Chapter II

VIKRAM SETH AND UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE: NEW NOVELISTS WITH NEW VISION
2.1 UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE: A NEW NOVELIST WITH SOCIO-POLITICAL VISION

Upamanyu Chatterjee and Vikram Seth are primarily concerned with social and political development in contemporary Indian. Their novels reveal concern and responsibility towards society. Both of them wield their pen like a hand grenade to blow up any form of immorality and illegal in the society. They used their trade to challenge unacceptable situations in society. They have written novels socially relevant. A novel for them is very obviously a tool for social analyses. They are the spokesman for their society. Their concern with truth makes him present society as it is. They do not hesitate to reveal what his society has lost. Their novels throb nevertheless with strong compassion for their fellowmen and a deep involvement with socio-political and moral issues. Wole Soyinka writes, “A writer records the experience of his society and is the voice of vision of his time. He has to function as social conscience… or else, he will have to withdraw to the position a post mortem surgeon.”

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in Patana, Bihar in 1959 and was educated at St. Xavier’s school and St. Stephen’s college, in Delhi. After completing his university education he appeared for I.A.S. Examination and in the first attempt he passed the examination in 1983. After joining the Indian Administrative Service, he was return number of short stories
including, ‘The Assassination of Indira Gandhi’ and ‘Watching Them’.

He has been named Officer does Arts et des Letters (Officer of the order of Arts and Letters), by the French government. Upamanyu Chatterjee also worked as a director in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Upamanyu Chatterjee has written in all five novels which include: English August: An Indian Story (1988), The Last Burden (1993), Mammaries of Welfare State (2004), Weight Loss (2006) and Way to Go (2010).

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of the powerful voices in Indian post-colonial literature. His corpus of themes includes the urban and rural life, political meanness, corrupt bureaucracy, degraded man-woman relationship. His experience in Indian Administrative Service makes him restless because before entering in to the service he had noble ideas about I.A.S. His parents were interested to make him an officer. When he entered in to the service, his ideas of welfare state were shattered in to the pieces. He articulates his disgust with the evils in Indian administrative Service in his debut novel entitled English August: An Indian Story. Upamanyu Chatterjee has presented modern India, her administrative services,

the corruption in high places,
inefficiency, the operation of the system,
the utter indifference of the
administration to eradication of social evils, the acute class consciousness among the I.A.S. hierarchy, the littles snobberies and pity jealously.²

The novel also deals with the predicament of intelligent and educated modern youth through the character of Agastya. The novel is red as a satirical portraiture of Indian Administrative Service. A. K. Singh writes about English August and its author, “Upamanyu Chatterjee has found ample space to swing his ideological stances on certain subjects as varied and interesting as post colonial Indian bureaucracy, development, politics, language and education which tend to be integral parts of his Indian story”³

The novel English August is set in a small town called Madna. It records Agastya Sen’s finding him self trapped in a strangulating situation like the fallen Adam in this place blazing under scorching heat aggravated by mosquito menace. Agastya does not relish working in Madna. He is not happy with the workings of various officers in Madna. He can not bring the desire changes in the bureaucratic culture. He can not neither obviates his personal abyss nor can find any suitable solution to the problems that surrounded him. As result he feels alienation, dissolution as he thinks he is simply wasting his time. Thus the novel describes the journey of an educated urban youth from his ruthlessness to his maturity, a struggle to come to terms with him self.
Upamanyu Chatterjee’s second novel entitled *The Last Burden* is published in 1993. Ravi Dayal considers this novel as, “For greater and original”\(^4\) in comparison to Upamanyu Chatterjee’s first novel. Upamanyu Chatterjee explores, “The dark side of kinship and family ties because his thesis that one is naked only with once family.”\(^5\) The novel tells the story of the middle class family and the lack of love, intimacy and concern for one another in an age of globalization. The writer probes, “The complex problems of the complex age in contemporary Indian society.”\(^6\) The fragmentation and disintegration of family, the discontinuity of the tradition, the clashes between the generations are sum of the current issues found in the novel. Tejpal writes about this novel, “the book is powerful affirmation of the ties that bind parents and children.”\(^7\)

The novel tells the story of young bachelor Jamun’s returning home on receiving news of his mother’s heart attack. Jamun extends his stay in the family for a long time in order to renew his old relationship with Kasturi. He has no affinity with his parents his elder brother is also bored with the parents. The whole family members including Urmila’s husband are waiting for Urmila’s death. There is no low and concern among family members for each other. “The three generation that Upamanyu Chatterjee draws under one roof in this uncomfortable portrait of an urban Indian house hold seems to be bound to each other as much as
by bile as by blood… the only silence is that of a sulk. Perhaps that is why the rare glimmers of tenderness, even of affection, are all the more poignant… despite the author’s wit and humorous prose, the nastiness of it all soon begins to wear. The reader may close the book with the same sense of relief as slamming the door behind a house full of quarreled some rowdy, acquaintances.”

*The Mammaries of Welfare State* is a sequel to English August, is published in 2000. Anjana Sharma writes about this novel in her review in “*The Hindu*”, “Mammaries is not for the faint hearted, or those who like the real and the fictional world sanitized and deodorized. Though a bit repetitive, it is a novel which demands and keeps one’s attention not only by its sarcastic asides and in-sides jokes, but also because it dares to voice a moral outrage that very rarely finds, it way in to fiction, especially recent Indian English fiction.” The novel depicts degraded and dark side of Indian politics, the corrupt and depraved political systems, indifferent attitude of bureaucracy are responsible for the tragic condition of welfare state. The novelist exposes the various issues related to politics, bureaucracy etc. in a mock version the Aflatoon Welfare State. The novel is an attack on the imperfect bureaucratic of India. The politicians as well as the government officers are plundering the state. This shocking novel is realist in the sense that ordinary people might have experienced
more than learned can ever imagine. That is why the novel is honored with *Sahitya Academy Award* in 2004.

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s fourth novel *Weight Loss* is published in 2006. The novel is about sexual degradation and loss of moral values in urban society. The novel tells the story of the strange life of a sexual deviant named Bhola. His attitude to most of the people around him depends on their lust worthiness. To Bhola sex is a form of depravity. He enjoys four males and four females and has felt no remorse for his illegal relationships. He progresses from fantasizing about the family cook Gopinath to falling madly in love with a vegetable vendor Titli and her husband. He lusts indiscriminately after his teacher of both sexes at school and has affairs with his land lady at college. Upamanyu Chatterjee looses the plot in the bizarre tale of spirituality and sex. Chitralekha Basu writes about the novel in her review, “There is semblance of a story-about Bhola, a highly sexed over weight 11-year-old boy, who’s mission is to curtail all excess fat from his life. Bhola’s existence is peopled with bizarre characters: the sadistic tyrant of a game teacher, Anthony; the child cares Titli, who draw’s the blood of her charges to sell it; her husband Moti; who doesn’t mind sleeping men for a price but wants murder them for desiring his wife. Bhola has the hots for more or less every character on two legs and fornicates with most of them.”

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2.2 VIKRAM SETH: AUTHOR WITH SOCIO-POLITICAL VISION

Vikram Seth is one of the literary figures in Indian English Literature who is strongly rooted in the social and political situations of contemporary India. Vikram Seth’s novels and poems depict a post-independence Indian life. Hence, he has been considered one of the prominent figures in the history of Indian English Literature.

Born on 20th June 1952 in Calcutta, West Bengal, India in Hindi rather than Bengali speaking family, Vikram Seth took education at Corpus Christ College, Oxford, Stanford University and Nanjing University. His father Mr. Prem Seth was an executive of the Shoe Company called Bata India Limited, whereas his mother Leila was the first lady Judge of Delhi High Court and later Chief Justice of the Simala High Court. His younger brother Shantum has a great interest in Buddhist Meditational Tours while sister Aradhana seems to be very fond of film culture and arena.

Vikram Seth’s appreciable thing is his mastery over various languages like Welsh, German, Urdu, Hindi, and French and of course English. He spent most of the time of his life in the journey of various places like Britain, China, California, and India. Through his works we find the representation of his experiences in these different countries. We
have ample examples of these kinds of representations, as his first novel, *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse (1986)* throws lights on the experiences of group of friends living in California. *A Suitable Boy (1993)* depicts the perfect and realistic post-independence life of Indians, because of such an excellent depiction, the novel won the W. H. Smith Literary Award. His third novel, *An Equal Music* was published in 1999. It is the story of two lovers, Michael and Julia. Recently in Oct 2005, his *Two Lives*, a memoir has been published and it is non-fiction family memoir written at the suggestion of his mother. It describes the lives of his great uncle and aunt.

Vikram Seth’s experience of traveling is seen in his travel book, *From Heaven Lake: Travel through Sinkiang and Tibet (1883).* Vikram Seth’s journey through China, Tibet and Nepal is presented in this book. This book is honoured with the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. Vikram Seth wrote *Beastly Tales from Here and There (1992)* for the sake of children. It contains ten stories of animals which make full and ultimate entertainment of the children. Vikram Seth has also contributed in the field of poetry. He has five volumes of his poetry to his credit. His first attempt was *Mapping* (1980). His experience in London and California is portrayed in this volume of poetry. This volume consists of themes like love, friendship, loneliness, loss, expatriation, nature and social conscientiousness, etc.
Vikram Seth’s first novel entitled *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* is published in 1986. This is a very different kind of novel, written in verse with five hindered and fifty stanzas. It is composed in rhyming sonnets. There are six hundred and ninety sonnets rhyming a-b-a-b-c-c-d-d-e-f-f-e-g-g. The novel based upon Alexander’s Pushkin’s 18th century Russian epic poem *Eugene Onegin*. It contains puns with slightly comic touch but seems very complicated to understand. It is really appreciable that when the poetry was an unwanted stream, Vikram Seth produced a novel in verse and achieved great success. The novel was written during his college life at Stanford University. He was inspired by English translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. It is true that *The Golden Gate* is a masterpiece of Indian literature bluffing to be genial comedy and a very less critical prospective have been stated about the novel. Still the novel focuses so many issues at the same time. He has pictured modern life with proper emphasis on the value of friendship, value of individual, self-realization, etc. As the novel captures successfully the distinction of west Coast Society and culture as it is set in San Francisco.

The novel is mingling of satire and romance. It describes journey of the couple from San Francisco. The novel depicts people indulge and involve in romanticism, fanaticism, love affairs, sexual relationship, superiority complex, different kinds of demands, passions, possessive mania and political ideals, etc. He has message to the society that one
should not waste one’s life in such destructive things. The major concerns of the novel are nothing but the theme of destruction due to extreme demands of a lover, and woman’s vote for having a good kind-hearted man in place of the miseries of an intense. This is what Vikram Seth tries to convince us through The Golden Gate. He not only tries to present this kind of approach through his written literature but in his personal life also. He says that these two things (Life and Literature) are merely for enjoyment and nothing else. We find such a strong representation of social aspects in Mahesh Dattani’s plays as well. He also sketches the issues like, sexuality, social and political realism, issues of gender and race discrimination, etc. In the same way Seth depicts the characters like Phil and Ed to represent the issue of homosexuality and its intensity.

In The Golden Gate Vikram Seth tries to explore and express the social and political issues. This novel possesses the actions and characters with great symbolic effect, as sexual relationship is one of the strong and major concerns of the novel. He gives less importance to the characters because of his intention to represent the clear picture of the society and politics.

Vikram Seth is shot into limelight with the publication of his longest novel entitled A Suitable Boy published in 1993. The novel has 1349 pages consisting of 700000 words. The novel is honoured with
Commonwealth Prize and Britain’s Channel Four has serialized it. Regarding the length and the publication of this novel, Seth confess, “I was in Calcutta, and I knew I wanted the novel to be typeset once only. I couldn’t bear to proofread a book of this length for three different English language publishers. I would have hated it by the end. I decided to do it in India to show that we could.” The novel also receives the Connect Award in 1993.

Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy (1993)* is the longest novel in English. The novel describes a synchronic look at post-independence Indian life. In this novel Vikram Seth uses the technique of mingling satire and romance and it becomes one of the greatest epic narratives in the late 20th century. Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy (1903)* makes positive impact on readers mind and becomes the masterpiece of classical realism. Up to a certain extent it also diverted the concentration from magic realism. In *Social realism in Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy* M. Rajagopalachary and B. Krishna C. Keerthi, writes about this novel as a “social comedy in the British nineteenth-century tradition, evoking Jane Austen.” The conflict between two religions, Hindu-Muslim, is a recurrent theme of this novel. Besides cultural conflict the political confederation between Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab Sahib, the friendship between their respective sons Maan and Firoz and its
difficulties, the communal riots that impair Brahmpur, are other aspects of this novel.

The novel portrays the relationship between a boy and a girl; a relationship which is religiously or socially not accepted in the conventional context in a country like India. Seth might be trying to put forward the post-independence picture of Hindu and Muslim religions. The novel revolves around the four families of different religions: Kappor, Khan, Mehra and Chatterji. The novel depicts the eighteen months of these families after the newly independent India. Vikram Seth sketches some imaginary places like Brahamapur, Purva Pradesh along with the real places like Calcutta, Delhi and Kanpur, etc. The novel centers on Mrs. Mehra’s attempts to get a suitable boy for her self-willed daughter, Lata. There is no need to explain the lexical stand of the word ‘suitable’. The word ‘suitable’ here primarily means a person or boy who belongs to the same religion. But Lata has a different perception and idea in her mind about a Muslim boy named Kabir. *A Suitable Boy* tells a love story which concentrates on the efforts of the two figures Mrs. Mehra and her daughter Lata. Mrs. Mehra tries to suppress the individuality of her daughter and insists her to get marry to the boy of her choice, the boy whom she considers suitable for her daughter. The novel begins with the line ‘You too will marry a boy I choose.’ But Late does not recognize
the intensity inculcated by her mother and tries to find out her own individuality.

The novel does not center a specific caste or religion oriented. It has a great depth, range and details of society, which the story ranges over number of places such as Calcutta, Lucknow, Allahabad, Benares and Delhi etc. We are quite familiar with the detailed social survey of Jane Austin or George Eliot and it is strongly represented through their novels. Vikram Seth does the same in his novels. He tries to sketch a portrait of a society from different angles which includes people of different religions. Here we can give the instances of conventional trading, financially insecure people and their life-style, love affairs which are not accepted in this context, etc. Vikram Seth seems to represent the post-modern picture of India where basic fundamentals of Hindu are neglected or eradicated.

Vikram Seth also highlights some hierarchical concepts rooted strongly in rural arena in our country i.e eradication of Zamindari System, another aspect of social systems in contemporary India. Vikram Seth has portrayed the real plight of peasants who are exploited by Zamindari System. Vikrma Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* is a representation of the strong intensity and realistic picture of political ideology. It also points out the psychological and economic upshots of the refugees and marginalized people and castes like Jatav. Chaman Nahal’s *Azaadi* also reflects the
same kind of plight and political scenario. *A Suitable Boy* also points out the issues that have already been pointed out by Chaman Nahal. In *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth portrays the issues like Hindu-Muslim conflict, eradication of Zamindari system, land reformation, empowerment of Muslim women, law and order and its role in the society.

Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* reveals the life of families of various castes of religion. Another necessary thing that needs to be discussed is Vikram Seth is liberal and secular approach which can be compared with the ideology of our first Prime Minister Panditji Nehru. Vikram Seth composes the collective image of India through the minuscule of an imaginary location Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh. Vikram Seth represents the North side locations like Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya through his imaginary location Brahmpur. It is true about our country that it is multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual country. Vikram Seth sees *A Suitable Boy* also is a plea for religious tolerance. He says, "It is an insult to Hinduism that these people has hijacked what it means to be Hindu. It's tolerance, understanding - not just trying to bash your neighbour over the head because he is Muslim. These things need to be said"¹⁴

Vikram Seth’s another novel *An Equal Music* is published in 1999. *An Equal Music* is a sensitive, conscientious novel sets in London. The novel depicts the love affair between Michael Holme and Julia
McNicholl. He falls in love with her when he was in Vienna. After a long time of interval he comes across her in London but she wants married. As soon as they meet their love and passion for each other are kindled. The novel is a fine mixture of these two passions together. The novel is not only about the love between Michael and Julia but also about the profession of Musician. It throws lights on the Michael Holme’s love for music. Vikram Seth handles the theme of love very skillfully in the novel. His depiction of Michael Holmes love for music, his attachment and affinity towards his friends and his love for Julia is really authentic and praiseworthy. The novel touches the hearts of the readers making them to think about true love. The novel publicity of the Suitable Boy has inspired him to write a sequel The Suitable Girl which begins where The Suitable Boy ends.

Vikram Seth is not only a novelist but also a poet. In 1980 he published his first volume of poetry entitled Mapping. This volume of poetry deals with different themes namely love, life, landscapes, etc. His The Humble Administrator’s Garden is another volume of poetry published in 1985. This volume is divided into three sections – Wutong, Neem and Live-oak. The first section Wutong contains eighteen poems expressing his experiences and journey in China. The second section Neem comprises six poems expressing his experiences and journey in
India, while the third section Live Oak includes twelve poems about his journey in California.

His third volume of poetry *All You Who Sleep Tonight* appeared in 1990 which consists of five sections entitled *Romantic Residues, In other voices, in other palaces and Meditations of the Heart*. In 1991 Vikram Seth published his *Beastly Tales* which is a collection of Ten Fables in poetry. *The Frog and The Nightingale* is another poem written by him in 1994.

Besides a novelist and a poet, Vikram Seth is also a good translator. He translated *Three Chinese poets* into English in 1992. It contains 34 poems out of which 11 are by Wang Wei, 10 by Li Bai and 13 by Du Fu. Thus Vikram Seth has contributed to the development of Indian English fiction and poetry. His work depicts the social, political and sexual life of the contemporary Indian society.
REFERENCES:


