Chapter One

Introduction - Vikram Seth’s World

Literature is a composite art form of positioning the individual self as well as the society in a dynamic socio-cultural-political-linguistic sphere. Any writer of ancient time or of present day would share a commonality that human beings continue to be inter-dependent or intra-dependent in terms of their divided selves to gratify their socio-psychological needs. When such need is unfulfilled and desire incomplete it leads human mind to be in conflict. Only the creative self tries to explore the context in which the various selves psychologically, socially and politically set in conflict and also elaborate them through the verbal nuances. Thus, born are literary writings with all its generic differences and the creative writers too. Vikram Seth is such a creative writer considered to be among world novelists and of best Indian writers in English.

The present research is a close textual study of Vikram Seth’s select writings, *An Equal Music*, *A Suitable Boy* and *Two Lives* in general and the characterization in particular. The characters have a subject center based on a paradigm of self-concept tuned psychologically by human experiences in terms of social and individual interactions. Also, this is viewed as how they contradict each other in a fictional as well as non-fictional mode. The hypothesis of the researcher is that these three novels may have a narrative identity which may encompass the characters into different selves, namely individual self, social self and political self.
Vikram Seth rocked the literary scene with his monumental love story *A Suitable Boy*, and hence, Vikram Seth continues to be in the limelight of the same fame. From professionalizing his passion for writing to churning out a slew of international bestsellers, the feats of Seth in the domain of literature are in no way microscopic. He can write and speak as many as eight languages including Welsh, French, Mandarin, Chinese, Urdu, German, Hindi and English and can play the Indian flute and cello. From demonstrating historical accuracy in *A Suitable Boy* to depicting Californian yuppies in *The Golden Gate*, Seth’s reach and range is extensive. He is indeed a writer of different genres, which makes him so loved among his readers. He possesses the art of creating a living and breathing world that keeps the readers focused and engaged.

Vikram Seth, born on June 20, 1952 in Calcutta, also the home of Indian literary giant Rabindranath Tagore, is an Indian poet, novelist, travel writer, librettist, children’s writer, biographer and memoirist:

An unusually forthcoming writer whose published material is replete with un-thinly-disguised details as to the personal lives of himself and his intimates related in a highly engaging narrative voice, Seth has said that he is somewhat perplexed that his readers often in consequence presume to an unwelcome degree of personal familiarity with him. (Opentopia)

Vikram Seth’s family lived in a number of cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar, near Calcutta, Patna and London. Although born in India, Vikram Seth spent some of his early years in London. He spent his life at
boarding school from the age of five. His father, Prem, was an executive of the Bata India Limited shoe company and he got migrated to post-partition India from West Punjab in Pakistan. His mother, Leila, was the first woman judge in the Delhi High Court as well as the first woman to become Chief Justice of a state High Court, at Simla. She had studied law in London and came first in the Bar examinations conducted. A week after, she delivered her second child, Seth’s younger brother, Shantum, who leads Buddhist meditational tours. His younger sister, Aradhana, is a film-maker married to an Austrian diplomat and has worked on Deepa Mehta’s *Earth and Fire*. Seth’s critics are of the opinion that their family members resemble the characters, Haresh and Savita and two of the Chatterji siblings in *A Suitable Boy*:

Seth has been unusually candid in acknowledging that many of his fictional personnel are drawn from life; he has said that only the dog Cuddles in *A Suitable Boy* has his real name — “Because he can’t sue”; his mother Leila Seth has said in her memoir *On Balance* that other characters in *A Suitable Boy* are composites but Haresh is a portrait of her husband Prem. (Wikipedia)

Having lived in London for many years, Seth is attached with the people and culture of the country and he owns a residence near Salisbury, England. He has renovated the house of seventeenth century Anglican divine and metaphysical poet George Herbert which was bought in 1996. Seth is a notable participant in local literary and cultural events. He also owns a home in Delhi where he stays with his parents and maintains an extensive library and his vast paper works. In 2006, he became a leader of the campaign against India’s Section 377, a law against homosexuality as he identifies himself as bisexual.
Vikram Seth attended St. Michael’s High School in Patna, Welham Boys’ School and The Doon School in Dehradun, often called the “Eton of India.” Seth remarked about his “terrible feeling of loneliness and isolation” while studying at the prestigious institution, at Doon Founder’s Day gathering in 1992. He said:

Sometimes, at lights out, I wished I would never wake up to hear the chhota hazri bell. For days after I left I thought of school as a kind of jungle, and looked back on it with a shudder. I was teased and bullied by my classmates and my seniors because of my interest in studies and reading, because of my lack of interest in games, because of my unwillingness to join gangs and groups. (Wikipedia)

Seth’s experience to outright sexual abuse at the hands of older boys has been projected on the character Tapan, in *A Suitable Boy* who refuses to go to the school, because of the bullying by his seniors. He is shown as the younger brother of Amit Chatterji, the character bearing numerous similarities to Seth himself. Amit takes charge of withdrawing the boy from the school and enrolling him in a day school in the novel.

Seth also spoke of the advantages that the school conferred on him and offered words of encouragement and inspiration. And in an interview with *The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s* Margaret Throsby, his slightly younger contemporary at Doon, the anthropologist and novelist Amitav Ghosh, recollected that Seth was deservedly lionized by both students and staff and his winning personality and brilliant intellect having been well in evidence even then.
Seth completed his “A” levels at Tonbridge School in Kent, and read Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The years spent in this college not only earned him a degree, but also helped him to explore his interest in poetry and writing. From then he worked towards poetry and other forms of writing. He even enrolled himself for Ph.D. in Stanford University but could never complete it because of his inclination towards writing. He undertook doctoral studies at Stanford University, and it is learnt that he spent eleven years (from 1975 to 1986) not getting an Economics Ph.D. He dislikes Economics, and explains the reason in his own words: “I discovered soon after I had begun my compulsory courses in macroeconomics and microeconomics that I could not get by without wasting a whole lot of time studying. The subject was dry, mathematically unrealistic and intellectually unchallenging” (TL 26). He says that Aunt Henny and Uncle Shanti, his guardian at that time, were not so happy that he disliked his ‘subject’. And Aunt Henny tries to increase his confidence and writes to him in a way of motivation: “Well, for one year you can devote to writing and have not to study Economics. Though Shanti hated dentistry first, he loves it for a long, long time, and the same may apply to you with Economics at least we hope so . . . . (27).

Though he was formally engaged in postgraduate Economics courses at Stanford he also undertook poetics studies and he was Wallace Stegner Fellow in Creative Writing in 1977-1978. He had a wonderful guide, the poet Timothy Steele, at Stanford. His traditionally structured verse with formal rhyme and metre inspired Seth and he adopted a similar formal discipline in his own poetry, along with that of Robert Frost and Philip Larkin. Seth recalled in 2003 interview:
I wanted to have some contact with the writing program. So I went to this office and asked if there was anyone who could help with poetry. There were two poets there and the one nearest the door was Timothy Steele, who writes with rhyme and metre. If the other fellow had been closer, I’d probably have turned out a poet of free verse (Jeremy Gavron).

Seth also enrolled in Mandarin language courses that later helped him gain fluency in the language during his stint in China. In 1980-82 Seth did extensive field work in China gathering data for his intended doctoral dissertation on Chinese population planning; he was attached to Nanjing University while in China and became fluent in Mandarin within six months. Later he started translating Chinese as well as Hindi poetry into English. He took advantage of his Chinese language fluency to return home to Delhi overland via Sin Kiang and Tibet, which resulted in From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sin Kiang and Tibet (1983). It is his first book, a combination of travel narrative and personal memoir written at the suggestion of his father.

Seth is a famous polymath, and is well versed with many languages like, Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu and Hindi, his mother tongue. The German he learnt helped him in giving birth to Two Lives. It is this German that he learnt by force for getting admission into Oxford, helped him to understand and translate the letters of his Aunt Henny from the “trove” that was found in the attic of their house untouched for years. The Urdu he learnt was useful to him during the travels in Sin Kiang and Tibet detailed in From Heaven Lake.
Apart from his interest in the languages, Seth is interested in music. He plays the Indian flute and the cello and sings German lieder, especially Schubert. He has a broad range of international literary as well as biographical influences, but admits in one of the interviews, that without Pushkin, he would have never written any novels. Seth always writes a sonnet in the Pushkin form at the beginning of each book. His poetry is almost musical, and music is indeed at the heart of his life, as described in the author’s note to An Equal Music: “Music is dearer to me than speech.” He gains pleasure from listening to many different kinds of music, from Bollywood to Schubert to north Indian classical music. He credits his partner, the French violinist Philippe Honoré, as inspiring him with the idea for this classical music novel An Equal Music. He does so in an acrostic sonnet on Honoré’s name in An Equal Music:

Perhaps this could have stayed unstated.
Had our words turned to other things
In the grey park, the rain abated,
Life would have quickened other strings.
I list your gifts in this creation:
Pen, paper, ink and inspiration,
Peace to the heart with touch or word,
Ease to the soul with note and chord.

How did that walk, those winter hours,
Occasion this? No lightning came;
Nor did I sense, when touched by flame,
Our story lit with borrowed powers –
Rather, by what our spirits burned,
Embered in words, to us returned. (AEM 1)
Sethi remembers how Seth retains a sense of wonder for the mysteries of poetry and says that he never tries to examine the process as it does not help for the poet and is dangerous to analyse one’s own work. When asked to describe about his search for a suitable form, to which to marry his subject matter, his answer is:

‘The question [of form and content] is not a chicken and egg question it is a knife and fork question. Philip Larkin said the inspiration and form come together and that’s what happens. I would say poetry, in a sense, is a miracle. It is capable of accepting many different rules.’ To read and listen to Seth breaking and making those rules in his own unique way is a suitable delight.

(Sethi’s Interview)

Seth began writing poetry at the tender age of three years, and this cradle passion became central to his life. He moved to England at the age of seventeen to live with his great aunt and uncle in North London. The interview further states: “I was very glad that I went there, at that time. I was a very, very introverted, painfully shy person”, he says. “It enriched my life and breadth of thought”. His peripatetic streak was to continue throughout his life and literature in the years to come. “It was really when I went to California that I found it was possible to be relaxed. I think it was the sunniness” (Sethi’s Interview).

In 1986, Vikram Seth wrote *The Golden Gate*, his first novel, the novel in verse. *The Golden Gate*, is indeed a novel in verse about the lives of a number of young professionals in San Francisco. The novel is a satirical romance describing the stories of young professionals in San Francisco throughout their quests and questions to find, then deal with, love in their own lives as well as each others’. It is written entirely in rhyming tetrameter sonnets after the style established by Aleksandr Pushkin in *Eugene Onegin*. At the time of the novel’s composition, Seth was a graduate student in Economics at Stanford University. Seth described the origins of the novel as a “pure fluke.” While conducting tedious research for his dissertation, Seth would divert himself with trips to the bookstore. He encountered its English translation in a Stanford second-hand bookstore and which changed the direction of his career, shifting his focus from academic to literary work. He says:

On one such occasion, I found in the poetry section, two translations of *Eugene Onegin*, Alexander Pushkin’s great novel in verse. Two translations but each of them maintained the same stanzaic form that Pushkin had used. Not because I was interested in Pushkin or Eugene Onegin, but purely because I thought, this is interesting technically that both of them should have been translated so faithfully, at least as far as the form goes . . . . And suddenly, I realized that this was the form I was looking for to tell my tales of California. The little short stories I had in my mind subsided and this more organically oriented novel came into being. I loved the form, the ability that Pushkin had to run through a wide range of emotions, from absolute flippancy to real sorrow and passages that would make you think, during and after reading it.

*(Wikipedia-*The Golden Gate*)
The novel brought him the 1988 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, by the Sahitya Akademi, India’s National Academy of Letters.

After this initial work, Seth slowly produced *A Suitable Boy*, the 1,349 page colossus whose publication in 1993 propelled Seth into the public spotlight. Seth has indeed produced many great books over the course of his career, and greatness is also a theme within his work in various ways: characters are compelled to assess the greatness of the relationships in their lives. His work *A Suitable Boy* is also ambitious in its great scope and form - and is one of the longest single-volume novels in the English language. After the success of *The Golden Gate*, Seth took up residence in his parents’ house back in Delhi to work on his second novel, *A Suitable Boy*. Though initially conceived as a short piece detailing the domestic drama of an Indian mother’s [Mrs. Rupa Mehra] search for an appropriate husband for her marriageable Indian daughter [Lata Mehra] against the background of the formative years of India, after Independence, the novel grew and Seth was to labour over it for almost seven years. He says that he never thought that it would take this much time for him to complete it: “I thought I would finish my Indian novel in a year or two, and that it might be two or three hundred pages long. In fact, it was to take seven years to complete and would run to over thirteen hundred pages” (*TL* 39). The 1349-page novel is a four-family saga set in post-independence, post-partition India, and alternatively, satirically, and earnestly examines issues of national politics in the period leading up to the first post-Independence national election of 1952, inter-sectarian animosity, land reform and the eclipse of the feudal princes and landlords, academic affairs, inter and intra-family relations and a range of further issues of importance to the characters.
After this novel’s success, Seth followed it up with *An Equal Music* (1999). *An Equal Music* is another romantic novel, minus the satire of *A Suitable Boy* and a thousand or so pages. The book centres on two gifted musicians: Michael Holme and Julia McNicholl. As Michael works on a Beethoven piece for the Maggiore Quartet, he grows increasingly preoccupied with recollections of his student days in Vienna where he met Julia. When the two are re-united by chance in London, their relationship is re-kindled. One of the most impressive aspects of this novel is the way in which it manages to convey music through language. While Seth is modest about his musical abilities, the fact that he was commissioned to write a libretto published as *Arion and the Dolphin*, for the English National Opera in 1994 suggests he is no novice. *An Equal Music* takes a conventional romantic plot and renders it compelling and novel through the seductive clarity and precision of its prose. Different from Seth’s previous two novels, both of which have omniscient narrators, his novel *An Equal Music* is narrated by one of the characters, Michael. He is the second violinist of a string quartet in London. When Julia, a beautiful pianist he abandoned in Vienna ten years ago when they were both music students, reappears in his life, the balance of the quartet is threatened, and Michael has to deal with some old conflicts in a new configuration.

There is a two CD set with the same title as the book. It contains full performances of some of the works performed and selections from others. One is grateful for the recording of Beethoven’s String Quintet although one has the sense that another rehearsal or two would have produced a more polished performance. Philippe Honoré, Seth’s longtime companion, plays beautifully on many of the compositions. It is less proper to note, but interesting and amusing, that Seth
apparently has an aversion to modern music. The only modern work to be named is one that may be fictitious and to which Seth has attached a satirical title. There is barely a mention of the great works by Bartok or Ligeti for string quartet. In Seth’s musical world Stravinsky does not exist, nor do Ravel or Debussy. *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan-Williams is the most recent work that appears on the CD.

Seth’s forthcoming novel, a sequel titled *A Suitable Girl* is due for release in 2013. Seth achieved international stardom with the publication of *A Suitable Boy*, which won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. He is now writing the book’s sequel, to be called *A Suitable Girl*, and engagingly discusses the complexities of re-visiting his characters. Sethi says:

Unlike those authors who periodically re-read their work, Seth has not returned to *A Suitable Boy*. As to how to approach the task of weaving in the past 60 years of social and economic change in India, he says that this might not be done directly but more obliquely. Soon, his hand is covered with ink, as he jokingly composes a few lines of the forthcoming book on his palm.

(Sethi’s Interview)

Seth’s recent book *Two Lives* (2005) a non-fictional narrative, is a famous memoir and biography. It is a family memoir written on the suggestion of his mother, and published in October, 2005. It focuses on the lives of his great uncle (Shanti Behari Seth) and German-Jewish great aunt (Henny Gerda Caro) who met in Berlin in the early 1930s while Shanti was a student there and with whom Seth stayed extensively on going to England at age seventeen for school at Tonbridge and then to attend Oxford. *Two Lives* contains much autobiography than *From Heaven Lake*. It is
not a novel but the biography of Seth’s London relatives, Uncle Shanti and Aunt Henny. Since Seth lived with them while he was a student in England, it has much about his own life and devotes more to the subject of his own life too.

In addition to Vikram Seth’s literary and poetic achievements, he was commissioned by the English National Opera to write a libretto based on the Greek legend of Arion and the Dolphin. The opera was performed for the first time in June 1994. Orion Children’s Books subsequently published a picture book based on the opera in which Vikram Seth’s words are illustrated by the internationally acclaimed artist Jane Ray. The book has since been made into a twenty-five minute animated special entitled *Arion and the Dolphin* and has been shown in Australia, Canada, Iceland, Malta, New Zealand, and throughout the United Kingdom.

*The Poems* is a collection of Seth’s entire poetry up to 1994 – *Mappings*, *The Humble Administrator’s Garden*, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, *Three Chinese Poets*, and *Arion and the Dolphin*: A Libretto, with Seth’s new introduction. It also has the index of first lines.

*Arion and the Dolphin* is a libretto for the opera, with music by Alec Roth. The opera was commissioned by the Baylis Programme of the English National Opera and first performed in June 1994. The story is based on an ancient Greek legend about the friendship between Arion, a boy musician, and a dolphin that saves him from drowning. This opera is in nine scenes of continuous action.

Seth has also penned a book for children, *Arion and the Dolphin* based on the libretto of the same title and it is a picture book. It is a story of Arion, a young musician at the court of Periander, Tyrant of Corinth. Thrown overboard on his return
from a musical contest in Sicily by crew members who are greedy for his prize of gold, Arion is saved and befriended by a dolphin. The book has beautiful illustrations in marine blues and greens with a touch of gold by Jane Ray.

In his translational work, *Three Chinese Poets* (1992), Seth offers us his most ambitious and daring translation to date. *Three Chinese Poets* is an anthology of 36 poems by the three T’ang dynasty poets, Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu, translated into English in an attempt to keep the original rhyme, metrical movement, and the meaning of the original words as far as possible. Seth’s introduction contains a history of the Tang dynasty. It points out similarities and differences among the three poets, and illustrates the typical Chinese octet structure. In translating from the original ideograms – the graphic symbols of the Chinese writing system, Seth closely follows the form and subject of the poems. It is Seth’s skilful collection.

Seth has also penned a play in verse set in London that deals with the shenanigans inside a publishing firm threatened by American takeover. Seth, getting inspired after reading Richard Wilbur’s lively translations of Moliele, started writing this play in Alexandrine couplets in summer 1987. This is mentioned in both Seth’s essay *Forms and Inspirations* and Dictionary of Literary Biography.

Apart from all these, a film of *A Suitable Boy* is slated for release in 2006, an earlier attempt at a television serialisation having been abandoned. *The Golden Gate*, an opera in two acts with music by Conrad Cummings and libretto from the novel-inverse by Vikram Seth adapted by the composer is currently (2010) in development by Lively Works and American Opera Projects and receives a staged workshop
Vikram Seth was an unconventional writer, who had this unique quality of unifying poetry and drama together. Compelling narrative force, strong characterization and ingeniously interrelated plotting give weight to most of his works. He has great aesthetic value when it comes to picturization. He takes the readers to the beautiful natural world that he described in his works. (Thanmay Thulkar-English PBL)

II

This part of introduction, categorically presents the critiques of various thinkers, academics and critics of Vikram Seth, ranging from Philip Larkin, the popular English poet to Blog writers like Amitabha Banerjee, as review of literature. His first book of poetry, *Mappings*, originally published privately attracted little attention. Seth had sent it to Philip Larkin for comment, though he offered Seth encouragement it was referred to rather scornfully among his intimates. Seth might be greatly influenced by Larkin as his poetry contains similar elements: “a highly colloquial vocabulary and syntax with enjambment and rhyme; closely structured form but without rigidity”. (Encyclopedia II-Global Oneness) *Mappings* was Seth’s first volume of poetry, a little known collection, it includes translations of work by Chinese, German, Urdu and Hindi poets. It has been dedicated to Tim Steele and Donald Davie, the two poets. Regarding poetic form, Seth was influenced by them to a greater extent. This book is a collection of 46 poems on various themes, with the original scripts printed in calligraphy.
Mappings was followed by From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet, a popular and compelling autobiographical tale of the author’s journey from Nepal to India and the many and varied people he meets on the way. He was able to hold candid conversations with them, obtaining a rare and intimate look at their real lives. Travel also provides the direction for Seth’s next two collections, The Humble Administrator’s Garden and All You Who Sleep Tonight. From Heaven Lake is a travel book and is an account of the travels Seth took from Heaven Lake in Sin Kiang, the extreme northwest province of China, to his hometown of New Delhi in India, via Tibet, in 1981 Hitchhiking. The book had become his first popular successful contribution as a writer. He registered himself also as a travel writer and was credited with the Thomas Cook Travel Award.

Seth’s liking for poetry is well exhibited as he makes frequent asides in verse. It provides an extensive insight about the reality and the effect of living abroad:

Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in 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. (From Heaven Lake 35)

The Humble Administrator’s Garden contains collection of poems in three sections that were written in China, India, and California, and each section reflects those locations. Throughout the collection, Seth’s attention is focused on human activity in the natural world – images of trees and animals juxtaposed with descriptions of human joys and sorrow. It is a witty collection of nature poems
structured around plants/places: Wutong (China), Neem (India) and Live-Oak (California). This collection is a conglomeration of cultures and pictures with vivid reality and variety revealing the poet’s outlook on life:

Despite inevitable and natural autobiographical elements depicting his experiences and impressions, the poem projects their author’s attitude towards society, nature, man and morality . . . . Through them all one does not miss the poet’s vision of the journey of life. Vikram Seth looks at society with a critical eye. He reveals the rusting and decaying of a great “culture” together with the death of a “heritage.” (Samraj 182)

All You Who Sleep Tonight is an elegant book of poetry that combines the sharp humour that characterises so much of Seth’s writing with darker subjects such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The unusual feature of All You Who Sleep Tonight is collection of poems in variety. The poems range from love poems to those dealing with nature or travel, varying from a section of epigrammatic quatrains to longer narratives in the voices of those caught up in war and public crisis. In this collection, by the use of memorable rhyme and meter Seth conveys his feelings with directness and clarity.

Seth’s quality of wit is exposed in his next book of poems, Beastly Tales from Here and There which is a collection of ten animal tales in verse couplets. These tales are a combination of Indian, Chinese, Greece, Ukrainian tales and the author’s own tales. Again it is another narrative of journeys through Greece, China, India and the Ukraine. These tales of quirky, witty, and funny animals have been described as modern Aesop’s Fables. Structured around the classic tension between good and evil and punctuated by superb illustrations, these tales in
verse will appeal as much to children as to adults. It is a fable as well as parody. 
“The Frog and the Nightingale” is a narrative poem of this anthology. Manivannan, in 
his article on Vikram Seth’s “The Frog and The Nightingale: A Critical Note on Art 
and Market” points out that it is a tale that reveals allegorically the shift from creative 
art to producing art that is consumable and it speaks about commercialization of art 
and exploitation of artist:

Vikram Seth, living in the age of consumer culture, has featured the frog so as 
to characterize the role of middlemen in promoting art and artist. He also 
discloses the world of sponsors and agents who simply trap the young artists 
for their benefits. What the poet has witnessed in the world of concert 
market/publishers market has been allegorically revealed in the poem. In the 
modern world of literature the key roles are played by agents, promoters and 
publishers. Even literary awards are considered a mechanism for popularizing 
books. In some cases legal battles are engaged to highlight authors and writers. 
The sad fact is that writers have to be pushed into the front in this highly 
competitive commercial world. (190)

Seth’s *The Golden Gate* is his first novel in the verse form. Even the author’s 
personal history, acknowledgements, dedication, and contents are in this verse form. 
It has a rhyme scheme aBabccDDefFeGG, inspired by Charles Johnston’s 
remarkable translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (Wikipedia-*The Golden Gate*).

Onegin stanza (sometimes “Pushkin sonnet”) refers to the verse form 
popularized (or invented) by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin through his 
novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. The work was mostly written in verses of
iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme “aBaBccDDeFFeGG”, where the lowercase letters represent feminine endings (i.e., with an additional unstressed syllable) and the uppercase representing masculine ending (i.e. stressed on the final syllable). (Wikipedia-Onegin)

*The Golden Gate* is called “Byronesque” by some critics (Perry). The story relates the lives of a number of Bay Area yuppies who in search of love and companionship. Their stories are underlined by modern themes such as homosexuality, terminal illness, and the fear of nuclear war. The narrative concerns the plight of young men and women lost in San Francisco, a city that cares little for them, and provides no solace of love or companionship. John, Jan, Liz, and Phil work through the tangles of love and friendship. “John is rigorous and self-centered, not at all a sympathetic person, but Seth shows him in real pain over the loss of a lover to another man and of her successor to death” (Bob Williams). He is at the close of the book a tragic figure of great dignity. The likelihood of commercial success seemed highly doubtful – and the scepticism of friends as to the novel’s viability is facetiously quoted within the novel; but the verse novel received wide acclaim and achieved healthy sales. “The great California novel has been written, in verse (and why not?): *The Golden Gate* gives great joy” (Gore Vidal).

*The Golden Gate* wonderfully evokes the landscape of California, and the trials and tribulations of the young protagonist, John, trying to find his footing in the great city. Seth describes how he enjoyed the energy of the place and people – an energy which permeates his prose. People are surprised that he has released poetry collections too:
It comes as a surprise to some readers of Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993) that the author of this, the longest novel in English ever written, has also penned six volumes of poetry. What is surprising is not Seth’s shift between prose and poetry (here he is in the company of several contemporary writers), but that an author famous for such an expansive, ‘unrestrained’ work of fiction, could also write with the formal and verbal restraint, economy and discipline of Seth-the-poet. (James Proctor)

After *The Golden Gate* had been published, Seth decided to write a short piece about India’s early years, but laboured over *A Suitable Boy* for almost a decade. After writing the first five hundred pages, Seth lost his momentum, feeling that the novel was not detailed accurately, and conducted research in India for more than a year, also spending time living in a village and with his family in order to find a way of weaving his intricate story together:

However I soon realized that the novel – which had opened with a grand wedding – now had so many characters whom I was interested in that I needed to take off at least a year simply to understand the varied worlds of law, politics, administration, medicine, farming, manufacture, commerce, education, music, religion, and so on . . . . As the novel had begun to expand geographically, I travelled a great deal around northern India by train. In the course of these trips I even visited the small town of Biswan where Shanti Uncle was born. (*TL* 40)

The novel contains a strong element of affectionate satire, something occasionally missed by Seth’s more earnest critics, as with his subsequent novel, *A*
Suitable Boy. Despite its formidable length, the novel was a bestseller, and propelled Seth into the public spotlight assured and highlighted his reputation.

The Indian journalist and novelist Kushwant Singh, in the Illustrated Weekly has mentioned of the novel: “I lived through that period and I couldn’t find a flaw. It really is an authentic picture of Nehru’s India.” English critics greeted A Suitable Boy with almost universal enthusiasm, notwithstanding its somewhat controversial passing-over for the Booker Prize shortlist, though it received mixed reviews from some American critics.

In reference to A Suitable Boy, the literary critics of The Washington Post, Eugene Robinson and Jonathan Yardley comment: “I have little doubt that . . . Vikram Seth is already the best writer of his generation,” and “Three and a half pounds of perfection” respectively. Both writers are literary critics for The Washington Post (Postcolonial studies-Web). Further the remarks of other critics too are stated that many of the least yielding critics, also have the same feeling and they have compared Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy to works by literary figures such as George Eliot, Goethe, and Leo Tolstoy.

While Yuko Sawabe, in his biographical note on Seth and his works reviewing the other critics’ views like Richard Jenkyns, he has remarked that the piece A Suitable Boy is a “decent, unremarkable, second-rate novel.” Seth has been placed among the group of post-independence writers examining postcolonial themes who have burst into the international literary arena. He points out that Seth’s novel is a different kind of postcolonial novel, free of the “covert nationalism” which is often seen in other postcolonial writers. Although the novel is a “publishing phenomenon”
and has been getting “favorable reviews,” Jenkyns does not think this domestic saga qualifies to be likened to Dickens, Tolstoy, Austen, or George Eliot because it lacks “intimacy,” “passion,” and “psychological penetration.” He seems in particular disagreement with the heroine’s choice of her suitable husband. (Yuko Sawabe)

While reviewing *A Suitable Boy* along with four other books, Catling says: “It is a triumph of story-telling over pretentious literary faddism.” He explains Seth’s “direct narrative thrust,” that eventually resolves some problems in the main story—modern courtship within the traditional match-making of conservative Indian family life—continuously gains strength, never diminished by incidental episodes of various crises in his “enthralling romantic saga.”

*A Suitable Boy* is written with a subtle, unobtrusive style which Vikram Seth attributes to his own taste and beliefs. Seth remarked that “with such a large cast of characters, a strong voice would have been too much. Easy writing makes damn hard reading, and I think the opposite is true as well. The book is not more difficult to read than it has to be” (qtd. in Robinson). True to his word, the novel begins with a statement from Voltaire, “The secret of being a bore is to say everything” (*ASB* 1).

According to Amitabha Banerjee:

This is the longest English novel based on a single story. Seth has crafted his characters well, most of his characters are different from each other, and relate well to people we see in our daily lives. The story moves well, although it does become monotonous at some times, Seth quickly and cleverly switches scenes. The description of rural India, and the socio political state of India in the 1950’s is excellent. The author has done a lot of research on the prevailing
state of India just after its independence and has put a lot of time and effort on a descriptive narration. (Web Blog)

*A Suitable Boy* is set in the political hotbed of India during the post-independence, post-partition decade of the 1950s. This story examines the inner workings and travails of four families, the Kapoors, Mehras, Chatterjis (Hindus) and the Khans (Muslims). Two primary characters in this story are Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Lata, her marriageable but rebellious youngest daughter. Seth is most proud of his vibrant Mrs. Mehra, who is based in part on Seth’s grandmother, also named Rupa Mehra, and whom Seth calls “the muse of the project” (Bemrose). Mrs. Rupa Mehra is a widow whose mission throughout the novel is to take care of her family, and in particular, the search for a husband of suitable, Hindu character for Lata. However, at the same time, Lata is torn by her mother’s wishes and her own love for a Muslim boy.

Commenting on the writing in *A Suitable Boy*, Schuyler Ingle states:

It is absolutely seamless. There are no impediments placed between the reader and the story and the intimate lives of the characters. The reader's immersion in Indian life is so complete that by the time *A Suitable Boy* comes to its successful conclusion, aspects of Indian life that seem exotic—like the idea of arranging a marriage for a daughter—make perfect sense to a Western reader. (e - notes)

In the background of the novel, rests the underlying Hindu/Muslim conflict which saturated the period following the independence of both India and Pakistan, and which continues to batter the South Asian subcontinent today. In the novel, conflict occurs between Hindus and Muslims in the fictional city of Brahmpur, where
the story is primarily set. Seth sees *A Suitable Boy* as a plea for religious tolerance, among other things. He says, “It is an insult to Hinduism that these people have hijacked what it means to be Hindu,” he said. “It’s tolerance, understanding — not just trying to bash your neighbor over the head because he is Muslim. These things need to be said” (qtd. in Robinson).

Saima Ali in her paper on Mapping Spaces: “Envisioning India In Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy,*” gives the views of Anita Desai on *A Suitable Boy*. She quotes Desai’s comments: “Seth’s intention was clearly to reproduce India on a scale in keeping with its history, its population, its diversity, and abundance of life” (60).

The novel won “The Connect Award” in 1993 and launched Seth into a slew of interviews, talk shows, and book signings on his book tour. He mentioned, “By the end of this, by the time this is over, I’ll be a most unsuitable boy” (Robinson). However, many readers and critics alike were dismayed when *A Suitable Boy* was left out of the race for the Booker Prize in 1993. Seth’s work was not among the six novels nominated for the prize, which was ultimately awarded to *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* on October 26, 1993.

*The Observer* in its review on *A Suitable Boy* gives its opinion by saying that the greatness of the novel lies in its truthfulness:

Set in post-independence India, the novel follows for eighteen months or so four linked families in Calcutta, the province of Purva Pradesh and its capital Brahmpur, and the cities–Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow—trawled by the heroine’s mother in her search for a “suitable boy” . . . But the greatness of the novel, its unassailable truthfulness, owes less to research than to imagination, an
instinctive knowledge of the human heart – with all its varieties of kindness and cruelty, its capacity for hurt . . . . As with all the best books, one feels only dismay when the pages on the right of the tome start thinning out. (*The Observer*-Penguin)

On critically analyzing the novel, James Proctor comments: “In *A Suitable Boy* Seth combined satire and romance to even greater effect in what became one of the most popular epic narratives of the late twentieth century.” He says that the classic realism of *A Suitable Boy*, that took Seth almost a decade to write, was for many readers of Indian fiction in English, a welcome break from the magical realism of that other heavy weight author from the subcontinent, Salman Rushdie. He observes that Seth’s preferred prose style seems to implicitly contrast him with that of Rushdie:

‘the kind of books I like reading are books where the authorial voice doesn’t intrude . . . [or] . . . pull you up with the brilliance of their sentences’. Of course, such comparisons ultimately conceal more than they reveal: if Seth’s novel represents a move away from self-conscious modernist experimentation then how are we to read the self-conscious epigraph with which it opens: ‘The secret of being a bore is to say everything’ (Voltaire)? (James Proctor)

The novel is a tale of a Hindu family’s attempts to find a suitable husband for their younger daughter, Lata. The novel interweaves stories of four large families and those who orbit them, depicting various scenes such as weddings, funerals,
childbirths, festivals, religious riots, and election campaigns. This is the longest single-volume novel ever published in English:

The novel has two main strands - Lata’s search for a husband and Maan’s search for something to do with his life--and Seth constructs a vivid and diverse portrait of Indian life around them, using a wide variety of interlinked characters and stories. The model for *A Suitable Boy* is not so much nineteenth century masterpieces as India itself. Seth’s style is lucid and the structure of the novel is remarkably clear. *A Suitable Boy* breathes “the unfakable, unmistakable breath of life.” (Lanchester)

Dalrymple describes the book’s style and subject matter as “antiquated,” and he points out that unlike the works of many Third World novelists, Seth’s novel contains “no witches, spirits or succubi.” He praises Seth’s conservative style – he calls it “delightfully unmodish”--in comparison with most other Commonwealth writers such as Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri, who “have made their reputation through literary innovation or iconoclasm.” Dalrymple also shares his contemporary critics that Seth seems to have drawn his inspiration from “the pure waters of 19th-century masters” such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Tolstoy.

One of the book reviews of cyberspace, labels Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* as “an evocative domestic drama by an Indian about India.” It is also viewed that the drama focused on “four families, displaying domestic frustrations and successes played out against a backdrop of the clash between traditional and modern ways” will help to wade away its hugeness (Brad Hopper).
Phoebe-Lou Adams describes and characterizes that the four families involved in what appears to be just “a domestic comedy” at the start, and the novel is recognized later as a “sweeping portrayal of India in the 1950s.” Seth is highly skillful in telling individual set of pieces as narrative, along with the running narrative as a whole.

Bob Williams is right to comment upon Seth’s works: He describes *A Suitable Boy* is so different that one immediately – with the advantage of hindsight – suspects that Seth is determined never to repeat himself. It is a book of staggering length, and although the sensibility of the author is modern, it has the qualities of a novel written in a previous century. It is Seth’s only novel so far to deal with Indians in India. It is also a historical novel although it does not venture very deeply into the past. Gandhi is dead and India shuffles forward under Nehru’s often baffling leadership. The movement to reform land ownership is underway. It will ruin the old landowners, some of whom are leading characters in *A Suitable Boy*, and much of the novel concerns itself with politics and political maneuvering.

But the basic story is more human and appealing. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is determined to find a husband for her daughter Lata. She is looking, in other words, for a suitable boy. Lata wanders from her mother’s intentions by her meeting and falling in love with a young Muslim, a very wrong thing for a young Hindu woman to do, more wrong than marriage between a Montague and a Capulet. Attrition and a failure of enthusiasm on the part of the young Muslim ends this relationship, and Lata finds her choices focused on a young man of good family, disapproved of by her mother since he is not her choice, and a hustling young man of less breeding but of good
heart. The young man of good family, incidentally, is a fictional version of Seth and the family that of his parents and siblings. (Amithabha Banerjee)

Bruce King, in his *World Literature Today* points out: “Seth has been shamefully ignored by the academic critical elite, probably because he does not fit into current expectations of the postcolonial,” but he is a “major writer” as *A Suitable Boy* “has the fullness of life of the great nineteenth-century novels.” He further says that Seth uses the Jane Austen theme of a search for a suitable marriage partner as a guide through Indian society and politics during the early 1950s. The young lady makes a sensible rather than romantic choice, as the novel values tolerance, common sense, and practicality.

Johnson in *Seth’s Subcontinent of a Novel* says, “This genial comedy in Indian manners is a work in the tradition of 19th-century realism, filtered through a late 20th-century sensibility,” and claims that being “readable” does not prevent its being “an artefact,” like Rushdie’s works. Johnson finds that although Seth observes the problems of Indian society “with the zest of a Trollope or a Waugh,” he shines most brilliantly “in the domestic and romantic spheres.” He also points out that Seth is not a mere “salon wit,” but that the novel “plumbs the depths,” too. (Yuko Sawabe)

The readability of the present novel is ample justification of its size. It excels in vivid subplots and the kind of masterful organization that makes the whole thing work. The author, who could dare to write a novel in verse, here dares to write a traditional novel with all the stop outs, and all the parts in well controlled motion. It is an extraordinary achievement:
*A Suitable Boy* has drawn favourable comparisons to the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872), and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981). Set in India during the early 1950s, the story centers on two characters: Lata Mehra, for whom her mother actively seeks a husband; and Maan Kapoor, who is searching for meaning in his life. The novel, however, is considered more than an exercise in character study; containing numerous subplots, it provides a vivid and lavishly detailed portrait of India’s diverse society and culture. (Amitabha Banerjee)

Pico Iyer writes about the general tendency among Indians writing in English to deal with exotic scenes in exotic terms, and gives comment on *A Suitable Boy* that Seth is different in trying “to usher India into the drawing room, to make it seem as everyday and close to us as nineteenth-century . . . Regency Bath.” The “uneventfulness” in a novel portraying “a life-sized, human, unextraordinary India” makes Seth closer to Jane Austen and E. M. Forster than to Dickens, and Iyer believes this “benign refusal” to dwell on obvious traumas and death is ideally matched by the “gentle pacing,” “directness,” and “lucidity” of Seth’s prose. The novel has also been likened to Tolstoy and George Eliot for its “spacious realism,” but Iyer’s choice as the closest parallel is Tanizaki’s *Makioka Sisters*. (Google Book)

*The Hindustan Times* in its review on *A Suitable Boy* says that it is “an immensely enjoyable novel which describes with unhurried pace the panorama of India . . . Illuminates segments of Indian life quite brilliantly . . . Everything appears familiar to us, yet in fact it is newly minted by a master artist.” (Penguin)
Seth’s third novel, *An Equal Music* set mostly in London and in contemporary Europe, focuses on the lives of classical musicians and their music. Paolo Isotta, one of Italy’s most significant music critics, wrote in the influential newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* of the Italian translation that “no European writer had ever shown such a knowledge of European classical music, nor had any European novel before managed to convey the psychology, the technical abilities, even the human potentialities of those who practise music for a living” (Silvia Albertazzi).

*An Equal Music* is a novel in which the length of Schubert’s Trout Quintet matters deeply, the discovery of a little-known Beethoven opus is a miracle, and each instrument has its own being. Just as Michael can’t hope to possess Julia, he cannot even dream of owning his beloved Tononi, the violin he has long had only on loan. And it goes without saying that Vikram Seth knows how to tell a tale, keeping us guessing about everything from what the Quartet’s four-minute encore will be to what really occasioned Julia’s departure from Michael’s life. (Kerry Fried - Blog)

Bob Williams further in his review feels that though there may be some flaws, “The strength of the novel [*An Equal Music*] is its concentration on music. Each aspect of it has its fascination and Seth deals fully with the beauty of the art, the weaknesses of its performers and teachers and critics, as well as with music as a commodity, packaged and exploited by shady men and women”

And, the non-fiction stands for a well matched combination of personal account of family biography and nations’ social documentary:

*Two Lives* is both a history of a violent country seen through the eyes of two survivors as well as an intimate portrait of their friendship, marriage and
abiding yet complex love. Part biography, part memoir, part meditation on our
times, this is the true tale of two remarkable lives -- a masterful telling from
one of our greatest living writers. (Book Browse)

In the words of Vivek Sharma: “Vikram Seth’s Two Lives is a biography, a
memoir, a novel and a collection of letters rolled into one.” The landscape it covers
includes India, Germany, England and America, and the time span includes most of
the twentieth century. Blake Marrison, writer of The Guardian rightly states: “Henny
and Shanti had no children. But they did have an author for a great-nephew. And his
Two Lives is a stay against their oblivion.” (The Guardian - Web)

On his review of Two Lives in The Observer, Frances Wilson states: “His
[Seth’s] ambition in Two Lives is to encompass the major events of the 20th century
in an account of two unhistoric lives. Seth gives us the horrors of the period through a
tidy house in Hendon.” (The Guardian - Web)

Vikram Seth has woven together their astonishing story, which recounts the
arrival into this childless couple’s lives of their great-nephew from India – the teenage
student Vikram Seth. The result is an extraordinary tapestry of India, the Third Reich
and the Second World War, Auschwitz and the Holocaust, Israel and Palestine,
postwar Germany and 1970s Britain. (Book Browse)

It is better to quote Amitabha Banerjee again as he has duly reviewed Two
Lives also and calls Seth ‘as an incredibly versatile writer, well versed in composing
an intimate biographical account of the extraordinary lives of his great aunt and uncle
and their love during one of history’s most turbulent times.’ His aunt, a German Jew,
came to England as a refugee and eventually married his uncle Shanti Seth. “Part of
what I write about is her trying to find out what happened after the war”, Seth explains. He discovers a trunk of correspondences from the 1940s in a loft in Hendon and the transcription of these forms the emotional heart of the narrative. Banerjee says that ‘this book is about the story of two people, Seth’s uncle and aunt, who lived through the twentieth century and it gives us a detailed and direct view of the lives of two ordinary, commonplace people who lived through the marking events of the 20th century: the conditions in Berlin before, during, and after the Seconds World War, the Holocaust, and the later half of the century in Britain.’

From his knowledge of local and international history he becomes the writer of the world and his memoir truly speaks about the intricacies of human relationships in war society:

The brilliance of the story is in the fact that it exposes the reality of the lives of ordinary people, caught in the effects of war and destruction. It shows the remarkable side of the human character: of friendships that show their value in the most difficult times, when your own and close people choose their own paths. The book also portrays an inside into the marriage of two people, from two totally different cultures, ultimately settled in a country they were neither born in, or brought up at. (Amitabha Banerjee)

In the essay “Forms and Inspirations” Seth describes how two poets, Donald Davie and Timothy Steele, with whom he studied at Stanford, molded his thinking about verse - “how form and inspiration can and need to work off each other” in poetry. He quotes from himself and other poets to demonstrate the idea of tightening
the form of a poem to convey the meaning more clearly. He also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of writing both in verse and in prose.

When his first novel was published, Kushwant Singh, in *Illustrated Weekly of India* declared Seth “a new star in the literary firmament”, saying that the book “outshines in brilliance anything that I have seen in half-a-century of star-spotting and Seth has the stuff that Nobel Laureates are made of” (*Illustrated Weekly*-Penguin).

Seth’s considerable range is demonstrated by the meticulous historical accuracy of *A Suitable Boy* with the finely nuanced cultivated-Indian English of the narrative voice, the correspondingly accurate depiction of northern California yuppies of the 1980s in *The Golden Gate* and of the world of western classical musicians in *An Equal Music*. He has continued to produce volumes of poetry at intervals alongside his publications in a range of other forms, including translations from Chinese poets. Despite his formidable erudition in a wide range of disciplines, both his prose and poetry are strongly characterised by their accessibility and he works hard considerably to ensure this.

In most of Seth’s writing, apart from *An Equal Music*, narrated in the first person by its central character there is a strong, and always engaging and attractive, narrative persona – sometimes, as in *From Heaven Lake*, obviously Seth himself; at other times, in his novels and poems, intermittently so.

Seth has been interviewed by variety of journalists. In a written version of the interview broadcasted on CBC Radio’s Sunday literary program, “Writers & Company” Seth tells about his family and his childhood, his bondage to literature since his young age, and discusses the circumstances that led him to writing *From
Heaven Lake, The Golden Gate, and A Suitable Boy. He also discusses Indian society and his religious identification while talking about A Suitable Boy.

In the interview with Bernhard, Seth attributes the popularity of his A Suitable Boy to the characters in the story, and he notes that his books of poetry and translation have not sold well. Seth enjoys the complexity of the Pushkin sonnet he used for The Golden Gate and introductions to A Suitable Boy and An Equal Music. He also points that other than those little poetic commonalities between the three novels, there is not very much that links them. With regard to An Equal Music, Seth says that he had no idea that Salman Rushdie was also writing a novel with music as one of its themes, but music is a huge subject, so it is not much of a coincidence.

In the course of an extensive interview with Debashish Mukerji for The Week, a number of interesting things about Seth’s approach to his works are revealed. After the effort of A Suitable Boy, Seth found it necessary to “lie fallow” for a while. He would not have chosen to write about music, wanting to keep it as a refuge from work, but after seeing the man in Hyde Park and deciding he was a violinist, everything in An Equal Music followed from that. Although his main character may appear to be from a totally different cultural background, Seth asserts that he has lived in England and loves Western music, so it was not a completely foreign world. Unlike many Indian writers in English, Seth is not obsessed with the theme of cultural displacement, though he is very interested in India’s “multiplicity of cultures.”

In an interview for Bold Type, Seth acknowledges that he “wasn’t very keen” to spend another decade of his life writing another novel as long as A Suitable Boy, so he hoped his next book would be of reasonable length. The inspiration for An Equal
Music was seeing a man staring at the water of the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London, and Seth decides that his character is a violinist who had been “passionately obsessed with a pianist many years ago.” At first Seth resisted writing about music, as it was his refuge, particularly Western classical music. He made Michael, the hero of *An Equal Music*, a member of a quartet rather than a soloist because of the tensions, complications, and richness a quartet would provide. As Julia, Michael’s love, is going deaf, Seth did a lot of research on deafness. He admits:

I did meet a musician – percussionist – who has been quite profoundly deaf for a number of years. She has built a wonderful career and given a lot of pleasure through her music. The first time I met her – this in the early stages of the novel – I didn’t know she was deaf. We met over lunch. She looked directly at my face quite a bit, which I thought was quite charming, and we had a very animated discussion. Afterwards, someone told me she was deaf. I was startled. She didn’t have a deaf person’s ‘voice’. She talked without hesitation, even though the room wasn’t very well lit. She couldn’t be deaf. How can a musician be deaf? After I decided to bring Julia’s deafness into the novel, I found a number of musicians who were quite hard of hearing. I also interviewed doctors about deafness, so that the symptoms were correct and the pacing of the onset of the disease was correct. And I took lip reading classes for thirteen weeks. That doesn’t mean I can ‘speak’ like a deaf person. But I have got a better understanding of how people who can’t cope through their ears cope through their eyes and, in the case of musicians, also through their mind’s eye. (Bold Type Interview)
In an interview to *Frontline*, on *Two Lives* when Seth was asked whether the book is about *Two Lives* or about him, Seth says that the book contains part of his story too:

In Hindi it would have been called *Dhaayi Jivan* (two and a half lives). Every book is eventually about yourself, I’d say this book more than most. Look at the choices people make and the huge moral and psychological pressures they face at different times. Will I lose my faculties? The moment you write about people’s lives, especially real people, you speculate about why they did what they did, and will something like that happen to you. (*Frontline* Interview)

At the time of her interview with Seth at the Hay Festival, Kerala, Anita Sethi says that she is captivated by his conversation: “He is relaxed, witty, peppering his sentences with anecdotes as playful as his prose. He touches on a huge range of literary and biographical references . . . . He speaks fascinatingly on the differences between forms: with poetry you look into your own heart and feelings; with novels you have to understand other people.”

Novelist Vikram Seth, who is writing a sequel to *A Suitable Boy*, may not name his new book *A Suitable Girl* as everyone was led to believe. It could even be named “An Unsuitable Boy”, says IANS. It quotes Seth’s words in an interview to *The Daily Telegraph* in London:

The sequel revolves around Lata - who was 20 in *A Suitable Boy* and is now 80. Lata was 20 years old then, (she) is now 80,” calculated Seth. “So it is not just India (that) has changed, but the aspect of the full life lived, look back upon, look forward to as well; and may be it’s for her grandson who can’t
communicate with his parents for one reason or another, but can talk to his grandmother - (his) confidante - talk to her about a suitable girl. But I have not decided whether I should call it *A Suitable Girl* or *An Unsuitable Boy*, which could be another possible sequel title. (IANS)

Seth’s works bring up a variety of subjects indicative of Seth’s education and experiences, evidenced in a passage from *All You Who Sleep Tonight* entitled “Sit”:

Sit, drink your coffee here; your work can wait awhile.
You’re twenty-six, and still have some life ahead.
No need for wit; just talk vacuities, and I’ll Reciprocate in kind, or laugh at you instead.

The world is too opaque, distressing and profound.
This twenty minutes’ rendezvous will make my day:
To sit here in the sun, with grackles all around,
Staring with beady eyes, and you two feet away. (20)

Vikram Seth has been a writer of different genres. The genres in which Seth has written have been remarkably diverse and so his critics’ opinions have varied greatly. Some praise him highly and others harshly condemn. There are opposing views of Seth’s aloof description of his characters’ emotions. Some see his characters as a reserved detachment on the part of the omniscient narrator that well suits his direct and lucid style, while others regard it as a lack of passion that ultimately leaves his characters hollow. Likewise, some favourably compare *A Suitable Boy* to novels by Dickens, Austen, George Eliot, or Tolstoy, whereas others dismiss that idea as a
blasphemy to the literary tradition, finding the comparison valid only in terms of length, plot, or number of characters.

Yuko Sawabe in *Vikram Seth’s Works and Related Criticism, with a Background Study of Post-colonial Literature and Modern Indian History and Culture* writes that Seth has often been categorized as a post-colonial writer by most of his critics. He is an Indian who has written in English about post-independence India. The work states that Seth does not show a strong sense of nationalism or express anger towards imperialism, and that he is calm and conservative in style and temper, unlike many other more dynamic and acerbic post-colonial writers such as Rushdie and Naipaul. Sawabe further says that it is hard to determine the kind of place Seth will have in English Literature:

Born into a Hindu family in India, but receiving an English-style education there and having lived and studied in England, America, and China, Seth himself has wondered about the various adjectives his critics have bestowed on him, such as “Indian,” “Commonwealth,” or “American,” referring to himself on one occasion as a “rootless cosmopolitan.” (Yuko Sawabe)

In spite of all these, Seth’s unique contribution, not only to post-colonial literature as an Indian writer but, also to English Literature itself, as an international writer is worth mentioning.

His critics never fail to notice the satirical elements textured in his writings. Satire and Poetry were the prominent elements in Vikram Seth’s works. Satire is a genre of literature, and sometimes graphic, which is used to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals and society itself into improvement. Although satire is
meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism. A common feature of satire is strong irony or sarcasm, parody, exaggeration and comparison. Satire is nowadays found in many artistic forms of expression, including literature, plays, commentary and music such as lyrics. According to Thanmay Thulkar, Seth’s motive of introducing satirism in his compositions is not only to criticize the evils of the society, so that they discourage one to do bad things but, to open the eyes of the public, show them the reality of the world and encourage them to fight against the evil. He comments:

Vikram Seth was unconventional writer, who had this unique quality of unifying poetry and drama together. Compelling narrative force, strong characterization and ingeniously interrelated plotting give weight to most of his works. Vikram Seth has great aesthetic value when it comes to picturization. He could take the readers to the beautiful natural world that he described in his works. (Thanmay Thulkar-English-PBL)

Seth’s approach to fiction is traditional – with an exception that The Golden Gate is a novel in verse. He does not share the innovative flourishes and colour of Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh. Despite the awesome quality of his work, he is seldom considered for prizes and awards:

He has even been dismissed by some as an Indian writer since The Golden Gate is about non-Indians and is set in San Francisco, and An Equal Music, set mostly in London, also has no Indian characters. This is the typical reaction of the colonized, resentful of those who have chosen cosmopolitanism over nationalism. It also ignores the monumental achievement of A Suitable Boy, a work that in size and scope is an Indian War and Peace. (Bob Williams)
Cultural hybridity is the most outstanding and immediately striking feature of Vikram Seth’s writings. Seth’s work is set in different continents and cultures and spans India, China, the U.S., and England, reflecting his cross-cultural affinities. He grew up in India and was a student later at Oxford, Stanford, and Nanjing University in China. On the surface, there appears to be little continuity of content or style in Seth’s work since he changes genres and contexts frequently. Yet what emerges in his work is an old-fashioned interest in family and relationships in the private and domestic spheres. He seems to grieve the loss of stable, sustained, personal relationships in a contemporary international world impacted by consumerism in the West and modernization and the break down of patriarchal society in India. His characters are created as ‘selves’ engaged in interplaying with their family members and the known and unknown members of the society.

III

The researcher attempts to conceptualise these ‘selves’ analyzing how far their interactions are important and meaningful to human experiences. This textual approach to rediscover the tripartite ‘self’, namely individual-self, social-self and political-self in Vikram Seth’s writings *An Equal Music, A Suitable Boy* and *Two Lives*, respectively intends to use the critical tool of socio-psycho analysis. For this study there needs sociological and psychological understanding of the characterisation rendered in the texts. These ‘selves’ are identified in the prime characters of his narratives and are valued for their interpersonal attachments. They are widely classified as selves, honouring right to life, and honouring right to choose. (Rowan 16)
Kantian concept, ‘to be is to do’ provides a space for the researcher to elaborate the notion that the being of being of an individual self is knowingly or unknowingly socialized. For, humans are fundamentally social. Hegalian principle “unity of unity in difference” (qtd.in Tony Smith 9) illustrates how a ‘self’ is structured within the system of society.

Moreover, sociological psychologists recognize the individual self as one that can not appear in consciousness as an ‘I’, which is always an object, i.e. a ‘me’. It is thus viewed: “the ‘I’ of introspection is the self which, enters into social relations with other selves. It is not the ‘I’ that is implied in the fact that one presents himself as a ‘me’. And the ‘me’ of introspection is the same ‘me’ that is the object of the social conduct of others” (Mead 375). Hence, by this strand, it is understood that a self is a subject to an individual and an object to society.

Generally, the ‘self’ in literature is representing both individual and social being. What is interesting in story telling is that how an individual self or socially collective self, vice-versa influences or contradicts each other. Irving Howe points out: “Self is a construct of mind, a hypothesis of being, socially formed even as it can be quickly turned against the very social formations that have brought into birth” (56)

To achieve a greater understanding of this three-fold ‘self’ phenomenon in Seth’s characters the researcher proposes to use, Constantine Sedikides and Marylynn B. Brewer’s psychological notion about self-concept ‘comprising the fundamental self-representations, namely the individual self, the relational self and the collective self’ (2).
The individual self has been treated as one’s unique side. It comprises attributes like traits, goals, aspirations, experiences, interests and behaviours that differentiate the person from others. The self is represented in this concept as independent, free from all social conditions. The relational self deals with the interpersonal side of an individual that is likely to be identified with all the socio-cultural norms and practices. It consists of features that are shared with other family and social members. It can be defined by the roles one is engaged in the relationship. Here, the self is represented by the reactions and responses of interpersonal association. The collective self has been figured out as one’s inter group experiences. It consists of attributes that are shared with in-group members who are easily differentiated from out-groups by their political stand.

Psychologists emphasise the importance of individual self primacy. Sedikides, et al. view that persons are motivated to maintain or elevate their self image and to protect against possible deflation of their self image and also they substantiate their view with an example: Persons regard themselves as better than the average other, claim credit for a dyadic or group success while displacing blame to others, derogate conveyors of unfavourable feedback, and when they cannot negate such feedback (99).

Social psychologists like Brewer view that the social self focuses on cross cultural prospectives. Also he states that such self is typically construed as individuated or interpersonal, focusing on cross cultural differences . . . . These different self-construals may also co-exist within the same individual available to be activated at different times or in different contexts’ (83). In short ‘individuals seek to
define themselves in terms of their relationships with others and with larger collective
and derive much of their self evaluation from such social identities’ (qtd. in Brewer).

The theory suggests that both interpersonal and collective identities are social
extensions of the self. The interpersonal identities are those derived from intimate
dyadic relationships such as parent-child, lovers and friendships. In the context of
collective social political identities, the political self does not require personal
relationship among group members (83).

A relational self is interpersonal always motivated by close relationships that
influence the individual’s perceptions, affective reactions and behaviours toward new
acquaintances (Sedikides 99). In literature this motivational self-concept focuses on
social and its relational impact on individuals. The collective self can be considered
an expansion of social self as Asch points out: persons are profoundly influenced by
their social groups in terms of conformity and belief polarization (qtd. in Sedikides
99). These individuals are politically motivated to elevate and protect a positive group
image that can be identified with any racial, religious and linguistic boundaries. They
manifest favourable perceptions, attitudes and behaviours to their in-group members
(99).

Any narrative in its characterization may be primarily concerned with the self-
concept explained above. The present study attempts to trace various ‘selves’
conceptualized by psycho-analysts, in the characters of Vikram Seth. The prime
characters Michael Holme in An Equal Music, Lata in A Suitable Boy and Henny in
Two Lives, taken for study can be well theorized by this three-fold notion of ‘self’.
Thus the researcher tries to find a paradigm in the characterization of the novels cited using socio-psycho analytical theory of Sedikides and Brewer as a critical tool to study the individual self, the social self and the political self in *An Equal Music, A Suitable Boy* and *Two Lives* respectively.

The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter I  - Introduction-Vikram Seth’s World

Chapter II - Individual-self in *An Equal Music*

Chapter III - Social-self in *A Suitable Boy*

Chapter IV - Political-self in *Two Lives*

Chapter V - Conclusion

The thesis comprises five chapters; the first chapter as an introduction (I) historically traces Vikram Seth’s place in Indian Writing in English, (II) presents the review of literature on Seth’s writings, and (III) introduces the psycho-analytical theory advocated by Sedikides and Brewer, which the researcher intends to apply to the prime characters of Vikram Seth in order to study their respective individual self, social self and political self from the point of view of individual, relational and collective self concept. The second chapter attempts to rediscover the individual self which is distinguished from the other selves in society in the narrative *An Equal Music*. The third one deals with how the social self is constructed in the novel, *A Suitable Boy* where as the fourth explores the political self, progressed through the non-fiction narrative, *Two Lives*. The final chapter comprehensively presents the argument developed and various ‘selves’- individual, social, and political comparatively discussed in the chapters concerned and the findings of this research work are also categorically presented.
The key words discussed in this dissertation are society and self in general, individual self, social self, and political self in particular.
Notes and References

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