



Vikram Seth: Globalized Indian, viewing the modern world through a prism.

Dr.Karnaty Sreenivasa Reddy

S/O Prof.K.Ramalinga Reddy,(S.V.U) H.NO; 168, Tulasi Nilayam L.S.Nagar, Tirupati -517502, Andhra Pradesh.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 8 June 2016;

Received in revised form:

10 July 2016;

Accepted: 15 July 2016;

Keywords

Thematic cluster, Prism

Superficial,

Fictional world,

American ethos,

Panoramic view,

Middle class conformism.

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses the research deliberations of the Vikram Seth's novels, *A Suitable Boy*, *An Equal Music* and *The Golden Gate* operating within the frame work of an imaginary, traditional society. Vikram Seth's protagonists who are mostly men and women from urban middle class reflect that they are conscious of their predicament as individuals in the society. In view of all this, Vikram Seth the writer, if certainly not 'one thing', still more 'some things' than others? A tentative answer is that Seth's perspective is increasingly that of a globalized Indian, viewing the modern world through a prism that may be multicolored but is, ultimately, made in Asia. His first book, the tale of an Indian in China, today seems uncannily predictive of current geopolitical and economic trends, with the twin ascent of India and China now a key theme of the emerging century. By now, he clearly feels entitled to interpret the West, to both Western and Eastern readers, with a confidence and authority that betoken an Asia and an India that no longer consider themselves subordinate.

© 2016 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

Vikram Seth's preoccupations are varied: loneliness, alienation, love and passion, music, marriage and family, changing times, corruption, realism and nuclear insanity and disarmament, etc. The world of Seth is full of frustration, destruction and disappointment. Seth seems to be interested in fulfilled love that leads to marriage and family. In other words, he is not just interested in superficial or romantic love but rational love. Each of his novels ends with a disappointment, quiet withdrawal from happiness which earlier had been grandly anticipated. It should be based on social stability, security, togetherness and social order. So he largely favors marriage and family.

From this vision of Seth's life, emerges a thematic cluster in his novels. Most of the themes like siblings, having inbred similarities in their basic nature, are integrally related with one another and with differences of contexts they tend to figure in almost all his novels, with varying degrees of significance, details and intensity. Though these themes are inextricably interlinked with one another and it is not possible to separate the different strands, yet for the sake of convenient discussion, we will deal with each theme separately. Almost all male protagonists in Seth's novels are lonely and isolated persons. Some of them have single parent while others are orphans. However, they are self-made persons and are rigid in their interpersonal relationship.

On the contrary, the female protagonists are flexible and adaptable in their interpersonal relationship. They are comparatively practical and matter-of-fact persons. They value their individuality and freedom above everything. For instance, Liz of *The Golden Gate*, Lata of *A Suitable Boy* and Julia of *An Equal Music* want to be loved but the love they desire is one that is pure and non-binding, that is capable of giving freedom, not taking it.

Seth's women characters have strength of their own, and in spite of challenges and hostilities, they remain uncrushed.

Seth's first novel *The Golden Gate* is entirely about American ethos and it portrays the forming and breaking up of personal relationships, romantic love, heterosexual and homosexual and homosexual affairs, loneliness, disappointment in family and so on. The characters are in search of self-realization. Human relationship plays a very vital role in the novel. It is with human relationships, the story of the novel entangles and disentangles and proceeds towards its end. Here, Seth seems to be in favor of acceptance and adaptation to the circumstances. The novelist appears to say that one should face life boldly and to adept oneself to it and to make an effort to find some meaning in it.

His second novel *A Suitable Boy* presents a panoramic view of Indian society of the years immediately following Independence. Seth tells the story of four upper-middle class families belonging to India of the immediate post-Independence era. He gives flashes from the lives of these four upper middle class families and creates a panorama of characters, conflicts, withering idealism, rotten corruption, communal disharmony, changing times, love and passion, marriage and family and so on. Lata is the principal character as she is the girl for whom a suitable boy is being sought by her mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra. Here Seth evidently is in favor of arranged marriage for stable life and happiness.

Seth's third novel *An Equal Music* is about the life of musicians and their emotional survival. It is a story of music, of the relationships that makes music the hard won harmonies of life that makes life worth-living. The two central characters, Michael and Julia, who are lovers move apart, meet again after ten years, and then part again. The other characters like music teacher, Carl Kall, Virginie, a French student, Mrs. Formby,

Michael's parents, Julia's husband and son and the members of the string quartet are portrayed quite realistically. Almost every relationship between the characters has a professional aspect as well as an emotional one. We also get a peep into the world of the deaf: how the deaf feel and manage things. It shows that the deaf have been among the best musicians in the world. Probably, they are more introspective and innovative and are less bound by traditions or by extrovert factors.

The most significant emotional episode in Michael's life is a long-finished affair with a pianist Julia, who comes back into his life for a brief period only. At the end, nothing is left for him except music, and that perhaps is enough. The message of the novel, it seems to me, is the art, be it music or poetry – can be as great, as deep, as true, and as important as love. Here, Seth seems to be saying that grief is natural in our contemporary life which is full of alienation and harshness. But sadness can be coped up with music.

In *The Golden Gate*, Liz is young and urban professional attorney who loves life sensuously. Pets mean everything to her while they do not mean anything all to John. In *A Suitable Boy*, Lata is a self-controlled person as she withdraws very soon from romantic passion. On the contrary, her lover Kabir Durani is passionate and impractical man. In *An Equal Music*, Julia is more careful about her son and family whereas Michael is moody, volatile and passionate man. Thus, the lack of understanding of each other's worlds of Seth's characters causes lack of co-operation and love. This temperamental incompatibility naturally leads to several problems like frustration, disappointment, destruction, unhappiness, alienation, loneliness and the like.

The Common Themes

The theme of loneliness or alienation is one of the major threads of Seth's fictional world. It is presented with variations and sustained throughout the novels. It is more conspicuous in *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music* than that of *A Suitable Boy*. It haunts, recurs and casts its morbid shade on all objects and events of novels. At times, it runs parallel with life, and at other times, it seems to merge with life itself and becomes an inseparable part of it. With its help, Seth is able to present one of the most important aspects of life.

Let us discuss first the alienation in *The Golden Gate* whose all principal characters are lonely and suffer the pangs of alienation at one stage or the other in their lives. The central figure of the novel is John, who is a young man of twenty-six and with whom the novel begins and ends, is described by the novelist as an isolated unhappy alienated man in the very opening of the sonnet in the very first chapter.

There lived a man. His name was John, Successful in his field though only - Twenty-six respected, lonely.*1

Thus, professionally and financially, John is a successful man yet he feels lost and depressed due to loneliness which could be evident from the following lines: "A link less mode, no spouse or sibling. No children....John wanders alone."⁽⁶⁾ Wherever he goes, it haunts his memory and gnaws his very being. He goes to have his favorite ice-cream where he is surrounded by several people but there too he feels "it hurts that he's alone."⁽⁶⁾

He craves for companionship and opens his heart before his former beloved and sympathetic friend Janet Hayakawa for advice. She advises him and says: "You need a lover, John, I think."⁽¹⁴⁾ She insists on giving the matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper for a suitable female companion.

John agrees to do so and gives the advertisement as follows: "Young handsome yuppie, 26, straightforward, sociable, but lonely."⁽²⁵⁾

His matrimonial advertisement also shows the fact how loneliness is deeply rooted in his mind. In response to his matrimonial advertisement, the two ladies, Bluestocking and Belinda Beale, meet him but the relationship cannot materialize as he finds them too eccentric to bear. It should be noted here that John is not the only character who is lonely. Liz is an urban attorney who suffers from the pangs of alienation which is evident from the following lines:

There must be some happy medium; Between a legal partner's life, O loneliness –or else, O tedium. (40)

Thus, Liz, being lonely, responds to John's matrimonial advertisement passionately and marries him. Both enjoy married bliss and happiness for few months only. But their marriage does not work and very soon they separate.

The desertion by Liz aggravates John's feelings of loneliness and renders him more depressed, dejected and disappointed and lonely. Though Janet is also lonely but she cannot do anything more than show sympathy as she is too busy in her artistic life. She is a drummer in a band party. She says: "It's sad to see you look so lonely."⁽²¹⁾ Janet is the only friend of John. But he gets the final blow when the former dies in an automobile accident. Thus, John loses a friend and sympathizer too. The feeling of alienation becomes more acute as he grieves and ponders over her death. "She died alone, with no one near her."⁽²⁹²⁾

Apart from the characters like John, Liz, and Janet, Philip, a friend of John, is also lonely when his wife Clare leaves him on the pretext of domineering disposition. After their separation, she neither visits nor phones, nor sends a gift to her six year old son Paul who lives with Phil. Paul, being depressed and alienated, asks his father about his mother's coming. But Phil says:

No Paul, She's gone away forever?; I just can't tell you son – but never; Think you're alone. You've got me. (62)

Thus, Phil and Paul both of them feel alienated. When Phil's friends the Lamonts die in an accident, their son, little chuck is left alone. In this way, almost all characters are lonely and alienated and suffer the pangs of isolation. The novel begins with alienation and also ends with John's poignantly hearing Janet's voice saying to him: "I am with you John you are not alone." (307) Thus, John is lonely at the beginning and so is he at the end of the novel.

Alienation in *An Equal Music* has been depicted as a natural part of life. It comes to the fore now and then. With the passage of time, it naturally develops and makes its presence more conspicuous, thereby manifesting its pervasiveness. Michael can be seen as a lonely person in the very first paragraph of the novel:

The branches are bare, the sky tonight a milky violet. It is not quiet here, but it is peaceful. The wind ruffles the black water towards me. There is no one about. The birds are still. The traffic slashes through Hyde Park. It comes to my ears as white noise. I test the bench but do not sit down. As yesterday, as the day before, I stand until I have lost my thoughts. (2)

Immediately, we recognize the familiar sadness of the lonely man who has been trapped in empty repetitions. Michael after the separation with Julia starts playing violin in the quartet (Maggiore) where through sheer lust and loneliness he maintains unsatisfying love affair with his music student Virginie. He says: "she wants it to, and I go along with it, through lust and loneliness." (6)

The love affair does not change the things for Michael. However, he meets Julia after ten years and both feel overjoyed to see each other. Nevertheless, the feeling of alienation becomes the part of their life. They are chased and haunted continuously by alienation. They feel lonely in their brief reunion also. Michael admits: "we have anyway become less sociable over these years. She cannot cope in a crowd, and I have merely reverted to the solitariness of my earlier life."⁽¹⁶⁸⁾

Thus, alienation persists even in the company of Julia. However, Michael suffers more from it when Julia leaves him for good. Michael is very much depressed and tired of the pervasiveness of tedium of alienation; he acutely articulates:

Balance your books. Ride buses. Walk. You are in lonely majority. Which of these sitting around you belong to your unselect fraternity? The chatterer, the smiler, the silent one who looks ashamed in a crowd.⁽³⁵⁴⁾

Here, it should be noted that it is not only Michael who suffers from loneliness, but even his father, after the death of Michael's mother, suffers from loneliness. Michael's Auntie Joan, a widow herself, is anxious about Michael's father's isolation. She says: "he would not survive loneliness, so she moved in with him and rented out her home." (27)

The novelist wants to convey the fact of contemporary life that whether one is surrounded by chatterer or smiler, whether one read books or rides crowded bus, one is in the lonely majority. Thus, almost all the characters are lonely and sad for the most part of their lives.

Seth has presented loneliness in *A Suitable Boy* prominently through Saeeda Bai, a courtesan and ghazal singer. Being a lonely woman, she finds escape from boredom in liquor and sex. People, young and old, visit her for sensual gratification. In this way, she is empty of love as well as fulfilling relationship. She speaks the barrenness of her life to her pet:

Now look at me.... I still feel young.... I am waiting to spend the evening with this disgustingly ugly man who is fifty-five years old, who picks up his nose and belches, and who is going to be drunk even before he gets here. Then he'll want me to sing romantic songs to him..... everyone feels that I am the epitome of romance but what about my feelings? (3)

Thus, there is a void in Saeeda Bai's life. It is only with Maan that life seems to have meaning for her. But their separation again leaves her as lonely as she ever was.

To conclude, one can say that the feeling of loneliness is omnipresent in Seth's fiction. Alienation in the lives of John, Michael and Saeeda Bai is symbolic of man's existential loneliness in the universe. Here, the words of Trilling are relevant who says: "Certainly the striking currency of words like 'isolation' and affectlessness in the present day psychiatric studies suggest a new prevalence of the symptoms these words describe." (4)

The main concern of the characters is the inner emptiness and emotional instability. We have seen that the lack of incompatibility leads to the lack of understanding each other, which in turn leads to lack of love and the same, is the cause of loneliness.

Let us turn to the theme of passionate love which is also one of the major preoccupations of Seth's novels. Fed up of the assaults of lonely existence, Seth's characters strive to get companions for fulfilling relationship. So they take resort to passionate love. They think that passionate love will give meaning to their worlds.

In *The Golden Gate*, the theme is presented as a possible weapon in the battle of lonely life. As we have seen, the

protagonist, John is young, well-paid and financially sound, and yet he is a sorrowful person who craves for intimate relationship. The two ladies, Bluestocking and Belinda Beale passionately fall in love with John who rejects their love. Having been disappointed in his quest for a companion, John passionately falls in love with Elizabeth Dorati, which is evident from the following lines: "She's lovely, John thinks, almost staring. They shake hands. John's heart gives a lurch."⁽⁴²⁾

Similarly, Liz too without giving serious thought approves of John's proposal of marriage. She becomes happy at the very sight of him which could be seen in the following stanza:

"Handsome, all right, and what he's wearing; Suggests he's just returned from church . . . Sound, solid, practical, and active," Thinks Liz, "I find him quite attractive." (42)

Thus, it is crystal clear that both John and Liz fall in love passionately at first sight, and they are enveloped in an amorous mist for some time enjoying the bliss of romantic love. They decide to move in a new residence. (126) In a fit of passion, they also throw a house-warming party to their friends and acquaintances. John, who has a materialistic approach towards life, thinks that he has got everything and articulates in ecstasy:

What a man needs, he thinks, is health; Well-paid, modicum of wealth; In short, In life's brief game, to be a winner - A man must have ... oh yes, above; All else, of course, someone to love. (129)

But John's happiness shatters into pieces when Liz quarrels with him about her cat (131, 135). They also quarrel over the peace movement as Liz takes active part in the said movement whereas John neither supports nor sympathizes with it. Clearly, the basis of the relationship between John and Liz is not compatibility but passionate love. So it comes to end.

Apart from the passionate love of John and Liz, there is also a passionate relationship between Phil and Ed. They maintain homosexual love which has been portrayed sensitively. It is one of the prominent motifs of *The Golden Gate*. It is expressed without bias or contempt.

The broken marriage disturbs mental equilibrium and distorts physical behavior. Ed, a man with sissified appearance, does not like girls and tends to be homosexual. Phil and Ed befriend during the house-warming party of John and get attracted to a homosexual relationship. Phil is more enthusiastic about homosexual love:

Love's whole; Or else it's nothing. I can't see you, Ed, as this disembodied soul. (190)

However, Ed, being a religious person believes in the teachings of the Bible which condemns such relations. Gradually, Ed inclines towards spiritual love:

Lovers indeed, Must shed more than their bodies. (182)

But Phil maintains that the outmoded biblical rules need no longer be adhered to or believed in. He further argues that God will not mind their physical touches, their caresses and sighs. He says that the earthly or boldly beauty does not exist just for contemplation. He convinces Ed with some strong pervasive lines:

While in its sweet maturity; yours lovely body dries unused? Ed, if that's so, you'll have abused, Yourself- and God's gift-far more truly, Than any flagrant sensualist. (186)

In spite of Phil's persuasion, Ed is hesitant about homosexual love. His censorious conscience is dormant during nights and during daytime; he considers homosexuality

as a sin. He is not afraid of social condemnation and judicial punishment but of religious contamination: "I love you, Phil-but my desire goes beyond sex." (182) On the other hand, Phil, being a passionate man, thinks that Ed's guilt is external as he follows a text written by someone else and taught by conventional morality. So he reprimands Ed in sharp terms: When your heart's aching with desire, Should something that you've somewhere read; By someone two millennia dead - Convince you that your heart's a liar. (190)

But Ed is wrecked by guilt and denies his desires. Finally, the passionate homosexual relationship comes to an end as Ed denies it. (109) Throughout the novel, it is quite clear to the readers that the Phil-Ed love which has all the warmth and sharing usually characterizes the best-woman relationship. It is born out of need and infatuation.

To conclude, it can be said that passionate love is the most prized principle for all the characters at the individual level. Implicitly or explicitly, every character of *The Golden Gate*, in his or her own way, hunts for passionate love.

Similarly, *A Suitable Boy* is also passionate love. In this connection, Vikram Seth candidly admits in an interview: "at the heart of it, *A Suitable Boy* is a love Story." (Sen 3) Indeed, it is mainly concerned with Latha's and Maan's quest for romantic love and their final disillusionment with it. In an exclusive interview published in *The Telegraph*, Vikram Seth observes: "Lata and Maan are the two main strands. They are conceived as twin studies in defeated passion." 5

Lata, like most of the persons of her age, identifies love with romantic passion only and thinks it incompatible with arranged marriages. So she is surprised by her elder sister's easy compliance with her mother's wishes regarding arranged marriage. While studying at the Brahmipur University, she falls in passionate love with a Muslim boy, Kabir Durani. Their passionate love takes place in the libraries, bookshops and symposia. It reaches its climax when they take a stealthy trip to Barsat Mahal on the confession of mutual love. Their love is passionate and romantic which is evident in following expression: "What I meant was that you're in a completely different element. All your movements are different-and, as a result, all your thoughts." (166)

Thus, the impulsive Kabir passionately and romantically ignites Lata's passion without much of a thought to the impracticality of an inter-racial marriage in India of 1951. In this way passionate love is carried on at different places. But, the lovers are seen by somebody and the news reaches her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra who is pained to know her daughter's love affair. So, she desperately starts searching for a suitable boy for Lata. In her search, she goes to different places. Wherever Lata goes, passionate love follows her. During her stay with her aunt (Mausi), her uncle Mr. Sahgal, blinded with lust, stealthily, approaches her in the midnight which shakes Latha to the core of her existence. (591)

At Kolkata, while staying with her brother Arun Mehra, Amit Chatterji, the poet and the novelist, who is also a mouth piece of Seth, is passionately attracted towards her. He immortalizes her in his poems. However, Lata is frequently possessed with passionate love for Kabir and loses self-control. But soon, she realizes her mistake and views practically their romantic love. She thinks that her life with Kabir means passion and violence and decides to give up passion for him. Lata's friend Malati persuades her not to give up Kabir, whom she loves passionately but the former rejects the idea:

I am not myself when I am with him. I ask myself who is this- this jealous, obsessed woman who can't get a man out of

her head- why should I make myself suffer like this? I know that it'll always be like this if I'm with him. (1296)

Thus, Lata gives up passionate love for Kabir. When she receives the letter from the latter, she responds with a controlled and rational tone:

I have got your note.... I got your letter too when I was in Calcutta. It made me think over and remember everything. I am not annoyed with you in any way; please do not think so. But, I feel that there is no purpose at all in our writing or meeting. There would be a lot of pain and very little point.

Therefore, Lata is prepared to go without the ecstasy of passion. In addition to Lata and Kabir, Maan, the son of Mahesh Kapoor, also falls in love passionately with the elegant, artful courtesan and musician, Saeeda Bai. Further, Firoz Khan (Nawab's Son) too passionately falls in love with Tasneem, the supposed sister of Saeeda Bai, who was actually born to her by the Nawab.

The passion takes Maan to Saeeda Bai's house where he finds Firoz. Maan asks Saeeda Bai whether Firoz was in love with her sister, Tasneem. On hearing this, Saeeda Bai laughs at Maan as if he had made some insane joke, and she frantically repeats: "My sister! My sister! - It is not my sister he is in love with- it is not my sister he is in love with." (1190) Being a passionate and self-indulgent person, Maan cannot understand the implied meaning and comes to the hasty conclusion that Firoz and Saeeda Bai have sexual relationship. Thinking that Saeeda Bai has betrayed him, in a fit of passion, Maan attacks her but it is Firoz who receives the wound during intervention. Saeeda Bai discloses the fact that Tasneem is her daughter and she was raped by the Nawab, Firoz's father when she was sixteen.

On hearing that Tasneem is his step sister, Firoz is ashamed and remorseful and gives up the passion. Due to Maan's passion, the Khans suffer intensely and the relationship is strained. On realization, Maan perceives that his self-indulgence and thoughtless passion is responsible for his mother's pre-mature death and as a result he renounces his passion for Saeeda Bai. Thus, passion brings Saeeda Bai disappointment and despair.

Also, passion fails in the case of Rusheed. Being an educated and secular person, he has a passionate zeal to reform the society. He fights for the rights of the landless labourers but in vain. He is rejected by his family, hounded by people and finally driven to suicide. (1316) Thus, Rusheed is destroyed by his passion.

To conclude, it can be said that Lata, Maan, Firoz and other characters reject passion after their failure. In this way, the novel ends unromantically. As Bruce King aptly observes: "*A Suitable Boy* is a love story with a sensible, rational and unromantic conclusion."⁶ Here it can safely be said that Bruce King's judgment is equally and fittingly applicable to *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*.

Passionate love figures in *An Equal Music* also. Michael and Julia passionately fall in love as they are music students and learn under the guidance of the same teacher, Carl Kall. Passionate Michael quarrels with Carl Kall. Julia defends her teacher and Michael is hurt by Julia's gesture. Being an impulsive person, he leaves Julia. Later on, he regrets his decision and lives with his burden of loss.

As I have said earlier, the uncontrolled passion leads Michael to have an unsatisfying sexual affair with his music student, a French girl. (6)

While searching for music album, Michael suddenly spots Julia, his lost love, on a moving bus. He wildly and

passionately chases the bus to have a word with Julia, but in vain. As a result he desperately cries: "Sweating diesel-gassed unable to see clearly through my most inconvenient tears. I run and gasp and run." (43)

In this way, Michael longs for Julia. Meanwhile Julia, married to an American banker, has a child, and is gradually going deaf because of an auto-immune disease. Still a performing pianist, she meets him in a concert. Unable to control the wild temptation of romantic passion and the power of their past love, they passionately begin to see each other.

Encouraged by their renewed intimacy, Michael articulates his passionate feelings in ecstasy which is one of the significant expressions of the novel, "that I can re-create the past that any wrong turn can be righted." (230) Thus, the previous magic is at work between them. On discovery of Michael's renewed relationship with Julia, Virginie is wild with passionate anger and ruthlessly accuses him of his Englishness in one of the significant lines of the novel: "oh, I hate you English. Be reasonable be reasonable. You have hearts like cement." (165)

Michael does not care for Virginie as he is happy with Julia. However, Julia is torn between her past and the present. She writes a letter to her husband. Michael stealthily reads it and reacts: "I feel like a thief who has entered a house to find in it goods stolen from his own." (291) Thus, being violent with jealousy, Michael is brutal in physical love making and callous with his tongue. (299) Enraged Julia too responds to his taunts with passionate rage and disbelief and leaves him for good. Thus, the passionate relationship comes to an end as it is not based on rational love.

To conclude, it can be said that Seth's fictional world is human comedy of love sought and lost and beloved found and lost. And so, Seth's novels end in disappointment. Seth's men and women are victims of uncontrolled desires. Being highly emotional and sensitive, they pursue passionate relationship in which they fail. Seth seems to convey through these passionate characters the fact that passion transforms the individual into suffering, despair and destruction. Those who indulge in outrageous and passionate actions are sure to be met with displeasure. The youthful love and mutual attractions are generally not the basis of enduring relationship which is the realization of the characters of Seth. The characters- John, Liz, Phil and Ed of *The Golden Gate*, Lata, Kabir, Maan, Saeda Bai, and Firoz of *A Suitable Boy* and Michael and Julia of *An Equal Music* – realize that passion does not work for them and they are completely disillusioned by it.

These passionate characters find it very difficult to conform to the norms of the society but after their failure they are obliged in the end to conform to the patterns of the middle class conformity. Seth's fiction reflects a concern with the fleeting nature of life and its youth and passion. The novelist seems to say that one must snatch some significant relationship of love and understanding to make it an anchor of one's life. Liz seems to echo the feelings of Seth's passionate characters when she says: "I too don't feel sure. I can't trust passion anymore." (240)

Thus, Seth's men and women, being worldly wise after receiving bitter assaults of life, favor rational love, marriage and family and fulfilling relationship. Marriage and family is the dominant note in Seth's fiction.

Let us discuss the theme of marriage and family in *A Suitable Boy* as the main focus of this novel is on four middle or upper middle class families- the Mehra's, the Kapoor's, the Chatterjees and the Khans. These families are tied to one another by way of marriage or friendship. The other characters

make their presence felt through their interaction or negotiations with these families.

The central strand of *A Suitable Boy* that connects all the character and events is the matrimonial quest of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. The novel opens with her command: "You too will marry a boy I choose," (3) This imperative is uttered at the wedding reception of Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter Savita who ties the nuptial knot with Dr. Pran Kapoor, a young lecturer in English at the Brahmipur University. Arun Mehra, the elder son of Mrs. Mehra, has married a Bengali Brahmin girl, Meenakshi Chatterjee, much against his mother's wish. It is a love-marriage.

Lata, like most of the persons of her age identifies love with romantic passion only and thinks it incompatible with arranged marriages. She too toys with the idea of a love marriage, first with the dashing and young cricketer, Kabir Durani and later with an Indian poet-novelist – Amit Chatterjee, Vikram Seth's mouthpiece.

However, she gradually realizes that she cannot give up her family. Her realization about family is clear when both Savita and Pran are hospitalized: "With life and death so near each other here in the hospital, it seemed to Lata that all that provided continuity and protection was the family." (877) This realization helps her to make up her mind finally regarding Kabir. She rejects Kabir whom she loves passionately as her passion causes her to lose self-control. When her friend Malati persuades her not to give up Kabir, Lata cries out against passion:

'I don't want to,' cried Lata, 'I don't want to. If that's what passion means, I don't want it. When I thought that Kabir was seeing someone else, what I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion, passionately and forever.' (1296)

Thus, Lata rejects Kabir's romanticism and Amit's lyricism. She opts for self-control and rational calm. She agrees to her mother's choice for arranged marriage. She takes a practical view of life and marriage. She values the innate qualities of her future husband. Finally, Lata marries Haresh Khanna- a suitable boy, who is best, suited to her and is approved by her mother. In the last scene, as was in the first scene, Mrs. Rupa Mehra having got a suitable boy, found celebrating the wedding ceremony of Lata and repeating her earlier command to her earlier command to her younger son, Varun. "You too will marry a girl I choose." (1343)

Apart from the marriage of Lata and Haresh, the novel abounds in marriages and married couples. The list is spearheaded by D. Kishan Chand Seth, Lata's grandfather and Parvati, Arun Mehra and Meenakshi Chatterjee, Savita Mehra and Pran Kapoor, Pran's sister Veena and Kedarnath Tandon etc. Perhaps, it is for this reason, Sarla Palkar observes: "*A Suitable Boy* is not concerned with issues like exile, hybridity and so on but with familial and marital relationships and togetherness."⁷

Through Lata, Seth projects the theme of sensibility in love and marriage. The two marriages – the Pran-Savita arranged marriage and Arun-Meenakshi love marriage – are held in juxtaposition throughout the novel.

The arranged marriage works in spite of the fact that Pran lacks any kind of glamour and brings home a meager salary. Contrarily, the love marriage is in shambles with numerous escapades and mutual recriminations, though Arun is glamorous as he is an executive. To sum up, one can say that marriage and family is a stable relationship. It is the most prized thing in the novel.

Similarly, in *The Golden Gate*, Liz and Phil prefer such a marriage and family which could be well-thought of and stable one. Liz realizes that her life cannot continue with emotionally cold John who is also conservative in many ways. Further, her mother, Mrs. Dorati's last wish is to see her daughter get married and have children. Phil is also disillusioned with his earlier romantic love. He now cares more for mental compatibility and does not believe in the passion as he shares his thought with Liz:

That love's a pretty poor forecaster; Passion's a prelude to disaster

It's something else that makes me sure - Our bond can last five decades more. (244)

In this way, being ripened with their earlier disappointment in romantic passion both Phil and Liz favour the enduring relationship based on mutual compatibility and not just physical and sexual relationship.

Love can be less than appealing; If everything's just great in bed Yet nothing's shared inside your head. (210)

Thus, both respect each other's intellectual ability and marry and have a child.

The same inclination towards marriage and family is shown in Seth's third novel, *An Equal Music*. As has been said earlier in the discussion of theme of passion, Julia and Michael love passionately. However, she is torn between her old love and her family. In Michael's presence, she becomes restless with passion and uncertain, afraid and guilty. (324) But she feels secure in the company of her husband and family.

She admits that though she loves Michael deeply, she cannot leave her family which provides her security. When she was attacked by the auto-immune ear disease, her husband stood by her. She acknowledges the support of her husband and the family: "In the worst days, when I could hardly recognize myself in the mirror, I saw in his eyes that I was myself." (327) Moreover, as a mother, Julia speaks of the need to provide stability to her son. Her desire is to extend the family by having another child, so as to provide emotional security to her son: "Luke needs someone to share me with or he'll grow up to be as selfish as I am." (328)

Thus, Julia comes to a conclusion that her present and future is her family. Michael is the past, and she cannot continue to live there in the past. Again, she reflects. "I, of all people, who have a before and an after, should have known that you can't relieve your life." (325) In this way, Julia leaves passionate love for the sake of family. Michael too, at the end of the novel, decides to return to his family and wishes to live in his home town Rochdale itself. There is nothing to keep him in London. He says: "it is no longer, if it ever was my home." (378) Thus, it is the family that is sought as dependable resort and shelter in *An Equal Music* as well. I do agree with Mala Pandurang who observes: "Julia's choice to opt for her dependable (though unmusical) business man-husband, James over the volatile and moody Michael, and her denunciation of passion for family and social order, is a thematic preoccupation once again repeated from *A Suitable Boy* and *The Golden Gate*."⁸

In this way, marriage and family assume great importance in Seth's fiction. However, Seth's fictional world is one of the middle class conformism. For instance, Lata and Maan in *A Suitable Boy*, Liz and Phil in *The Golden Gate* and Julia in *An Equal Music* sacrifice youth's dream and passion in the name of family and stability.

References

1. Seth, Vikram, *The Golden Gate* (1986)
2. Seth, Vikram, *A Suitable Boy* (1993)

3. Seth, Vikram, *An Equal Music* (1999)

Internet References

1. "Listening to God's melodies", *The Times*, 29-07-2006, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,923-2288533,00.html>. Retrieved on 05-09-2008
2. "Vikram Seth, DoonOnline: Features & Spotlights, <http://doononline.net/pages/info_features/features_spotlights/s_potlights/seth/index.html> Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
3. "Mornings with Margret Throsby: Amitav Ghosh", *ABC.net.au*, 22-03-2005, <<http://www.abc.net.au/classic/throsby/stories/s1365984.htm>> .Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
4. Dang, Jess (17-05-2000), "Novelist Seth reads from work", *The Stanford Daily*, <http://www.stanforddaily.com/article/2000/5/17/novelistSethReadsFromWork> Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
5. Gavron, Jeremy (27-03-1999), "A Suitable Joy", *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,,306943,00.html>. Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
6. Bhatia, Shyam (2003-09-01), "Seth to get at least \$3 million advance", *Rediff.com*, <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/sep/01seth.htm?zcc=rl>>. Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
7. Seth, Vikram (2003-11-18), "Appreciation: Giles Gordon", *The Guardian*, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/obituary/0,,1087614,00.html> Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
8. Seth, Leila. *On Balance*. New Delhi: Viking, 2003, ISBN 0-670-04988-3, P.429.
9. Reddy, Sheela (2006-10-02), "It Took Me Long To Come To Terms With Myself. Those Were Painful Years.", *Outlook India*, <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20061002&fname=Anterview+Vikram&sid=1&pn=4>. Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
10. "Sex, Lives, and no Videotape, and Transformative Grief", *Up Front Radio*, 2005-12-30, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=a95917feb2f9cdc81f65c010ca06fa>. Retrieved on 05-09-2008.
11. Albertazzi, Silvia (2005-01-20), "An equal music, an alien world: postcolonial literature and the representation of European culture", *European Review* (Cambridge University Press) 13: 103-113, doi: 10.1017/S1062798705000104, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=276618>
12. Amazon: *An Equal Music*, <<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000F3T4HC>>. Retrieved on 10-09-2008.
13. Amazon: *An Equal Music* (CD), <http://www.amazon.com/Vikram-Seth-Johann-Sebastian-Bach/dp/B000030OOL>>
14. Chaudhari, Amit (ed.). "Vikram Seth (b. 1952)." *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature*. New York: Vintage, 2004: 508-537.
15. *Literary Encyclopaedia Biography*
16. *Emory biography*
17. *Contemporary Writers Biography*
18. Vikram Seth at the Internet Movie Database.
19. 1999 BCC audio interview with Vikram Seth.