Writing Diaspora

by Satish C. Aikant

Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations
by Mala Pandurang
Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2001
pp.191 Rs. 395

When Salman Rushdie dismissed Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, as a great Indian soap he was perhaps out to promote his own brand of 'magic realism.' To be fair to Rushdie, his collage of various postmodernist devices was fascinating and the *Midnight's Children* did question the authoritative accounts of history to inscribe varied perspectives, an enabling device much popularized by our own subaltern historians, but then why couldn't Rushdie understand that Seth was entitled to his own approach to social history in compliance with the formal and conceptual configuration of his own writing? It is also interesting to note how the *Midnight's Children* is now marketed as a book 'by the author of *Satanic Verses*.' So much for its author's 'magic realism.' Seth's *A Suitable Boy* made news, initially, for wrong reasons—the huge advance paid to him by the publishers—but the hype did not detract from the merits of the novel. Mala Pandurang's book on Vikram Seth places all his writings in a perspective. She begins with problematizing the notion of diasporic writing, in relation to Seth and examines the usual tropes associated with such writing: anti-essentialist, anti-nativist, and so on, which do not necessarily apply to his body of work. She examines various frames of reference for diasporic writing, and comes round to the view that Seth, a writer of Indian diaspora, nonetheless, defies the various prescriptions for diasporic writing. He neither explores the gaps between the 'culture of origin' (India/home) and the 'cultures of adoption' (UK/USA/ other worlds), nor does he address issues of ambivalence or liminality that come from a conflict of different cultural perspectives. Neither does his work fall back on predictable fictional thematic preoccupations of 'rootedness' or 'displacement,' privileged in metro-politan discourse. Even the word 'home' for a writer like Seth does not necessarily connote a sense of belonging— it is more often the function of a personal choice the writer exercises. Though Seth has dealt with the theme of cultural displacement, for example in his poem 'Divali,' he believes that nothing can really be gained by necessarily harping on such themes; they have to come naturally. Jasbir Jain, in her preface to the book facilitates Seth's inclusion as a diasporic writer by widening the concept of diaspora. Pandurang concurs with Bhikhu Parekh that "the Indian diasporic subject can share and coexist in several homes simultaneously, and distance need not necessarily lead to alienation or psychological deracination." Since a diasporic writer negotiates various boundaries, the global ceases to occupy a unified space.

It is time the readers, too, freed themselves from the obsession with looking for 'Indianness' as a marker of authenticity in every writer who writes in English. Having said that, however, it is not easy to shed the ubiquitous burden of English, which in India is undeniably associated with class and privilege. The flip side to this positioning is that the writers in English are often criticized for their lack of sympathies and for their one-dimensional representations, alleging that they are 'deracinated' to the point that their work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a true understanding of the 'soul of India.'

Pandurang makes a careful analysis of the works of Vikram Seth from several perspectives. Seth, whose oeuvre extends to various genres: poetry, libretto, novel and travel writing, announced his arrival with his novel *The Golden Gate*, a bold experiment in verse in which he employs the postmodernist diction and the traditional form of a narrative in verse, taking Byron and Pushkin as his models. (The Byronic irreverence and skeptical cynicism are all too evident in the narrative.) The achievement of the work, no doubt, is sheer aesthetic exuberance. It is, however, in projecting characters as realistic portraits that Seth seems to exploit his resourcefulness to its utmost, the subtle economy and suggestiveness of the verse medium providing support for the shifting points of view. Pandurang suggests that Seth's use of the sonnet form to 'discourage audience empathy' is to draw attention to the fictionality of his artistic creation. However, there appears to be in Seth a reverse anxiety to appear not as a non-Californian, so that he takes great pains to include as many culture specific signifiers as

possible. But beyond the postmodernist playfulness, there is also a message. Drawing upon Borgmann's model for the contemporary condition of *hypermodernism*, Pandurang points out that Seth tries to convey through his narrative, the seductive, material vitality of the consumerist culture rampant in the modern west.

Seth has experimented with various forms, and though he shows no preference for any particular mode of writing he has often been criticized for abandoning the current forms of postmodernism in *A Suitable Boy*. For this long social comedy of manners he opts for a straightforward and linear narrative, thus resisting the temptation to go along the Rushdie way, whose *Midnight's Children* was marked as the trendsetter for all subsequent Indian Writing in English. Seth's contention is that he admired the Victorians for their unambiguous style and writing that lays emphasis on characterization rather than on the intricacies of technique. But the Victorians are not the only inspiration for him. The tradition and way of life in India is a plenitude of collective and communitarian structures, providing ample materials for fictional accounts. The fifties was particularly important period in Indian history when the Nehruvian vision of a nation-in-making was beginning to take shape. Setting his story against this background, Seth's engagement with history, tradition and modernity acquires a certain urgency as the personal and the national history become inseparable in his novel.

A Suitable Boy has been criticized for its sprawling narrative, with characters teeming at every page, leaving little room for developing individual characters with any depth. But Pandurang defends Seth's method of characterization in terms of his fictional credo of social realism: "If there is little room for detailed psychological analysis, this is because Seth invests his characters with great realism of detail with the intention of using them to identify and develop a wide array of social-related themes." And dealing with social reality, Seth's mode is deliberately ironic for, as Lukacs believes, we are now far removed from the epic era, which evoked a sense of wholeness and organic totality. The present era, the era of the novel is of fragmentation, which often results in the deliberate constructions of totality. This artifice is more marked in *The Golden Gate*, but is also used in *A Suitable Boy*. The realist mode of *A Suitable Boy* switches to the modernist mode in *An Equal Music* and even though the authorial tone is almost invariant one can notice subtle shifts of perspective and emphasis, the detailed observation, and extraordinary ease with phrasing. Seth is reported to have said that music was the last subject he would write about, but it is his passion for music which saves this work and helps him find new alternative points of equilibrium while dealing with the hybridization of cultures, a vital aspect of the postcolonial experience. One could, however, have problems with this novel as it operates in a world rendered somewhat artificial by the excess of the romantic which often degenerates into the maudlin, a world which is aesthetically skewed.

Pandurang's study is a product of well-documented and exhaustive research and provides a wholesome and balanced perspective on Seth's work. It is a pity though that this serious analytic work should be marred by a number of typos. The publishers have to take note of it.

Satish C. Aikant
is Reader in English at
H. N. B. Garhwal University, Pauri

Interdisciplinary Studies in Science, Society, Value and Civilizational Dialogue

by D.P. Chattopadhyaya

The essays of this book are addressed to some basic issues of Science, Society and Value. Discounting the autonomy claim of science Chattopadhyaya tries to trace its social roots and discover its historical background. Also he discounts the value-neutrality claim of science—of both social science and natural science. All forms of knowledge, scientific and social, are basically rooted in the human nature and influenced by its cognitive capacity and limits. According to Chattopadhyaya, freedom underpins human inspiration and aspiration and which explains the *integral* character of facts, ideas and values. He finds no dichotomy between fact and value, between natruralism and humanism, or between subjectivity and objectivity.

A substantial part of the book is concerned with the nature of scientific knowledge. It is argued that because of its humanistic roots science cannot be absolutely objective. Objectivity is nothing but inter-subjectivity, sharability of knowledge by suitably qualified people. From this thesis of inter-subjectivity the author argues back to the *unity* of human nature and *community* of human interests and intentions. From the analysis of the concepts of unity and community he extracts the larger perspectives of the human unity, democracy and justice. All these elements are claimed to be inputs of much needed civilizational dialogue in a world torn by strife and inequitable levels of development

ISBN: 81-7986-030-2 **Rs. 450**

Published by
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Shimla