

# Realism & Social Consciousness in Vikram Seth Narration

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**Abstract –** *The use of Realism and its social concerns by Vikram Seth is unique to other Indian authors. Several concepts about realism have analyzed his major fictional work to determine the characteristics of realism in his novels. By analysing important works in the realistic Indian Fiction stream in English, a serious effort has been made to point out that realism prevails in all of them as a narrative strategy. Seth separated himself from the car of other realistic writers and established his prominence over other as the main writer in the subcontinent by his own narrative strategy and unique social concern. By thoroughly analyzing different points of view on realism, we have created a definition of realism which corresponds to Seth's novels. It is discussed in depth and thereby established the affinities of Indian writers in English for the adoption of this particular story mode which is suitable for fictionalizing the Indian society that leads to the creation of this narrative mode. Seeking a complete image of the realistic movements, views from some truthful critics, such as Edmond Duranty, George Lewes, Balzac, Henry James, Maupassant, Edwin H Candy, George Lukacs, Philip Hamon, Roland Barthes et al.*

**Key Words –** *Realism, Social Consciousness, Vikram Seth Narration, Fictional Works, Indian Fiction*

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## INTRODUCTION

The novels of Vikram Seth show great realism in their various manifestations. As discussed in the end of the 1st chapter, his realistic stories, characteristics, the people hip of the plot, its commitment to truthfulness and plausibility and its unique social interests are the traits of Realism explicitly apparent in his novels. The Golden Gate was his first novel in a verse, and his magnum opus A Suitable Boy was then compiled. Equal Music is a masterful exploration with a realistic approach of Western classical music. In determining the author's merit of realism, the authenticity and familiarity of the place, the plot and the character plays a decisive role. In all three novels, the author stressed his account of the daily reality of ordinary people. In his works, George Lukacs in his monumental realistic studies, he established the much-needed sense of history. The first two texts are narrated in a third person, and this omniscient narrator watches and transmits to the reader the essential elements of the plot. The plausibility of the story told is undoubtedly demonstrated by the common nature of the characters and events. Seth, a true classical realist, relates to characters from the middle class and their sensitivities, and the lower strata and working group sections of the people in the novel have due importance. This magnificent game of realism

reinforced by an honest and devoted social consciousness makes Seth's fictional adventure in English Indian writing a remarkable and unparalleled achievement.

Realism is different from European realism in Seth's practice. Seth must meet another, stagnant, superstitious and heterogeneous society. Integration into fiction of such a different setting is a Hercules challenge for the author. Seth takes his own form of realism to represent an Indian society in his magnum opus, which is both politically servile, economically deprived and socially circumscribed. Seth handles Indian middle class socially mobile in A Proper Boy. The European realistic modes that are appropriate for industrialized Europe are not suitable for the emerging Indian societies' new phases. That justifies the deliberate deviations of Seth from the European realism cannons. Thus the realism of writers such as Vikram Seth is not in its real sense, whether European or Victorian, but a realistic rework that adequately carries the inconsistencies and orthodoxy of stagnant Indian society. Seth follows European classical realistic conventions in relation to the Golden Gate and An Equal Music. However his ideological basis is Indian, as he meets truthfulness in both the novel and his Indianans triumphs over the former, when

there is a confrontation between his European and Indian sensitivities.

## FEATURES OF REALISM IN THE GOLDEN GATE

The Golden Gate is a realistic fictional verse medium adventure, the first Seth novel, and it follows all the realistic features discussed in detail in the first chapter. In this chapter, the main aspects of realism in Seth's Golden Gate are examined based on these theoretical claims, as well as two other novels with special emphasis on an appropriate kid. The Golden Gate, Seth's verse novel, adheres explicitly with realism cannons. The novel follows a linear pattern of narration, a magnificent feature, and is embellished with a plausible, true plot. The fear of a modern American society with prophetic insights, which are based upon powerful observation, is truly depicted in Seth's unique social concerns.

## REALISTIC NARRATION

Like his later novels, realism plays its decisive role in The Golden Gate. In the opening stanza of chapter one, Seth gives us the exact time, place and persons of the novel which is largely fictional than poetic. So, Seth Says, in 1980 there lived a man called John Brown, who is a computer scientist working for a software company linked to nuclear arms. Seth gives us a picture of John through perfect detailing:

John's looks are good. His dress is formal,

His voice is low. His mind is sound.

His appetite for work's abnormal

A plastic name tag hangs around

His collar like votive necklace.

Though well-paid, he is far from reckless,

Pays his rent promptly, jogs, does not

Smoke cigarettes, and rarely pot,

Eschews both church and heavy drinking (2).

Like Michael of An Equal Music he is also haunted by a certain melancholy. He thinks, "if I died, who'd be sad?/ Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad" (1). The novel is full of realistic images. The copes chasing the traffic offender, the ways burdened with over-traffic, bill-boards on the highways etc are some of them. The following stanza is full of such realistic images:

The freeway sweeps past humming pylons,

Past Canterbury carpet mart,

Warehouses, ads displaying nylons

On shapely legs that make John start.

A Cigarette ad, sweet and suborning

Subverts the Surgeon General's warning.

A craggy golfer, tanned, blue eyed,

Insouciantly stands beside

A Porsche-caged blonde; coolly patrician,

He puffs a menthol-tipped king-size.

John tries to curb his vagrant eyes

And need the poet's admonition

"Beneath this slab John Brown is stowed

He watched the ads and not the road (36).

Seth narrates realistically the prevalent social customs in America. John is a lonely person. He is melancholic in nature and his former love, Janet Hayakawa, a sculptor, advises him to advertise in the newspaper, for a companion. After trying one or two girls from the responses he received John chooses a third one, Elizabeth Dorati (Liz). She describes what she is in the letter:

I'm friendly, female, 27

Well rounded too, and somewhat square;

I've not yet known romantic heaven,

But harbour hopes by getting there.

I'm fit- at least, I'm not convulsive;

And fun, I hope, though not impulsive

To match the handsomeness you flaunt

I do not mean this as a taunt;

I find immodesty disarming,

I have heard several people say

I am good looking in my way (46-47).

Seth keeps up the presence of an omniscient narrator in The Golden Gate. Seth's narrative technique in the novel adds to the realism in the book. The narrator is detached from the plot and interferes very little with the characters. The narrative voice is passive and simple with no added embellishments.

## REALISTIC STYLE

The Golden Gate's construction in a form like a sonnet improves the structure of Seth. The story becomes formal and the rigid verse is used to identify with the outside concrete world, which it fictionalizes. The rim scheme of the verses is a BaBccDDeFFeGG where the lower cases match the female rhymes and the upper case correspond with the masculine rhymes. In contrast to Petrarch, Spenser and Shakespeare, where the lines are iambic pentameter, the lines are composed in iamic tetrameter. It's also called Onegin Stanza (Punekar 97). The poems written in the tetrameter in Iambia are not news in English. Chapter six of John Fuller's verse novel *The Illusionist*, for example. For example. It is the speed and lightness of the Seth bear lines that distinguish it from that of Fuller. This is accomplished through diction and short sentences, but also by the fact that syntactic endings are not always the same as line endings and the use of female rhymes and strands. The use of catalytic and hypercatalexis also strengthen the rhythm of conversation between the lines. (GJV.Prasad 56; Khair). In Seth's successful verse novel, Indian English poetry has taken its rightful place. Vis a Vis to UK / American poetry, in which the main language is the spoken language. As Khair observes, in India, the relationship between primary and secondary speech genres is not the same as that in Australia, England or Jamaica. English in India, like Sanskrit and Persian, also has a rich tradition of literature in textual languages used by the elites (52-53). "Even if we emphasize nine out of 10 words in English or in American, we emphasize the tenth word differently, and in Indian English, that tenth word can produce Indian poetry" (51). In this context the height and success of Seth's work is necessary to understand. Khair also clarifies: "This meter reduces the handicap that Indian English poems often have under its predominantly regular allocation of stress in sentences with international standard English, apparently spoken by a Californian cosmopolitan spoken voice" (57).

In contemporary Indian poetry, Seth's ability in versification is unmatched. The brevité and beauty of the motion of the plot is enhanced by this particular way of narration. The passage is quick and vibrant with Iambian tetrameter lines with short and abrupt dialogue. With the desired effect, the essential mood for abruption is easily passed on to the reader. Seth combines poetry with fiction here effectively. Janet's suggestion to a reluctant John is "Your mind needs to remove waste of prejudice" (Golden 23). This line marks Seth's next music novel, *An Equal Music*, in which the words are magnificently like a verse novel that is reorganized. In his novels, Seth is poetic rather than prosaic.

In many of *The Golden Gate*, realism, versioning and poetry make a special mixture. All three elements play their part in the entire novel individually and

collectively. But the three units play excellent in certain stances, making it an unforgettable piece of poetry and fiction. The following stanza exemplifies it:

How beautiful it is, when waking,  
To find one's lover at one's side;  
The delicate slow light is breaking  
Irresolutely through the wide  
Bay windows of their bedroom, falling  
On Liz's hair, and John's recalling  
How last night she untied it, how  
It flowed between his hands; but now  
She lies asleep, unswiftly breathing;  
Her thoughts are not with him, her dreams  
Traverse the solitary streams  
Of inward lands, yet her hair, wreathing  
The pillow in a mesh of light,  
Returns to him the fugitive night (160).

Some critics differ from Seth's tetrameter use at *The Golden Gate*. Anita Desai notes that the verse form used by Pushkin is too much of a tetrameter sonnet. *The Golden Gate* for all its technical achievements is essentially a light verse close to John Betjeman and Ogden Nash in spirit and not to Pushkin's fervent and satirical wit. She feels that this analogy is unfortunate. Seth's application of the highly officialized structure for the sonnet sequence in a verse novel has been widely critical of *The Golden Gate*. Seth's craftsmanship is lauded for the elegance and fluency of his poetic diction, traditional use of meter and rhyme. Bobb and Digirolamo consider 'This art has not been visible for more than a hundred years,' and his know-how and control over his use of verses can only come about because he has deeply immersed his poetic traditions (Pandurang 73).

## TRUTHFULNESS

Seth gives us a true image of California in which his main characters live and die. This is a key feature of the realistic text. Seth also follows this established canon of reality, while the Californian society is fictionalized. The image ranges from trivial social questions to contemporary sexual behavior. Homemade parties, picnics, weekend

trips and sumptuous breakfasts, and design groups are also available. The people love animals. The most cherished Siamese cat of Janet is Cuff and Link, Charlemagne and Iguana Schwarzenegger of Phil are examples. The society is lively and accommodating by means of computer games like Star Wars, exhibitions and classic symphonies. In order to prevent a suspicion that a non-Californian is doing this, Seth deliberately attempts to disguise his individuality by instilling as much cultural codes as possible. "Leslie suggests that the text is filled with information about California "that native peoples occasionally ignore because they're overly familiar," and Craig Tapping wonders whether the work could be taken into Seth's views of the most exotic hidden house of the late California capitalist culture of the 20th century," " " (Swiss Pandurang 76).

In all its wonderful glory Seth paints San Francisco, delineating the minute things that make up the town's heartbeats: The city is presented as a life, pelling entities in which intellectual advancement co-exists, along with sexual licensing. Pumpkin pasta, bubble gum; highways; traffic cops chasing the cars; witty bumsticks; bills, demonstrations; the bay region and gay bars. This is specifically done to emphasize the superficiality of the existence of man in a city in which life regenerates in a meaningless striving. Even the language as it is spoken is reproduced; it is full of American English colour and language. The San Francisco Seth image is three-dimensional in terms of the way the mind operates, the physical characteristics of it, the odds, its moral standards, work ethics, parenthood alone, love, leisure, friendship (Gupta 56).

The book Viz's title Realism is a major feature of the Golden Gate. California's Golden Gate Bridge is a marvel of engineering. There is no visible support for this suspension bridge. Their function is to link two geographical locations in the bay area and thereby to establish relations between the protagonists and their natural surroundings. After his drive along the bridge, Ed's amorous try on Phil will be fulfilled. A «blessing» robs his heart. A blessing. Then he chooses "phil" (135). Following the bitter arguments Phil had with John, he and Liz went along to the Bay and pass the bridge, "the most majestic of man's / whose steel threads are spread over mist and showers, / wind spraying and memorable rushes / storms from the ocean link the shore" (270). Phil and Liz open up their difficult relationship with both Ed and John on the bridge (Pandurang 87).

## REALISTIC CHARACTERIZATION

One of Realism's important characteristics is its truth to life. The author maintains his inevitable link to the outside world by means of these tactics, which he relies on for fiction. A lively example of this is Seth's meticulous care and efficacy in shaping his character in The Golden Gate. John is a lonely person without warmth and the backing of others, Seth

characterizes. ' John feels like a cold self-compassion cast surrounds him. The mother of John is dead. His dad rarely answers that he seldom sends his letter. He realized that he is alone when he looked at a group of schoolgirls in an ice cream room (5). John is sensitive to inefficiency and is railing against the post office's unnamed crimes (5). The delays caused by posts sent from coast to coast worried him as well. Ed is made a tormented person by the religious and moral pull. He has committed unnatural sex with Phil under the feeling of guilt. He is becoming increasingly faithful. He loves Phil, his friend, very much, but is in a moral dilemma. This feature of Ed's personality sometimes reflects in the narrative. The moral stand of Seth on unnatural sexual relations is a combination of the moral dilemma of Ed. The following stanza exemplifies it:

Next morning in the St. Ann chapel  
Ed sinks into the Latin mass.  
Although he does his best to grapple  
With the degenerate morass  
Where his sick soul is doomed and drifting,  
He finds the plainsong too uplifting  
To concentrate (to his chagrin)  
On unoriginal thoughts of sin.  
Confession helps to cause the pricking  
Of his relentless conscience. Ed  
Now rejoins Phil. The deep wine-red  
Blood of the olives they were picking  
Has left on the white tub a stain,  
Dark, inerasable, profane (157).

The Golden Gate, the so-called 'relationship anxiety,' which is the refusal to grow in a mature relationship, is in the manner of the main characters. Although, in the course of the novel, John and Janet try seriously to overcome this anxiety, it is suddenly too late for them when Janet dies. Phil and Liz are the only ones who do not suffer, and they are rewarded with safe, happy lives properly. In some ways, with the exception of Phil and Liz, the other characters do not realize that the security provided by a continuing relationship cannot be replaced by an externally successful life. Ed's anxiety is different, he wants to keep his heart guiltless without the body, but does not want to face the fact that he really doesn't want it (Guta 40).



Seth develops the role of American women in their society in a thematic way. American women are the pioneers and find their own niche across all walks of society to combat patriarchy. Liz and Janet are the representatives of these entrepreneurs and individual persons who work in society for themselves and their associates. Liz is an attorney, music and academic in support of antiviral campaigns. Liz's profession is a lawyer. Janet is a sculptor, a drummer, on the other hand. She's the artistic woman's representative. Her achievement is still gone, for art critics are men and they view a woman's work with a precarious mind. The women are both single and show their love on their pets – an ideal representation of American average women Liz ultimately comes out of her solitude by establishing a continuous relationship with Phil. In characters like Liz's mother the outgoing old values are represented. Hyper-modernism has made some of Phil's wife, Claire, selfish. Her husband and six years old son look away from the milk of human kindness and she goes in search of her own personal comfort and happiness gratification (Gupta 42). In Seth's novels, relationship breakup is common. This is the result of his character's impulsivity and fetishism. The characters are not extended beyond certain stereotypes. They are proactive and predictable in their actions. His characters are sunk into cheap popular molds by melodramatization and sentimentalisation. No exception is the Golden Gate.

## FEATURES OF REALISM- A SUITABLE BOY

Seth's deeper and matured understanding of Indian society and her magnificent fictionalization in the *Appropriate Boy* are shallowness and populism of *The Golden Gate*. This he accomplishes by applying realism with the modern perspective almost Tolstoyan. He fictionalizes India's unimpressed 50s with a diversified historical sense. When asked what interested him in the particular period 1950-52, Seth said, "I just stagnated in the early years which were... much richer than I could have imagined" (GJV.Prasad. 22). The story is mainly constructed around Brahmipur, Calcutta, an imaginary town. He focuses on the abolition of Zamindari, the leather industry, general elections, Hindu-Muslim studies. In the novel Maan Kapoor like his character, Seth learned Urdu from the teacher "in order for us to get a better understanding of the nuances of Muslim culture" (L.Seth 350), read all the cases of land reform, visited families of the shoemakers in Agra, collected intimate knowledge of the Muslim people of eastern UP, of the rivers and gullies in Old Delhi and dipped in the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. (Mr. Prach 12-13). There is no need for other better evidence in Seth's insistence on truthfulness.

In the Nehruvian era of Indian civilization Seth's *A Suitable Boy* "is an effective thought about life, not in the tricks, but life in its totality (9). Pre-independent Indian writers are die-hard nationalists who induced in the public reading the spirit of nationalism and

enhanced our independence campaign. Higher Indian Mysticism and Spiritualism are their trump card in the political and cultural spheres of oppressive foreign power. Those cliché fictional perceptions came out of the post-independent writers, such as Ghosh Amitav, Chatterjee Upamannu, Shashi Tharoor, Nina Sibal, Pratap Sharma, Sahgal Nayantara and Seth, and they began to represent India in its daily reality. In other words, their works have seen a revival of realism in Indian fiction. As the Industrial Revolution of England sparked Austen and Dickens' imagination, Indian creative thinking was influenced by the politics of underhand and by the dwindling public and political morality. This process of thought was catalyzed by the Nehruvian socialist and industrial revolution. Indian society gradually became greedy, family and personal relationships lost their sacredness. Nirad C Choudhari in *The Continent of Circle* observes this fact sharply. "The real motive behind India's industrialization is this love of money" (84). The result is the birth of the Indian middle class, as a result of this new greed. This particular fact starts with Seth's Austenian leanings. Ms Roopa Mehra also shares traditional sentiments of the middle class with Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. In the meantime, the previous diseases of Indian society are sustained at the expense of the poor and the impotent. The society in general moves faster. This is unfortunately remembered by the fictional works of post-independent writers.

## CONCLUSION

Seth is not realistic because of the essentials that he retains of his subject matter, which fall to the level of a propagandist or document writer. In the Victorian period, Anderson argues that the use of all-knowledge is a sign of a separation, a prerequisite for the fun and production of aesthetics (Srivastava 167). Seth takes on the essential detachment of a third person omniscient narrator or first person, and the fictional quality of the truth he attempts to fictionalize is preserved. By this caution Seth transforms reality into realistic fiction. Seth transforms through imagination the abstract and chaotic observations of his life. So the inner truth of Seth's work depends on the arbitrariness of his observation into his real world of life. Realism is revolutionary in Seth's adaptation. Post-Modernist language games dominate 20th-century novels and also become the reigning paradigm of Indian English fiction. The revolutionary effort of Seth is attached to R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand's tradition of compassionate realism. Seth prefers to have the orderliness of realistic fiction in the 19th century rather than 'anarchic and postmodernist anarchists' (Mohapatra 27). His attachment to the realism of Austen makes him focus on the drawing room and the salon as sites for complex social discussions and exchanges. In Seth, as in

Austen, marriage is a major metonymic concern (ibid). The insistence of Seth on a well-defined form combined with masterful characterization makes his work anything but a photo-representation of reality. The form and content selection of Seth is mutually complementary. Seth's unique social awareness helps to shape certain character types according to their ideological position. Seth unhesitatingly endorses the Aristotelian dictum of man to be a social animal and Seth's firm belief in mankind is the reason why social values and problems are adequately represented in his novels. In developing his characters Seth differs from the modernists by adhering to an existing reality. The motion and conduct of the Seth characters are predictable. Each one has a history of its own. In all his novels, especially in *A Suitable Boy*, Seth maintains this fundamental link, which makes him a perfect example of realism and social awareness. In analysis of Seth's different styles of story in his novels, it is found that Seth's novels adhere to Philip Hamon's poetic characteristics. They are Seth's frequent use of flash and memory, the differing psychopsychological motivation of characters, the systemic use of the names of protagonists and places, the detailed overloading of the text, the predictability of the various movements in this plot, and the delegation of acts to the fictitious person.

Analyzing such a theoretically elusive author, such as Seth, poses definitely challenges before the project has been overcome. While remaining the most docile creative writer Seth showed significant changes in the genre. When he reaches *Equal Music* he dramatically transformed the old verse style he showed at the *The Golden Gate* into real post-modern techniques. As a writer he has demonstrated maturity and steady progress in all literature genres. This research was conducted to identify the nature and articulation of Seth's realism and his unique social awareness. A concerted effort is made to achieve this objective by means of rigorous research.

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