1.1. Vikram Seth:

He is one of the most towering writers in Indian Writing in English today. With the complexity and depth of his work and his significant achievement in prose as well as verse, Seth has proved as a master of the English language. His many themes and concerns, from land-ceiling in Post-Independence India to Western Classical Music and relationships, all cast in formally perfect prose or poetry. This has gained him a formidable reputation as a stylist & a perfectionist.

Vikram Seth was born on 20th June 1952 in Calcutta [now Kolkata], West Bengal, India. His family lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar [near Kolkata], Patna, near Danapur and London. His father Premnath [Prem] Seth was an executive with the Bata India Limited, a shoe Company who had migrated post-partition India from West Punjab in Pakistan. His mother, Leila Seth, was trained in Law in London. Subsequently, she became the first woman judge on the Delhi High Court as well as the first woman to become Chief Justice of a State High Court at Simla. She studied law in London while pregnant with Seth’s younger brother and came first in her bar examinations conducted only weeks after she delivered her second child. Seth’s younger brother, Shantum, led Buddhist meditational tours. His younger sister, Aradhana, is a film-maker married to an Austrian diplomat, who worked on Deepa Mehta’s movie Earth and Fire. Comparing the characters Haresh, Lata, Savita and two of Chatterji siblings in A Suitable Boy; Seth has been candid in acknowledging that many of his fictional characters are drawn from life. Justice Leila Seth is of the opinion in her memoir On Balance that other characters in A Suitable Boy are composites but Haresh is a portrait of her husband Prem. Of his family’s direct influence on his writing, Vikram Seth has said,

My father was not a very literary person, but my mother used to write poetry when she was young. There were always lots of books lying around, so I suppose I was
partly inspired by her. Nevertheless, despite my father’s lack of interest in the arts, it was he who encouraged me to write. [Gujarat 1993]

His mother’s autobiography, *On Balance* [2003] gives significant perspectives on her own personal career and those of her three talented children. At a tender age Seth was sent to Doon School which he attended from 1961-67 situated in Dehradun and modelled on an English School. Its headmaster taught at Eton. Doon is India’s most prestigious school. Seth, it seems, has “divided feelings about the place: appreciation for the superb education he received and lingering bitterness toward his classmates” [Woodward 9], a bitterness which has come from having been bullied there.

The character of Tapan, the youngest of the Chatterji clan in *A Suitable Boy*, and his terrifying experiences at the fictional school Jheel in the novel, may probably be based on the author’s own school days. On leaving Doon, Seth went to Tonbridge School in England for a year. An account of his year in Tonbridge Public School and the entrance test, which he qualified to go up to Corpus Christi College, Oxford forms the first part of the recently published biography of his great uncle Shanti and his wife Henny, titled *Two Lives* [2005].

It is interesting to note that Seth changed his original plan of reading English literature at Oxford. He chose to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, partly because his father was a businessman and Seth “wanted to be able to see things from his point of view” [Gujarat 1993]. But during the half year that Oxford allows its students off between the three terms every year, Seth seems to have pored over literature books at his shanty [Vikram Seth’s father’s brother] uncle’s home in London. He also wrote, during this time, “poetry imbued with traumas of life and love and vast philosophical questions about existence and purpose” which he dismisses as bad poetry [*Two Lives* 21-22]
The young writer clearly demarcated the two fields of interest: Economics and Poetry, and consciously kept his love of literature separate from his academic pursuits. In 1975, passing his graduate studies with honours from Oxford, he gained admission to the doctoral programme in Economics at Stanford, California where he forced to do compulsory courses in Macroeconomic and Microeconomics. He discovered that he “could not get by without wasting a whole lot of time studying. The subject was dry, mathematically unrealistic and intellectually unchallenging” [Two Lives 26]

There in Stanford, California he later completed his post-graduation in Economics [1979]. He has said that “it was in Stanford that he learned to have fun” [Dougary 69]. Given the humour that runs through his work it is odd to think of him as a rather serious person before this. He took up the Cello, the Chinese language and lessons in Poetry. In poetry he had wonderful guides in Timothy Steele [whom Seth considers the finest living poet in English] and Donald Davie, both of whom inspired and influenced his work. In his second year at Stanford he won the Wallace Stegner Fellowship in creative writing for the year 1977-78 that enabled him to stay in the University and write Poetry for a year.

While doing his Ph.D., Seth spent two years at Nanjing University in China and also secured a diploma in Chinese in 1981, and during the holidays, he hitchhiked back to Delhi through Tibet. Seth reflects upon his Chinese experience in his travelogue From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet [1983]. Subsequently he worked instead as an editor for Stanford University Press for two years 1985-87 and wrote poetry.

Seth later said that, he had spent eleven years from 1975 to 1986 at Stanford without getting Ph.D. His passion for Poetry dominated his academic studies and he worked at it with dedication. Seth’s learning is impressive. He speaks not just English and Hindi but Chinese and German and having lived in Calcutta, he is familiar with
Bengali. His linguistic knowledge includes four scripts: Roman, Devnagari [Hindi], the modified Perso-Arabic Script [Urdu], and the Chinese characters in addition to his linguistic knowledge. He is trained in Classical Indian Singing as well as an aficionado of Western Classical Music.

Seth’s parents seem to have had seminal influence on the growing writer. Seth acknowledges that middle class values of “industry and decency and solidity and so on” were part of his upbringing [Wachtel 87]. It is significant that leather working and the legal profession form important constituents of the plot in *A Suitable Boy* [1993]. In many ways, it is a novel formed from autobiographical material. The most striking thing about Seth’s oeuvre is its variety, as a fellow novelist Amit Chaudhari wrote:

His career has been one of the ceaseless reinvention; from economist to poet, to travel writer, to novelist, to who knows what next. Skipping from genre to genre, it’s as if he is not just a writer, but a microcosm of the cultural ethos. [508]

1.2. Vikram Seth’s Literary Achievement:

Vikram Seth’s prodigious literary career has encompassed several books of poetry, a travelogue, a verse novel, an epic novel, modernist fiction and a memoir-cum biography. Each book is set in a different cultural landscape and breaks new grounds in terms of form and genre. Every new book of Seth creates a fresh departure in form and theme. It is perhaps not surprising that though he is described in more and more reviews as the finest living writer in English, there is no canon or category that can accommodate him, or any critical formulation through which he can be studied.
1.2.1. Novels:

1.2.1.1. *The Golden Gate* [1986]:

Vikram Seth created history in more than one way. He is the first Indian English Novelist to write a novel titled *The Golden Gate* [1986] in verse, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1988. *The Golden Gate*, a novel set in San Francisco of the 1980’s provided a stepping stone into fiction. The novel rose to fame and the subsequent reputation rests largely on the fact that, it is written entirely in sonnets. The novel is made up of a sequence of nearly six hundred Sonnets in Iambic tetrameter over thirteen chapters, with the Acknowledgements, Dedication and a charming Contents list, all in perfect Octosyllabic Sonnets. As *American Poetry Review* in Nov/Dec 1986 says,

This novel reminds us of Byron’s Don Juan or Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin. Susan Sontag compares The Golden Gate to Eugene Onegin in its “particular mix of wit, Sagacity and rue” and praises The Golden Gate as a “thrilling, subtle literary achievement” [37-46].

The novel is written in mellifluous sonnets and is devoid of Oriental character. It contains 594 stanzas, with a stanza each for Acknowledgements, Dedication, Table of Contents and A Note about the Author. It deals with the longing for love, affection and sense of belonging on the part of John, the Silicon Valley executive. Most of the characters experience loneliness in life and hence they search for meaning and emotional fulfillment.

1.2.1.2. *A Suitable Boy* [1993]:

Vikram Seth is the first Indian English Novelist to get a fabulous amount of rupees two crores as advance for his epoch-making novel *A Suitable Boy* [1993]. He has received the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and WH Smith Literary Award for *A Suitable Boy* in 1994. This
novel was short-listed for the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. *A Suitable Boy*, for instance, is set against a background of a period in Indian history that was uneventful. This novel took six years to be written and almost another two to cut. Thus, the novel is written into nineteen parts. Several years went into the writing of this massive novel which, in the tradition of the European realistic novel of the 19th century, tells the interconnected stories of four families flung across North India.

*A Suitable Boy* deals with a simple theme, the quest for *A Suitable Boy* for Lata, the younger daughter of Rupa Mehra. Lata is nineteen years attractive and who has just passed her graduation. She has three suitors-Kabir Durani, Amit Chatterji and Haresh Khanna. She has to choose her life partner. Seth meticulously writes about these three suitors and Lata’s affairs with each of them, so that they can be judged objectively and the final choice can be made.

There are some interesting parallels with *Middlemarch* by George Eliot published as a serial in 1871-72. It is set forty years earlier. There are general elections in both novels and two sentences from Rosemary Ashton’s *Introduction to Middlemarch [ITM]* could apply almost equally to Seth’s novel.

It is above all about change and the way individuals and groups adapt to, or resist change. In their marriages, in their professions, in their family life and their social intercourse, the characters of the novel are shown responding in their various ways to events both public and private [ITM 9]

1.2.1.3. *An Equal Music* [1999]:

Seth’s third novel, *An Equal Music [AEM]*, a novel set in London with Western Classical music as its backdrop. The novel was awarded EMMA [BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award] in 2001. This
novel focuses on the lives of classical musicians and their music cannot but seem a daring venture and risk.

While writing the novel Vikram Seth sat in on quartet rehearsals, understood details of music, musical instruments, sales, events, halls, tours, took lessons for six weeks in lip-reading to get into the character of his deaf heroine and the subject of the novel. The novel is a first person narrative, in the present tense, of sensitive and volatile violinist and Seth attempts with fine delicacy to convey the effect of music through words.

The story of the novel opens in London with an upcoming musician, Michael Holmes, a 35-year old violinist from Rochdale playing with Maggiore Quartet and giving music lessons to a group of not so enthusiastic pupils with one of whom he is carrying on a desultory affair. The novel has turbulent love story full of passion and pathos. Seth has successfully integrated this love story with the story of music and music lessons. The novelist seems to say that music can alleviate the sufferings in life caused by unfulfilled love. Hence, ending of the novel kindles a hope in human heart.

Music, such music, is a sufficient gift why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music- not too much or soul could not sustain it from time to time [AEM 381]

As Maggie Gee wrote in *Daily Telegraph*: “Seth gives the fullest portrait I have ever read in fiction of a musician’s relationship to his music” [Gee 1999].

1.3. Poetry:

Vikram Seth’s poetry is characterized by a curious effacement of the self and a firm distancing of its intrusive capacities and is distinguished by the use of meter and rhyme and older forms of verse, especially the
sonnet. In Seth’s poetry, the predominant trend is an anti-romantic attitude towards the world. Though his poems reveal how moved he is by nature and her beauty, it is natural scene that is on display in his several nature poems and not his own subjective self.

Seth can write about the ordinary and commonplace with a great deal of ease. There is a lightness of touch even when he reflects on more serious subjects, which makes for wonderfully refreshing poetry.

1.3.1. Mappings:

His first volume of poetry, *Mappings*, was written while he was a student in London and California. Having no luck with publishers, Seth produced his own stapled volume which he hawked around the bookshops of San Francisco Bay in 1980 [*Mappings*]. It was not until his trip home to Delhi, during the break from his research in China, that he met Professor P. Lal of the Calcutta Writers Workshop who published Mappings in 1981. Later Seth sees the reason why he could not find a publisher for mappings: “I stood outside the orbit of the latest critical theories, and did not realize that writing in rhyme and metre would make me sort of literary untouchable” [*Mappings* IX].

The volume includes the intimate subject matter of love, lost love, sexuality, and relationships within the family, as well as poems about nature; he also touches on public issues such as the injustice of poverty. The poem, “Dubious” which starts with the stanza

Some men like Jack

And some like Jill;

I’m glad I like

Them both; but still [*Mappings*]
This has led people to make assumptions about Seth’s sexuality. It is a question often touched upon in interviews and one Seth refuses to answer. On one occasion, he said:

My attitude about the question of my own sexuality as that if people don’t like my books then they shouldn’t be interested, and if they like my books then it’s a pretty poor recompense for the enjoyment I’ve given them to try to remove the privacy from my life.[Dougary 69]

Mappings introduce us to Seth, the Polygot, with poems translated from Hindi, Urdu, German, and Chinese. The verse is in rhyming couplets, triplets, octets, and sonnets.

1.3.2. The Humble Administrator's Garden [1985]:

The Humble Administrator’s Garden was published in 1985, which won the Commonwealth Poetry Award for Asia. This slim collection of individual lyrical and satiric poems describes Seth’s experience of four diverse cultural milieus- Indian, English, Chinese and Californian. The collection is divided into three sections, each with the title of a tree symbolic of a different part of the world in which Seth has lived: Waitong [China], Neem [India] and live Oak [California]. This continues Seth’s interest in the natural world, which enters A Suitable Boy through Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor’s well-tended garden. As Patel puts it “Seth mingles memory and nostalgia with agreeable detail” and it is these qualities that “make the poems primarily visual and reflective” [Patel D 2000]. Seth dedicates the anthology “to my family, pictured within” as in Mappings. “Homeless” in the Neem section describes strong feelings of having left home and being uprooted and the alienation that comes with constantly being on the move. The poem is a gentle satire on upper middle class life in post independent India of the 1980’s. The autobiographical references are evident.

Seth is able to encapsulate comments on contemporary politics, corruption, academic practices, personal ideology, as also a changing
system wherein the grandmother expresses feelings of neglect and loneliness.

In this way, the poems are cosmopolitan: they recuperate diverse cultures and states of being. Yet the pervading spirit of the poems is humanism. Poetic form is more than just craft. It becomes, as King asserts, “a defence against self-destructiveness”; such “neo-formalism is a kind of post-modernism” [229].

1.3.3. All You Who Sleep Tonight [1990]:

All You Who Sleep Tonight was published in 1990. It is a collection of miscellaneous lyric poems and brief narratives in rhymed, unrhymed and free verse and translations and epigrams that once again bring to our attention Seth’s exposure to different cultural milieus.

All You Who Sleep Tonight is dedicated to Seth’s brother and sister, is similarly outward looking while the first section “Romantic Residue” explores past love and friendship, another group of poems, under the heading In Other Voices depicts historical events: Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and the disintegration of the Moghul Empire after, 1857.

The poem has all the features typical of Seth’s other poetry volumes: humanism underpinning a cosmopolitan approach to the world and its experiences, feelings of exile tempered by the need to be free, a keen eye for nature and the acceptance of limitations that life imposes and of course the polish of these feelings in superbly crafted verse. China, California and India were the three spaces represented in the earlier volumes.

In short Seth introduces Nazi Europe and the bombed Hiroshima, thereby enhancing the spatial and temporal reach of the poems.
1.3.4. **Beastly Tales: From Here and There [1991]**:

*Beastly Tales: From Here and There* [1991], a collection of ten fables was penned during the time he was writing the epic Indian novel. The preface to the volume relates disarmingly the circumstances that led to the first ‘beastly tale’: “Because it was very hot in my house one day and I could not concentrate on my work, I decided to write a summer story involving mangoes and a river” [*The Collected Poems* XXXII]

The poem is a collection of ten tales and in Seth’s characteristic cosmopolitan fashion, the first two come from India, the next two from China, two more from Greece and Ukraine each and the last two from the poet himself. Written with wit and style, the book has endeared itself to a wide readership, finding itself on school curriculum, in audibooks and given as an excellent gift to children and adults alike. The poem are fables set in contemporary times and reflects lightly on a fair share of the world’s concerns such as the consumer culture or media savvy stardom and it is possible in an academic discussion, to take apart with heavy hands a thing of much fun and insouciance.

Seth extends the original fable to accommodate darker tones. His light-hearted jobs in the world around him belong to the realm of social satire which the polished comic rhyme of the poems, only emphasizes, as does the Punning title of the collection: Beastly Tales quite clearly. These tales are about human affairs disguised in the garb of animals. The pun on the word ‘beastly’ that means both ‘of beasts’, and nasty and horrible, connects to the most supreme of all beasts: the human being. In such a way, by and large, the tales are evidence of the law of the jungle-the good guy does not win.

1.3.5. **Three Chinese Poets [1992]**:

*Three Chinese Poets* [1992] is a collection of translation by Seth of the poetry of a Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu, three recognized literary figures of China who lived during the reign of the emperor Ming
Huang of the Tang Dynasty, in the 8th century A. D. The selection is largely on the political responses of these poets to their common times in terms of appreciation of music, perception of nature, bonds of loyalty and friendship. In his introduction, Seth explains how works in translation have always had as deep an influence on his own writing as works he has read in the original. “In some cases”, he states, “The translations have so moved me that I have tried to learn the original language of the work” [TCP, xiii]. In fact, Seth attributes his interest in China to the translations of Wang Wei. Seth was motivated enough to study the language and was eventually was able to read Wang Wei in the original. Yin Chuang, Seth’s Chinese language professor at Stanford, describes Seth a ‘fantastic’ student [Leslie 5]. Seth’s dedication in Three Chinese Poets is to Yin Chuang “Enthusiastic and Sardonic, exacting warm and too soon past, your classes, once my daily tonic, have borne eccentric fruit at last.” The book is a ‘dual offering’ of thanks to three previous translators mentioned in the acknowledgement-David Hawker, Pauline We and Xianggang Guangzhi-as much as to the three original poets.

John Cayley, reviewing the collection in the Times Literary Supplement [Amazon on-line review], suggests that the book should not be judged as more than a homage to certain of his literary mentors.

Seth’s Chinese versions are well turned and easy to read, but they are unlikely to dwell long in the memories of new English readers where their fine originals deserve to live again.

Caley continues:

…All the poems are too well known for the translator’s good, since his version must compete with peerless originals and with many existing and anthologized translations; but also too well known for their readers’ good, since we learn little that is new about the original poets or their work. There is a small chance of getting closer to the distinct voices of Li Bai, Du Fu or Wang Wei through Seth’s slender volume. [27-29]
The Indian reader of poetry in general, has limited exposure to the works of these [and other Chinese] poets, and therefore Seth’s collection could still serve as a bridge across culture as Seth, no doubt, intended.

1.4. Non-Fiction:

1.4.1. From Heaven Lake [FHL] [1983]:

In his brief introduction to the first edition of the book, Seth tells us that the journey was undertaken when he lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. In the summer of 1981 he returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal. The book is based on journal Seth kept on what he saw, thought and felt.

Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet contain some vivid portraits of the characters Seth met while travelling through China and Tibet, as well as an appreciative description of the landscape. Enroute, Seth mused on the political administration and its differences to the Indian system of government. He also talked to one Tibetan family about the injustice faced by same in Tibet. Seth values the experience of having lived in three continents and wrote of China. The book received high praise when it came out in Britain and it received the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, Britain’s prestigious award for travel writing, for the year 1983.

Writing in the early 1980’s the best Seth could hope for, at the macro level, is patience and respect between the two nations and at the individual level he can only affirm, by example that,

To learn about another great culture is to enrich one’s life, to understand one’s own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add that reservoir of individual goodwill that may, generations from now, temper the Cynical use of national power. [FHL 178]
As Meenakshi Mukherjee has pointed out—

The non-Western worlds of Africa and Asia have hardly even entered the literary portals of Indian writing in English. The use of English language moreover provides a feeling that Indian writing in English speaks for or represents the whole of India, especially to the Western reading public. The fake idea of homogeneous national identity, which emerges from Indian writing in English, is based on two imperatives: an erasure of linguistic /cultural differences within India and the emphasis of difference with the West. The use of English language necessarily conveys the impression of a homogenous Indian tradition. This homogenous tradition in turn is “pitted against an equally unified imaginary West” leading to a “dialectic of alterity.” [85]

Seth and Amitav Ghosh are the two Indian writers in English who break these India vs. the West dialectic by introducing into their works non-western locations such as China and Tibet. [in case of Seth], and Egypt and Cambodia [in case of Ghosh].

1.4.2. Two Lives [1985]:

His most recent book, Two Lives, is a non-fiction memoir and autobiography written at the suggestion of his mother, and published in, 2005. It focuses on the lives of his great uncle [Shanti Bihari Seth] and German- Jewish Great aunt [Henny Carro] who met in Berlin in the early 1930’s while Shanti was a student there and with whom Seth stayed extensively on going to England at age 17 for school at Tonbridge and then to attend Oxford. As with From Heaven Lake, Two Lives contains much autobiography and is a considerable part of its appeal.

Seth, while talking about his uncle and aunt, acknowledges that his aunt never shared her innermost feelings with his uncle so Shanti’s relations never became her own. So, Seth seems to be it right when he concludes,
There were matters deep in her heart that she withheld from him. There was the world of his birth and upbringing that she chose not to explore. There was a great deal that they did not understand about each other. They were not soul mates. Theirs was a companionship based on mutual confidence rather than confidences… beset by life, isolated in the world, in each other they found a strong and sheltering harbour. What is perfect? In a world with so much suffering, isolation and indifference, it is cause for gratitude if something is sufficiently good. [Two Lives 435]

In the light of the fact that it narrates the biographies of the author’s great uncle and aunt partly through his own memories, Vikram Seth has termed it Adhai Jiban: “two and a half lives” [Sengupta 2005]. Also, Seth examines a range of historical events and themes: the third Reich, Auschwitz and the holocaust, the Second World War, the British Raj and the current situation in Israel / Palestine. Much publicity surrounded the advance of 1.4 million pounds, the largest so far for non-fiction, that Seth is said to have received.

Seth’s Two Lives was the biggest book of the year 2005, and the publishers praising Seth for his unmatched “range and versatility” said, “He is truly international” [Nayar M 2005]. The reviews praised the book and Seth’s writing. Frances Wilson for The Observer says Seth “weaves a consideration of the ethics of biography into his exemplary memoir” [Wilson 2005]

The review in Washington Post by Jonathan Yardley describes Two Lives as a “Thoughtful, evocative, moving book” and admirers of Seth’s prose will find much in the book that meets their hopes and expectation [2005].
1.5. Libretto:

1.5.1. *Arion and the Dolphin* [1994]:

Arion and the Dolphin is a libretto [a text for opera]. What occasioned the libretto was a commission that Seth received from the English National Opera. As in the case of his other books, Seth put in meticulous research into his writing. In an interview, Seth revealed he swam with a Dolphin off Ireland’s Dingle Bay as part of his research. [Field 46]

The narrative of this text uses both prose and verse, and is based on the classical Greek tale of Telemachos, Odysseus’s son, who fell into the sea and was saved by a Dolphin. We may recall at this juncture the character of Orion in Twelfth Night, which is also based on the older tale. In Shakespeare’s play Orion is a rich musician whose last wish is to sing a song before jumping overboard into the sea when attacked by the pirates. Orion, however, like his Greek namesake, is rescued by a dolphin and taken to safety.

Music has been a recurrent feature of Seth’s work and intrinsic part of this libretto and forms the theme of his novel *An Equal Music*. In *Arion and the Dolphin* [A&D], Seth retells the Greek Story of the young Corinthian musician who is thrown overboard by cruel sailors and is rescued by the dolphin. The Dolphin thus becomes the boy’s saviour and it is not difficult to see that the libretto foregrounds environmental concerns as its major theme. The opera ends on a tragic note when the Dolphin is captured by fishermen and left to die. Seth is perhaps stressing, through the tragedy, the dire nature of environmental degradation happening at human hands in the contemporary world. The libretto ends on Arion’s appeal that speaks of Seth’s characteristic humanism:

> May music find the sky, the earth, the sea
In tune, in harmony.

Dark sea, protect all voyagers whose home

Rests in your ring of foam.

Warm earth, teach us to nourish, not destroy

The Souls that give us joy.

Bright stars, engrave my dolphin and my lyre in

The night sky fire. [A & D 44]

In this way, Vikram Seth has been called as a citizen of the world and cultural traveller through more than one study. About this multifaceted writer Shobha De, the renowned English author claims, “There is nobody in the same league. He breaks rules with every book he writes.” [1999]

Every new book of Seth creates a fresh departure in form and themes. His work is housed in a variety of eclectic and traditional forms and location of his poetry and prose move across the world, making literary homes of distant land and cultures.

1.6. Pankaj Mishra:

He is one of the most promising talents of his generation. Writer, novelist, essayist, lecturer, literary critic, journalist, and reporter Pankaj Mishra was born in 1969 in North India. Raised in a small town named Jhansi, his childhood and adolescence were spent in the Northern Indian province of Uttar Pradesh. As a child, he felt distaste for formal schooling because it kept him away from what he loved most: reading. Later he graduated with a bachelor degree in commerce from Allahabad University before earning his Master of Arts degree in
English literature at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. After submitting an article on Edmund Wilson to *The New York Review of Books*, Mishra was discovered by the renowned editor Barbara Epstein. He wrote his first novel when he was only seventeen years old, and two further novels followed, although none have been published. Mishra is himself a Hindu of Indian origin and he speaks Hindi, Urdu and English. After his Bachelor degree, and before joining Harper Collins India as a chief editor, Mishra lived in a village, 14 km north of Shimla but in recent years he mostly schedules his time among London, Delhi and Shimla. He travels around the world writing on a wide range of topics, including religious violence, globalization, Bollywood, the Dalai Lama, and the “Talibanization” of South Asia.

### 1.6.1. Pankaj Mishra’s Literary Career:

In 1992, he moved to Mashobra, an isolated Himalayan village, where he began to contribute literary essays and reviews to *The Indian Review of Books*, *The India Magazine*, and the newspaper *The Pioneer*.

#### 1.6.1.2. *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* [1995]:

His first book was *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* [1995], a travelogue that describes the gradual yet profound social and cultural changes taking place in rural Indian towns in the new context of globalization. In 2000 Mishra is awarded with Art Seidenbaum award for Best First Fiction. Hailed as India’s travel writing sensation, this book vividly brings to life 19 small towns of India, describing them not in exotic or quaint terms, but rather in the frightening new context of modernization and globalization. Mishra's focus on small towns [and not the usual tourist destinations] is welcome, as is his Indian perspective which sets him a step or two ahead of most Western travel writers. There are familiar sights throughout -- almost all the places he goes to are much visited -- but
they are not the biggest or best known [i.e. don't expect a visit to the Taj Mahal]. Western readers would do well to have a map handy (none is provided in the book) if they want to get a sense of Mishra's routes; Indians will know almost all the sites, many chosen because they have recently been the focus of attention [modernizing Bangalore, ever-backwards Bihar, etc.].

Mishra describes the people and his interaction with them well, an interesting cross-section of Indian society. From the family that sees him as prospective son-in-law [much to his surprise and chagrin] to students working towards taking [and failing] the Civil Service exam to passing encounters with Western tourists Mishra covers a lot of ground. [There are also figures and scenes suggestive of those appearing in his novel *The Romantics*].

Transformation is everywhere in this rapidly changing society, and at times Mishra, then in his mid-twenties, sounds like a nostalgic old man talking about the good old days. Nevertheless, his perspective and his experiences make this a more interesting India-book than most. Overall the book gives a good impression of a fast-changing society, offering many vantage points and vistas. It is a good overview of modern India, quite well written and amusing.

1.6.1.3. *The Romantics* [2000]:

His novel, *The Romantics* [2000], an ironic tale of people longing for fulfilment in cultures other than their own, was published in eleven European languages and won the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum award for first fiction. The central setting of this international breakthrough is the holy city of Benares and the main protagonist is a young Indian Brahmin intellectual named Samar, who stumbles upon a group of Western dropouts. The ensuing friendship provides Samar with a fresh, more serious look at life, and he begins an erratic journey in search of himself.
1.6.1.4. **An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World [2004]:**

His next book *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* [2004] tells of Pankaj Mishra's search to understand the Buddha's relevance in today's world, where religious violence, poverty and terrorism prevail. As he travels among Islamists and the emerging Hindu, Muslim class in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Mishra explores the myths and places of the Buddha's life, the West's discovery of Buddhism, and the impact of Buddhist ideas on such modern politicians as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Mishra ultimately reaches an enlightenment of his own by discovering the living meaning of the Buddha's teaching, in this unusually discerning, beautifully written, and deeply affecting reflection on Buddhism.

He mixes memoir, history, and philosophy while attempting to explore the Buddha’s relevance to contemporary times. Mishra himself states:

> I would like to express much more than is possible in a novel. I grew up where Buddha walked the earth, 2,500 years ago. For me, this region represents history; possibly the only one with which I feel a bond. [The Introduction about Pankaj Mishra]

However, *An End to Suffering* is both a personal account of Mishra’s contemporary experience of Buddhism and also his historical analysis of Buddha's place in the 6th Century B.C. world. As the book’s narration shifts from India to Pakistan, Afghanistan, America and Europe, the reader comes to know more about a deeply personal yet ultimately universal story told by the writer; the story of the search for identity. Further, through his travels, Pankaj Mishra attempts to expose the origins of the Buddha, Siddhartha’s own pilgrimages, and India’s transition from colonial outpost to an independent nation.
However, Buddhism, Mishra recognizes, is not easily practiced in the modern world, where almost everything is predicated on the growth and multiplication of desire, exactly the thing that the Buddha had warned against. In the United States, particularly, "as Alexis de Tocqueville had noticed in the early 1830's, individual self-interest was the very basis of the brand-new commercial and industrial society that Europeans had created in the seemingly unlimited spaces of the New World. Yet Buddhism has taken root and flowered here. Perhaps, Mishra suggests, it is beginning to play -- though still in a small way -- the role Tocqueville foresaw for religion in America, as a moderating influence on society's worst excesses and strains. Mishra’s book is in the best tradition of Buddhism, both dispassionate and deeply engaged, complicated and simple, erudite and profoundly humane.

1.6.1.5. **Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond [2006]:**

*Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* [2006], describes Mishra’s travels through Kashmir, Bollywood, Afghanistan, Tibet, Nepal, and other parts of South and Central Asia. According to Mishra, these countries seem different from each other but share “the same dilemma: how do people with traditions extending back several millennia modernize themselves?” [Mishra P. Foreword v]. Here he also writes about the changes under pressure of Western modernity, and about the paradoxes of globalization. Mishra insists that the interconnected narratives of his book are not supposed to offer any solutions to their great problems;

Rather they seek to make the reader enter actual experiences: of individuals-Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists trying to find a way in the modern world-and of the traveller, as, confronted with a bewildering complexity, he moves from ignorance and prejudice to a measure of self-awareness and knowledge. [ibid.VI]
This book was reviewed by *The Economist* [1 July – 7 July 2006 issue]. Mishra’s polemics regarding Hinduism as a religion and the modern history of nationalist movements among Hindu people in India such as the BJP have generated some disquiet among some Hindu circles within India. His book *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, and Tibet and Beyond* was reviewed by The Economist [1 July - 7 July 2006 issue] and provides an example of the analysis and commentary that have made Mishra controversial in India. His remarks against Hindus have earned him accusations of being an anti-Hindu, and of “pandering to white pro-Muslim audiences in the West” [Review: The New Yorker], though he is himself a Hindu of Indian origin.

It is worthy to mention that in 2005, Mishra published an anthology of writing on India, entitled *India in Mind* [Vintage Books]. Edited and introduced by Pankaj Mishra, this anthology on India is a vivid, multicolored collection of writings, musings, poems by 25 well-known writers ranging from Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell to Mark Twain and Gore Vidal. V. S. Naipaul, Octavio Paz, Paul Theroux, Mark twain, etc. These excerpts reveal as much about the authors and their times as, with intuition and intelligence, about this vast country and its people.

This book gives us a view of how India was perceived and written by each of these writers right from the 19th century to present day. The reactions that India revokes are complex, ranging from awe and wonder to repulsion and rejection, as Pankaj Mishra describes in his introduction to this anthology. This book is an interesting and kaleidoscopic introduction to India, and India has been sliced and diced and presented from various angles in this anthology.

1.6.1.6. *From The Ruins of Empire* [2012]:

For this Nonfiction Pankaj Mishra is awarded with Crossword Book Award in 2013 and Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding in
This is an excellent introduction to Asian history and political philosophy. It traces the decline of Muslim and Chinese political influence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mishra explains the background for the intellectual and political awakening of Asia after the declines of the nineteenth century. It features the careers and political philosophy of the Persian Muslim, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Chinese writer Liang Quichao. Also featured prominently is Indian poet and political philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore. Mishra well describes how these protagonists influenced philosophical development of later principles Sun Yat-Sen, Gandhi, Nehru, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi-min, Atatürk and others. A major theme is antipathy to the encroachments of Europeans in Asia, particularly the British. The book also depicts rising militant influence of Japan, starting with the Chino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars.

Mishra shows impressive knowledge of a wide variety of Eastern philosophy. Although the extent of influence of Mishra's candidates is not made entirely clear, there is much of interest in his book. The book concludes with the rise of many Asian nations, predicting that Western dominance is a short-lived historical phenomenon. Mishra states his modern interpretations in an epilogue. He says that the war on terrorism is misguided, as it should be related to the condition of the world's poor. The idea that globalization will enable the billions in China and India to enjoy an American lifestyle is an absurd and dangerous fantasy. It is a realistic deviation from populists like Jeffry Sachs who think that a few billion dollars can eliminate world poverty.

This book is all the better because it depicts a history relatively unknown in the West, featuring protagonists that I was not familiar with. For myself, Pan Islamic and Pan Asiatic philosophy is a bit much to assimilate from a single book.
1.6.1.7. A Great Clamour: Encounters with China and Its Neighbours [2013]:

Pankaj Mishra’s *A Great Clamour: Encounters with China and Its Neighbours* [2013] tries to fill that gap by weaving in history, memoirs and politics to construct a narrative that is thoughtful, intelligent, rigorous and deeply insightful. As the title of the book clearly indicates, China is the principal anchor and its neighbours are explored through their intricate and sometimes troubled connections with it. Mishra presents China’s incredible story through the works of various scholars, journalists, filmmakers and writers, both Chinese as well as Western. He uses these sources and his own experiences to weave a lively and insightful account of the country’s complex political, social and economic history and its continuing and rapid transformation into a country that pulls considerable weight on the global stage.

Showcasing an extraordinary range of writings and commentaries on China, he makes an interesting point about how the policies and steps [mostly authoritarian and undemocratic] undertaken by the Chinese leadership have, in many instances, devastated this nation but also helped it achieve several important milestones linked to better infrastructure, healthcare, education and now increasingly, environmental protection. He compares this to India’s audacious experiment with democracy and market liberalization that has not, unfortunately, resulted in a just and equal society, but has instead opened new fault lines.

1.6.1.8. Other Writings:

Mishra’s Other Writings have been anthologized in *The Picador Book of Journeys* [2000] *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature* [2004], and *Away: The Indian Writer as Expatriate* [Penguin], among other titles. He has introduced new editions of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* [Modern Library], E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* [Penguin}
Classics], and J. G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* [NYRB Classics]. He has also introduced two volumes of V. S. Naipaul’s essays: *The Writer and the World* and *Literary Occasions*. Working as an editor for *Harper Collins*, he is credited with having discovered Arundhati Roy’s exceptional novel *The God of Small Things*. In her acknowledgement page Arundhati Roy praises Pankaj Mishra for “flagging it [her novel] off on its journey into the world” [vii]. Mishra is no longer a publisher but has continued to encourage and champion new writers. As a matter of international recognition he has caught the attention of widely known editors in the West such as John Epstein of Random House, Nicholas Pearson of Fourth Estate and Peter Straus of Picador. Gillon Aitken is Pankaj Mishra’s literary agent in England.


He was a visiting professor at Wellesley College in 2001, 2004, and 2006. In 2004-2005 he received a fellowship at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Centre for - 128-Writers and Scholars, New York Public Library. Pankaj Mishra was the Visiting Fellow for 2007-2008 at the Department of English, University College London, UK, where he gave two lectures in the English Department, one in the autumn term and one in the spring term, and he also conducted a seminar with postgraduate students. His topic was globalization and literature.

In this way Pankaj Mishra has won Windham–Campbell Literature Prize for Nonfiction in 2014, valued at $150,000 one of the largest prizes in the world of its kind and in the same year Premi Internacional D’assaig Josep Palau i Fabre.
Considering such a huge academic excellence, one may find out that Pankaj Mishra is a versatile, precocious, and distinguished scholar as a review of the list of his different activities proves it.

1.7. Upamanyu Chatterjee:

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959 in Patna [Bihar], India. He is the son of Sudhir Ranjan Chatterjee. He is an Indian Bengali author. Chatterjee was educated at St. Xavier’s school and St. Stephen’s college, in Delhi. While studying in high school, Chatterjee penned a play, the story of which he adopted from a Hitchcock drama, ‘Dilemma’. The drama was not published, but won the school drama competition in spite of it caricaturing the school rules and regulations.

After finishing his MA in English Literature from the Delhi University, Chatterjee joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983. Later on in 1990 following the success of his novel English, August, moved to the United Kingdom to serve as the writer in Residence at the University of Kent. In 1998, he was appointed as the Director [Languages] in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. His professional career not only marked the beginning of his literary career, but also was the source from which he created his characters. And at present works as a civil servant in Bombay. He writes novels on the side—? When no one is looking, as it were. His family comprises one wife and two daughters. He enjoys diverse solitary occupations.

He is being awarded with Officier des Arts et des Lettres [Officer of the order of Arts and Letters], by the French Government. And with the Sahitya Akademy Award in 2000 for The Mammaries of the Welfare State.
1.7.1. Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Literary Career:

His novels are written in a humorous style and are intended to go beyond the basic concept of comedy. He defied conventional traditions and created a niche for himself. Through his works, one can see his protests against the austere world of the Indian Administrative System. Most of his novels focus on the life of a young westernized diplomat who is posted in a non-descript town. The characteristics of his novels have a wry sense of humour, amazing language and an eye to portray the life of middle-class India. The satirical aspect of his novels sometimes shocks readers. However, there are critics who are of the view that he has not achieved the success which was promised by with the launch of his debut novel. He too has written a handful of short stories of which *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi* in 1986 and *Watching Them* are particularly noteworthy.

Upamanyu Chatterjee sought into prominence with his best-selling first novel *English August: An Indian Story* [subsequently made into a major film], was published in 1988 and has since been reprinted several times. Chatterjee has followed *English, August* with three further novels *The Last Burden*, which was published in 1993, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* in 2000, and *Weight Loss*, a dark comedy was published in [2006] as a sequel to *English August*, while continuing to pursue his career in the civil service. And also published *Way to Go* [2010], as a sequel to *The Last Burden*.

1.7.1.2. *English, August: An Indian Story* [1988]:

Chatterjee’s *English, August: An Indian Story* is a thinly disguised autobiographical novel which was published in 1988 about a sensitive administrative officer in west Bengal.

Upamanyu Chatterjee sought into prominence with the publication of his first novel, *English August: An Indian Story* [1988] has an appropriate title for the whole action of it takes place in three
places-Delhi Calcutta and Madras. It suits the hero’s mentality and mood, particularly when the hero is alienated from his land and people. It depicts the encounter of an urban youth with the provincial India and gives an account of a twenty four year old I.A.S. trainee posted in Madna. He is a westernized Indian whose thoughts Women, Literature and Soft Drugs dominate. Through the novel, he portrays some serious issues that revolve around the ‘urban educated youth’ and pictures a class of ‘westernized people’ who are otherwise unnoticed in regional and English fictional work. Since the publication of the novel, and the novel is an apt choice for those who are keen on knowing more about modern India.

The power and authority of an I.A.S. officer vis-à-vis the politician turns out to be illusionary. Getting disgusted with the system, Agastya Sen resigns from service and returns to Calcutta where his father, lives as the Governor of West Bengal. At the surface level, the novel can be taken as a satirical portraiture of Indian Administrative Service but at the deep level, it is about self-discovery. Chatterjee attempts as it were, to bring everyday reality into the realms of fiction. The story was made into a film with the same name in 1994.

1.7.1.3. The Last Burden [1993]:

In 1993, his second novel, The Last Burden was published which portrays life in an Indian family at the end of twentieth century. The novel is written in a rich and powerful language and provides a stunning and accurate depiction of the overwhelming burden of family ties. The Last Burden is a more somber and sober book, smaller in ambit, different in its ambitions.

The Last Burden is a book about parents -- about coming to terms with them. The anger of parents is never anger, Urmila tells Jamun. He understands, but it does not make it easier to deal with them. The book suggests that there is some growth here, that Jamun does begin to come to terms with his parents and also begins to find his
own place in the world [for a variety of reasons, including unexpectedly becoming a father himself], but The Last Burden is not meant as an uplifting tale. Chatterjee remains a realist—and occasionally the realism can appear brutal.

The writing is very solid throughout the book. There is some humour, but little of the lightness found in much of *English, August*. But Chatterjee strikes the proper tone throughout: it is both assured and accomplished – more so than in either of the Agastya Sen novels [and with a more solid narrative frame to it as well]. Throughout, the scenes and memories, the fights [about trivial matters], and the descriptions of the characters [even down to the mimicry of the young children, the pompous doctors, and the servants], are all very well done, fitting together to make the whole greater even than the fine parts.

Many of his flourishes are particularly good, woven in throughout, rarely simply authorial preening [as one finds, for example, in much of Salman Rushdie’s work]. Chatterjee has a good ear, and he can get away with most of his playful, musical use of language: on rain-pelted, flooding streets, for example, he writes that auto-rickshaws continue to squirm through, like flitting lifers ducking flak.

In India one imagines that this portrayal of domestic life might also have been seen as too dark [and too real], not at all how family life should be. Abroad—well, perhaps it was also not the picture of India readers hoped for. It is a shame: *The Last Burden* is a very good book. It does not have the humour or light touch of *English, August: An Indian Story*, but it has more depth and solidity, and it is very well written.

**1.7.1.4. The Mammaries of the Welfare State [2000]:**

In 2000, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* was published as an apt sequel to *English August*. The novel is described by many as a masterwork of satire by a prominent writer at the pinnacle of his
powers. Chatterjee takes the reader through the corridors of Indian bureaucracy with gory sarcasm and leaves no opportunity to mock the entire system. The novel won the Sahitya Academy Award in 2004.

*Mammaries of the Welfare State* reveals the grim reality that encompasses a country, where the poor and the downtrodden lead a miserable life. People at the helm of affairs enjoy their life and are insensitive to miseries of the underprivileged class. It is a novel which demands and keeps one's attention not only by its sarcastic asides and inside jokes, but also because it dares to voice a moral outrage that very rarely finds its way into fiction, especially recent Indian English fiction.

Still, Chatterjee’s satire is sharp, and his lingering over various politician's sagas and descriptions of futile attempts at getting anything done are enjoyable. He picks at all parts of the Welfare State, and he does so well. He has a sharp eye regarding character, getting the various bureaucrats, peons, politicians, and businessmen just right. Even the asides and casual observations are nicely done [and spot-on]. Neither father nor son had retained his original caste-revealing surname for the obvious reason that for the legerdemain of politics, one travels light.

It is a hilarious satire. But the issue it focuses on: is too serious to be laughed off. It provokes one to realise, how worthless one’s upbringing has been when it comes to facing one’s own country. The author could have spared the reader some 100 pages containing unnecessary details which make his mockery of the system less effective. You need tonnes of patience and disgust with official wrong-doings to carry on with the book till the end.
1.7.1.5. **Weight Loss [2006]:**

Chatterjee’s fourth novel, *Weight Loss* which is a dark comedy was published in 2006. Is about the strange life [from age 11 to age 37] of a sexual deviant named Bhola, whose attitude to most of the people around him depends on their lust worthiness. Bhola’s tastes are not, to put it mildly, conventional. Sex is a form of depravity for him and he has fetishes about everyone from; teachers to roadside sadhus to servants; he progresses from fantasizing about the portly family cook Gopinath to falling madly in love with a vegetable vendor and her husband. This last obsession spans the entire length of the book and most of Bhola’s life – he even ends up teaching at a college in an obscure hill-station hundreds of miles from his home because he wants to be near the couple. At various other stages in his life he is expelled from school for defecating in a teacher’s office, participates in an inexpertly carried out circumcision [one of the book’s many manifestations of the “weight loss” motif]. His genius for dark humour is really convincing in this novel.

1.7.1.6. **Way to Go [2010]:**

In 2010, his latest novel, *Way to Go* was published as a sequel to *The Last Burden*. The novel is accepted as well written and is a pleasure to read. It is suitable for anyone who wants to broaden their perspective on life and enjoy themselves in the procedure.

In this way, Upamanyu Chatterjee based his novels on The Indian Administrative System, which he depicted with hilarious sarcasm. The humour, sometimes, placed the reader in a state of shock as the as the writer went to an extent which his Indian contemporaries do not dare to go to. Through his works, he dared to match the sensibility which one uncovers only in modern European novels.