Chapter IV

Vikram Seth: Traversing Trans-National Spaces

The postcolonial Indian novel, especially after the 1980s, developed along two lines: the innovations with postmodern techniques; and realism. Rushdie and Alan Sealey belong to the earlier strand, and Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry to the latter and Ghosh traversing both. Seth subverts and sheds Rushdie's radical experimentations with language and narrative techniques and reverts to conservatism with regard to style and technique. He does not take the postmodernist stance and instead opts for a linear and direct narrative technique, coupled with an accessible vocabulary. His admiration for the Victorian writers, who portray the lives of other people instead of their own, becomes obvious as we read *A Suitable Boy*.

Vikram Seth has a distinctive voice in the history of Indian Writing in English. Rushdie and Ghosh overtly treat the questions of history, identity, nationalism, whereas in Seth's fiction the treatment of these issues is subdued. In his *oeuvre*, we see him perform several roles: of an economist, a poet, a traveler, a novelist in verse, and a librettist. He straddles several genres, and his writing becomes a microcosm of cultural ethos of the post-independence urban English educated middle class. Borrowing from the tradition of a Pushkin and George Eliot, and from popular culture, Seth has charted out his own writing sphere. This chapter explores the world of Vikram Seth: his position in the pantheon of Indian English writers; his postcolonial stance; his novelistic craft; and his reactions to contemporary codes of family relationships, with specific reference to *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and *An Equal Music* (1999). While analyzing these novels, this chapter also attempts to dislodge the
framework of national allegory that seems to characterize third world texts, according to Jameson.

Seth is indeed a worthy successor to the great representative writers of the English tradition - Dickens, Thackeray, Austen and Galsworthy. However, it must be noted that while European or American novels focus on the progress of the protagonists, Seth's work focuses equally on all the characters. John from *A Golden Gate* and Lata from *A Suitable Boy* are placed in a relatively privileged position in the narrative, but there are sections from where they disappear, and yet the reader does not lose his/her interest in the novel in the absence of these privileged characters. *A Suitable Boy* is not only Lata's story; within the text, there are stories of groups, castes and communities. Amit, who is writing a novel, sums up the entire process of fiction writing, especially a novel on an epic scale. He uses the metaphor of a banyan tree to describe the process of novel writing. In response to Lata's question, "What is it like to write a novel?" Amit replies that he does not exactly know because it is his first novel and in the process of finding out, he feels that the writing is like a banyan tree:

...it sprouts, and grows, and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks. When you go to the Botanical Garden you'll see what I mean. It has its own life — but so do the snakes, birds, bees and lizards and termites that live in it and on it and off it. But then it's also like the Ganges in its upper, middle and lower courses — including its delta... (483)

Even earlier in the novel, Amit Chatterjee employs the metaphor of a performance of an Indian classical raga:
... I've always felt that the performance of a raag resembles a novel – or at least the kind of novel I'm attempting to write....first you take one note and explore it for a while, then another to discover its possibilities, then perhaps you get to the dominant, and pause for a bit, and it's only gradually that the phrases begin to form and the tabla joins in with the beat ... and then the more brilliant improvisations and diversions begin, with the main theme returning from time to time, and finally it all speeds up, and the excitement increases to a climax. (394)

Seth’s art seems summed up in Amit’s spontaneous and unassuming explanation. His novels are not exclusively concerned with the fate of one particular character, which is like the backbone of conventional romantic stories, but rather with the humankind as a whole, or large portions of humankind. They are concerned with the roots, the branches, the leaves, the flowers, the creepers, the sap, the multiple outgrowths, and incarnations of life. The Tree of Life is a universal archetype, or the Tree of Heaven (which incidentally is the name chosen for a restaurant in The Golden Gate). The banyan tree becomes the perfect symbol for the writing that encompasses the destinies of many people. The tree has a religious connotation: The Garden of Eden to Christ’s Cross, Buddha’s Bodhisattva tree, Emperor Ashoka’s planting of banyan trees along the pilgrim’s roads. The all-encompassing banyan tree symbolizes, like Rushdie’s Bombay, a miniature India with the luxuriant vegetation; strong, complex and eternal.

But The Golden Gate has fewer branches and outgrowths: fewer characters, fewer intricate plots and subplots compared to the impressive and massive A Suitable Boy, which is a novel that grows organically with relationships and marriages. However, there are parallels between the two texts. The political unrest on the Pacific shore has parallels in the violent riots along the Ganges. The common thread running through
the two works is the search for a suitable companion to fight loneliness. The search for a life partner and an ideal companion is the motivating and moving force in both the novels. Even the two female protagonists, Liz and Lata finally make sensible choices. Seth’s characters are all engaged in the pursuit of happiness, American or Indian style, but life teaches them not to expect too much out of it. Seth stresses that life is contemplative, not ascetic, fused with simple ordinary pleasures, revealing the impermanence of things and that passion is temporary. The manner in which Seth handles these situations disproves Jameson’s assumptions about third world writers that they return to the national question repeatedly. Jameson seems to forget that family, relationships, marriages are central concerns of humans across borders globally.

Seth, a master of many genres at once is a poet, a travel writer, a novelist, and a writer of children’s stories. He is not bothered about diasporic dislocations or search for roots; maybe as a writer or individual, he does not feel dislocated or uprooted. His novels do not overtly profess any particular ideology, even when he addresses issues like homosexuality, disarmament etc. His works do not fit into any particular category. As a writer, he does not seem to be responsive to current trends in theory. It is difficult to label him as an Indian or a Commonwealth writer. He gives the impression that he belongs to the world, not rooted to any specific locale. His novels emerge from and address different locations: the North of India in *The Suitable Boy*, California in *The Golden Gate*, and Venice/Europe/London in *An Equal Music*. He is perhaps the first Indian writer who is truly transnational. His novels provide a humanitarian worldview in the age of pop culture and global consumerism.

*A Suitable Boy* is a true Indian novel in English. In its representation of linguistic inclusiveness (the use of Urdu and Hindi), it reaffirms Nehru’s secularism
and nationalism. It elaborates the discourse of modernity in the third world, particularly in the manner in which this modernity is negotiated. It also addresses the contemporary problem of communal violence that has gripped India and the subcontinent in the post-independence period. Through a sub-plot in the text involving an inter-religious love story, it contextualizes the Indian political scene. As a result, the public and the private domains of the characters do not remain mutually exclusive categories.

*An Equal Music* has a different location, both geographically and culturally. It is like a British novel written by a cultural insider. Seth’s treatment of his male-female characters makes him vulnerable to charges of furthering patriarchy. Seth has been criticized for his almost near exclusion of colored people in England, the setting of the text. It is difficult to pinpoint the location of his self while reading his texts. He belongs both ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home and ‘away’, in a world where borders are created and traversed everyday, defining his Indianness paradoxically in the context of cosmopolitanism.

I

*A Suitable Boy* is set in fictionalized North India and deals with a particular historical moment. Seth translates a North Indian society into English, charting the transition of a feudal society to a modern one. The novel is positioned at a particular historical juncture in India. While talking about postcolonial historiography, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) writes:

The phenomenon of “political modernity” — namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise — is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even
theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a climactic form in the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. (4)

Chakrabarty’s arguments prove useful when we place *A Suitable Boy* in this context. He does not propose that this burden of Eurocentric thought can be replaced by nativism or nostalgia. The postcolonial historiography should emphasize social injustice when it makes a case for a universally secular vision of humanity. It is hard to reconcile these issues of social injustice with Indian modernity; critics argue that the project is still incomplete. The universalizing of history has a Eurocentric focus. The story of India’s march towards modernity from a medieval culture gets homogenized in the narratives of colonial period. This transition from the medieval to the modern was seen in the garb of secular Hinduism. The version of modernity pushed religion into the domestic space, the private domain. The Indian project of modernity is seen against the grand narrative of Western modernity that was completed elsewhere. Further, Chakrabarty observes that, “Most modern third-world histories are written within problematics posed by this transition narrative, of which the over-riding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism” (31). Fredric Jameson overgeneralizes when he claims that third world literatures are national allegories (Jameson, 1986). Several postcolonial novels center on such transition narratives. *A Suitable Boy* concerns itself with a nation that has matured since its independence. Chakrabarty writes, “The mode of self-representation
that the "Indian" can adopt ... is what Homi Bhabha has justly called "mimetic."

Indian history ... remains mimicry of certain "modern" subject of "European" history
and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure. The transition narrative will
always remain "grievously incomplete" (40). Indian historiography mimics and fails
to catch up with the narrative of development that has been completed elsewhere.

Chakrabarty stresses the point that modern politics should not be justified as being
unfolded in a unitary historical time, as a privileged European story.

_A Suitable Boy_ is like a realist 19th century English novel. It is important to
keep in mind that the English novel of the 19th century is also a historical
development mediated by the development of scientific-evolutionary ideas of
modernity within Europe. Seth presents the nation moving towards technological
advancement, but does not align himself with ideas of modernity within Europe. He
contextualizes it within the social fabric of India. One of Seth's characters, Mrs.
Mahesh Kapoor's son Arun, is full of Englishness -- Angreziyat; he has nothing else
on his mind, still the novel does not overwhelm its readers with it, and rather it
satirizes the enthrallment with English. Angreziyat is not privileged. The text
overflows with details of North Indian life, Urdu poetry etc. Seth is not rewriting a
19th century historical novel within the Indian context, but narrating the transition of
India from the postcolonial, post-independent period moving towards globalization.
The novel also looks back at India with its Zamindari system, caste distinctions, etc.
The "map of the future" (993) refers to the development that would take India towards
a future time. Mahesh Kapoor is such a man, one who legislates the abolition of the
feudal Zamindari system, someone who by a stroke of the pen had wiped vast estates
off the map of the future. This aspect of modernity disrupts the power structures of the
old world order and the bonding and human relationships that people enjoyed. On the
one hand, Maan, Mahesh Kapoor's son, feels helpless in such a situation; on the other, Haresh, the suitable boy, Lata's suitor accepts this situation. Even Kedarnath who was "not insolvent, just illiquid … knew that money, unlike labor, owed no allegiance to a particular trade, and could flow out of shoes and into, say, cold storage facilities without retraining or compunction or doubt. It only asked two questions: 'What interest?' and 'What risk?'" (243). These people accept the logic of the modernity project, whereas Rasheed, a supporter of the Socialist Party, talked about feudalism and superstition and the oppressive structure of society and especially the Nawab Sahib of Baitar's role in the system. Rasheed keeps raving and ranting about feudalism and ends up almost insane; his madness cannot be reasoned out in the modern world, which is fast moving towards the lure of the Capital. This questioning of the process of modernity by an individual can be seen as the nation's anxiety.

However, as the novel closes, the readers get a sense of time that flows naturally into a homogeneous empty time. Lata's sister Savita and Pran go past and view the Barsaat Mahal, in a boat, down the Ganges, flowing with the current of the sacred river that had come down to earth and would continue to flow. Lata and Haresh's leaving Brahmpur station is also a similar, natural transition towards a time that stabilizes the socio-political disruptions. The novel, set in India, tracks along towards a future laced with the past and attempts to transcend it; the married couple's leaving by train is symbolic of a modern India, leaving behind the colonial past. The novel captures the transition of the nation's emergence into modernity in the 1950's, and India's position in that evolutionary time frame. The resistance to Zamindari system ends in defeat of the Raja of Marh symbolized in the rolling back of the Shiva-lingam into the river. The Nawab, who takes a sympathetic view of the system, feels that the legislation would ruin the privileged class. On seeing the historical process, he
The Nawab realizes that he has been deeply immersed in the past. The support to the Zamindari system is considered as liberal values in conformity with capitalist modernity, evident in the character of Mahesh Kapoor.

Even as we see India’s progress towards becoming a modern state, the novel makes us see the counter forces that are threatening the secular fabric of the country, and particularly the Hindu secularism. It invites the readers to visualize the cultural diversity of the nation and its slow transition to modernity. In the public sphere, we see the nation aligning itself with the modernity project, but in the private domain, the status of women was an indicator of a split within this developmental logic. The political freedom of the outside world is not reflected within the domestic space and does not indicate any change in the status of women. Societies, which meted out cruel treatment to its women, were considered primitive. The British colonial discourse used Sati as an issue for the colonizers to intervene with, as a way to civilize a Dark Continent. The postcolonial subject, or the citizen of the civil society, especially a woman, was not someone with a free choice. Lata faces restrictions because of tradition, in her choice of her husband. Her mother decides whom she will marry; further, Rupa Mehra’s choice of a groom for Lata, from a particular caste complicates this issue of freedom. When Rupa Mehra learns that Haresh is in the shoe trade, she begins to have second thoughts about him because that would mean caste pollution; ultimately Lata’s decision is not so much dependent on the caste factor as much as an affirmation of the economic stability offered by a modern capitalist society. Haresh has the first-hand experience of the living conditions in the jatav colony; he disregards the caste factor and pays a visit to the jatav colony and his attitude to the jatavs and their colony is that of a reformist. He thinks of altering the living conditions if he had
the funds and labor, but he knew that the problems were many — illiteracy, poverty, dirt, indiscipline — but it was not lack of potential that obstructed development, it was all a matter of taking sensible decisions. He is a pragmatic man and believes in the economic aspect of progress. His attitude towards the imperial power is also pragmatic. He has studied abroad, not in elitist institutions but in a technical college, equipping himself with technical knowledge. In his occupation too, he worshipped efficiency and quality of work. Lata makes an honest effort to get rid of her prejudice for Haresh; his job in the leather industry and his imperfect, inadequate knowledge of English makes her re-examine her feelings for Haresh. She tries to get over the attitude problem that she has within her, for him. She struggles hard to make a choice between the Muslim Kabir and the Hindu Haresh.

Even more pronounced is her struggle to come to a decision that stems from the contrast between Haresh as one who symbolizes capitalist modernity in post-independent India, a man of the future and Kabir, who belongs to the other religion and associated with the romance of a slowly dying nawabi culture. Lata’s and Haresh’s marriage ceremony, though done according to Hindu rites, has the ring exchange ceremony, which is not essentially a Hindu ritual, which puzzles the priest. Lata’s secular ideology is not the conventional one; it is not related to caste either. The novel positively projects the reality of Indian modernity. Seth does not attempt to blend western modernity with colonialism but projects an Indian modernity that combines the diversity of religions, caste, and class existing in Indian society. Nehruvian socialism governed the political and economic sphere of the country and underneath it, in the private domains, modernity kept ties with tradition. While Lata and Haresh become part of the emerging capitalist modernity, Mrs Kapoor’s Hinduism shows a marked split, because she conforms to the secular ideals of her
husband but follows her own traditional Hinduism in her private domain. The relationship that Mahesh Kapoor and his wife share shows the split between public and the private domains. The gap between Mahesh Kapoor's public secularism and private 'religion' of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is clearly visible in the text. The way Mahesh Kapoor treats his wife leaves much to be desired, and it is only on his wife's death when a number of people came to express their condolences, does he realize her worth. The generation that divides Mahesh Kapoor and his wife and Lata and Haresh and the changes that take place reiterates that the chasm between tradition and modernity can be bridged. Although Haresh is not a natural choice of Mrs Rupa Mehra for her daughter, Lata's agreeing to marry Haresh is like going against her mother's traditional wishes and yet upholding tradition. We see the movement of Indian modernity emerging from the shadows of colonialism bypassing the Eurocentric universal grand narrative of Western progress. Seth captures Indian modernity as it evolved from the colonial to the postcolonial phase. Seth achieves this with the use of English language. The language captures the dialectical differences of the different speech communities of Purva Pradesh – for example, the courtly Urdu, the country dialect of the rural communities, and with the use of the third person narrative that distances Seth from the characters and gives him free access to the consciousness of his characters. A very neutral voice is maintained that does not privilege any particular speech community. As Jaikumar points out, "Rationality has a very tenuous hold on the Indian psyche" (1273). The Anglophone Arun's attitude towards Haresh's diction and idiom stands in contrast to the narrative voice – Arun sees it as 'the' language of the English, whereas for Seth it is a vehicle for Indian modernity, a world language of modernity. In the process, Seth does not denigrate Indian languages; the authorial voice is not Anglo-centric.
Seth is part of the Indian diaspora of the 20th century capitalist world, which involves moving between different continents for professional reasons. This phase of diasporic movement involved the migration of the English speaking Indian professionals to the western metropolitan centers. This diasporic movement is different from the mid-19th century phase of diasporic migrancy: as indentured labor force transported to British colonies. Rushdie, Ghosh and Seth, the three writers I have dealt with here either live abroad or spend their time traveling abroad, and have a base in India as well. The term ‘diaspora’ is not to be understood in a narrow sense. A wider definition would include people not as dislocated entities or individuals, nor people with distanced imagination, but writers who occupy an imaginary space that leaves them with the freedom of narrating or inhabiting clearly defined territories as well as distanced spaces. They can become native and foreign at the same time, and these multiple perspectives define their writing. Seth belongs to both the domains, and his writing reflects a cosmopolitan culture that is of a traveling writer; he occupies an urban space that facilitates a fusion of disparate tendencies in his oeuvre. His work does not regress into nostalgia for a lost world, nor does it lament the present, as his imaginative acts attempt to capture new areas of experiences. In categorizing Seth as a diasporic writer, one needs to redefine the term ‘diaspora’ to capture the fluidity that it denotes. This chapter also attempts to examine whether Seth’s writing operates within the framework of diasporic writing. We know Seth as someone who inhabits different continents and experiments with different literary genres. He belongs to the group of Indian writers of diasporic migrancy, those who have lived abroad or outside the Indian subcontinent. The present-day intercontinental mobility has redefined the concept of national identities that were previously defined by geographical borders. His work spreads across different continents, from China to North India to San
Francisco to England and Vienna as evident in *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983); *The Golden Gate* (1986); *A Suitable Boy* (1993); and *An Equal Music* (1999).

In this study the term diaspora, as applied to Rushdie, Ghosh and Seth, can be interpreted in relation to people settled outside the country of their birth but acknowledging collective multiple identity and emotional loyalty to the land to which they belong. Nevertheless, in their writing they are not only preoccupied with their host country. Their thematic concerns include their experiences in the host country as well as with the homeland: real or imaginary. Seth’s writing is not preoccupied with exile, dislocation or uprootedness in an alien context, with the process of reformulating, recreating another identity, with racial marginalization or the use of indigenous folk or myths for narration and ethnicity and immigrant anxieties. In the novels like *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*, he does not explore the gaps arising out of different cultural perspectives: of the homeland and the host country. In *A Suitable Boy*, he documents the political-social history of India, or rather the subcontinent, in the 1950s.

Compared to Rushdie’s novels, which draw attention to history as itself, *A Suitable Boy* stands out as a classic realist novel. Its backdrop is the early 1950’s India of the formative years of the Nehru period, which saw the abolition of the Zamindari System, and conducted the first election of free India. Critics find it easy to cast this novel as a national allegory with its copious realism. It is different from Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in the way it endorses India’s history, which marches towards secularism, and sees the growth of commercial society (reference to the leather industry and trade) based on the western models of development. Its plot is simple involving the choice of a suitable boy for the heroine, Lata Mehra. The heroine shows
sparks of dissent (her love affair with the Muslim Kabir), but ultimately the novel and its heroine subscribe to societal norms and the inevitability of bourgeois life. In the end, Lata chooses to settle down neither with a rich man's son of Calcutta's high society, nor with Kabir, the Muslim boy, whose friendship scandalizes Rupa Mehra (Lata's mother) but with Haresh Khanna of Prahapore, who has studied in a British Technical College, and not in some elite institution. Haresh Khanna is being trained for the shoe trade (leather industry), a profession which brings in issues of caste and class. He is portrayed as the proper bourgeois man, free from religious superstitions and social snobbery. On the one hand, we get a sense of inevitability of a specific type of national development; on the other, the novel also delves into a nostalgic journey into the feudal world of Urdu literature and poetry and courtly entertainment. The novel also subscribes to the notion that the fate of the middle class Indians lies in shedding the traditional identities and in striving for secularism in its liberal economic mode.

The novel deals with four families: the Mehras; the Kapoors; the Chatterjis that are interconnected through marriage; and the Khans. The narrative introduces these families and all the major characters of the novel right at the beginning. Mrs Rupa Mehra's daughter Savita's marriage to Pran Kapoor, a university lecturer in English, introduces the major theme of the book: marriage as a social institution and its role in a civilized society and its importance for an Indian woman. The wedding ceremony brings together other characters like the Anglophone Chatterjis, who live in Calcutta, and the Nawab of Baitar, who is the largest landowner in the State, the last remnant of a feudal aristocracy. The story is set in the winter of 1950 in the north of India. The setting of the novel is Brahmpur, a fictitious city capital of Purva Pradesh, an imaginary state in the Indian subcontinent. The narration moves back and forth in
the nineteen chapters; the dominating landscape is the North and East of India which includes such cities as Patna, Allahabad, Banaras, Kanpur and Calcutta. Rupa Mehra’s opening lines to Lata, “You too will marry a boy I choose” (3), said very firmly to the daughter, indicates the thematic preoccupation of the novel: a quest for “a suitable boy” for Lata Mehra. Marriage for Lata is a social requirement, and for Rupa Mehra to get a daughter married off is to adhere to social norms. In the middle of the novel, Rasheed’s (Maan Kapoor’s Urdu teacher) father tells Maan that “Not being married is considered by my religion and yours [i.e. both Hinduism and Islam] to be .... ‘Adharma? Against correct principles?’ suggested Maan. ‘Yes, call it adharma,’ said Rasheed’s father....” Rasheed’s father tells Maan “I believe that a man between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five is in the prime of his life” (668). “Our religion says that the izzat, the honour of an unmarried man is half that of a married man.” ... “One should be married. No question about it” (669). The characters and events narrated do not have symbolic equivalents but they are literal: they are none other than their own selves. The characters and the plot have a historical base, because it is against the backdrop of an independent India with her socio-political-cultural progress and crises that this search for a suitable boy begins. Rupa Mehra has to identify and locate a suitable bridegroom for her daughter Lata Mehra amidst a society in transition. The social fabric includes a variety of characters: from the upper middle class to the untouchables jatavs engaged in shoe trade, Hindus, Muslims; it has a cross-section of people with different religious, regional identities and, who become victims of class and religious politics. The novel delineates the manner in which religious fanaticism disrupts the social texture. Haresh Khanna, the most suitable boy, is engaged in the shoe trade, and has to deal with local tanners who belong to the untouchable jatav caste. Thus, he is indirectly involved in the politics of
power and hierarchy even when he does not adhere to those belief systems. The professional politicking at the university level is evident in Pran Kapoor's characterization (Pran Kapoor is Lata's brother-in-law, married to Rupa Mehra's elder daughter Savita). Lata's lover, Kabir Durrani, becomes a victim of class and religious politics prevalent in the society. The novel exposes the perils of fanatic religious sentiments when the Raja of Marh tries to reinstate the Shivalinga near the cremation ghat. All the male characters presented on the canvas belong to the patriarchal world -- the men and women having specific roles demarcated for them. The women belong to the domestic sphere with a clearly defined private space, while the men form the public domain. The four major families delineated have a number of women characters who have definite roles and belong to different family clusters: Tandons-Kapoors-Chatterjis. Rupa Mehra and her two daughters Savita and Lata, Malati (Lata's best friend), Veena Tandon, her mother Mrs. Kapoor and her mother-in-law Mrs. Tandon, the courtesan Saeeda Bai and her sister Tasreen, the Chatterji women which include the two sisters Meenakshi and Kakoli, who celebrate the ideal domestic space allocated to them in a structure of patriarchy. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is the traditional homemaker, widowed at an early age. She educates her children in English medium schools with the support of family and friends. She is known for her habit of making an emotional capital out of her widowed status; she invokes her husband, the late Raghbir Mehra as 'Him' on every possible occasion, especially in moments of crisis. Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is the so-called matriarch of Prem Nivas; Mrs. Rupa Mehra is related to her through the marriage of her daughter to Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor's son. Thus, Mrs Mehra and Mrs Kapoor are co-mother-in-laws. As a selfless, conventional, kind soul, Mrs. Kapoor refers to her husband as "Minister Sahib" or "Pran's father." She finds it unthinkable to refer to him by name. Seth meticulously details the cultural
specificities. Such detailing undercuts the nation syndrome, with which Jameson characterizes third-world novels. Against these conventional models of Indian womanhood, the Professor of English Dr. Ila Chattopadhyay stands out as a blunt outspoken forthright woman with clear opinions, but she is not accorded much space in the novel. Abida Begum is the sister-in-law of the Nawab of Baitar. The Nawab's brother goes back to Pakistan, but Begum Abida does not follow her husband to Pakistan and stays back in Brahmpur. Mr L.N. Agrawal, the Minister for Home Affairs thinks, "... How little there was in common between this shameless, exhibitionistic woman who smoked in private and screeched in public, who had not even followed her husband when he had left for Pakistan but had immodestly and spouselessly remained in Purva Pradesh to make trouble — and his own late wife, Priya's mother, who had sweetened his life through her years of selfless care and love" (259). In the patriarchal ideology, the women are located in well-defined spaces, and the stereotypes continue to persist; women are not given scope to counter the system. Women's lives are intertwined in the domestic sphere, and even those who resist patriarchy have to confine themselves to the institution of marriage and family. Lata's anger against the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service for not selecting a married woman is justified, but not given much voice or space in the novel.

Lata Mehra falls in love with a Muslim, Kabir Durrani, a student of history. The name Kabir is misleading. Lata learns from Malati that he is a Muslim. Lata realizes that this would never go down well with her mother: "Visions of her mother's disapproval floated across her mind" (48). She knew her mother well and realized that she would suffer deep pain and horror if she heard that her daughter had been seeing a Muslim boy. Rupa Mehra was not more prejudiced against Muslims than most upper
caste Hindu women of her age and background were. She had a stereotypical image of the Muslims: dirty-violent-cruel-lecherous. Lata wants to elope with Kabir, who wants to join the Indian Foreign Service and therefore does not want to act in haste in this matter. Lata does not share her mother's dislike for Muslims, but rethinks her decision. In the end, she has to choose between Haresh Khanna and Amit Chatterjee, and she chooses Haresh. The simultaneous narrative strand has quite a different set of events taking place in Old Brahmpur, which, however, prove significant to the story.

Kedarnath Tandon has a guest, Haresh who is on a visit to Brahmpur on business. After doing his BA with English honors, Haresh did a diploma in leather technology from England. Kedarnath, a partition victim, is engaged in the shoe business. He takes up the leather business (not typical to his caste) after they were forced out of Lahore. Kedarnath is impressed by Haresh's technical knowledge of shoe manufacture and thinks of proposing a business connection. He takes Haresh to see a few places where shoes are made to see the conditions of manufacture as compared to what Haresh has seen in England or at his Kanpur factory. Haresh's visit to Ravidaspur, a shoemaker's neighbourhood, which is full of poverty, illiteracy, indiscipline, dirt, fills him with a feeling a moral disapproval and a feeling of annoyance at the state of things.

Haresh for the first time catches a glimpse of Lata at the Brahmpur Junction standing with her mother en route to Calcutta. He finds her face striking— not a classical beauty, but it had a quality of such an attractive intensity that Haresh stopped for a second. Lata gets to meet Haresh later at the house of Kalpana Gaur, and he later tells Simran's (his former lover) sister that Lata is indeed wife-material. On meeting Haresh for the first time, Lata's first impression of him was that he was shorter than she had expected. He had been chewing paan, which did not go at all well with her idea of a husband. His whole mode of dressing struck her as being flashy. Flashiest of
all were the co-respondent shoes, and she could not understand who he was trying to impress. A visit to the tannery leaves Lata with a sudden revulsion for his work and for the completely polluting business of hide and carrion and a sense of disquiet about someone who could enjoy this sort of thing. She reflects, "Haresh was not westernized in the proper sense: she sensed that in his manners and style he was a bit half-baked (at least by Calcutta standards)" .... If anything, he was too certain about the correctness of his views. Nor did he lay on the odious, insincere charm that she had got used to with Arun's young Calcutta friends" (579). Haresh gradually grows on her, and Lata begins to like him. Therefore, Lata rejects the impulsive, dashing, romantically inclined Kabir, and by rejecting him, she rejects passion. She closes her mind on Amit because she realizes that Amit Chatterji, the gifted, eccentric, self-indulgent, materialistic poet from Calcutta is devoted to his Muse: his writing and probably he would not need her. In choosing Haresh, she opts for self-control, rational calm and a social order, which is culturally ingrained. In delineating human relationships that include family bonding, Seth writes primarily about the social, religious and familial traditions and customs of India.

The novel foregrounds Seth's forte: the art of story telling. The simplicity of form emerges as the hallmark of the novel in postmodern times. There is no stream-of-consciousness technique, no shifts in time sequence. The third person narration scrupulously follows chronological time in the manner of Victorian novels. Like Austen, Seth attempts to portray the lives of other people represented by the large number of characters that inhabit the novel. Though marriage is central to the theme, it is just the take off point from where the novel, like a Banyan tree, acquires gigantic proportions. Brahmpur town is the centre of the action, but Seth cannot be confined to boundaries. We have the small conservative town of Brahmpur, on one hand, while,
on the other, there is the modern upper middle class life of Calcutta and the pathetic living conditions of the villagers of Rudhia. Seth paints a huge canvas and practically everything under the Sun: marriage-deaths-family-gardening-references to Ramcharitmanas-cocktail parties-Zamindari system-Nawabi culture- courtesans-dalits-and the stories of four prominent families.

The novel form is English, the language is Standard English, but it goes to present a very un-English environ, created very self-consciously by the narrator, without making the text entirely exotic. The novel represents a reality that is unknown to the western readers in a very familiar way. Postcolonial writers have used the varied cultural resources, not from a strictly Orientalist point of view but from the point of view of an insider, one who straddles the cross-cultural experiential reality. In the text, we do not get a feel of the post-modernist’s display of linguistic virtuosity, intertextuality, or differing signifiers. The reality is conveyed by minute realistic description. Seth establishes a connection between the shoe-making business and literary-poetic creation. The narrator says:

No poet ever worked harder or more inspiredly to craft a poem than Haresh worked for the next three days on his pair of shoes. He was supplied the materials, and told where the various machines were, and he set to work amid the heat and din of the factory. He examined and selected fine pieces of upper and lining leather, measured them for thickness, cut, skived, cemented and folded the components, stamped the lining for size and style, fitted the upper, and lining components together and carefully stitched them to each other. He inserted and shaped the counter and toe-puff in the upper, and attached the insole to the last. (920)
The detailed description of the artistry of shoe making makes one question the boundaries of the 'poetic', 'literary', 'art', in terms of creation and representation. The shoe making trade is used as a paradigm for pragmatic and literary creativity. The narrator's technical knowledge of the subject inscribes the foreignness associated with the activity within the traditional bounds of the narrative, and this demonstrates the connection between language and experience, creation and representation. This comparison between crafting a poem and crafting a pair of shoes invokes India whose otherness has to be experienced rather than comprehended. The straightforward descriptions come across in a language, stripped of all its floweriness, in a precise business fashion. Even the passage describing the heroine Lata to a prospective suitor uses the epistolary mode. The poetic representation is rejected in favor of an evocative, matter-of-fact-description: “As for Lata—she is nineteen years old, brilliant at her studies, came first in her Senior Cambridge exams from Sophia Convent, did her Intermediate Arts from Brahmpur University, and has just finished (with excellent marks) her first year B.A. exams in English, also from Brahmpur University” (566).

The notion of Indianness here is both elusive and concrete at the same time. For the western reader, it is far away from reality, but the meaning is not lost between the writer of the letter and its addressee. The suitable girl is described the Indian way; the narrative expression becomes concrete, real, curious, strange, provocative, all at the same time, and all these exchanges happen in English. In the conservation between Saeeda Bai and Maan, the reader notices a shift in the language. Maan is not well versed in Urdu. Their exchanges are translated versions of elaborate Indian similes: Maan presents Saeeda Bai with a book in Urdu: *The Poetical Works of Ghalib: An Album of Pictures by Chaughtab*. Though greatly delighted by the gift, Saeeda Bai very modestly tells him that such a formality was not necessary. When Maan and
Saeeda Bai discuss and analyze the book, the original Urdu poetry with English transcription, we see that the two linguistic spheres are necessarily different, and all the differences are explained in English. Saeeda Bai explains the Urdu poetry in Hindi for Maan and Maan translates the English into Hindi for Saeeda Bai; in the narrative, this transaction takes place in English. The in-between poetic space that is created in the conversation between Saeeda Bai and Maan is filled with English. The varied cultural unrepresented realities, experiences, perspectives are seen and presented in the form of a mosaic.

Seth uses the river Ganga in the novel (the semiotics of ‘Otherness’ – ‘Exoticism’) as a symbol of spiritual regeneration, of essential Indianness, and this is evoked in the epistolary form within the larger framework of the novel. Dipankar Chatterjee, on his pilgrimage, writes postcards to his brother Amit in Calcutta. The postcards are in a mixture of Bengali and English about his experiences during his pilgrimage on the banks of Ganga in search of spiritual truth. The image of Ganga as a sign of Hindu spirituality is a western cliché – a British representation about Indian identity using some stock imagery. Seth projects the stereotypical vision of Indian spirituality and religiosity which is typical of the western representations of India. These alien notions are expressed in English without becoming a clash of two cultures – the ‘Otherness’ is depicted in a traditional realist manner in English. The subject discussed and the linguistic choice made (that of English) do not create the binaries of East-West, nor do they become a conflict between two cultural realities; instead, they successfully blend the alien reality (for the west) into a variety of English, i.e. Indian English signifying the elasticity of language. The novel demonstrates that just as there is no absolute truth, India is a land of pluralistic experiences, with a profusion of characters, geographical locales, cultural diversity aptly demonstrating that there exist
not just one but many Indias — modern, post-independent, post colonial states. Seth’s vision encompasses the existing social order in a state of flux, which would facilitate the birth of a new order. His canvas incorporates the entire range of human emotions and experiences making the novel a national history, very specific, yet general and universal. The novel has been compared with 19th century classics like *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice*, while centering on India, a country whose variety of life and patterns of family relationships, social customs Seth maps with stark realism. Both Seth and Rushdie attempt to incorporate the liberal pluralistic vision of India into their novels. *A Suitable Boy* is not just a national but also a domestic history, concerned less with political struggles than with the smaller dramas of everyday life. It aims at a vast comprehensive unity and focuses on those aspects of life that hold society together rather than those that tear it apart. In this sense, Seth, like Rushdie, moves consciously beyond the jarring fragmentary aesthetics of postmodern fiction.

Seth suggests that the meaning of life is to be found not in passionate romance, conspicuous riches or glamorized hi-gloss porn, hi-tech violence or lust for cars and wines (as in the West) but in the tolerant participation of family togetherness, arranged marriages, and social idealism. Lata, later in the novel, delivers a charged denunciation of passion; she explains to Malati why she gave up her romantic infatuation with the Muslim Kabir Durrani. In choosing Haresh, she not just obeys maternal orders but answers to her elder brother’s arrogant rejection of him as a suitable boy and her mother’s doubt about his class because of his shoe trade. The Lata-Haresh alliance is in keeping with the class-caste hierarchy. In contrast to this alliance, the narrative delineates a powerful Hindu-Muslim relationship: the Muslim courtesan Saeeda Bai Firozabadi and the Hindu Maan Kapoor, son of Mr. Mahesh Kapoor. Saeeda Bai comes from a family of singers and she was going to sing at Prem
Nivas, the Kapoor mansion on Holi. Even though she was a Muslim, Seeda Bai sang happy descriptions of young Krishna playing Holi with the milkmaids of his foster-father's village with such charm and energy that one could conjure up those scenes before one's eyes.

Throughout the narrative the reader senses that 'the family' as a social unit stands out, gaining centrality in the story. Family as a traditional social institution stands for stability, security, safety. When Savita has a baby and Lata watches the excitement, fuss and happiness, she realizes that "... all that provided continuity in the world or protection from it was the family" (877). The birth of a child is seen as an addition to the clan, and not restricted to just the couple. The joint family system exercises a strong influence on its members. The entire clan rallies around Savita when she becomes a mother, and it is at that moment that Lata realizes the importance of a family as a unit. When she finds herself in the marriage market, forced to travel from city to city, "... Lata had begun to look at marriages (the Sahgals, the Chatterjis, Arun and Meenakshi, Mr and Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, Pran and Savita) with more than a disinterested eye.... Lata felt she had changed" (877). Lata looks back on her wish to elope with Kabir with a kind of amazement, even as she could not shake off her feelings for him. A gradual, stable attraction such as Savita's for Pran was the best thing for her and for the family and for any children that she might have. This understanding prompts Lata to give up Kabir and to decide to accept Haresh as the prospective husband. These images of the institution of the family have their seamier side too. On the other side of a normal secure family relationship, stand issues like same-sex relationship, incest, sexual abuse, extra-marital affairs etc. On Lata's second visit to Lucknow to her aunt's place, she feels a peculiar sense of unease and remembers the shocking experience of a sexual assault on her by her lawyer uncle,
Mr. Sahgal. His abuse of his own daughter has turned her neurotic. The social-cultural taboo about discussing sex and other issues silences her. Seth highlights this theme of repressed sexuality, perversions which society chooses not to discuss. The theme of incest is touched upon in the relationship between Firoz and Tasneem. Child abuse is another issue Seth openly talks about in the story of the youngest son of the Chatterjis who has to suffer homosexual advances from his seniors in school. The young boy recounts the experiences to his elder brother Dipankar because this psychopathic and persistent sadism had left him speechless.

The novel becomes an authentic study of human relationships framed outside and within the institution of the family in postcolonial India. Seth projects the Indian perspective on human relationships in *A Suitable Boy*. Human life is dependent on mutual contact, cooperation, relatedness; these form the foundation for personal and social harmony. Human relationships are structured and they function within the twin domains of the self and society. Western society endorses individualism, whereas the non-western societies pin faith on networking or interconnectedness of relationships, in the solidarity of a community. The socio-cultural structure and the value system of the society also condition the pattern of human relationships and the basic instincts that govern life and people’s attitude, for example, love-hatred-jealousy-passion-infatuation. The social-cultural structure also governs institutions like marriage: for example, the arranged marriage system in India (though now in the 21st century the scene has changed) which is contrasted with the love marriages in the west, where the emphasis is on familiarity between individuals. *A Suitable Boy* must be interpreted in the light of the Indian socio-cultural context of India after independence. Seth becomes an authentic spokesperson of India’s identity, cultural heritage and contemporary reality. The novel is culture-specific involving people who have lived
and shared the centuries old Hindu-Islamic socio-cultural-intellectual milieu. The Mehras, the Chatterjis, the Khans, the Kapoors and their interconnected lives are portrayed with a close understanding of the human and individual emotions and the socio-cultural structure and patterns existing in India.

In a tradition bound society like India, issues like marriage, jobs, occupations, profession are not exclusively limited to a person’s private domain; individualism is not celebrated or accepted in 19th century realist novel. Fixing marriages of girls does not remain a private affair. An individual’s life is contained not only within the family but also within his/her community-caste-class-religion. Thus, individual plight, personal passion and the social norms do not synchronize; they are always in conflict. Human relationships bring along with them a gamut of emotions. Lata, too, suffers inwardly because of her passionate love for Kabir. This relationship places her in a predicament because there are caste-religion variables attached to it; Lata never seems to be at peace when she is involved in a relationship with Kabir. She gets the impression that she has become someone other than herself. She wonders whether her acceptance of Haresh was a reaction to her failed relationship with Kabir. Despite Haresh’s encouraging letters and her own cheerful replies, Lata begins to feel uncertain and lonely.

Lata seriously contemplates on the pain and suffering she undergoes in her passionate relationship with Kabir; she juxtaposes personal longing, passion with societal norms, stability and order in life. She weighs one against the other and speculates: “...where would these feelings lead? A gradual, stable attraction such as Savita’s for Pran — was this not the best thing for her, and for the family, and for any children that she might have?” (877). Kabir also realizes that the pressure of the extended family, coupled with religious difference, that influences its members, was
something that he had never had to face. Lata was therefore out of reach for him. She finds herself directionless in her association with Kabir and knows that ultimately everything will come to nothing. Knowing that her relationship with him would not culminate in marriage, she makes up her mind in favor of stability and socially accepted arranged marriage with Haresh Khanna.

The novel grapples with inter-religious, inter-community relationships, especially between the Hindus and the Muslims. The 1950s was a turbulent period in Indian history; India had still not recovered from the Partition horror. In the novel, the fictional town Brahmpur becomes the site for communal tension because of the construction of a Shiva temple adjacent to an existing mosque. On Friday at the midday prayer the hereditary Imam of the Alamgiri Mosque:

... gave his audience the most stirring and inflammatory speech he had given in years, very far removed from his ordinary sermon on personal morality or cleanliness or alms or piety. His grief and frustration as much as their own bitter anxiety called for something stronger. Their religion was in danger. The barbarians were at the gates. They prayed, these infidels, to their pictures and stones and perpetuated themselves in ignorance and sin.... (232-233)

The Tazia procession of Moharram and the Ram-Bharat Milap procession coincide to ignite riots and religious frenzy between the two communities. The situation gets out of control and Brahmpur’s Misri Mandi becomes the site of horrendous religious madness and violence. The nation is a troubled site; the communal conflict keeps on simmering; and the novel partly makes a plea for religious tolerance. India had witnessed several crises, but it had risen above religious fanaticism and set an example of the indivisible cultural bond that different religious groups share in India. The novel also stresses that religion is not strictly restricted to the private sphere; it
spills over into the public space. Jameson, therefore, fails to recognize the cultural and religious diversities of the subcontinent and its impact on individual lives. The nation has to confront the categories of caste and religion; thus, making the political and the private domains not water tight compartments.

Moving outside the closed private space of the family, we find that the role of the state is central in postcolonial independent nations. The nation states are caught in competing versions of tradition and modernity. The colonial notions of progress and reform form one facet of the independent nations, but it also reveals that independent nations have not been able to free themselves from the colonial institutional arrangements of law-order-bureaucracy. In the process of modernization (to reform the institutions, which are colonial legacies) the indigenous forces of communalism—the traditionalists—keep spouting their anti-colonial rhetoric. Tradition and modernity are the two opposing views of Indian nationalism. Unlike Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which draws on the theoretical assumption of a nation as a fictional construct, Seth’s position is different in *A Suitable Boy*. The novel talks about the real India of the 1950’s against the background of Nehruvian idealism-socialism. The nation’s identity is discovered in both its mythic past and its claims to western modernity in the post-independence era. Nehru’s ‘*discovery*’ of a unified India is hung between tradition and modernity, between its past and its future. Between these twin poles, India emerges as a system of cultural signification within a fractured discursive field of the “nation.” Written in the mode of a realist fiction, *A Suitable Boy* explores the relationship between literature and the formation of the Indian nationalist identity. Seth uses the mimetic mode; the historical references alluded to in the novel constitute the notion of India as a unitary entity, a single nation with its internal diversities. Seth very minutely draws out the varied socio-cultural
peculiarities inherent within the nation. The idea of an invented, imagined nation comes from Benedict Anderson's thesis in *Imagined Communities*. The part played by literature in the construction of national and cultural identity is important. Since India's independence, the novels written in English language have been instrumental in constructing the images and style of national imagination. The predominant mode of Seth's fiction, in general, and *A Suitable Boy*, in particular, is cast in the frame of 19th century European novels with the sociological realities and the discursive instabilities of an imagined and a real nation. The imagined nation becomes like the plot of the novel in which actions are plotted. Like the realist novel, the imagined nation gets a strong sociological base.

What forges an ideological unity of the nation among Indians is a matter of debate. If Seth's *A Suitable Boy* follows the realist mode of narration, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* employs the non-mimetic mode to map the discursive Indian continent in the form of multiple stories. In Rushdie, the nation state becomes a fictional, fractured, discursive field, while in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie reminds his readers of the status of the nation as fictitious. Seth does not summarily dismiss the factionalism, the class-caste factors, and religious fundamentalism that threaten the stability and authority of the secular-socialist nation state. Seth does not obscure the multiple realities – myths about India—nor does he dismiss any illusion that one might have about the unity of the Indian nation state. He writes, "We should think above divisions, splits, cliques! We must pull along like a team, a family, a battalion....this is India, Hindustan, Bharat, the country where faction was invented before the zero. If even the heart is divided into four parts can you expect us Indians to divide ourselves into less than four hundred?" (1023). Seth does not challenge the idea of the concept of nation-state as a fictional construct; he is neither skeptical about
the 'national Indian identity'. In the process of upholding the image of unified secular India, his novels celebrate the resilient nature of India that affirms and honors differences. Seth does not deny that India is not a cohesive cultural entity and that despite the existence of differences among the inhabitants of the various communities the country has not disintegrated. However, the growing factionalism in the political parties, the rise of leaders more interested in power than in ideals, the growing frustration and disillusionment among the educated youth present a bleak future.

Mahesh Kapoor realizes that the Congress Party had become as oppressive as the British were, but he feels that in the interest of the nation, the narrow interests have to be buried to steer India towards modernity and a secure future. As Revenue Minister, he attempts to initiate social reforms and recognizes his duty toward the larger society. In spite of the defeat of progressive-secular politics (exemplified in Mr. Mahesh Kapoor), Seth has faith in the future of the socialist and secular ideals of the Indian nation state. The bourgeoisie-urban lives of the Mehra's, the Kapoor's, the Chatterjis present one image of India, Seth presents the other face of India in the rural district of Rudhia. When Maan accompanies Abdul Rasheed to Debaria, Rasheed's native village that represents a different social reality, Maan's "endemic flippancy" (663) and his urbanized attitude is oblivious to the stark reality of the pitiable condition of villagers like separate drinking wells for people belonging to different religious faiths. Maan's "monumental directionlessness" (666) is beyond Rasheed's comprehension. He has come from a background where higher education seemed unattainable. In his own life, he tried to reconcile everything – family life, learning, calligraphy, personal honor, order, ritual, God, agriculture, history, politics into a comprehensible whole.
The jatav, Jagat Ram’s presence and participation in Lata and Haresh’s wedding are also marginal. Seth deals with another subaltern figure Kaccheru, a landless labourer, the peon who works for Arun Mehra, Professor of English. He portrays the Indian English educated middle class, and it is ironic that the English-speaking Indian middle class make the presence of these subalterns invisible. In the character of Arun Mehra we find the remnants—sceptre of colonial past looming large—of his westernized lifestyle turns him into a mimic man. His wife Meenakshi stocks up her fortnightly grocery ration which includes:

- her white flour, jam and Chivers Marmalade and Lyle’s Golden Syrup and Anchor Butter and tea and coffee and cheese and clean sugar (“Not this dirty ration stuff”) — … and half a dozen bottles of Beck’s beer from Shaw Brothers....
- All the purchases went into a large basket which a ragged little boy carried on his head and finally took to the car. Whenever she was accosted by beggars Meenakshi looked straight through them. (372)

Arun’s pro-colonial stance is evident—his angreziyat becomes known—when he listens to Churchill’s speech. He takes pride in displaying his familiarity with London shops and cafes without ever having visited them. Bentsen Pryce, a British owned company is Arun’s employer. Arun Mehra is an anglophile, aware of his privileged position and is enraptured by everything that was/is English. It is with such an attitude that he judges Haresh Khanna. He feels that Lata and Haresh operate on different frequencies and do not match. Haresh’s English diction and idiom leave much to be desired. In contrast, the Chatterjis are an affluent anglicized family. Justice Chatterji has five children, and “none of them worked, but each one had an occupation” (383).

Amit is a writer, Meenakshi a social bird, Dipankar reads Sri Aurobindo’s poetry and looks for meaning in life, Kakoli is busy on the phone, and Tapan studies at a
prestigious public school. The profile of the Indian middle class and upper middle class is heterogeneous. The comments of the non-Indian characters on the postcolonial Indian situation are indeed facts and depressingly real; one of them says, “By the end of the Raj they were so busy slitting each other’s throats that they left ours unslit” (402). This is a sad comment on the way the colonized were perceived by their colonial masters. Indians are given various epithets like “a charming people... face flattering, back-biting, name-dropping, all-knowing, self-rising, law-mongering, power worshipping, road-hogging, spittle-hawking.... (403). One of the far-reaching and major consequences of the colonial rule was the spread of English among the Indian middle class and the study of English Literature in colleges and universities. There are several references to these facts that the reader notices. For example, Lata’s preference for Jane Austen, Amit’s boasting of Jane Austen as the only woman in his life, Haresh Khanna’s watching *Hamlet* and reading Thomas Hardy testify to this aspect. The Chatterji clan also is well versed in English language and has a very English lifestyle. An exception to this is Mrs. Chatterji who feels Tagore is sidelined in all the versification that goes on in the family at the breakfast table. In the novel, the presence of the British in the aftermath of independence is very palpable: for example, references to English literature and the debate on the importance of the Irish James Joyce in the English literature syllabus; Sandip Lallu reading *Howard’s End*, listening to BBC, and the preference for Beethoven or Mozart over Indian classical music. The knowledge of English language or culture does not create an identity crisis for the characters; they are not torn between their post-independence Indian identity and the impact of British culture.

The novel deals extensively with the debate over the Zamindari Abolition Bill; the stampede caused at Phul Mela because of administrative lapses; the students’
socialist revolution spearheaded by Rasheed. Later, the text gains headway (momentum) when in 1951 Maan Kapoor is charged with attempted murder of Firoz and is taken to prison. The same night as her son is detained in jail, Mrs. Kapoor dies of shock. The description of her death, of how the community rallies around the grieving family, of the Chautha ceremony, of the philosophical attitude to Death expressed in the preachings from Gita easily refute the criticism leveled against this text for its so-called un-Indianness.

All the narrative strands come together at the end and get resolved in the last two sections of the novel. Mahesh Kapoor loses his position on the political front in the wake of Maan’s arrest; Pran gets a promotion as Reader in English; and the most important issue, the novel’s epicenter, the search for a suitable boy for Lata ends. Mahesh Kapoor loses his election, hence, his chances of becoming the Chief Minister; Firoz recovers from the violent attack; and Lata finally settles her choice on Haresh Khanna. Before she decides on Haresh, Lata has to confront Amit’s marriage proposal. She believes that unlike Kabir, Amit would not have been her undoing, but she can’t see herself as his wife. She argues thus: “We’re too alike. His moods veer and oscillate as wildly as mine. Can you imagine the life of our poor children? And if his mind’s on a book I don’t know if he’ll have any time for me. Sensitive people are usually very insensitive” (1296). Lata’s final assessment of Haresh is based on pragmatic reasons. Haresh is practical, forceful, and is not cynical. He gets things done and helps people without making a fuss about it. Lata’s argument of rejecting the earlier two proposals in favor of Haresh is, “more like Nala and Damyanti than Portia and Bassanio.... Haresh’s feet touch the ground, and he has dust and sweat and a shadow. The other two are a bit too God-like and ethereal to be any good for me”
(1299). She opts for a mature relationship with Haresh and rejects the possibility of a youthful passionate relationship with Kabir Durrani.

Seth presents differing viewpoints on the theme of marriage and sex. Mr. Biswas Babu explains that an arranged marriage with a sober girl is advisable and that marriage as an institution is necessary for procreation and for controlling the baser human instincts. Lata’s decision to denounce passion is probably the projection of Seth’s philosophy of taking up the middle path, of moderation and control and refraining from excesses. Seth reiterates that unsettling passion could prove disastrous. The virtues of serenity, calmness and security that love brings figure prominently in Seth’s next novel, An Equal Music. Lata oscillates between bouts of serene optimism and terrifying attacks of uncertainty; she feels that sharing life with Haresh will allow her to grow and the aspirations of an ideal domestic life will be fulfilled.

Contrary to conventional norms, Lata and Haresh would first have a civil ceremony and then the traditional wedding because Rupa Mehra feels that she had to protect her daughter from the injustices of the traditional Hindu law; marriages solemnized before a Registrar were governed by laws that were much fairer to women. At the close of the novel, all the major characters, who were introduced in the beginning of the novel, re-assemble. The novel begins and ends with marriages of Savita and Lata, the Mehra daughters: for Rupa Mehra, it is like a mission accomplished. In the opening scene of the novel involving Savita’s wedding, the mood is one of belonging to the community – easy sociability – brotherhood – congeniality. The novel ends with Lata and Haresh leaving for Calcutta, leaving the reader to imagine what Lata’s future would be like.
By opting for the realist mode, Vikram Seth is attempting to contextualize the diversities of India within the British literary tradition – it is not an attempt to privilege the English novel as a literary genre. Moreover, by writing in English language the novel cuts across the diversities of India, familiarizing the reader through shared knowledge. Critics have debated over the question of representation in a language that is not of Indian origin and is a legacy of colonialism. The term “twice-born fiction,” coined by Meenakshi Mukherjee (1971), appropriately defines the Indian English novel as the product of two parent traditions and indicates that recognition of this fact is the first step towards granting the Indo Anglian novel its proper place in modern Indian literature. Mukherjee evaluates Indian English novels in terms of their themes and techniques and differs from the critics who think that the English language is unsuitable for Indian writers. English provides a vast unifying scope according to her. She argues that the English language cuts across diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, and thus attracts a wider audience in India. Seth’s fiction exemplifies Mukherjee’s evaluation of Indian English fiction. The urban culture as well as the provincial life is very effectively and convincingly portrayed in English and this depiction of provincial life achieves universal vision through English.

II

When one looks at An Equal Music (1999) one is struck by its modest size (381 pages, compared to the epic dimension of A Suitable Boy). In this novel, the realist narrative mode is left behind; instead, we find a well-crafted novel that depicts a fragmentary, romantic world, written in a modernist vein. It is the story of Michael Holden and his passion for music, and intense love for Julia whom he loses twice in the novel. The literary marketplace greatly awaited the publication of this novel,
because Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which was published during the same time, and this novel focused on the same subject of music. While Rushdie's novel deals with popular rock music, Seth's centers on western classical music and its influence on the lives of its protagonist's search for self.

The setting of *A Suitable Boy* dispels any doubts about Seth's affiliation to India and his realistic reconstruction of the lives of Indian middle class society of the fictional state of Purva Pradesh, the 'Home' for his readers, but the setting of *An Equal Music* is England and Europe. Seth establishes here his transnational identity. The major theme of the novel is Western classical music; for Indian readers, this theme could be a factor for alienating them from its appreciation. If western music could pose a problem for the Indian audience, other concerns of the novel, like human relationships, family, importance of love as a universal emotion, music as a means of overcoming handicaps, will enable Indian readers to engage with the text.

Michael Holme, the protagonist of the novel, plays second violin in a concert at the String Quartet Maggiore in London. He is deeply passionate about his music and has strong attachment to his violin: a 270-year-old piece. The narrative deals with his intense love for Julia McNicholl, who was his student in Vienna, a very talented pianist. Michael returns to London after walking out on her. He realizes very late, what he has lost there in Vienna, which he could possibly never retrieve. After ten years, as the narrative unfolds, he still thinks about her, her whereabouts, and whether she had forgiven him. He clings to her memories even after their break up. He recounts their break up in the second section of the novel. Julia accuses Michael of being unable to stand authority in any form. Michael sees her allegation as a defense for Kall. He sees this as an unbearable betrayal on her part.
Julia gets married to James Hansen; she is slowly losing her sense of hearing. When Michael meets her again, Julia is partially deaf. He, then, tries to know what it must be to live in spaces devoid of sounds or in a world of soundlessness, by reading books on deafness. He realizes the difference between silence and a world gone mad with sound. The narrative takes us into the world of Julia’s emotions as her life makes a transition from the world of sounds to that of deafness. Michael’s life is an emotional vacuum, except for the world of music that he inhabits. Otherwise, he leads a lonely existence. It is through Julia’s perception of Michael that we get to know Michael’s persona. After their break-up, Julia starts a new life and settles down into matrimony, while Michael continues to live in the past. Michael seems to disown his past, as is evident from the way he recollects it. From the start, his mother drilled it into his head that the small and constrained town of Rochdale in which they lived had nothing to offer him. She wanted Michael to escape from the disadvantaged life by attending a decent school, and later a university and some decent profession. Michael’s father had a butcher’s shop and no one in the family had ever dreamed of going to university. Michael insisted on making a career in music. His father’s reaction was that music would not get him a “blooming pension” (22). His father felt frustrated at Michael’s choice of a career in music because both he and Michael’s mother had worked so that he could have a better future. His insistence on choosing music as his vocation is seen by his parents as an act of betrayal. After his mother’s death, Michael feels that by turning his back on her dreams, he had deprived her of happiness due to her. Michael goes back in time and recollects going to a concert:

... sitting between Mr and Mrs Fromby in a state of anticipation....Into the circus ring, enter not elephants and lions but a group of men and women, many of them bearing amazing instruments, gleaming and glowing. A small
frail man enters to applause such as I have never heard before, followed by the strange, absolute silence of a multitude. ... a huge and lovely noise fills the world. More than anything else, I want to be part of such a noise. (67)

In between losing his Tononi (a musical instrument) and Julia, Michael gives himself up to moments of dark panic, self-pity. After leaving his music group, he works for advertisement companies doing jingles for products. He even has suicidal impulses, and out of sheer desperation phones call-girls from a booth. Even after he receives the violin gifted by Mrs. Fromby in her will, Michael has to confront Mrs Fromby's son, Cedric Glover who intends to sell the violin and raise money for his daughter's future. Michael wins the violin back and slowly returns to his world of music, and reinvents his life. He is called to the Maggiore. He visits his home and realizes that London was no longer his home, if it ever was. After he returns home, he visits his mother's grave; gets the violin from the car, and plays a little from "The Lark Ascending." He also plays for her the great-unfinished fugue from the "Art of Fugue." He returns to London and goes to listen to Julia who is playing the Art of Fugue at Wigmore.

Julia's decision to go away with her husband, her decision to choose James and her family over the temperamental Michael is an act of denunciation of passion and acceptance of family and social order, a theme that concerns Seth here as well as in A Suitable Boy. Seth takes the title of his novel from Donne's Valediction, describing life after death; Seth reiterates the theme of companionship, friendship, togetherness, and equal communion between friends. In the epigraph to the novel, we read:

And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor hopes, but one
equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal
communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one
equal eternity.

In writing about western classical music, a romance set in London, Seth actually speaks about the universality and the transcending power of music. If *A Suitable Boy* is deeply rooted in the Indian backdrop, *An Equal Music* can fit into the slot of global literature. *An Equal Music* consciously directs itself to readers outside the third world boundaries and creates a world where Seth is a citizen, co-habiting and exploring a credible world without resorting to selling only Indian exotica. By not addressing questions of economic, cultural, political debates in the novel, he stays away from the complex politics of identity formation, and he does not subscribe to a narrow vision of engaging in the polemics of national self-definition. In the private world of music, the individual finds himself oblivious of the political world and its forces around him. The novel, thus, refutes Jameson’s labeling of third-world texts as national allegories. The novel takes us away from the social reality of India into a world ruled by a universal, transcendental power of music.

*A Suitable Boy*, written in the tradition of 19th century classics looks at the patterns of life, its social behavior and challenges to the social fabric of the nation. It presents a social history of India, a domestic history of parents, families and communities, set in the 1950s. It is far less concerned with political struggles than with smaller dramas of everyday life in which there is struggle, heartbreak, and chaos. Seth emphasizes the redeeming aspects of the private lives of individuals, of family as a secure haven for individuals and love that binds and connects human beings across national and transnational borders. His humanism may be questioned in the present-
day multinational, globalized world, but he has successfully crossed *The Shadow Lines* to create *An Equal Music*.

**Works Cited**


