "When she sees I'm not miserable she becomes more miserable" (SB 245). She wishes that she will not ill-treat her daughter-in-law in such a way and would give her ghee and sugar every day. It reveals the revolt against the cruelty and ill treatment on the part of mothers-in-law against their daughters-in-law. They want to live freely and enjoy the bliss of married life but it seems them impossible in the presence of so many restrictions imposed by orthodox Indian society.

Another character Priya is married to Ram Vilas Goyal and she has to face the restrictions of married life. She has to live in the four walls of her house without any liberty and she imagines herself as a panther in a cage. She is not allowed to go out of the house except for wedding or the trips to temple or a religious fair as it would be disgraceful for the daughter-in-law of Rai Bahadur to be seen in the market. She finds it much better to be a monkey than a daughter-in-law in the Rai Bahadur's house because a monkey is free from every kind of restrictions and it enjoys unlimited freedom in this world. Although she does not want to live in so many restrictions of joint family but she has to submit because her husband wanted her to do so. The period of adjustments and sacrifices begins in a woman's life after marriage. It is said that marriage brings with it "an inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance"

(Jayabharthi 153). Priya and her tolerance, adjustment, understanding, and sacrifice is one of the main strands of the novel that deals with marriage with its unlimited limitations. It has been told to Priya that, “the first years of married life are the hardest – they require the most adjustment” (SB 239) but she feels it going more and more intolerable with the passage of time. Priya Goyal tolerates all the restrictions, oppressions, and inconveniences for the sake of her loving and caring husband who believes in “maintaining the decencies of a joint family” (SB 239).

Marriage is not something different for Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor than other women of the Indian society. Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is described as an incarnation of typical Indian woman. She takes care of her husband’s comforts, bears all the cruelties of her husband without speaking a word in revolt, follows him meekly and sheds her own pleasures for the sake of her husband whom she considers her god or deity. She is the idol of tolerance, endurance, simplicity, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Mahesh Kapoor delights in baiting and rebuking his wife whenever he gets a chance as: “you’ve been married to me for more than three decades and you have become more ignorant with each passing year” (SB 1026). After her death, Mrs. Rupa Mehra considers the pitiful life and the critical situation of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor who had devoted her life for the welfare of her family. She ponders, “Had her life been a full life? Could her marriage be said to have been happy or successful or fulfilled: and if so, what did those words mean? What was at the centre of their marriage ...” (SB 1223).

Marriage occupies a central position in the themes of the novels of Vikram Seth and he deals with this issue in perfect and excellent way. He not only deals with the marriage of middle class women but the married life of poor, lower caste woman could not escape from his sharp sight. Marriage means restrictions for the wife of poor Kachheru. She has no freedom after marriage. Regarding the condition of women Majumdar comments that, “if during one period of time or in one civilization she was brought up as a private possession of parents in some other, she was completely neglected and accepted as a provider of sexual pleasure to man and as a producer of his offspring” (7). Before marriage a woman lives in social bindings in her parents’ home and after marriage the four walls of her husband’s home becomes her inevitable abode. Kachheru’s wife is not an exceptional case as she had known two villages, “the village into which she had been born and the village into which she had married” (SB 532). Her daily routine is to bring *roties*, salt, a few chillies, and some *lassi* to drink, watch her husband eat in silence and to return back to her cheerless cage. The married life of this poor woman seems dull, monotonous, cheerless, and without any charm or attractions.

A Suitable Boy describes not only the concept of marriage in typical Indian society but Muslim society also. Remarriage of a man or woman is not considered odd in Muslim society and Rasheed has to sacrifice his liking and love for Tasneem for the sake of this tradition. He has no attraction and charm for marriage as his life is already constrained by the promise he had made to his dying mother and that has “tied his life down before he had begun to taste freedom” (SB 536). He is demanded to marry the widow of his elder brother who has dies in a train accident. Rasheed has no love or passion for his sister-in-law who later gets the honour of to be his wife. He feels ashamed to share a room with her though steadily he becomes habitual to the brief visits he pays to her in the midnight. But neither Rasheed nor his wife is happy with each other. Ruminating about his past, Rasheed feels: “If I had any choice, would it ever have been a woman like her whom I would have chosen as my partner and companion through this life?” (SB 648-649). It seems that Rasheed is not happy and satisfied with the destiny imposed upon him by his dying mother and marriage becomes a kind of imposed binding or an unbearable burden which he has to carry on throughout his life, though he feels unable to carry it. Rasheed becomes

so frustrated with his life that he commits suicide and ends the drama of his pitiable life. On the other hand, Rasheed's wife could not forget her former husband and she has no passion for Rasheed but she feels "a sense of comfort when he was with her" (SB 650).

Abida Khan, the wife of Nawab Sahib's younger brother's wife, is presented in a new light. She represents the empowerment of Muslim women. Though after marriage she has to live in *pardah* like all the other Muslim women of the world but she could not tolerate this imposed imprisonment for a long time and she revolts against it successfully. "Women's claim to their own space is perceived as threat to patriarchy" (Shukla 14 Dec. 2015) but Abida Khan shows courage, stands against time-ridden old customs and rituals, comes out of it breaking all the customs, and becomes a member of legislative assembly that was a matter of great honour and courage on the part of an Indian Muslim woman in the period of 1952. She has enough courage to deny to follow the rules of *pardah* and to live in another small house, away from the restrictions and bars of the prison like home. Abida Khan's rare struggle and courage after her marriage is one of the prominent themes of the novel. She is presented as the symbol of women's enlightenment, awareness, and the struggle for the betterment of their critical situation in the society and provides hope for other women to struggle for their rights and independence from unnecessary customs and restrictions.

Wife of Nawab Sahib is quite opposite to Abida Begum. She maintains strict *pardah* throughout her life. She is presented as courageous lady who was able to read and think, who runs estate efficiently behind the walls of her seclusion, taught her children the value of discipline and culture. She has amazing power of endurance and sacrifice. She takes marriage as such a relationship "where accepting each other with their imperfections is the key" (Gupta 17 Feb. 2013). She tries her best to adjust with the Nawab Sahib and put up with what she knew of the Nawab's own unsettled youth. Though Nawab Sahib fails to maintain the sanctity of marriage and establishes sexual relationship with a prostitute Saeeda Bai who becomes pregnant and gives birth to Tasneem, yet she remains loyal and obedient to her husband throughout her life, following the rules of the society. Marriage is something different for the wife of Nawab Sahib's wife than what it means to Abida Khan.

Nawab Sahib's daughter Zainab is another Muslim woman who follows the rules of *pardah* despite of being educated. Zainab has seen elegance, subtlety, etiquette and family culture, yet for her the world of *zenana* was "a complete world, even if constrained one" (SB 272). Like all the other old women of Baitar House Zainab has accustomed herself to live in the four walls of *pardah*, far away from the glimpses of the outer glittering and charming world.

Saeeda Bai is a courtesan who has a lot of admirers but none has shown courage to marry her. Saeeda Bai remains unmarried, yet she aspires to get a good match for her daughter Tasneem, publically who is recognised as her sister. She bears the responsibility to find a suitable life partner for Tasneem and disregards all the three admirers of Tasneem – Ishq Khan, Firoz, and Rasheed, for one reason or the other. It seems that like Mrs. Dorati of *The Golden Gate*, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Mrs. Chatterji of *A Suitable Boy* Saeeda Bai remains worried to get her daughter married with a suitable boy in proper age. It was sole motif of her life to make Tasneem secure and happy in this crud and selfish world.

An Equal Music is basically a novel about music and love. It is the romantic story about the passionate love between Julia and Michael, two musicians who fall in love passionately, get separated after some time, reunited again after ten years of unbearable separation, and get separated again forever. But one of the strands of the novel revolves around the marriage of Julia with James, her lust and physical attraction for Michael for some time, and her regret and return

to her loving and caring husband after recognising her fault. It is true that marriage is not only the binding between two bodies but it is a pious union of two souls also. In *An Equal Music* Julia falls in love with Michael when they both were music students in Vienna. Due to a row with his teacher Michael leaves Vienna as well as Julia also and comes to London. After ten years of intolerable separation they meet again in London. In the meanwhile Julia has married with James a banker and has a seven years old son Luke. When Julia and Michael reunite, their old love and passion rekindles and they enjoy physical and sexual relationship. But at last marriage gets victory over passionate love and Julia returns back to her mature, caring and loving husband, deserting demanding Michael forever. Julia's consciousness against treachery has also been echoed in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* where Rosie started crying after realising her fault of establishing physical relationship with the guide Raju, "After all ... After all ... Is this right what I am doing? After all, he has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom. (106).

Marriage is based on trust and mutual understanding and Julia understands this secret of life very well. Though she diverts from her path for a while and establishes physical relationship with her lover Michael but she understands the value of marriage and family and holds the caring hands of James deserting her lover Michael forever. Seth has proved that the success of marriage does not depend on physical love but internal feelings and beauty because physical love is alluring and charming in the initial stage, later on it dissipates into unnecessary and meaningless rifts. Though the marriage of Julia and James is not the product of their passionate love but they have regard and respect for each other and they accept each other forgetting and forgiving their mistakes or faults. Julia accepts about James that "I liked him from the start. He isn't volatile – like me. He isn't moody – like me ... He comforted me. He made me happy. He kept me sane. He gave me courage" (EM 327-328).

Seth reiterates the foundation of marriage which goes much beyond mere physical gratification. It seems that Seth advocates the philosophy of Prerana Sinha that marriage is a "commitment of inter-personal trust, faith, concern, caring and sharing in life" (134). Vikram Seth has deep insight and understanding of the social tradition of marriage and time and again it becomes one of the prominent themes of his novels. In all the novels of Vikram Seth we see his concern for the issue of marriage, types of marriage, superiority of arranged marriage over love marriage, bad results of love marriage for the couple as well as for the family, and the heroines' preference for marriage and family over love or romance. By introducing the theme of marriage, Seth has advocated marriage over love and made the readers to have a moral lesson regarding marriage and its aftermaths. Seth has presented marriage as the eternal and unending source of happiness, co-operation, security, togetherness, and unlimited bliss in human life.

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