

## A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL ETHOS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF VIKRAM SETH

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**Abstract**

This research paper critically examines two major literary works of Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate* (1986) and *A Suitable Boy* (1993). The study analyses these novels from the perspective of postcolonial ethos and highlights how Seth presents the effects of colonialism in society. It also explores the ideas of cultural hybridity and the rejection of Orientalist representations. Through the themes, characters, and narrative techniques in these novels, the paper studies Seth's treatment of cultural identity in a globalized world. The paper further shows how his writings contribute to postcolonial literature by addressing issues such as identity negotiation, cross-cultural understanding, and cultural interaction.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Ethos, Colonialism, Cultural Hybridity, Orientalism, Negotiation

**Introduction**

Vikram Seth, born in Calcutta on 20 June 1952, is a well-known writer and poet. His novel *The Golden Gate* received the Sahitya Academy Award. Seth is recognized for his realistic portrayal of modern culture in his works. He presents different aspects of human identity through ethnicity, culture, class, gender, and other social factors. His writings are strong examples of realism in literature.

*The Golden Gate*, written in verse form, and *A Suitable Boy* are considered two of Seth's greatest literary works. This paper critically examines these novels using postcolonial ethos as a framework. The study explores how Seth addresses the complexities of postcolonial identity and the cultural conditions shaped by colonial history and global influences. In *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and *The Golden Gate* (1986), Vikram Seth presents an interesting comparison between Indian and Western cultural traditions, especially in the depiction of marriage and social relationships. These works provide an important framework for understanding postcolonial ethos and the cultural effects of colonialism. Through these novels, Seth reflects the realities of societies influenced by both traditional values and modern global culture.

**The Golden Gate**

'*The Golden Gate*' by Vikram Seth is a verse novel that portrays the lives of young professionals in San Francisco during the 1980s. Although the novel is set in the United States, it delicately addresses postcolonial concerns through the ideas of diaspora and cultural hybridity. The characters in the novel reflect the social and cultural fragmentation of a globalized society where identities are no longer limited to a single national or cultural background. The novel presents the wealthy and modern environment of San Francisco, yet it also explores

themes of identity, cultural fusion, and the loss of ethnic roots in foreign settings. Through its humorous portrayal of Yuppie culture and its innovative poetic structure, the novel examines how individuals from different backgrounds struggle with the pressures of assimilation in a predominantly Western society. An important aspect of the novel is the absence of Indian characters, which is unusual for an Indian writer like Vikram Seth. Instead, the characters are distinctly American. This absence reflects the postcolonial condition in which people from former colonies often abandon their ethnic identities in favour of a new and more uniform Western identity. Seth presents this condition in a subtle and thoughtful manner.

The characters in *The Golden Gate* include liberals, professionals, gay men, and bisexuals who belong to a society that celebrates diversity but often expects conformity. In such a society, ethnic identities gradually disappear within a larger American identity. This resembles the postcolonial experience in which individuals attempt to balance their cultural roots with the need to fit into dominant social structures. Hybridity is one of the major postcolonial ideas explored in the novel. The characters move through different cultural influences that shape their identities and personal relationships. John Brown, the central character, grows up in a multicultural environment, and his interactions with others reveal the fluid nature of identity in a postcolonial world. The setting of San Francisco, known for its cultural diversity, further strengthens the idea of hybridity in the novel. The novel also explores the idea of the "Other" through social relationships and cultural interactions. The characters' relationships often reveal tensions related to race, class, and cultural differences, reflecting the continuing impact of colonial history

on modern society. Seth's use of a traditional poetic form to narrate a modern story symbolically combines tradition and modernity, a common feature of postcolonial literature.

The title *The Golden Gate* carries deep symbolic meaning when viewed from a postcolonial perspective. The Golden Gate Bridge functions as both a physical and symbolic structure representing opportunity, transition, contradiction, and cultural hybridity. It symbolizes the struggle between cultural identity and assimilation in a postcolonial society. Through this symbol, Seth examines the complexities and contradictions of modern multicultural life. The novel also presents a subtle critique of the American Dream. Beneath the appearance of a progressive and multicultural society, Seth reveals emotional isolation, social tensions, and cultural disconnection. In this way, *The Golden Gate* becomes not only a novel about love and loneliness but also a reflection on the postcolonial condition. Seth further challenges traditional colonial power structures by presenting American society through the perspective of a postcolonial writer. With humour and sensitivity, he reverses the colonial gaze and gives agency to the postcolonial subject.

Another important aspect of the novel is the use of companion advertisements as a narrative device. John initially rejects the advertisement as a "meat market" (Seth 1.34), reflecting Western criticism of arranged marriages often associated with Indian culture. However, Janet's persistence and the eventual success of the advertisement suggest a reconciliation of cultural differences. This also highlights the theme of cultural hybridity and the possibility of meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries. Both *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* explore matrimonial relationships and provide insight into postcolonial cultural experiences. Through the contrast between Western individualism and Indian collectivism, Seth highlights both differences and connections between cultures.

Overall, *The Golden Gate* explores universal themes of love, identity, and loneliness while reflecting postcolonial ideas of displacement, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. The novel examines the symbolic importance of the Golden Gate Bridge, the interaction between nature and human emotions, and the blending of Indian and Western cultural sensibilities within a modern global society.

### **A Suitable Boy**

'*A Suitable Boy*' by Vikram Seth portrays the complex political and social condition of India during the 1950s, a period marked by the transition

from colonial rule to democracy. From a postcolonial perspective, the novel examines the challenges of nation-building, the tensions within the newly independent political system, and the lasting effects of colonialism on Indian society.

The novel is set during a time of political unrest and economic difficulty. Seth carefully presents the transformation of India from a colonial state into a democratic nation. Through this background, the novel critically explores the conflicts between modernity and tradition, unity and diversity, and idealism and practicality in post-independence India. Several events in the novel, such as the implementation of the Peasant Reform Act, communal riots, and political corruption, reflect the larger struggles faced by a country attempting to establish its postcolonial identity. At the same time, the idealism of young college students contrasts with the corruption of political leaders, revealing the gap between national aspirations and social realities. Through these events, *A Suitable Boy* offers a detailed examination of the political culture and social attitudes of the time. The novel presents the difficulties of governing a newly independent nation while also celebrating the diversity and resilience of Indian society. Seth highlights how India struggled to balance the legacy of colonialism with the hopes of creating a free and democratic society.

The novel also contributes to the larger tradition of postcolonial literature by examining the effects of colonialism, criticizing unequal social systems, and imagining the future of a newly independent nation. Through its realistic portrayal of 1950s India, *A Suitable Boy* becomes an important reflection on the complexities and contradictions of postcolonial society. One of the important postcolonial concerns in the novel is the continued influence of caste and social inequality on personal and family decisions. This is clearly seen in Mrs. Rupa Mehra's wish to arrange a suitable marriage for her daughter. She supports Pran Kapoor as a suitable match because he is a "good, decent, cultured khatri boy" (*A Suitable Boy* 8). The term "khatri" refers to a specific caste within the Hindu social system, traditionally associated with trade and business. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's focus on caste shows that caste-based divisions remained deeply rooted in Indian society even after independence. Although India achieved political freedom, social inequalities continued to influence everyday life.

This tension between the ideals of a modern democratic nation and the reality of traditional social structures reflects the continuing effects of colonial and pre-colonial history. Seth shows how postcolonial societies often struggle to balance modern national identity with older cultural

traditions. The novel further highlights the difficulties of identity formation in a postcolonial society through its depiction of caste and traditional gender expectations. Seth suggests that political freedom alone cannot completely remove deeply established social systems. Social and cultural transformation remains a gradual and continuing process.

Through its rich and detailed portrayal of postcolonial India, *A Suitable Boy* becomes a thoughtful reflection on tradition, modernity, identity, and the continuing effects of colonialism in a rapidly changing society.

### Colonial Effects in Seth's Works

Vikram Seth discusses global and postcolonial issues in both *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*, though in different ways. In *The Golden Gate*, these issues are explored through migration, cultural displacement, and hybridity in the Western world. In contrast, *A Suitable Boy* examines the challenges of postcolonial identity in a nation still dealing with the effects of colonialism.

Both novels show Seth's ability to present the complexities of postcolonial life. His works provide meaningful insights into the struggles and possibilities of living in a world shaped by colonial history and its continuing impact. Through these novels, Seth explores themes such as race, identity, mimicry, hybridity, migration, and the idea of the "Other." His detailed narratives and realistic characters reveal how colonialism continues to influence individual and cultural identities in a globalized society. *The Golden Gate*, set in California during the 1980s, presents issues of cultural displacement and identity conflict. The novel reflects the experiences of diaspora communities as they attempt to adjust to a new cultural environment. Through the character of John Brown and his relationships with others, Seth highlights themes of hybridity and cultural negotiation. The novel portrays the difficulties of maintaining identity while adapting to a modern Western society. On the other hand, *A Suitable Boy*, set in India during the 1950s, focuses on the lives of four families in a newly independent nation. The

novel explores social issues related to caste, religion, gender, and class, all of which are deeply connected to India's colonial and social history. Through Lata's search for a suitable husband and her resistance to social expectations, Seth presents the conflict between personal identity and traditional cultural values in a postcolonial society. Seth's works also show the complex relationship between gender, class, and social structures in both colonial and postcolonial settings. In *A Suitable Boy*, the character of Lata reflects the difficulties faced by women in a male-dominated society, while Maan Kapoor represents the complexities of caste and class in post-independence India. Similarly, *The Golden Gate* examines social and cultural identity through the experiences of individuals living within a multicultural society.

### Conclusion

This research paper has critically examined Vikram Seth's novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* from a postcolonial perspective. The study has focused on themes such as identity, hybridity, mimicry, migration, and the "Other." Both novels present the complexities of postcolonial societies, whether through the experiences of Indians living in the United States or through the realities of India after independence.

Through these works, Seth presents the continuing effects of colonialism on individuals, culture, and society. His novels contribute significantly to the understanding of postcolonial literature by exploring the struggles of identity formation, cultural negotiation, and social change in a world influenced by colonial history.

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