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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 22: Vikram Seth

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Background

- Diaspora is now more a universal phenomenon.

❑ Features of Indian diasporic writings:-

- ➢ Focus on homeland, dislocation and displacement
- ➢ Nostalgia
- ➢ Mobility between multiple places
- ➢ Shifting identity
- ➢ Cultural hybridism
- ➢ Dislocated individual

Vikram Seth

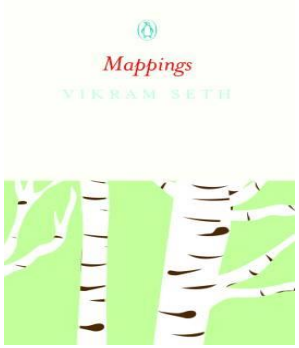
- An active voice of Indian diaspora
- Born in Calcutta in 1952 in an educated family
- His mother was the first female judge of Delhi High Court.
- Went to England for higher education
- Composed poetry, wrote novel, travelogue, memoir and children fiction.
- Sahitya Akademi Award (1988) for *The Golden Gate*
- Awarded with Padma Shri in 2007.
- Conferred Pravasi Bhartiya Samman in 2005.



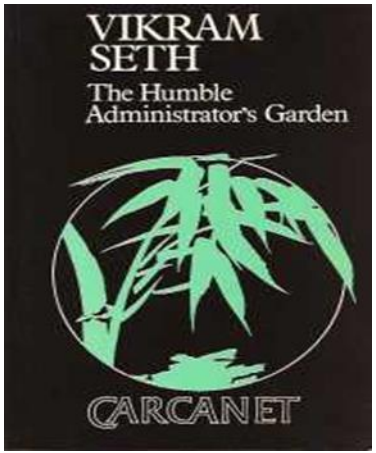
- After writing *The Golden Gate*, he returned to India and highlighted the hollowness of life in foreign land.
- Now he lives both in India and UK.
- He bought the house of famous Anglican poet George Herbert and renovated that.
- After the great success of *The Suitable Boy*, he announced to bring *The Suitable Girl* which has not come yet.
- Translated Hindi and Chinese poetry into English.

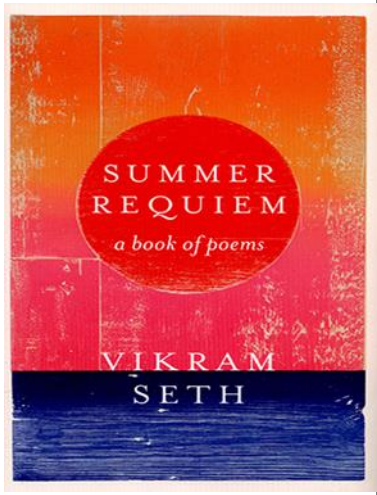
"Seth himself is a product of the diaspora, though in his fiction he has chosen to focus on individual countries and their cultures from an observer/commentator point of view rather than on the experience of migration."- Rita Joshi

Poetry Collections

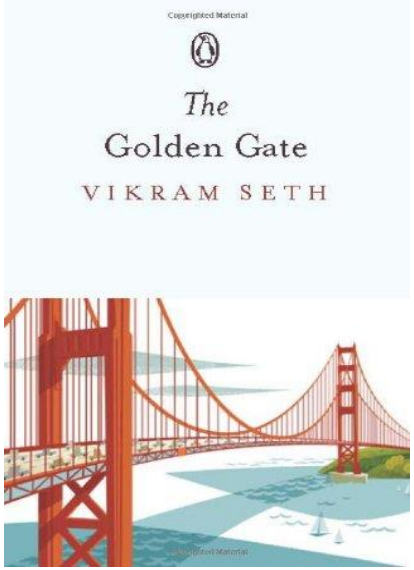


- *Mappings* (1980)
- *The Tale Of Melon City* (1981)
- *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985)
- *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990)
- *Beastly Tales* (1991)
- *Three Chinese Poets* (1992)
- *The Frog and the Nightingale* (1994)
- *Summer Requiem: A Book of Poems* (2015)
- *A Doctor's Journal Entry for August 6, 1945*

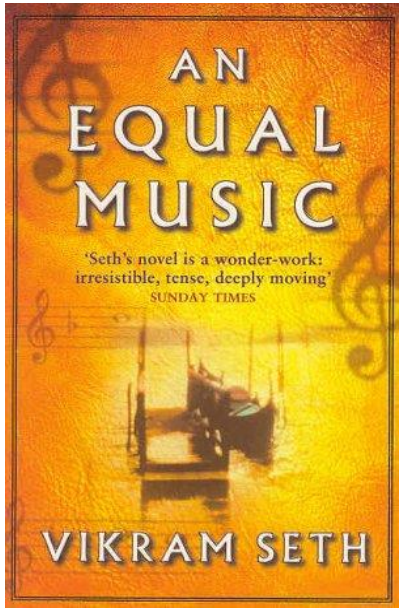




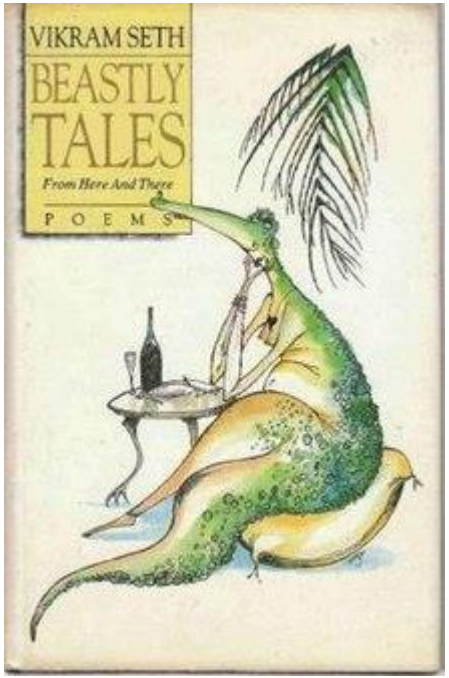
Novels



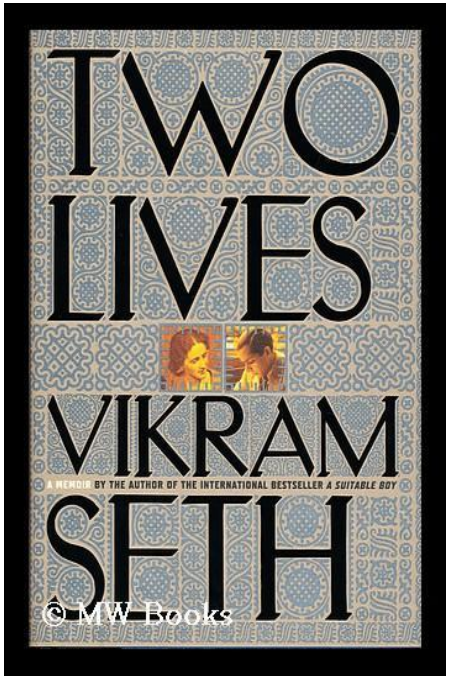
- *The Golden* Gate(1986)- a novel in verse
- *A Suitable Boy (1993)*- adopted by BBC as a television series in 2020 and made available on Netflix in India where the main characters were played by Tanya Maniklata, Tabu, Ishaan Khatter, and Rasika Dugal.
- *An Equal Music* (1999)



Other Writings



- *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983)- a travel book.
- *Beastly Tales From Here and There* (1992)- a collection of 10 short stories.
- *Two Lives* (2005)- a non-fiction work where there is a love story of an Indian boy and a German girl.



General Themes & Elements of His Poetry

- Nostalgia
- Multiculturalism
- Hybridity
- Transnational
- Exile, rootlessness and displacement
- Love, sorrow, relationship, family, and failure
- Cross- cultural affinities
- Theme of immigration

"If I died. Who'd be sad? Who'd weep? ..... Would anybody?" (*The Golden Gate*)

Mappings

- A young man's attempt at 'self-scrutiny'
- Youthful restlessness, rebellious concerns
- Mapping of his diverse selves
- Ambivalent feelings

Orphaned at two, you ran away
From Baoji at fifteen.
The tin shack, the Mussourie store
Hunger, the freezing rain,
Nothing could split the shell of hurt and pride.
You would haver rather died.
Than faced that uneasy ease again,
Unsure of tenderness
Where you most craved it, did it grow
Too anguished to express?
You screened your love: though mama says you cried
The day Baoji died.

("Departure Lounge")

From Humble Administrator's Garden

- "Divided into three sections; each of them is named after a tree symbolizing China, India and California respectively: ("Wutong," "Neem" and "Live-Oak")."
- Sense of immediacy, Nature of Art

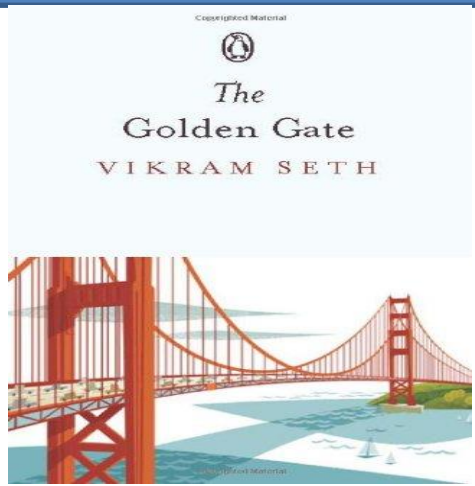
Sudden delight: they point upwards and scowl
One imitates a baby elephant
The other glares and totters like an owl
Then stomping through flower-beds with glee
("The North Temple Tower")

Two lovers come
To gaze at fish and foreigner in the park
With a pen-knife hack their name of bark
For posterity
("The Gentle Waves Pavilion")

The Golden Gate

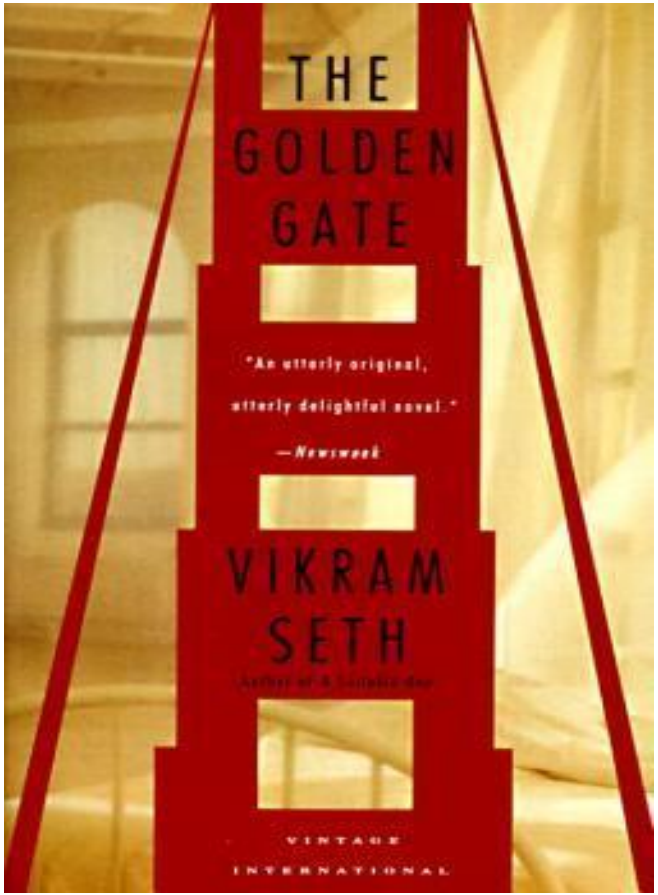
- His first novel. Written in verse.
- It captures the life of modern California.
- It is the story of John Brown, a Silicon Valley Computer expert. His quest for love is the main theme.
- It highlights the loneliness in modern American society.
- Divided into thirteen sections.
- *The Golden Gate* follows the fourteen-line stanza pattern of Eugene Onegin which was written by Alexander Pushkin and translated by Johnson.
- Vikram Seth follows the fourteen-line stanza pattern of Eugene Onegin, which is written in verses of iambic tetrameter with the unusual rhyme scheme a,b,a,b, c,c,d,d, e,f,f,e, g,g.
- Seth's novel comprises 594 sonnets, all written in iambic tetrameter.

He gives tribute to Pushkin -:
"– Pushkin's masterpiece
In Johnston's luminous translation:
Eugene Onegin – like champagne
Its effervescence stirs my brain."
(*The Golden Gate* 102)



from *The Golden Gate*

When fear grows too intense to handle;
We shrink into a private smile,
Surprised when here and there a candle
Drives back the dark a little while,
A little space, before it gutters;
Or in the madness a voice utters
Words full of calm that to us seem
To bear the dry light of a dream
And stain our waking with more sorrow.
The night of hate that covers earth,
The generous country of our birth,
The single land from which we borrow
All that is ours-air, insight, tears,
Our fragile lives-for a few years, (7.1)



Contd…

That night of hate grows dense around us.
We laugh through what we can't dispel,
While apathy and terror hound us
On well-intentioned paths to hell.
Best to concede, to the septic chorus
Of the world's counsels, what's good for us,
And let them, if they choose to, mar
Our common earth with civil war.
Live day to day; relieve a little
What sorrow lies within our scope ;
A moratorium on hope
Will, if it makes our laughter brittle,
Lend peace until that day of wrath
When the smooth doom toys hurtle forth.
You follow the conception through,
That's all. What if you leave a slew
Of living dead, of radioactive
'Collateral damage' in its wake?
It's just a job, for heaven's sake. (7.2)

Contd.

"I'm employed, healthy, ambitious,
Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed.
But all my symptoms are pernicious.
The Dow-Jones of my heart's depressed.
The sunflower of my youth is wilting.
The tower of my dreams is tilting.
The zoom lens of my zest is blurred.
The drama of my life's absurd.
What is the root of my neurosis?
I jog, eat brewer's yeast each day,
And yet I feel life slip away.
I wait your sapient diagnosis.
I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!"
"You need a lover, John, I think."
(The Golden Gate 14)

Some Memorable Lines

"Ceasing Upon The Midnight"

[…] To cease upon
The midnight under the live-oak
Seems too derisory a joke.
The bottle lies on the ground.
He sleeps. His sleep is sound
(Seth, *The Humble Administrator's Garden* 61).

"Night in Jiangning

A glass of tea; the moon;
The frogs croak in the weeds. A bat wriggles down across Gold disk to silver reeds.
The distant light of lamps.
The whirr of winnowing grain. The peace of loneliness.
The scent of imminent rain.
(Seth, *All You Who Sleep Tonight* 31)

“Unclaimed”

To make love with a stranger is the best.
There is no ridcile and there is no test.-

To lie and love, not aching to make sense
Of this night in the mesh of reference.

To touch, unclaimed by fear of imminent day,
And understand, as only strangers may.

To feel the beat off reign in heart to heart
Preferring neither to prolong nor part.

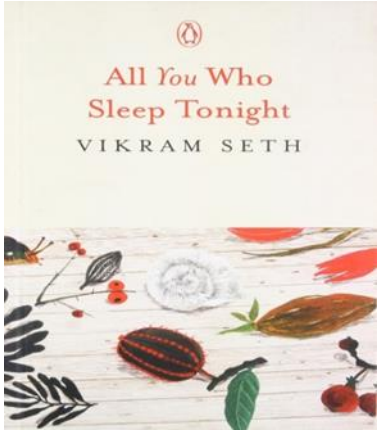
To rest within the unknown arms and know
That this is all there is; that this is so.



“All You Who Sleep Tonight”

All you who sleep tonight
Far from the ones you love,
No hands to left or right,
And emptiness above –

Know that you aren’t alone.
The whole world shares your tears,
Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.



His Liberal attitude

Beasts of the forest and voracious wolves

Who hasten to spill innocent blood and kill

The pious and the upright.

Read these words

But think of the Moses words, the man of God

Sign aloud, O you nations of his people

For He avenges the blood of his servants, and

Renders revenge upon his adversaries. (AYWAST, 164)

Features of His Poetry

- Cultural- hybridity
- Continuity of style
- Cultural and psychological conflict
- Autobiographical elements
- Lightness of wit
- Conversational Tone
- Indian society in background
- A poet of many traditions

"Poetry. Always poetry. I have written lyric poetry throughout my career. The books appear sporadically, but that is only because composing poems to form a book takes a number of years"- Vikram Seth

“Round and Round”

After a long and wretched flight
That stretched from daylight into night,
Where babies wept and tempers shattered
And the plane lurched and whiskey splattered
Over my plastic food, I came
To claim my bags from Baggage Claim

Around, the carousel went around
The anxious travelers sought and found
Their bags, intact or gently battered,
But to my foolish eyes what mattered
Was a brave suitcase, red and small,
That circled round, not mine at all.

I knew that bag. It must be hers.
We hadnt met in seven years!
And as the metal plates squealed and clattered
My happy memories chimed and chattered.
An old man pulled it of the Claim.
My bags appeared: I did the same.

As a Poet

- Vikram Seth assimilates many traditions and cultures.
- He mixes doggerel, parody, banality, romanticism and sentimentality.
- He is essentially a poet who explores the theme of love and relationship in great detail.
- He brings historical and personal to textual harmony, mixing modern and Victorian.
- A master of lyricism and narrative structures, blending humor and irony at times.
- He “attempt to translate the sounds of music into the written word.”
- Once Khushwant Singh predicted that Seth would become a Nobel laureate.

“There is so much poetry that one reads which really doesn’t move or enlighten one at all. I’m not surprised that people are turning away from poetry.”



- “Seth’s acceptance of and delight in exile combined with a highly self-conscious traditional poetic form and prosody result in surprisingly original poetry.”- Bruce King

- “And there is an ambivalence, too: the poems are both intimate and distancing, as if they would keep the reader at arm’s length and draw him in at the same time.” - Jeet Thayil

- “….. He cannot be easily contained in any single tradition of contemporary fiction writing. He remains that elusive breed – an international writer who is a global, world citizen.” - Rita Joshi

Summing up

Across these miles I wish you well.
May nothing haunt your heart but sleep.
May you not sense what I don't tell.
May you not dream, or doubt, or weep.
May what my pen this peaceless day
Writes on this page not reach your view
Till its deferred print lets you say
It speaks to someone else than you. (Across)

Thank You

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