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An Annotated Bibliography:  
Vikram Seth's Works and Related Criticism,  
with a Background Study of Post-Colonial Literature  
and Modern Indian History and Culture

Introduction

Since Vikram Seth is relatively new to the English literary scene, studies of his works have so far been mostly book reviews, and a critical consensus has not yet been achieved.

Seth has been a controversial writer among his critics. Just as the genres in which he has written have been remarkably diverse--four books of poetry, a travel book, a novel in verse, a lengthy novel in prose, a book of translations of Chinese poems, a libretto for an opera, a children's book, and a verse play, as well as various essays--so his critics' opinions have varied greatly.

Some praise him highly for the same characteristics that others harshly condemn. For example, there are opposing views of Seth's aloof description of his characters' emotions: some see it as a reserved detachment on the part of the omniscient narrator that well suits his direct and lucid style, while others regard it as a lack of passion that ultimately leaves his characters hollow. Likewise, some favorably compare *A Suitable Boy* to novels by Dickens, Austen, George Eliot, or Tolstoy, whereas others dismiss that idea as a blasphemy to the literary tradition, finding the comparison valid only in terms of length, plot, or number of characters.

Although Seth has often been categorized as a post-colonial writer because he is an Indian who has written in English about post-independence India, some critics have pointed out his uniqueness in that category on the basis that Seth does not show a strong sense of nationalism or express anger toward imperialism, and that he is calm and conservative in style and temper, unlike many other more dynamic and acerbic

post-colonial writers such as Rushdie and Naipaul. His novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, depicts contemporary California society, yet the main story of *A Suitable Boy* is a very classic British situation (a family's search for a suitable husband for a daughter) set in the exotic world of post-independence India in the early 1950s. It is hard to determine what kind of place Seth will have in English literature.

Born into a Hindu family in India, but receiving an English-style education there and having lived and studied in England, America, and China, Seth himself has wondered about the various adjectives his critics have bestowed on him, such as "Indian," "Commonwealth," or "American," referring to himself on one occasion as a "rootless cosmopolitan."

In this project, I would like to assemble all of his works and all the relevant criticism in order to determine Seth's unique contribution not only to post-colonial literature as an Indian writer, but also to English literature itself as an international writer.

Part One lists Vikram Seth's works and related criticism, and Part Two contains books and articles on post-colonial literature and modern Indian history and culture which are useful as background for understanding his works. In Part One, Seth's works are arranged chronologically to follow his development; critical articles and reviews are grouped according to the work they refer to. Within each group of criticism and in each section in Part Two, the items are arranged alphabetically by the author's name for ease of reference.

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22 July 1999

An Annotated Bibliography:  
Vikram Seth's Works and Related Criticism  
--Supplement I--

Introduction

This is a supplementary bibliography to the last year's project. My purpose in this project is to keep collecting the relevant criticism on Vikram Seth. He has just issued

his latest novel, *An Equal Music*, this spring, and reviews of this book are currently being written. I have been collecting them as well as the articles on and book reviews of his previous works, especially *A Suitable Boy*, which I am working on for my Master's thesis.

Last year, my research sources were mainly the *MLA International Bibliography* and *Book Review Digest*, but this year, in addition to those, I have been able to locate articles and book reviews through various sites on the Internet. I have realized that this is a very convenient way to collect criticism, especially when you are working on a writer who is currently writing. Also, by using the Internet, I have found access to articles and book reviews in some of the British and Asian publications that are not usually included in *MLAIB* and *BRD*. The weakness of this method, however, is that it is hard to locate the criticism on the older works by the author, but I have still found a few articles on *A Suitable Boy* through this method. I have also located a couple of lengthy book reviews through notes in an article about this novel.

In Section One, I list Seth's works according to the genres. Within each genre, his works are listed chronologically. I include interviews in this section. The annotations of three interviews are quite lengthy, but I include them because there are a number of interesting points in Seth's own words that might be helpful in understanding his writings. In Section Two, I list related criticism according to the works they are referring to. Within each group, they are arranged alphabetically according to the writers' names, or if not, to the journal names.

I will keep trying to obtain as much criticism as possible. I am hoping that more substantial articles will be written about his works.

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15 March 2004

### Bibliography Update without Annotations

Since the last time I compiled the bibliography with annotations, more articles, book reviews, and some critical books have been published. To update the list, I added the new items even though they are not annotated. I will keep tracking down the criticism on Vikram Seth.

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## Part One

### Section One: Vikram Seth's Works

#### **Poems**

*Mappings*. Calcutta: Lai/Writers Workshop, 1981.

Seth's first book of poems, which is dedicated to Tim Steele and Donald Davie, the two poets who greatly influenced him regarding poetic form. This collection of 46 poems on various themes includes four translations from Chinese, Urdu, German, and Hindi, with the original scripts printed in calligraphy. This is a beautiful book, handbound with handloom sari cloth woven in India.

*The Humble Administrator's Garden*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1985.

The three sections of this collection of poems were written in China, India, and California, and each section reflects those locations. Throughout the collection, Seth's attention is focused on human activity in the natural world--images of trees and animals juxtaposed with descriptions of human joys and sorrow.

*All You Who Sleep Tonight*. London: Faber, 1990.

The unusual feature of this collection of poems is its variety--the poems range from love poems to those dealing with nature or travel, varying from a section of epigrammatic quatrains to longer narratives in the voices of those caught up in war and public crisis. In this collection Seth conveys his feelings with directness and clarity, using memorable rhyme and meter.

*Beastly Tales from Here and There*. Illus. Ravi Shankar. 1993. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

A collection of ten animal tales in verse couplets. The first two tales come from India, the next two from China, the next two from Greece, the next two from Ukraine, and the final two are Seth's original tales. These tales of quirky, witty, and funny animals have been described as a modern Aesop's Fables.

*The Poems, 1981-1994*. New Delhi: Viking, 1995.

A collection of Seth's entire poetry up to 1994--*Mappings, The Humble Administrator's Garden, All You Who Sleep Tonight, Beastly Tales from Here and There, Three Chinese Poets*, and *Arion and the Dolphin: A Libretto*, with Seth's new introduction. It also has the index of first lines.

### **Novels**

*The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse*. 1986. New York: Vintage, 1991.

A novel consisting of 590 tetrameter sonnets with the rhyme scheme aBaBccDDDeFFeGG, inspired by Charles Johnston's remarkable translation of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. Even the author's personal history, acknowledgements, dedication, and contents are in this verse form. Set in San Francisco, this novel relates the lives of a number of Bay Area yuppies who are searching for love and companionship. Their stories are underlined by modern themes such as homosexuality, terminal illness, and the fear of nuclear war.

*A Suitable Boy*. London: Phoenix House; New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

A tale of a Hindu family's attempts to find a suitable husband for their younger daughter, Lata. The novel interweaves stories of four large families and those who orbit them, depicting various scenes such as weddings, funerals, childbirths, festivals, religious riots, and election campaigns. The setting is the post-independence India of the 1950s. This is the longest single-volume novel ever published in English.

*An Equal Music*. London: Phoenix House; New York: Broadway Books, 1999.

Different from Seth's previous two novels, both of which have omniscient narrators, his latest story is narrated by one of the characters, Michael Holme. He is the second violinist of a string quartet in London. When Julia MacNicoll, a beautiful pianist he abandoned in Vienna ten years ago when they were both music students, reappears in his life, the balance of the quartet is threatened, and Michael has to deal with some old conflicts in a new configuration.

### **Travel Book**

*From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet.* 1983. New York: Vintage, 1987.

An account of the travels Seth took from Heaven Lake in Sinkiang, the extreme northwest province of China, to his hometown of New Delhi in India, via Tibet, in 1981. Hitchhiking and fluent in Chinese, Seth met a lot of people and was able to hold candid conversations with them, obtaining a rare and intimate look at their real lives. Winner of the Thomas Cook Travel Award.

### **Essay**

“Forms and Inspirations.” *London Review of Books* 29 Sep. 1988: 18-20.

In this essay, Seth describes how two poets, Donald Davie and Timothy Steele, with whom he studied at Stanford, molded his thinking about verse—“how form and inspiration can and need to work off each other” in poetry. He quotes from himself and other poets to demonstrate the idea of tightening the form of a poem to convey the meaning more clearly. He also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of writing both in verse and in prose.

### **Libretto for Opera**

*Arion and the Dolphin.* London: Phoenix House, 1994.

A libretto for the opera *Arion and the Dolphin*, with music by Alec Roth. The opera was commissioned by the Baylis Programme of the English National Opera and first performed in June 1994. The story is based on an ancient Greek legend about the friendship between Arion, a boy musician, and a dolphin who saves him from drowning. This opera is in nine scenes of continuous action.

### **Children’s Book**

*Arion and the Dolphin.* Illus. Jane Ray. 1994. New York: Dutton Children’s Books, 1995.

A picture book based on the libretto of the same title. It is a story of Arion, a young musician at the court of Periander, Tyrant of Corinth. Thrown overboard on his return from a musical contest in Sicily by crew members who are greedy for his prize of gold, Arion is saved and befriended by a dolphin. The book has beautiful illustrations in marine blues and greens with a touch of gold by Jane Ray.

## **Translation**

*Three Chinese Poets: Translations of Poems by Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu.* 1992. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

An anthology of 36 poems by the three Tang dynasty poets translated into English in an ambitious attempt to keep the original rhyme, metrical movement, and the meaning of the original words when possible. Seth's introduction contains a history of the Tang dynasty, points out similarities and differences among the three poets, and illustrates the typical Chinese octet structure.

## **Play**

A play in verse.

A play in verse set in London that deals with the shenanigans inside a publishing firm threatened by American takeover. Seth, inspired after reading Richard Wilbur's lively translations of Moliere, started writing this play in Alexandrine couplets in summer 1987. (Mentioned in both Seth's essay "Forms and Inspirations" and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.)

## **Letter**

"A Suitable Boy." Letters to the Editor. *The Times* 26 Mar. 1993: 17.

Seth wrote this letter to defend Salman Rushdie, who was wrongly quoted as having called *A Suitable Boy* "a soap opera" in Daniel Johnson's book review a day earlier. Seth stated that what Rushdie had said to him was simply "I hear you've written a book," and expressed his hope that Rushdie "would be spared these pinpricks that have come solely as the result of his open-hearted and generous interest in a fellow writer."

## **Interviews**

"Eleanor Wachtel with Vikram Seth." *Malahat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* 107 (Summer 1994): 18-26.

A written version of the interview which was broadcast on CBC Radio's Sunday literary program, "Writers & Company." Here, Seth tells about his family and his childhood, his bondage to literature since he was very little, and detailed circumstances of writing *From Heaven Lake*, *The Golden Gate*, and *A Suitable Boy*. With regard to the last novel, he also discusses Indian society and his religious identification.

“A Poet at Heart.” Interview with Sudeep Sen. *Wasafili: Journal of Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures and Film* 21 (Spring 1995): 22-25.

Telephone Interview with Brendan Bernhard. *LA Weekly* 30 Apr.- 6 May 1999: Online.  
<http://www.laweekly.com/ink/99/23/wls-bernhard.shtml>

This brief interview ranges over Seth’s sales and popularity, the sonnet form he uses, his writing method, his use of and taste in music, and his response to reviews. Based on what readers tell him, Seth attributes the popularity of his “absurdly long” *A Suitable Boy* to the characters in the story, and he notes that his books of poetry and translation have not sold well. Seth enjoys the complexity of the Pushkin sonnet he used for *The Golden Gate* and introductions to *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*, pointing out that “other than those little poetic commonalities between the three novels, there isn’t very much that links them.” Seth had no idea Salman Rushdie was also writing a novel with music as one of its themes, but music is a huge subject, so it’s not much of a coincidence. Seth has no prejudice against modern music, but his narrator is a classical musician, so of course the novel expresses the narrator’s tastes and dislikes. For Seth, the ultimate judgment of a book is whether it works for the reader, not what critics say. When asked about contemporary novelists, Seth admits he doesn’t read many novels: “I don’t really believe in long books. They take a long time to read, if you think of it.” When the interviewer points out that this is a peculiar statement for the author of *A Suitable Boy*, Seth hurriedly ends the interview.

Interview with Debashish Mukerji. *The Week* 9 May 1999: Online.  
<http://www.the-week.com/99may09/life2.htm>

In the course of this expansive interview, we learn a number of interesting things about Seth’s approach to his works. After the effort of *A Suitable Boy*, Seth found it necessary to “lie fallow” for a while. He would not have chosen to write about music, wanting to keep it as a refuge from work, but after seeing the man in Hyde Park and deciding he was a violinist, everything in *An Equal Music* followed from that.

Although his main character may appear to be from a totally different cultural background, Seth asserts that he has lived in England and loves Western music, so it wasn’t a completely foreign world. Unlike many Indian writers in English, Seth is not



obsessed with the theme of cultural displacement, though he is very interested in India's "multiplicity of cultures." Seth did not purposely set out to write in such a variety of forms, nor did he write a verse novel trying to start a trend: "It's just that when I'm inspired to write something, the form follows it, in some cases, precedes it." Though he tried to avoid reading other Indian writers while working on *A Suitable Boy* and doesn't like to be asked his opinion of contemporaries such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, Seth believes R. K. Narayan is "the finest of us all." He thinks it is "great ... there are so many good writers writing," but they are different and can't be classified in one particular school. His major influences remain Pushkin, George Eliot, and Jane Austen. He had thought to write a play, though *An Equal Music* emerged. He may write a biography of his great-uncle.

"The Seth Variations." Interview with Akash Kapur. *Atlantic Unbound* 23 June 1999: Online.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba990623.htm>

"An Interview with Vikram Seth." *Bold Type*. Online. 15 July 1999.

<http://www.boldtype.com/0599/seth/interview.html>

In this interview, Seth acknowledges that he "wasn't very keen" to spend another decade of his life writing another novel as long as *A Suitable Boy*, so he hoped his next book would be of reasonable length. The inspiration for *An Equal Music* was seeing a man staring at the water of the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London, and Seth decides that his character is a violinist who had been "passionately obsessed with a pianist many years ago." At first Seth resisted writing about music, as it was his refuge, particularly Western classical music (while writing *A Suitable Boy*, Indian music would draw him back into the world of his novel, thus providing no escape). He made Michael, the hero of *An Equal Music*, a member of a quartet rather than a soloist because of the tensions, complications, and richness a quartet would provide. As Julia, Michael's love, is going deaf, Seth did a lot of research on deafness. The writing, editing, and promotion of a book have their own pleasures and frustrations, though a seldom admitted peril of a promotion tour is that it is possible to get tired of your own book.

"Suitable Music." Interview with Amazon.co.uk. Online. 25 May 2001.

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/18053/ref=pd\\_d\\_rab\\_1\\_1.../026-2957708-907963](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/18053/ref=pd_d_rab_1_1.../026-2957708-907963)

“Hearing a Different Music.” Interview with Jay Currie and Michele Denis. *January Magazine*. Online. 9 Mar. 2003.

<http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/vseth.html>

### **Speech**

“Founders Day Speech.” October 1992. *Doon Online*. Online.

<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/speech.htm>

A speech Vikram Seth made for the Founders Day celebration at Doon School in New Delhi, October 1992. He talked about his days at the school, which were not entirely happy ones. Originally published in *The Doon School Weekly*.

### **CDs**

*A Suitable Boy*. BBC Radio Collection. John Dryden, Producer. BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2002.

This is a full-cast dramatisation of the novel by BBC. Recorded on location in India. 4 CDs.

*An Equal Music*. Cond. Decca, 2000.

A Compilation of all the music pieces which appear in and are very important in the novel--Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Vivaldi and Vaughan Williams. The booklet contains “A Note from the Author.” 2 CDs.

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## Section Two: Related Criticism

### **Critical Books**

Agarwalla, Shyam S. *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: Search for an Indian Identity*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1995.

Atkins, Angela. *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002.

Pandurang, Mala. *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations*. Writers of Indian Diaspora. Jasbir Jain, ser. ed. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001.

### **Biographies & Omnibus Reviews**

Alexander, Meena. "Vikram Seth." *Postcolonial Studies at Emory*. Online. 9 Mar. 2003.  
<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Seth.html>

Gavron, Jeremy. "A Suitable Joy." *The Guardian* 7 Apr. 1999: Online.  
<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/guard2.htm>

Guneratne, Anthony R. "Vikram Seth (1952-)." *Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. 339-344.

"Indians That Have Done India Proud Vers(e)atile--Vikram Seth Experimenting with Words." *Gentleman's Magazine* 9 Mar. 1999: Online.  
<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/gent.htm>

Haven, Cynthia. "Poetic License." *Stanford Magazine* May/June 1999: Online.  
<http://www.standordalumni.org/news/magazine/1999/mayjun/articles/seth.html>

Ho, Cynthia. "Vikram Seth." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 271: British and Irish Novelists Since 1960*. Detroit: Gale, 2002. 304-315.

Knorr, Katherine. "Vikram Seth Plays to His 'Truest Judges.'" *International Herald Tribune* 23 Apr. 1999: Online.  
<http://www.iht.com/IHT/KK/00/kk042399.html>

Patel, Devesh. "Vikram Seth: A Poet in Exile." *Contemporary Poetry Review* 25 Sep. 2000: Online.

<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/contemporary.htm>

Ragen, Brian Abel. "Vikram Seth." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 120: American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*. Ed. R. S. Gwynn. Detroit: Gale, 1992. 281-85.

A helpful guide to Seth's works through 1990. In addition to providing biographical facts about the author, it summarizes and comments on his books of poetry, his travel book and essays, and makes a detailed account of his widely acclaimed novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*. It also quotes from several critics' articles to provide a better overview of his works. There is a mention of his yet-to-be-published prose novel (*A Suitable Boy*), too.

Vijayasree, C. "Vikram Seth (1952-)." *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bibliographic Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993. 401-05.

### **Book Reviews of *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet***

Mirsky, Jonathan. *New Statesman* 7 Oct. 1983: 25.

In his short review, Mirsky praises *From Heaven Lake* as "the perfect travel book." Seth, who speaks and reads Chinese, walked and hitchhiked through western China, Tibet, and Nepal, on his way back to India in 1981, staying in truck parks, country inns, and with Chinese families, experiences very rare for a foreigner, and Seth rewards us with his observations and evocative descriptions. For Mirsky, Seth is a "wonderful companion" who "notices everything and tells us about it."

Otness, Harold M. *Library Journal* 1 May 1984: 899.

In his brief review, Otness finds Seth's book to be a 'very good' travel narrative about overcoming obstacles on a little-traveled route. Seth's "descriptions of the barrenness of this part of the world and the unhappy political situation in Tibet, and his comparisons between India and China are all interesting and well stated," unlike other more predictable tourist accounts.

Robinson, Andrew. *British Book News* Nov. 1983: 713-14.

### **Book Reviews of *The Humble Administrator's Garden***

D'Evelyn, Tom. "The New-Old Poems of Vikram Seth." *The Christian Science Monitor* 21 Aug. 1985, Eastern ed.: 21-22.

D'Evelyn comments on two poems quoted from the collection, defining them as "accessible, economical, plain" poems which approach "universal experiences." In spite of his exotic background, Seth focuses on "the mundane with unusual clarity"--not only in images but also in musical rhythm--to represent in his poems "feelings of the widest applicability."

Rawson, Claude. "Knowing the Throne." Rev. of 11 books of poetry, including *The Humble Administrator's Garden*. *The Times Literary Supplement* 7 Feb. 1986:137-38.

In the section which deals with Seth's book, Rawson points out that "the rich social notation and the ironic flatness" in Seth's poems recall Eliot and Pound. The reviewer regards some of the poems as "small masterpieces of delicate and emotional discipline, observant of pathos, of ironies of behaviour, of the unexpected small exuberances of life."

Tong, Raymond. *British Book News* Sep. 1985: 559.

### **Articles on & Book Reviews of *The Golden Gate***

Adams, Phoebe-Lou. *The Atlantic* May 1986: 99.

In her brief review, Adams describes the novel as being about "the amorous maneuvers of a quintet of San Franciscans. . . . The story covers the process . . . by which these characters abandon dreams of ideal romance . . . to settle for available reality." Adams praises the tale's wit and psychological shrewdness. It may have been "wildly daring" to write a novel in verse, but she finds it "fast, crisp, thoroughly contemporary. . . . In this novel every word counts."

Balliett, Whitney. "John and Liz, Phil and Ed." *The New Yorker* 14 July 1986: 82-83.

After noting the rarity of the modern verse novel, this review begins with information about the number and type of stanzas Seth uses, and it provides a few biographical details about Seth. The review gives a plot summary, quoting three stanzas and parts of two others. Balliett finds that "the book's technical aplomb, pleasing bits of

wit, and general hustle nearly conceal its keening and sorrow,” but the verses never go stale: “Seth pulls off his feat with spirit, grace, and great energy.”

Bawer, Bruce. “Pushkin by the Bay.” *The New Criterion* May 1986: 77-80.

Curlin, Jay. “‘The World Goes On’: Narrative Structure and the Sonnet in Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*.” *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 22.2 (Fall 1996): 13-26.

Disch, Thomas M. “Sunlight, Coffee and the Papers.” *The Washington Post* 23 Mar. 1986: 1+.

Deltcheva, Roumiana. “Recycling the Genre: The Russian and American Novel in Verse: The Case of Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* and Seth’s *The Golden Gate*.” *Rosyjska Ruletka: Almanach Kola Naukowego Rusycystow* 2 (1995):33-51.

Gross, John. “Book of the Times.” *The New York Times* 14 Apr. 1986: 16.

Gupta, Santosh. “*The Golden Gate*: The First Indian Novel in Verse.” *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. Ed. & introd. Kirpal Viney. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990. 91-100.

This article acknowledges previous praise of Seth’s novel, notes Seth’s literary preferences and independence from prevailing literary modes, and places the novel in the narrative tradition of Byron’s *Don Juan*. In his summary of the story, Gupta finds Seth’s treatment of love and marriage to reflect an Indian rather than American attitude. Acknowledging the novel’s limitations--such as a shallowness in characterization--Gupta praises Seth for his straightforward narrative mode, his flexible use of narrative voice and tone, and his technical skill in managing meter and rhyme. Gupta ends by praising the novel’s “remarkably vivid and colourful evocation of the life of San Francisco.”

Hill, Rowena. “Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*: A Quick Look.” *The Literary Criterion* 21.4 (1986): 87-90.

A grudging review. Though the reviewer finds the book to be a successful novel,

carefully structured and balanced, rapidly paced, with clearly identified characters who are viewed with both irony and compassion, she is repulsed by “a flaw in values,” for she finds a disturbing implied equivalence between the plea for human survival (Father O’Hare’s speech) and Phil’s plea for homosexual enjoyment. She finds “a dose of gloating . . . in Seth’s celebrations of the California way of life” and finds it hard to see how he can be considered an Indian writer. She finds the intrusion of the narrator “doubtfully successful,” some of the comments “silly,” the people “too small, too human-centred” to fit the “grandeur and beauty of their natural surroundings,” but she praises Seth’s mastery and versatility in handling the tetrameter sonnet.

Hollander, John. “Yuppie Time, in Rhyme.” *The New Republic* 21 Apr. 1986: 32-34.

Hollander praises *The Golden Gate* as a “glittering novel,” a “brilliantly fashioned tale of life among a number of Bay Area yuppies,” and a “charmingly unique sort of minor masterpiece.” Specifically, he praises the expertly controlled verse (and points out various ways--meditative asides, catalogs, conversation, oration, description—Seth uses Pushkin’s stanza), the narration, and Seth’s ear for rhymed verse and the ironies and tonalities of colloquial speech.

Hollinghurst, Alan. “In the Onegin Line.” *The Times Literary Supplement* 4 July 1986: 733.

After describing the virtues of the Pushkin stanza as a vehicle for social verse narrative, Hollinghurst delivers a split opinion about *The Golden Gate*: it is a “technical tour de force,” but it is also a “bizarre book.” The reviewer feels that there should have been more authorial intrusion. If the author abstains from his role as guide, then the characters and concerns are wrapped in a “motiveless irony” by the “ambiguous ethos of the Pushkin stanza.” Thus, the form prevents the subtlety and naturalness of prose narrative, and one finds it hard to care about Seth’s characters.

Iannone, Carol. “Yuppies in Rhyme.” *Commentary* 3 Sep. 1986: 54-56.

After praising Seth’s mastery of versification, Iannone convincingly points out a number of problems with the content of *The Golden Gate*: 1) the ideas and themes are contemporary liberal orthodoxies; 2) the characterizations are sketchy and flat; 3) the characters are graded on a scale of moral possibilities (with regard to such concerns as

peace or attitude toward work); 4) racial and ethnic characterizations are crude; 5) homosexuality is shown as life-enhancing and spiritually expansive. For Iannone, the book's "fatal failing" is Seth's limited attitude toward his characters.

Kennedy, X. J. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 6 Apr. 1986: 1+.

A rather breezy review that notes that the book provoked much commotion by being a modern rarity, a novel in verse. Kennedy assures the reader that *The Golden Gate* is "a true novel" that "conducts us on a psychological safari through five interesting souls." Although Seth's characters are "ordinary" and Seth "gently preaches indirect sermons we have heard before," the book is a "splendid tour de force" that "finally hooks us into caring less about its author's skill than in caring how its sad and wistful comedy will turn out."

King, Bruce. "Postmodernism and Neo-formalist Poetry: Seth, Steele, and Strong Measures." *The Southern Review* 23.1 (Winter 1987): 224-231.

In a sometimes technical discussion of poetic forms, King praises Seth highly as "a serious poet worthy of consideration with the best today." Seth is "one of the international writers without a homeland," and he has written "a love song to San Francisco for its beauty and as a symbol of the contemporary good life." The characters may be cliché, but they represent various American subcultures. The self-conscious narrative is fun, the rhymes delight, each stanza has some pleasure, and the brisk movement of the main story is enhanced by ingenious interruptions, contrasts, and unexpected twists. Seth's remarkable achievement is to have combined the artifice of narrative satire with the immediacy of free verse. For King, "*The Golden Gate* is the most interesting, unexpected, original book of new poetry in years."

Lehman, David. "A Sonnet to San Francisco." *Newsweek* 14 Apr. 1986, US ed.: 74-75.

Briefly summarizing the story by quoting quite a lot of lines, Lehman praises Seth's first novel as "utterly original and utterly delightful." In Lehman's opinion, Seth writes with the "fluidity and directness of prose," but with a "buoyancy and intensity available only in verse," and thus succeeds in writing first-rate fiction while revitalizing verse as a storytelling medium. With his joyous wit and his ability to make the reader care about his characters, Seth's novel works as an "antidote to the trendy nihilism on display



in so many first novels these days.”

Leslie, Jacques. “Rhyme and Reason.” *Los Angeles Times Magazine* 8 June 1986: 16.

Miyawaki, Takao. “*The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth.” This Month’s Masterpiece. *CAT (Cross and Talk)* July 1999: 28-29.

Mungo, Raymond. “Modern Love in Rhythm and Rhyme.” *The New York Times Book Review* 11 May 1986: 11.

A peculiar review in Pushkin stanzas that is basically a witty plot and character summary of *The Golden Gate*. Only a few points are made about Seth and his novel: though it is a “most ambitious / Throwback to our literary past,” the quality of verse ranges “from great to doggerel.” The novel disappointingly lacks a fourteenth chapter (thus violating the sonnet pattern), but the review ends by quoting Seth’s “best” stanza to show he may be considered a potential laureate poet.

Paranjape, Makarand R. “*The Golden Gate* and the Quest for Self-Realization.” *ACLALS Bulletin* 8.1 (1989): 58-73.

A lengthy analysis that insists *The Golden Gate* is a serious enquiry into the meaning of life in the contemporary world rather than merely a trendy celebration of Yuppiedom. In a detailed examination of John, the central character, Paranjape points out the moral values asserted by the book: love (not passion), friendship, and the trio of tolerance, acceptance, and flexibility. Enjoyment of life is celebrated and peace is the most important social value, but the last chapters, showing John’s suffering and change, give the book “an unexpected depth.”

Parrinder, Patrick. “Games-Playing.” *London Review of Books* 7 Aug. 1986: 8-9.

Perloff, Marjorie. “‘Homeward Ho!’: Silicon Valley Pushkin.” *The American Poetry Review* 15.6 (Nov.-Dec. 1986): 37-46.

In her lengthy, academic, and basically negative review, Perloff is sceptical of the extravagant praise of *The Golden Gate*. Comparing Seth unfavorably to Pushkin, Byron, and even Cole Porter, Perloff finds his diction often at fault, ruled by the rhyme

scheme rather than appropriate to the character. Wit is muffed, rhymes are “merely cute” or “flat,” the plot is predictable, and characters are “pure paper dolls” and tired cliché. She ties the interest in Seth’s book to academic battles about the nature of poetry, and she credits Seth for calling “a renewed attention to the role of sound in poetry,” but for her his “cream puff” fails to rise.

Zirin, Mary F. *Library Journal* July 1986: 111.

A negative capsule review of a “curious work.” The plot uses ironic reversals of fate, there are powerful passages, and Seth’s ambition should be respected, but he is no Pushkin: “Often, however, the thud of clumsy stress jars the reader, and overall the work is wordy, pedestrian imitation of Onegin’s perfect fusion of form and plot.”

### **Book Reviews of *All You Who Sleep Tonight***

Hupp, Steven. *Library Journal* 15 May 1990: 80.

A brief but brutal book review which attacks Seth’s “lockstep meter and corny rhymes.” Hupp finds Seth’s poems to be “utterly devoid of subtext; what little meaning exists is all on the surface.” What is even more inexcusable is that that surface—“the surface meanings, and the forms that express them”—is not “beautiful.” The reviewer bluntly declares that this collection “should not have seen the light of day.”

Mackinnon, Lachlan. “Brief and Bald.” *The Times Literary Supplement* 21-27 Sep. 1990: 1007.

This review points out that Seth’s skill is not uniform. The “humdrum sentiments and linguistic inertia” sometimes look obvious in the short poems in this collection, while Seth gets away with them in his long verse narrative, *The Golden Gate*, because of its “narrative impulse.” Mackinnon believes Seth, like Byron, needs “a demanding, expansive form” to best convey his natural gifts—his “variety” and “digressiveness”—which the shorter form tends to inhibit.

Perry, John Oliver. *World Literature Today* 65 (Summer 1991): 549-550.

Though the poems of this collection continue to be written in rhyme and to make particular points, “to effect closure,” Perry does not regard it as a success like the earlier *The Golden Gate*. He describes the longest poem in the collection as “rather drably

descriptive, uninspired,” and quotes lines to show other negative points, but he also praises several poems set in China as being “the most clever and moving.”

### **Articles on and Book Reviews of *A Suitable Boy***

Adams, Phoebe-Lou. *The Atlantic* June 1993: 134.

Adams describes and characterizes the four families involved in what appears to be just “a domestic comedy” at the start, but which is recognized later as a “sweeping portrayal of India in the 1950s.” She finds Seth equally skillful with running narrative as a whole and with the individual set pieces in this novel, which is “enormously varied, unfailingly interesting, funny, sad, exasperating, and appealing.”

Aithal, S. Krishnamoorthy. “Humor in the House of Contemporary Indian-English Fiction.” *Commonwealth Novel in English* 9-10 (Spring-Fall 2001): 30-67.

Atkins, Angela. “Land as Legislative Space in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* and Phanishwarnath Renu’s *Maila Anchal*.” *SOAS Literary Review* 3 (Autumn 2001). 14pp. Online.

<http://www.soas.ac.uk/soaslit/>

Baneth-Nouailhetas, Emilienne. “Forms of Creation in *A Suitable Boy*.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 22.2 (Spring 2000): 69-83.

Buchan, James. “A Foreign Country is the Past.” *The Spectator* 27 March 1993: 31.

Catling, Patrick Skene. “Caste in a Modern Light.” *Evening Standard* 18 March 1993: 45. Online. LexisNexis.

---. “Books of the Year.” Rev. of four books, including *A Suitable Boy*. *The Spectator* 20 Nov. 1993: 41.

In the section about Seth’s book, Catling announces it is “a triumph of story-telling over pretentious literary faddism.” He explains Seth’s “direct narrative thrust,” which eventually resolves some problems in the main story--modern courtship within the traditional match-making of conservative Indian family life--continuously

gains strength, never diminished by incidental episodes of various crises in his “enthraling romantic saga.”

Chopra, Marie. “Vast Panoply of Indian Life Entwines All Sects, Caste.” *The Washington Times* 6 Mar. 1993: Online. LexisNexis.

Clee, Nicholas. “Vikram Seth.” *Sunday Times* 21 Mar. 1993: Online. LexisNexis.

Coles, Joanna. “A Suitable Soap Goes the Literary Distance with 1,400-Page Tome.” *The Guardian* 5 Nov. 1992: 28. Online. LexisNexis.

Dalrymple, William. “Such a Talented Boy.” *The Sydney Morning Herald* 3 Apr. 1993: 46.

In this rather casual book review sprinkled with quotes from an interview with Seth, Dalrymple describes the book's style and subject matter as “antiquated,” and he points out that unlike the works of many Third World novelists, Seth’s novel contains “no witches, spirits or succubi.” He praises Seth’s conservative style--he calls it “delightfully unmodish”--in comparison with most other Commonwealth writers such as Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri, who “have made their reputation through literary innovation or iconoclasm.” For Dalrymple, Seth seems to have drawn his inspiration from “the pure waters of 19-century masters” such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Tolstoy.

Desai, Anita. “Sitting Pretty.” *The New York Review of Books* 27 May 1993: 22-26.

Without falling into the extremes of praising the novel shallowly or criticizing it harshly, Desai presents a well-proportioned and fair criticism of Seth’s work. Her review ranges from the domestic scenes to the political strife, all the while informing the reader about Indian culture and society. It has been said that several episodes in this huge novel would have made more shapely independent stories by themselves, but Desai’s contention is that by intricately interweaving all these tales, Seth manages to “reproduce India on a scale in keeping with its history, its population, its diversity, and abundance of life.”

Ellison, Mike. “Choice Words for Booker Judges as Favourite Is Left on the Shelf.” *The*

*Guardian* 23 Sep. 1993: 26. Online. LexisNexis.

Gross, John, ed. *The New Oxford Book of English Prose*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

In the section which deals with the English-language authors of the Indian subcontinent, Seth is discussed along with other Indian writers such as Nirad Chaudhuri and Salman Rushdie. They are described as being taken more seriously around the world these days. Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is called "vast wrist-breaking" book (Information through Roger Buckley's "Five Hundred Years of the English Written Word," a review of *The New Oxford Book of English Prose*, in *Asahi Evening News* 13-14 Feb. 1999: 15.)

Grossman, Cathy Lynn. "Seth's '*Suitable Boy*' Is a True Heavyweight." *USA Today* 11 May 1993: 1D. Online. LexisNexis.

Hopper, Brad. *Booklist* 15 Mar. 1993: 1276.

In this capsule review, Hopper calls Seth's novel "an evocative domestic drama by an Indian about India." He promises that the reader who can wade through this "huge" and "long-winded" novel will be rewarded by the drama, which is focused on "four families, displaying domestic frustrations and successes played out against a backdrop of the clash between traditional and modern ways."

Iyer, Pico. "The Empire Writes Back." *Time* 8 Feb. 1993, Asia ed.: 50-55.

This article about "World Fiction" or "Postcolonial Writing" shows how authors from Britain's former colonies have begun to dominate the English literary scene with their exotic contributions, having recently received or been short-listed for various literary prizes. In addition to Salman Rushdie, who has been regarded as "the godfather of postcolonial writing," the authors featured here include Vikram Seth, Michael Ondaatje, Ben Okri, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

---. "India Day by Day." *The Times Literary Supplement* 19 Mar. 1993: 20.

Iyer mentions the general tendency among Indians writing in English to deal with exotic scenes in exotic terms, and points out that Seth is different in trying "to usher India into the drawing room, to make it seem as everyday and close to us as

nineteenth-century . . . Regency Bath.” The “uneventfulness” in a novel portraying “a life-sized, human, unextraordinary India” makes Seth closer to Jane Austen and E. M. Forster than to Dickens, and Iyer believes this “benign refusal” to dwell on obvious traumas and death is ideally matched by the “gentle pacing,” “directness,” and “lucidity” of Seth’s prose. The novel has also been likened to Tolstoy and George Eliot for its “spacious realism,” but Iyer’s choice as the closest parallel is Tanizaki’s *Makioka Sisters*.

Jenkyns, Richard. “As the Raj Turns.” *The New Republic* 14 June 1993: 41-44.

Jenkyns points out that Seth’s novel is a different kind of postcolonial novel, free of the “covert nationalism” which is often seen in other postcolonial writers. Although the novel is a “publishing phenomenon” and has been getting “favorable reviews,” Jenkyns does not think this domestic saga qualifies to be likened to Dickens, Tolstoy, Austen, or George Eliot because it lacks “intimacy,” “passion,” and “psychological penetration.” He seems in particular disagreement with the heroine’s choice of her suitable husband.

Johnson, Daniel. “Seth’s Subcontinent of a Novel.” *The Times* 25 Mar. 1993: 37.

Johnson praises this “genial comedy in Indian manners” as “a work in the tradition of 19th-century realism, filtered through a late 20th-century sensibility,” and claims that being “readable” does not prevent its being “an artefact,” like Rushdie’s works. Johnson finds that although Seth observes the problems of Indian society “with the zest of a Trollope or a Waugh,” he shines most brilliantly “in the domestic and romantic spheres.” He also points out that Seth is not a mere “salon wit,” but that the novel “plumbs the depths,” too.

Jones, Nicolette. “Imagination Knows No Frontiers.” *The Times* 31 Mar. 1993: 31.

Kanga, Firdaus. “The Leaden Echo.” *Poetry Review* 83.1 (Spring 1993): 68-69.

Kaveney, Roz. “An Epic from Scratch.” *New Statesman and Society* 19 Mar. 1993: 40.

Kaveney links Seth’s novel to the “Great Tradition” by likening its “affairs of the heart” to those in Austen and George Eliot, and its “public, masculine matters” to those in Tolstoy. Seth’s fondness for “set pieces” is also pointed out, and the reviewer

defends this tendency by claiming that such episodes in a novel “model the complexity of life.” This “thoroughly peopled novel” is not perfect, according to the reviewer, for there are moments of sentimentality which “belong rather to the genre of historical romance than to the serious novel of period and nation-building.”

Kemp, Peter. “A Caste of Thousands.” *The Sunday Times* 21 Mar. 1993: 7. Online. LexisNexis.

King, Bruce. *World Literature Today* 68 (Spring 1994): 431-32.

For King, “Seth has been shamefully ignored by the academic critical elite, probably because he does not fit into current expectations of the postcolonial,” but he is a “major writer” whose *A Suitable Boy* “has the fullness of life of the great nineteenth-century novels.” Seth uses the Jane Austen theme of a search for a suitable marriage partner as a guide through Indian society and politics during the early 1950s. The young lady makes a sensible rather than romantic choice, as the novel values tolerance, common sense, and practicality.

*Kirkus Reviews* 15 Mar. 1993: 327-28.

Seth’s novel is summarized as an “adipose saga” which “counterbalances a book of social manners . . . with a historical account . . . of the subcontinent.” This negative review determines that Seth falls into the same trap in this novel as he did in *The Golden Gate*, which “was clever and energetic in concept but dull and soapy in final effect.” The reviewer also points out that this “fat but fatuous” story encompassing “four well-off families, with a focus mostly on the younger members,” reminds one of Tanizaki’s classic Japanese masterpiece, *The Makioka Sisters*.

Lanchester, John. “Indian Summa.” *London Review of Books* 22 Apr. 1993: 9.

The novel has two main strands—Lata’s search for a husband and Maan’s search for something to do with his life--and Seth constructs a vivid and diverse portrait of Indian life around them, using a wide variety of interlinked characters and stories. The model for *A Suitable Boy* is not so much 19th-century masterpieces as India itself. Seth’s style is lucid and the structure of the novel is remarkably clear. For Lanchester, *A Suitable Boy* breathes “the unfakable, unmistakable breath of life.”

Lee, Sonya. "Less Than Momentous, More Than Mundane." *A. Magazine: Inside Asian America* 2.3 (31 Oct. 1993): 58.

Mehta, Nina. "A Saga of Four Families in India." *The Christian Science Monitor* 19 July 1993, Eastern ed.: 13.

Seth's book may seem "intimidatingly long," but it is a "deft and straightforward mosaic of stories built around the lives of four families." Mehta gives a summary of the main characters and notes numerous subplots, which "range from music to religious conflict." For Mehta, the novel has "a quiescent tone, a turning away from the tumult of insight, emotion, and cumulative human action." Mrs. Mehra may be one of the strongest characters, but Haresh seems to be Seth's model for India's new citizen: a confident business leader "who combines vision with common sense."

Mills, Beth Ann. *Library Journal* 15 Apr. 1993: 128.

This capsule review praises *A Suitable Boy* as "old-fashioned storytelling at its best." The story of a Hindu family trying to find a suitable husband for their younger daughter becomes "a richly complex tale." The setting of India in the 1950s is vividly realized, there is a lively and idiosyncratic cast of memorable characters, and drama is provided by conflicts between Hindu and Muslim.

Mohan, Raj. "The Superfluous, That Very Necessary Thing." *Little India* 4.9 (30 Sep. 1994): 65-66.

Mohapatra, H. S. "A Burnt-Out Case: Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Realism." *New Quest* 101 (Sep.-Oct. 1993): 313-16.

Moman, Praveen. "The Lost India of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*." *The Times* 25 Mar. 1993: 37.

Moman provides a brief account of Indian society inside and outside Seth's novel. She regards the "baroque, mannered world" in this novel as "wooden and archaic," but admits that the three influences—"Muslims by culture, Hindu by religion and English by education"—among the characters still continue in present Indian society. The biggest



change, she points out, is the attitude of the daughters, who now want to control their own fates, having been inspired by education, independence, and the discovery of equal rights, much more than Lata's generation did.

Myers, David. "Vikram Seth's Epic Renunciation of the Passions: Deconstructing Moral Codes in *A Suitable Boy*." *Indian Literature Today*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 1994. 79-102.

Paranjape, Makarand. "A Suitable Author." *The Week* 9 May 1999: Online.

In his book review of *An Equal Music*, Paranjape criticizes *A Suitable Boy* for being "devoid of great conflicts or enduring passions, a far cry from [a publisher's] boast that it was the novel of the century to be compared with *War and Peace*." Paranjape, a poet himself, considers Seth to be primarily a poet and *The Golden Gate* to be Seth's best work. He has written a lengthy analysis of *The Golden Gate*.

Pass Notes. "No. 114 / Vikram Seth." *The Guardian* 22 Mar. 1993: 3. Online. LexisNexis.

Porlock, Harvey. "Any Advance on Tolstoy?" *The Sunday Times* 28 Mar. 1993: Online. LexisNexis.

Rayan, Krishna. "Suggestion or Statement?: Three Contemporary Cases." *New Quest* 106 (July-Aug. 1994): 203-208 + 234-.

Robinson, Eugene. "A Tolstoy--On His First Try." *The Washington Post* 1 May 1993, : Online.. (The same article appeared as "Indian Author's rendezvous with Fame" in *International Herald Tribune* 5 May 1993: 20.)

Rollason, Christopher. "On Some Aspects of Language in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*." *Atlantic Literary Review* 3.3 (July-Sep. 2002): 69-95. Online.  
<http://www.geocities.com/atlanticliteraryreview>

Roy, Amit. "Channel 4 Scraps £5m Indian Drama." *Daily Telegraph* 11 Dec. 1996.

This newspaper article reports that Channel 4, the British TV station, has

decided to drop its “most ambitious project,” a 10-hour dramatization of Vikram Seth’s novel, *A Suitable Boy*. The reason given for the cancellation is quoted as: “One of the problems of such a vast book is that there was a real sense of loss when it was adapted for the screen.” It would have been screened to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Indian independence in 1997.

Shapiro, Laura. “Easy Reading, Heavy Lifting.” *Newsweek* 7 June 1993, Asia ed.: between 44-45. (Originally appeared on p. 62 in *Newsweek* 24 May 1993, US ed.)

Shapiro finds “something strangely appealing” about Seth’s novel despite its length and flaws. For Shapiro, Seth’s mild tones deflate any tension: “we are never very moved by what Seth tells us about his characters’ deepest emotions. As a narrator he is more of a chess player, moving his people strategically about the text, than he is a dramatist.” On the other hand, Shapiro is impressed by the dozens of interlocking subplots and the “quantity of vivid detail” that brings scenes to life.

Sharma, L. K. “Booker Shortlist Raises Hackles.” *The Times of India* 27 Sep. 1993.

Spalding, Frances. “Fiction” section. *TES* 7 May 1993: 10.

Thieme, John, ed. *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. London: Arnold, 1996. 747-751.

As one of the selections from different genres, Seth’s novel is summarized and a few pages from the novel are included with some vocabulary notes in this anthology. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* is called a “great classic,” and Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* is described as a “gargantuan novel.”

Tsuga, Masayuki. “Vikram Seth no Taiga-Shosetsu: *A Suitable Boy* wo Yomu” (“Vikram Seth’s Saga Novel: Reading *A Suitable Boy*”). *Eigo Seinen (The Rising Generation)* 1860.1 (Feb. 2004): 27-29.

Towers, Robert. “Good Enough for Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother.” *The New York Times Book Review* 9 May 1993: 3+.

Seth’s ambitious attempt to join “an essentially tidy, Jane Austen-like main plot

with an attempt to re-create the multitudinous life of post-British India” fails as “an important work of literary art.” Seth’s rather distanced interest in his characters--and the multitude of characters--produces no unforgettable ones: “In his drive toward inclusiveness, he has sacrificed intensity. He does not . . . probe deeply enough to achieve the kind of impassioned empathy that renders a character unforgettable.” For Towers, the narrative is too diffuse, and *A Suitable Boy* is no *War and Peace* or *Middlemarch*.

Walker, J. H. “Trunks of the Banyan Tree: History, Politics, & Fiction.” *Island Magazine* 63 (Winter 1995): 18-26.

Focusing on history and politics as they are presented in fiction, Walker compares Seth unfavorably with the Indonesian writer Pramoedya. In his depiction of India, Seth marginalizes agents of change (particularly women, who are trivialized), accepts the repressive constraints of caste, class, and religion, and approves the political dynamics of patronage. Hence, “the world of *A Suitable Boy* is reducible to a domestic framework which denies India’s potential for change,” for Seth is “politically one-dimensional and reductive.” Though narrowly focused, this is an impressively serious and thoughtful essay. Its pointed criticism of Seth as a political writer must be taken into account.

Wood, James. *The Guardian* 16 Mar. 1993: 9.

Seth may lack the moral concentration and intensity of a Tolstoy or George Eliot, and he may sometimes be flat and sloppy as a writer, but *A Suitable Boy* is “rich and epical . . . so vast and so amiably peopled” that it deserves thousands of suitable readers. Wood finds Seth’s characters to be lovable, brilliant creations rendered in “stunningly lively portraits.” For Wood, “life blows through this novel in a storm of detail and comedy.”

---. “Edinburgh Festival: Accidents Will Happen.” *The Guardian* 2 Sep. 1993: 9. Online. LexisNexis.

Worth, Robert. “India--All of It.” *Commonweal* 21 May 1993: 25-26.

Despite the ambitious scope of *A Suitable Boy*, which encompasses important political and social issues, Seth’s emphasis is on the redeeming aspects of private life. In

his desire to be fair, Seth can sound dry and passionless. In comparison with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Seth's novel is marked by calm detachment, and Seth treats his characters "with a gentle concern." Seth "focuses on aspects of life that hold society together rather than those that tear it apart," but in aiming at a "vast, comprehensive unity," Seth may have been so moderate as to be bland.

Yardley, Jonathan. "A Dickens for the Subcontinent." *The Washington Post* 25 Apr. 1993: 3.

Yardley's enticingly invitational words are: "Surrender to this strange, beguiling world and be swept away on the wings of the story." He highly praises this novel by saying "it is difficult to imagine that many contemporary writers could give us a novel that provides so much deep satisfaction." Yardley wittily comments that "multiply Middlemarch times Bleak House and you come out with *A Suitable Boy*." The novel is summarized as "bursting with plot, characters, coincidences, adventures, calamities, excitements, and spectacles."

### **Book Reviews of *Arion and the Dolphin***

*The Economist* 26 Nov. 1994: 105.

This review praises this collaboration between the illustrator Jane Ray and Vikram Seth as "firmly resident in the realm of wonder." (It also laments in passing that Seth's *A Suitable Boy* "was ignorantly kept off the 1993 Booker short-list.") The reviewer notes that the story, which was originally written as the verse libretto for an opera, fits beautifully into picture-book format, taking its place alongside the work of "one of the most luminous illustrators at work today."

Estes, Cheri. *School Library Journal* July 1995: 74-75.

Estes regards the story as "a maudlin retelling of an ancient Greek legend," and describes it as having "an overly dramatic, operatic quality." She complains that the story line is confusing and leaves some things unexplained, and she calls Jane Ray's illustrations "unremarkable." John Lonzo Anderson's *Arion and the Dolphins* is mentioned as "not any better written," but "closer to the original."

### **Book Reviews of *An Equal Music***

Adams, Phoebe Lou. *The Atlantic Monthly* July 1999: 97.

Bailey, Paul. "A Pull on the Heart Strings." *The Guardian* 3 Apr. 1999: 8. Online. LexisNexis.

Ballal, Prateeti Punja. "The Strains of Performance." *The Christian Science Monitor* 10 June 1999, Eastern ed.: 16.

Bernhard, Brendan. "Unequal Books." *LA Weekly* 30 Apr.- 6 May 1999: Online.

<http://www.laweekly.com/ink/99/23/wls-bernhard.shtml>

In mentioning Seth's three novels, which are written in completely different styles, Bernhard calls Seth "a kind of literary sprite" who has been "blowing words like bubbles through a reed." Bernhard cites one reviewer who has called Seth's new novel "the finest novel about music ever written in English." For Bernhard, Seth achieves "an impassioned invocation of music's, not time's, power to heal all wounds" in this "story of love lost, found, and then lost again." This review is followed by a telephone interview Bernhard managed to hold with Seth.

*Bold Type*. Online. 15 July 1999.

<http://www.boldtype.com/0599/seth/index.html>

After referring to *A Suitable Boy*, which is "the longest single volume novel ever published in the English language," the reviewer calls Seth's latest book "a far shorter, though equally satisfying novel." In this review, Seth is praised for conveying "the inner life of a musician" and articulating "the joy and pain of creating music."

Carey, John. "Music for the Mind." *The Sunday Times* 28 Mar. 1999: Online. LexisNexis.

Chew, Shirley. "The Art of the Fugue." *The Times Literary Supplement* 2 Apr. 1999: 22.

Christopher, Nicholas. "Quartet for Five." *The New York Times Book Review* 13 June 1999: 34.

Clark, Alex. "Who Are You Looking At?" *The Guardian* 7 Apr. 1999: Online.

<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/guard.htm>

*The Complete Review* 11 Apr. 1999: Online.

<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sethv/equalm.htm>

A negative review of this "flawed romance." Seth's characters in this "sappy story" are described as "incredibly flat," and the central relationship between the protagonist and his lover "does not truly come alive." The reviewers state that the message of this novel is that "art--be it music, poetry, or fiction--is as great, as deep, as true, as important as love, and can be as redeeming," but they dismiss the notion as "absurd." While praising Seth's treatment of music in the novel, the reviewers find Seth has failed to create believable character. The art Seth falls back on is "insufficient to redeem or convince," which is "the greatest failing of *An Equal Music*."

Denby, David. "Heartstrings: Musicians in Love." *The New Yorker* 7 June 1999: 91-92.

"Boy's Toys." *The Economist* 15 May 1999: 12-13.

Ganguly, Meenakshi. "A Maestro at Work." *Time* 24 May 1999: Online.

<http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,26263,00.html>

After briefly discussing Seth's works and his latest novel, which she calls "a vibrant, passion-filled tale," Ganguly makes an interesting point. For her, one of the charms of this novel is that Seth is "effectively colonizing the fictional space of the West." In her view, Seth makes "no attempt to flaunt his Indian-ness" and demands "no indulgence for the exotic experience of being from a distant commonwealth." Ganguly notes Seth's unique position among those Indian writers who appear to be "on a mission to alter the impressions left by Kipling and Naipaul."

Garebian, Keith. "High-Toned Soap Opera with a Great Soundtrack." *The Canadian Forum* Sep. 1999: 37-39.

Gleick, Elizabeth. "Out of Tune." *Time* 31 May 1999: Online.

<http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,25713,00.html>

Comparing Seth's latest novel to *The Golden Gate*, which was in "elegant verse," and the "marvelous, sprawling, and gripping *A Suitable Boy*," Gleick shows her disappointment in *An Equal Music*, likening it to a "sudsy ... soap opera" by writers such as Judith Krantz. In Gleick's opinion, Seth appears to have "hit a flat note" this time. She praises Seth's "extraordinary versatility," but the tone of what she writes makes this praise sound sarcastic.

Holland, Tom. "Bum Notes." *New Statesman* 3 May 1999: 58.

Kapur, Akash. *Salon* 13 May 1999: Online.

<http://www.salon.com/books/review/1999/05/13/seth/index.html>

Referring to Seth's diversity in the topics and settings of his novels, Kapur points out that "unlike most writers of Indian origin whose works are obsessed with the subcontinent, Seth seems at home anywhere in the world." Kapur states that Seth's latest novel, unlike anything he has previously written, is distinguished by "remarkable psychological portraiture." He calls the tale "a gripping and profound meditation of love, music and the irrevocability of time."

Kaufman, Gerald. "Beware: Strings Are Attached." *The Weekly Telegraph* 7-13 Apr. 1999: 22.

In this short and vague review, Kaufman compares Seth's latest novel to "chamber music," in contrast with the "teeming canvas" of *A Suitable Boy*. He praises Seth for his superb depiction of "a man absolutely losing command of himself," especially later in the novel when Holme narrates his own nervous breakdown. In Kaufman's opinion, the only drawback to this novel is, as in *A Suitable Boy*, Seth's characters "take on a life beyond their creator's control," sometimes with "irritating effect."

King, Bruce. *World Literature Today* 74.1 (Winter 2000): 241.

*Kirkus Reviews* 15 Mar. 1999: Online. LexisNexis.

For the reviewer, Seth's novel is a "highly readable if frustratingly uninvolved story of lost love set in the rarefied world of classical music performance." In

summarizing the story, the reviewer shows his/her disappointment by saying “the story’s downbeat ending looms inevitably” in the middle of the story. The reviewer describes this novel as “an uneven array of witty observation and keen writing ... unwisely mixed with soporific romance.”

Kumar, Amitava. “Indian Music, Sans Sitar.” *The Nation* 269.1 (5 July 1999): 30+. Online.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=19990705&s=kumar>

Mars-Jones, Adam. “Words for a String Quartet.” *The Japan Times* 11 Apr. 1999: 15. (Originally appeared in *The Observer* 28 Mar. 1999.)

In this lukewarm review with a number of musical allusions, Mars-Jones calls this novel “a bagatelle” in contrast with the monumental *A Suitable Boy*, which was “a feat of absorption that required something similar from its readers.” In Mars-Jones’ view, Seth’s latest novel has a “touching fervency” as a “love letter to the canon of classical music,” but as a novel it is “something of a nonstarter.” Mars-Jones regrets that the reader who has been “promised big tunes” will be instead offered “almost 400 pages of tuning up.”

McWilliam, Candia. “Vikram Seth: Hearing the Key Theme.” *The Financial Times* 3 Apr. 1999: Online.

<http://doononline.net/lightlights/seth/ft.htm>

Messud, Claire. “Seth’s Novel of Finely Tuned Harmonies.” *The Times* 1 Apr. 1999: Online. LexisNexis.

Nordlinger, Jay. “Seth, Rhymes with ‘Great.’” *National Review* 17 May 1999: 60-61.

“A Suitable Novel.” *The Observer* 16 Jan. 2000: Online.

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,3951121,00.html>

Paranjape, Makarand. “A Suitable Author.” *The Week* 9 May 1999: Online.



<http://www.the-week.com/99may09/life2.htm>

This is an account Paranjape wrote after he attended an evening when Seth launched his latest book and read from it. Paranjape remembers that there was “a controlled modesty and charm to the evening, so typical of Vikram.” He describes this novel as being about “the pain and beauty of love, and of music ... not only about love and music, but also about loss, about sorrow and reconciliation. And loneliness.” He criticizes the novel’s style, especially the characters’ speeches, describing them as “so mannered, metred, and controlled.”

Parks, Tim. “Sentimental Education.” *The New York Review of Books* 15 July 1999: 20-23.

Power, Carla. “Arts & Entertainments” section. *Newsweek* 3 May 1999: 72. : Online. LexisNexis.

Quan, Shirley N. *Library Journal* 15 Apr. 1999: 146.

*Random House Write Up* Mar. 1999: Online.

<http://doononline.com/highlights/seth/rand.htm>

Sardar, Ziauddin. “Maestros Singing from a Very Different Song Sheet.” *Sunday Herald* 4 Apr. 1999 : Online.

[http://www.sundayherald.com/news/newsi.hts?section=7Days&story\\_id=1913](http://www.sundayherald.com/news/newsi.hts?section=7Days&story_id=1913)

In comparing Seth’s new novel to Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, Sardar develops a very negative review of *An Equal Music*. For Sardar, while Seth still has “an eye for detail, for that acute observation that made *A Suitable Boy* such a pleasure,” this time the details are “so mundane, so banal” that they fail to ignite the reader’s interest. Sardar harshly states that the “emotional sterility” of Seth’s novel alienates the reader. Sardar says that both novels are trying to convey the same postmodern message that “art is all there is and all that matters,” but he dismisses both writers because “the notion of art as a universal theory of deliverance just does not wash.”

Schenk, Leslie. *American Book Review* May/June 2000: 28.

Seaman, Donna. *Booklist* 15 Mar. 1999: 1261.

Sutcliffe, William. *The Independent* 4 Apr. 1999: Online.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/books/stories/BR002326.htm>

Sutcliffe tries to justify the biased views of Seth's works, which have been criticized as not quite "serious" and a little "Soap Operatic" in tone. In Sutcliffe's opinion, critics seem to have the curious belief that "clear, unfussy prose is somewhat not 'heavyweight.'" While the "baroque, flashy contortions" of some of the post-colonial writers are "regularly slobbered over by literary prize judges," writers like Seth are "inevitably passed over," because critics are "blind to the labour and skill behind the flawless, transparent prose." Though it is a fairly short novel compared to *A Suitable Boy*, Sutcliffe believes *An Equal Music* is too long: it is "a 400-page novella" whose "precision and beauty undermine themselves through overkill."

Warwick, Jacqueline. Rev. of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* by Salman Rushdie and *An Equal Music*. *Warwick Review*: Online. 11 Mar. 2003.

[http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/echo/Volume1\\_Issue1/book%20reviews/warwick-review.html](http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/echo/Volume1_Issue1/book%20reviews/warwick-review.html)

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## Part Two

### Section One: Post-Colonial Literature

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. 1989. London: Routledge, 2002.

---. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.

A comprehensive glossary of the terms necessary to understand post-colonial theory. It has extensive cross-referencing, suggestions for further reading at the end of each entry, a bibliography of essential writings in post-colonial studies, name and subject indexes, and is presented in an easy-to-use alphabetical format.

---. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.

A substantial collection of 86 articles in post-colonial theory and criticism, divided into 14 sections such as “Nationalism,” “Hybridity,” “Place,” and “Ethnicity and Indigeneity.” It covers a wide range of topics and issues, and reflects the diversity of work in the field and the vibrancy of post-colonial writing. It includes an impressive bibliography and a name/subject index.

Eagleton, Terry, Frederic Jameson, and Edward W. Said. *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Introd. Seamus Deane. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990.

A collection of three essays—“Nationalism: Irony and Commitment” by Eagleton, “Modernism and Imperialism” by Jameson, and “Yeats and Decolonization” by Said. Each deals with the question of nationalism and the role of “cultural production” as a force in understanding and analyzing the aftermath of colonization.

Gugelberger, Georg M. “Postcolonial Cultural Studies.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994. 581-85.

This entry in the encyclopedic Guide describes the development of postcolonial cultural studies, also noting important milestones in postcolonial writing since the 1950s. It also discusses the diversity of postcolonial theory, noting negative views of postcolonial writing, such as those which see it as mere resistance or as having no unitary quality, and points out the similarities and differences between postmodern literature and postcolonial writing.

Iyer, Pico. “The Empire Writes Back.” *Time* 8 Feb. 1993, Asia ed.: 50-55.

This article about “World Fiction” or “Postcolonial Writing” shows how authors from Britain’s former colonies have begun to dominate the English literary scene with their exotic contributions, having recently received or been short-listed for various literary prizes. In addition to Salman Rushdie, who has been regarded as “the godfather of postcolonial writing,” the authors featured here include Vikram Seth, Michael Ondaatje, Ben Okri, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993. New York: Vintage, 1994.

An important work of cultural criticism that emphasizes the relation of literary criticism to the vast social, cultural, and political problems of the present. Said draws dramatic connections among Western imperialism, the Western culture that reflected and reinforced it, and local resistance to that imposed culture, discussing such varied writers as Austen and Dickens, Joyce and Yeats, and Chinua Achebe, Albert Camus, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and Wole Soyinka.

---. *Orientalism*. 1978. New York: Vintage, 1979.

In his enormously influential book, Said defines Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” Thus, Orientalism is a form of cultural domination and a projection of geopolitical bias into literary and scholarly texts. Once this structure of cultural domination is realized, however, Orientalism offers students of literature and criticism “a marvelous instance of the interrelations between society, history, and textuality.” Although his focus is on the Islamic Orient, Said’s book led to increased scholarly interest in postcolonial literature.

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## Section Two: Modern Indian History and Culture

“The End of the Raj.” *Life* Fall 1997: 30-31.

Ranked as No. 86 in “The Millennium: 100 Events that Changed the World,” this column notes the imposition of colonial rule of the vast South Asian subcontinent in 1857, the beginnings of the nationalist movement and Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent resistance, India’s independence from the British Empire in 1947, and its situation after 50 years of independence as the world's largest parliamentary democracy.

Jussawalla, Feroza. “Indian Theory and Criticism.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994. 399-404.

This entry maintains that there is an unbroken line of literary theory and criticism in Indian culture that goes back as far as the Western tradition, which essentially

derives from the Greeks. It explains how the practice and appreciation of literature was deeply woven into religion and daily life in India, and also mentions modern Indian writing in English.

Mehta, Gita. *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*. 1997. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1998.

Through 35 short essays, Mehta serves as a guide to the folkways and history, the culture and politics, the ancient traditions and current concerns of India, which is the world's most populous democracy though still upholding the caste system, an ancient civilization that has just celebrated fifty years as a modern nation. This book includes a political chronology since independence from the British Empire.

Naipaul, V. S. *An Area of Darkness*. 1964. London: Penguin, 1968.

A darkly reflective and semi-autobiographical account of a year in India. Coming from a family which left India two generations ago, Naipaul felt that his roots lay in India and spent a year there visiting various regions. With his novelist's perception and sense of irony, he both describes the places, people, and incidents he encounters, and manages to convey the meaning which lies behind them.

---. *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. 1990. New York: Penguin, 1992.

In this book of travel writing, Naipaul relates the stories of many of the people he met when he first visited India more than thirty years ago. Through his impassioned observations and disturbing insights, he explores how those people have been steered by the innumerable frictions in Indian society such as the contradictions and compromises of religious faith or the whims and chaos of random political forces.

---. *India: A Wounded Civilization*. 1977. London: Penguin, 1979.

A more analytical study of Indian attitudes. Thirteen years after his first visit to India and two more visits later, Naipaul recapitulates the feelings aroused in him by this vast, mysterious, and agonized continent which has been wounded by a thousand years of foreign rule. He evokes what he saw and heard superbly and vividly.

Rushdie, Salman. "Mohandas Gandhi." *Time* 13 Apr. 1998, Asia ed.: 62-65.

Gandhi is chosen as one of twenty leaders and revolutionaries in the first of *Time's* special series, "The 20th Century's Most Influential People." Writer and fellow countryman Salman Rushdie tells the life story of this man who was a passionate opponent of modernity and technology, who believed in nonviolence, and who shaped a nation's struggle for freedom until he was killed by a fanatic in 1948.

Stein, Burton. *A History of India*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

An original, succinct, but sustained narrative of the development of Indian society, culture, and polity from 70,000 BC to the present. In this substantial book, Stein relates contemporary India to a rich and varied past. A number of maps and photographs are provided throughout the text, and there is a helpful glossary of non-English terms, as well as name and subject indexes.

Stern, Robert W. *Changing India: Bourgeois Revolution on the Subcontinent*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

A comprehensive introduction to contemporary Indian society that focuses on changes from within, such as family values or caste and class consciousness, and changes brought about from such larger influences as British imperialism, Indian nationalism, and Muslim separatism. It contains a glossary of Indian terms, maps and tables, and a guide to further reading.

Tharoor, Shashi. *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*. New York: Arcade, 1997.

An illuminating introduction to India from the viewpoint of the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the variety of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices, and the range of levels of economic development. It covers the period of India's independence from the British Empire through its 50th anniversary in 1997. A chronology of major events and a glossary of Indian terms are helpful.