



Locating Vikram Seth In Diaspora: Decoding Migrant Subjectivity In Fiction And Poetry

Paramjeet Kaur

Assistant Professor of English

Centre for Distance and Online Education

Punjabi University Patiala

This paper aims to analyse the generational development of Indian English diasporic writers and also to position Vikram Seth as a notable postcolonial, postmodern diasporic author of the modern era. Chronologically speaking, the word “diaspora” traces back to the ancient Greek combining ‘Dia’ meaning “across” or “through,” and ‘speirein,’ meaning “to scatter” or “to sow.” Originally associated with agriculture and describing seed dispersal over large areas, the term later took on a deeper metaphorical meaning when it was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Septuagint, to refer to the forced scattering of the Jewish people from their homelands. His literature proves that diasporic writing is neither homogeneous nor monolithic; it is heterogeneous.

Early Indian migration was voluntary, initiated by traders, pilgrims, and monks traveling to Southeast Asia and beyond. They acted as cultural ambassadors, spreading religion, language, and art. A significant change occurred during British rule, when millions of Indians, mainly from rural regions, were transported to British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific to work on plantations. Although legally different from slavery, this migration involved coercion, separation, and cultural disruption.

After Indian independence in 1947, the Indian diaspora experienced a significant shift with the end of indenture. This led to a more diverse migration pattern, as Indian workers and professionals increasingly sought opportunities abroad in the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia. Survival was not the only force behind these post-independence migrations; they were also driven by education, career advancement, and personal ambitions, especially following India’s economic liberalization in the 1990s. Consequently, a new global Indian identity began to take shape, one that is fluent in the language of the colonizer or host but still haunted by ancestral memories and cultural legacy.

Due to globalization and the erosion of traditional national boundaries, the third wave emphasized transnationalism, multiculturalism, and hybrid identities. There was an acceleration in the flow of cultural ideas and identities through the internet, social media, and digital communication. Transculturality is one of the most critical themes in the works of the third-generation diasporic writers, such as Aravind Adiga, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh.

Initially, it is essential to recognize that the Indian diaspora has evolved, and Seth's work is a significant example of this evolution. The paper contends that Seth's contributions signify a paradigm shift in postcolonial diasporic literature and reflect the new circumstances from which this genre emerges. Most importantly, diasporic literature is not homogeneous or monolithic; rather, it is heterogeneous, as seen in the works of writers like Seth. Previous Indian postcolonial writers like Raja Rao, V.S. Naipaul, and Rohinton Mistry, among others, signified stagnation as they resisted integration into foreign or host cultures, often adopting a back-to-roots stance that harbored hostility towards British rule. Their work usually includes nostalgia and longing for the homeland. However, later generations, such as Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth, have taken diasporic writing onto a new trajectory, indicating a vital paradigm shift characterized by a lack of nostalgia and a fear of assimilation. Instead, these writers have created counter discourses and embraced foreign lands and cultures, feeling more comfortable in the West and aligning more closely with Western lifestyles.

Seth considers his fiction to be set after professionals and academics from India migrated to the West following the 1970s. However, most of his stories take place in the West, with protagonists who are primarily Americans or Europeans. Robin Cohen, in *Global Diasporas*, describes 'diaspora' as a community of people who (a) settle outside their original homeland, (b) maintain strong collective identities and feel a connection to their old country, (c) exhibit a sense of ethnicity and tend to identify with other members of their diaspora abroad, and (d) sustain strong group ties over time, often leading to social exclusion in their new societies. More broadly, immigrant writing can refer to any work addressing issues related to diasporic life and focusing on the contemporary immigrant experience in the host country. Conversely, a diasporic work often involves themes of the lost or imagined homeland.

Seth differs from other diasporic writers because themes such as anxiety over the loss of the homeland, nostalgia, alienation, and existential crisis are not central to his works. For instance, in both *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*, he does not explore the gaps between the culture of origin, India, and the cultures of adoption, such as the UK or the USA. In this manner, he is not a diasporic writer in Cohen's sense, who gives expression to the collective identity of people residing in a foreign country, voices the consciousness of marginalization, or suffers cultural confusion and loss.

Seth's ideological stance seems rooted in liberal humanism. Like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, he adopts a humane perspective, portraying characters as part of a species rather than focusing on individual traits. Subtly, he aligns with the moral outlook of writers like Shakespeare, Swift, Dryden, and Pope from the late sixteenth century, as well as later authors such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, and D.H. Lawrence. For him, literature's main role is to reflect life while also serving a moral purpose.

Vikram Seth represents a period when postcolonial and Anglophone diasporic writings had acquired centrality in the field of art and literature. It was reflective of the indispensability of English as well as English writers in scripting the socio-cultural and political realities of postcolonial times. Writers like Rushdie, Naipaul, and others wrote authoritative, disapproving accounts of the orthodoxies and conservative values that the First World imposed on the Third World. No doubt their versions of history enjoyed tremendous success and were variously consumed by international audiences. It is also true that these accounts, while having artistic finesse, also had very clearly defined neo-orientalist tendencies. Popularity and critical attention also led to the homogenization of the postcolonial diasporic literature by linking it with regular themes such as cultural loss and dilemma, search for identity while confirming the east-west divide and third world bashing by terming postcolonial societies as failed nations (Rushdie for instance links the birth of India and Pakistan with miscegenation) and over dependence and foreground of memory and remembering.

In comparative terms, Vikram Seth is a less feted and critically acclaimed postcolonial writer, and his inclusion in the postcolonial paradigm has always remained a subject of doubt, mainly because of the singularity and uniqueness of the subjectivity that he brings to his writing. His vastly different location as a postcolonial writer is suggestive of the fact that postcolonial migrant experience is marked by greater heterogeneity than is normally assumed. The thesis has attempted to study his location in terms of his aesthetic choices as well as his overall orientation. Today, as attempts are made to provincialize the Indian diaspora as a means of representing postcolonial realities, and English is no longer the sole normative form of literature, the distinct appeal of Seth's works becomes even more pronounced.

Research has aimed to answer various aspects of Seth's representation of migrant subjectivity, including the tension between cultural rootedness and transnational identity in his portrayal of migrant characters. It has also examined his cosmopolitan sensibility, his treatment of migrant experiences through the lens of postcolonial theory, and how this sensibility influences his depiction of migrant subjectivity across different genres. The answer lies in the fact that Seth's literary engagement with migrant subjectivity emerges as a nuanced inquiry into the dynamics of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation, providing a significant contribution to contemporary diasporic and transnational discourse. He constructs migrant subjectivity not merely as a condition of geographical dislocation but as a deeply psychological and emotional experience in works such as *An Equal Music*, *The Golden Gate*, and *Two Lives*. Moreover, his characters occupy liminal spaces, culturally hybrid and emotionally unsettled, where issues of belonging, memory, and selfhood unfold with quiet intensity. For instance, in *An Equal Music*, music serves as both a metaphor and a medium, translating the protagonist's internal fragmentation and nostalgic yearning into a

resonant aesthetic experience. His American text, *The Golden Gate*, with its structured verse form and urban Californian setting, juxtaposes formal control with emotional chaos, reflecting the dislocated rhythms of modern migrant life in America. As far as his narrative strategy is concerned, it uniquely foregrounds the inner lives of migrant characters, illustrating how subjectivity is shaped not only by physical movement but also by emotional and cultural negotiation. *Two Lives* further extends this exploration into the realms of historical trauma and biographical reconstruction, where diasporic identity is viewed through the lenses of personal and collective memory.

Seth resists simplistic postcolonial paradigms by presenting migrant subjectivity as an evolving process, marked by fragmentation but also by aesthetic coherence, emotional complexity, and the potential for re-rooting. His cosmopolitan ethos allows for a portrayal of migrant lives that are not marginal but central to the human experience, positioning the migrant figure as emblematic of modern subjectivity itself: fluid, fractured, and yet capable of profound synthesis.

Research has also revealed that most of the regular themes that characterize postcolonial diasporic literature are absent in Vikram Seth. Rather than confirming the east-west divide, he tries to transcend it by delineating the western world as an insider. Apart from this, his approach to culture is marked by a catholic openness. Cultural self-assertion of early postcolonial writers like Raja Rao or R.K. Narayan, or attempts at cultural self-preservation, as in the case of minority writers like Rohinton Mistry, are again not a part of his artistic journey.

Thus, as a diasporic, third-generation postcolonial writer, Vikram Seth transcends traditional narratives of displacement and colonial trauma, instead articulating a nuanced engagement with identity, hybridity, and global belonging. His works reflect a shift from collective postcolonial anxieties to deeply personal, transnational concerns, blending Eastern and Western sensibilities with lyrical clarity. Ultimately, Seth redefines diasporic literature through his cosmopolitan outlook, giving voice to the complexities of modern existence in a globalized world.

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