

Cosmopolitanism and Multiculturalism in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and *A Suitable Boy*

Dr. R. Eveline Shindya  

Abstract

Cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism takes the center stage in the postcolonial studies which reflects the complexities of identity, cultural hybridity, and globalization. This paper explores how Vikram Seth's novels An Equal Music and A Suitable Boy portray cosmopolitan identities and multicultural interactions. Through a close reading of these works, the study examines the representation of cultural fluidity, the role of music as a transcultural medium, and the impact of postcolonial histories on both individual and collective identities. An Equal Music highlights the universality of music as a bridge between cultures, while A Suitable Boy captures the tensions and harmonies within India's diverse society. The research article further investigates how Seth's narratives negotiate the intersections of tradition and modernity, East and West, and local and global influences. Ultimately, the paper argues that Seth's works provide a nuanced perspective on cosmopolitanism, emphasizing both its liberating potential and the inherent struggles present in contemporary multicultural societies.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism, Cultural hybridity, Globalization, Transnational identity, Music and Literature.

Cosmopolitanism is the ideology that all human beings belong to a single community, based on a shared morality. A person who adheres to the idea of cosmopolitanism in any of its forms is called a cosmopolitan or cosmopolite.

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Dr. R. Eveline Shindya, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 629004, Tamil Nadu, India

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Globalization has been identified with the emergence of cosmopolitanism, and this erases all local differences and takes off the identities of peoples and persons. Postcolonial writing is an attempt to rediscover the cultural identity that is imbibed after the entire process of imperialism. Cosmopolitans, in general are geographically and culturally mobile. A cosmopolitan develops his ability to adhere to cultural differences and transcend his native culture.

The awareness of cultural diversity tends towards a multicultural society, recognizing the cultural differences. The term multicultural is a reference to plural societies that has citizens from all the corners of the globe. As C.W.Watson relates in his book *Multiculturalism*, there is distinctiveness in each culture, but still there is a lack of boundary in each cultures. As he explains, a multicultural society is a society that contains several cultures, “To speak of a multicultural society, then, is to speak of a society – a state, a nation, a country, a region or even simply a bounded geographical location such as a town or a school – composed of people who belong to different cultures” (Watson 1-2). Further, the civilizational differences after the long century of European colonization tend to Eurocentric norms and practices.

The aftermath cultural practices of the decolonised societies emphasize a clinging towards western culture and it is brought to lime light by Vikram Seth. His representation of the multicultural society delineates the western influence in his works of art. As far as Seth is concerned, he relates music to the contemporary multicultural society in his novel *An Equal Music*. The novel analyses different kinds of music from Indian classical music to western classical forms including pop music and rock ‘n’ roll. This explores the Eurocentric visualization as rendered by the writer. Music as represented by Seth in this novel explores the productive space of culture in a contemporary globalised society.

This article investigates the themes of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in Vikram Seth’s novels *An Equal Music* and *A Suitable Boy*. By examining the characters, settings, and narrative structures in both works, this article seeks to understand how Seth portrays the complex interplay between diverse cultural identities, cosmopolitan ideals, and the challenges of belonging in a globalized world. This article analyses Vikram Seth’s portrayal of relationships that transcend cultural boundaries, examining how love, friendship, and conflict are shaped by cosmopolitan and multicultural influences.

Vikram Seth gives vivid evidence about the world of music as witnessed through Micheal and Julia. Christin Hoene says “music can travel across from one place to another in a Society” (Hoene 5). Hoene points out to Edward said, who in his *Musical Elaborations*, marks music as a postcolonial condition that is identified as a “transgression of boundaries, be they geographically, historical, cultural, social, or related to differences in religious beliefs, gender, race, and class” (Hoene 5). Seth’s *An Equal Music* discusses the connections between music and literature through Michael. The novel is portrayal of the lives of classical musician and their musical life. Set in London and Vienna, music forms an integral part of the novel. Michael

elaborates the spirit of the musicians of the Maggiore Quartet to explain their commonality. This commonality is a principal trait of multiculturalism, when people of all sectors and cultures share a common platform. As he narrates, their music in the quartet is beyond their differences and it takes them beyond that they lose themselves in music, freeing their selves. As Michael asserts, the audience, can never imagine the musicians' "separate spirits" (EM 14) that are "compelled to embody together" (EM 14). Beyond their differences, the musicians give up their barriers in giving out a perfect harmony of music. Here music becomes a cultural artefact that is performed by a community of shared thoughts and cultural differences. The embodiment of their musical spirit places them in a global platform grounded with different cultural practices. "But despite the differences and the idiosyncrasies of its members, the quartet is a family unit, in which not only the actions of a member but even his or her emotional state affect the dynamics of the entire quartet" (Gupta 80).

Seth portrays the "conflicting individualities" (Gupta 80) into a "realm of wholeness" (Gupta 80) which is an imminent trait of a multicultural society. And further, the love and musical life of Julia and Michael is exposed delicately and indicated by the musical reference to the great masters like Rozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Bach. Their love is based on the foundation of music, referring to the great masters. For Julia and Michael, music is not just a vocation, but a strength that patched them up beyond their boundaries of different societal norms. "Music aside, their love, thought evident enough on the purely physical level, vibrates with a touch of transcendence that elevates them above anything sordid and contrives to keep them innocent somehow" (Gupta 84).

As Michael enumerates, when he plays Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, he imagines their cities. Julia had shown him those cities through their music and here Seth substantiates the multicultural influence of music in his *An Equal Music*. Also Julia's deafness can be attributed to a cosmopolitan society that remains deaf to the cultural differences on a global platform. Julia, amidst her deafness, understands music and plays it. She forgets her deafness only in the realm of music that sets aside all the differences "I've been so hungry to speak of music-and to play it with someone who understands me as I was before I- before all these changes in my life" (EM 137). Julia's "non- responses" and "avoidance" (EM 143) proves herself deaf with an auto-immune ear disease. Her intense feeling of remorse is very well expressed in the novel. She elaborates her pain of being deaf individual to Michael:

It was a strange transition from the world of sounds to the world of deafness - not soundlessness, really, because I do hear all sorts of noises, only usually they're the wrong ones. I was so afraid to lose my music, and I was so afraid for Luke, left with a mother who couldn't even hear him cry. (EM 151)

Julia tries to concentrate on her music, so that she could overcome her deafness. She takes pain to learn lip-reading and sign language to plunge into the

world of music. She compares music to any other language and puts her heart and soul in knowing music. Julia even avoids wearing hearing aids as she thinks that it avoids her from hearing the right pitch. She understands the pitches from the bow, the fingers and posture and delves deep into her world of music. She reads the hand movements of Michael and revives the tune and texture from her memory. Here Seth delineates Julia's world of music by conveying every minute details of the language of music.

Seth blends both the description and emotion of Julia and captures the very essence of music despite her deafness. However Julia remains satisfied for not being born deaf and she is happy to have the memory of the sounds of "Schubert's string quintet" (EM 169). Even Michael wonders at her skill of making music with her hands, she finds a "mental analogue to the way she leans a phrase" (EM 169) and allows her body to express it. Julia's deafness has found a way to merge with the musical platform which represents the ideal of a multicultural society. Her expression of music through the "visual cues" (EM 193) she grasps from the other players tell that music has acknowledged her capability to sync with the other musicians, despite her deafness. As she herself confesses, "If I were blind I would have coped better. If it weren't for music I'd be a mess" (EM 328).

An Equal Music is a completely different novel set in different locations and it resembles a British novel in its setting and culture. He has proved himself to be a transnational writer with a divided self and his novel *An Equal Music* renders Western Europe in its most illustrative cultural achievement. Seth is a transnational writer who gives a complete picture of pop culture and global consumerism. His picturisation of Venice, Europe and London points out his first-hand knowledge at a global consumeric world. *An Equal Music* has a different location, both geographically and culturally. It is like a British novel written by a cultural insider. Seth's treatment of his male-female characters makes him vulnerable to charges of furthering patriarchy.

Being an Indian writer, Seth undoubtedly elevates a cosmopolitan world with his cosmopolitan characters. His characters are foreign without any taint of Indianness. As far as Micheal and Julia are concerned they both hail from England but "different Englands" (EM 80). Their studies at Vienna spans into another world of a different culture and language. Julia speaks both German and English as she "had been brought up in a world unreachably different" (EM 81) from Michael. Julia comes from a culture "where art and literature and music are absorbed without effort or explanation from speech and travel from books and records, from the very walls and shelves" (EM 81). Michael witnesses the essence of globalisation as he could see the streets of London flood with multicultural identities. He could see Greek restaurants, Australian pubs and other cultural identities which stamp the contemporary societies with multiculturalism:

Although it is not appropriate to talk of different national 'models' of multiculturalism, in part because this implies well-thought-out national

variations, it is nevertheless the case that the trajectories of multiculturalism in different countries have varied for a wide range of reasons. (Rattansi 15)

The concept of multiculturalism encapsulates the idea of diversity and difference, providing the opportunity for discrimination and differentiation. Earlier the theories on culture focused on the cultural identity that is found to be the source of cultural discrimination in societies. These discriminations seem to be based on religion, race, gender and ethnicity. But later on cultural theories put an end to discriminations and focused on multiculturalism as a system of a group with differentiated rights.

India is always a culturally, linguistically and genetically varied multicultural society. India is apart from a stereotypic, standard nationalism with a shared history and a single language. Instead it is a nation with a belief on national pluralism Seth, in his *A Suitable Boy* encompasses India in its varied cultural traditions: “in all its variance, with heat, dust, light, extended families, its violence and lust together with the rigidities of castes and religions, along with religious processions, rigged elections and grand weddings” (Albert 499). *A Suitable Boy* effectively figures out the excessive ambiguities and contradictions of a country “in all the vicissitudes” (Albert 499).

The novel reveals its multilinear plots as Seth unravels a bunch of varied characters. *A Suitable Boy* has several plots in it and it is a reflection of the multicultural Indian life, mainly about Indian life and its culture. Lata, in the novel loves a Muslim, Kabir Darrani. In a multicultural society like India, a variety of cultures pave way for cross-cultural interactions. These interactions create tensions amidst the traditions of individual societies. Here Lata’s mother becomes cautious of their affair and expresses her anger to reject the proposal only because Kabir hails from another religious culture:

... devastated when his last name turns out to be Durrani. “A Muslim!” said Mrs. Rupa Mehra more to herself now than to anyone else. What did I do in my past life that I have brought this upon my beloved daughter, year he’ll say “Talaq, talaq and you’ll be out on the streets. You obstinate, stupid girl! You should drown yourself in a handful of water for sheer shame. (SB 182)

The rejection of Kabir exposes ethnic segregation of religions in a multicultural society Kabir is a Muslim boy and Lata is a Hindu girl and a Hindu-Muslim marriage is still a taboo in this multicultural India. Cross-cultural interactions are seen quite often in this novel as Seth hints at the influence of Hindu culture on Saeeda Bai, a Muslim courtesan. Saeeda Bai sings Holi songs, which is a typical example of cross-cultural interactions in a multicultural society. Further, Seth also hints at the Hindu culture of tying Rakhi, as the novel evidences Veena, daughter of Mr. Kapoor, tying Rakhi to Imtiaz and Feroz Khan, two Muslims. They become Rakhi-brother and Rakhi sister:

Veena went in the morning to Prem Nivas to tie a Rakhi around Pran’s

wrist, she fed him a laddu and blessed him and received in exchange his promise of protection five rupees and a hug. Veena also went to Baitar house, as she went every year to tie a rakhi around Firoz's wrist. And Imtiaz's both were in, since they were expecting her. (SB 1180-181)

Here, Seth beautifully unravels the tricks of co-existence amidst the cultural diversity of India. Seth, in his own ways displays the secularism of India, on which the country had taken pride in.

In *A Suitable Boy* Seth pictures religious intolerance and he highlights the horrors of partition as Pakistan was completely terminated from India. Brahmpur, the setting of *A Suitable Boy* is an invented fictitious city witnesses the construction of a Hindu temple near an existing old mosque. It creates an embarrassing situation when "the Muslims gather for their daily prayers and kneel to face Mecca, they also must face Hindu idols they consider obscene" (Robinson). Seth says that it is an insult to Hinduism as being a Hindu is something else, a part from discriminating other communities: "it's tolerance understanding . . . not just trying to bash your neighbour over the head because he is a Muslim. These things need to be said" (Robinson).

Seth elevates a moral strategy against communalism in this novel. Seth truly presents a horrifying scene of religious fanaticism where Firoz, a Muslim and Maan, a Hindu are attacked by a group of Hindu communalists. Here, Firoz yearns for an enduring co-existence amidst different communities and propagates religious tolerance. Leila Seth details her views on regaining communal harmony as follows: "The aims is pluralistic humanism; live and let live; tolerance and respect. How do we bring it about? By awareness and education. By education, I mean holistic education, not just literacy. . . . If there is anger and hatred towards a person or group, a child takes it intuitively . . ." (368). As she further adds, the people of India feel themselves belonging and a great Indian universe, neglecting the vagaries of history. India is vast land clad with a variety of religions and this concept is justified in the voluminous novel. The friendship between Maan, Firoz, Saeda Bai and Nawab develops inspite of their religious differences and a remarkable tolerance is observed in their relationship.

Vikram Seth's novels, *An Equal Music* and *A Suitable Boy*, explore themes of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, highlighting the intersections of tradition and modernity, East and West, and local and global identities. In *An Equal Music*, Seth uses music to illustrate the transcultural nature of artistic expression, where cultural boundaries fade away in the universal language of melody. Julia's struggle with deafness serves as a metaphor for the selective cultural openness found in cosmopolitan societies, reinforcing the idea that identity is shaped by both personal and collective experiences.

Vikram Seth intricately depicts, in these two novels, India's pluralistic society, emphasizing the tensions and harmonies within its multicultural landscape. The novel illustrates how cross-cultural interactions, religious differences, and societal

expectations influence individual choices and relationships. Through the characters of Lata and Kabir, Seth highlights the ongoing challenges of religious and cultural intolerance, while also celebrating moments of coexistence and unity. Ultimately, Seth's works present a nuanced perspective on cosmopolitanism. While they celebrate the enriching possibilities of cultural hybridity, they also acknowledge the inherent struggles and contradictions within multicultural societies. By bridging the past with the present and the personal with the universal, Seth's novels serve as insightful narratives that reflect the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation in a globalized world.

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