



# Multilingual Identity and Cultural Belonging in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* through the lens of multilingual identity and cultural belonging. Although the novel is set in 1980s San Francisco and follows the lives of American characters, its form, style, and themes reflect the transnational, multicultural identity of its author. Written entirely in verse using a Russian poetic form, the novel offers a unique look at global literary traditions, the politics of language, and the complex search for identity and connection in a multilingual world. Through characters who struggle with isolation, activism, and emotional displacement, Seth reflects his own diasporic consciousness and challenges traditional ideas of nationality and belonging.*

**Keywords:** multilingual, identity, cultural belonging, diaspora, tradition

## Introduction

The Golden Gate, written by Vikram Seth in 1986, is among the most innovative and distinctive pieces of modern literature. Using the Onegin stanza, a poetic style popularized by Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, this novel, which is entirely in poetry, tells the story of a group of young professionals in San Francisco in the 1980s. The work is heavily impacted by Seth's own ethnic and multilingual identity, while being supposedly an American tale written in English. Given that Seth is an Indian author who attended Stanford and Oxford, as well as having been exposed to a variety of literary traditions, including Chinese, Russian, American, British, and Indian, The Golden Gate is an engaging case study for examining

questions of multilingual identity and cultural belonging. This essay explores how, while being set in an American city and having a high number of American characters, The Golden Gate reflects and navigates themes of multilingual identity, diasporic sensibility, and cultural belonging. Although the novel's protagonists do not specifically examine Indian or immigrant identities, its form and subtext offer deeper insights into Seth's own status as a transnational, cosmopolitan author writing in a language that is both alien and local.

Knowledge of the literary and cultural background of multilingualism is crucial before delving into Seth's work. Multilingualism is defined in literary studies as not only the coexistence of



many languages but also the interaction of various worldviews, syntactic patterns, cultural viewpoints, and semantic registers within a single text or throughout an author's body of work. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri are just a few of the authors who have examined how English, as a colonial and international language, can be a tool for both tyranny and emancipation. Despite being less obviously political than these peers, Vikram Seth likewise deals with this tension. Although he uses flawless English verse in *The Golden Gate*, his cultural viewpoint is not based on a single identity. Instead, it transcends literary, linguistic, and national boundaries with ease. In this context, being multilingual involves more than just speaking and understanding several languages. It involves using several cultural logics when writing and thinking. His own multilingual and cosmopolitan upbringing is reflected in Seth's usage of a Russian verse, a Western setting, and a philosophical framework based on universal humanism.

The most immediately striking feature of *The Golden Gate* is its form. Each stanza of the 14-line sonnets, which are written in iambic tetrameter, follows a rigid rhyme pattern (aBaBccDDeFFeGG), which was taken from *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin. The book has a distinct rhythm and tone because of this form, which is rarely utilized in English fiction and hardly ever employed for a whole novel. The form selection is important for comprehending multilingual identity: One indication of transcultural hybridity is Seth's choice to write in English about Americans while embracing a Russian poetry form. It displays his capacity to traverse several literary traditions, or literary multilingualism. Even though he writes in English, he is influenced by Russian formalism, which is a rigorous literary tradition that places a strong focus on technical aspects of writing. Seth's linguistic identity is influenced by literary history as well as region and ethnicity, as this combination demonstrates. A sort of cultural translation, the novel is a transfer from one literary tradition to another, rather than from one spoken language to another.

In any language, writing a novel in poetry is difficult, but writing in English, particularly when utilizing a foreign meter and rhyme system, calls for intense proficiency. Seth's proficiency in other languages is evident in his classically poetic English, which is not merely proficient. Even though English was a colonial language in India, this decision also shows how English has evolved into a medium for international cultural expression. In order to demonstrate how language, like culture, can be both a creative space and a limitation, Seth ironically contrasts the characters' feelings and identities with the verse form's rigidity.

Despite the fact that none of the primary characters in *The Golden Gate* are overtly South Asian or Indian, the book delicately examines cultural belonging via the characters' intellectual and emotional development. As a successful software programmer, the main character, John Brown, battles emotions of isolation, purposelessness, and alienation. Racial or ethnic identification is not the source of his estrangement; rather, it stems from existential dislocation, a sense of rootlessness that many people experience in contemporary urban living. Even though John is a member of society, his alienation from it serves as a metaphor for the diaspora experience. He is emotionally lost despite being physically at home in San Francisco. This emotional state mirrors the more profound cultural state of not belonging, which is a recurring issue in immigrant and postcolonial literature. Among the most interesting characters in the book is Phil. Phil is a gay lawyer and activist who finally starts dating John. His storyline examines social action, such as anti-nuclear demonstrations and legal battles, in addition to sexual identity. Phil has a complex identity. He is morally motivated, politically aware, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. His sense of place is based on connections and values rather than geography. This demonstrates an emotional and ideological bond that goes beyond ethnicity or culture. Through Phil, Seth demonstrates that finding significance in common values and experiences is more important than one's place of birth or passport. Both Janet, an artist and single mother, and her ex-husband Ed are complicated individuals who must



balance their sense of political and personal identity. Ed, who becoming more radical, looks to anti-nuclear activity for purpose, while Janet attempts to strike a balance between parenthood and artistic expression. Between ideology and pragmatism, between job and family, their fight symbolizes the cultural complexities of contemporary life, where belonging is frequently fractured. Seth highlights the inconsistencies of cultural life in a multilingual, multinational world by presenting these conflicts rather than trying to provide answers.

The Golden Gate's lack of Indian characters or Indian scenery, which sets it apart from the writings of other Indian English authors like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, or Rohinton Mistry, is one of its most talked-about features. This absence, however, does not mean that Indian identity is being rejected. It instead signifies a reinterpretation of Indian identity as something that is broadened by international experience rather than restricted by geography or ethnicity. The tone, form, and philosophical viewpoint of the book all contribute to Seth's sense of self. Despite being universal, the novel's questions about love, labor, religion, politics, and sexuality are viewed through a diasporic perspective that emphasizes transparency, diversity, and self-reflection. The ability to view American culture from both the inside and the outside, with empathy and critical distance, is what makes Seth Indian, not the subject matter. Even though The Golden Gate is written in English, it shows a profound interest in linguistic politics. In postcolonial thought, English is frequently viewed as a liberating medium as well as a colonial imposition. This contrast is complicated by Seth. He does not, like Rushdie, employ English in a subversive, hybridized form or to establish cultural supremacy. Rather, he reclaims English as an impartial vehicle for artistic investigation by using it in its most lyrical form. Seth's proficiency in English verse, however, demonstrates how postcolonial authors can produce better work in the colonizer's native tongue. It is a protest against the idea that English is only a Western language as well as a gesture of belonging to the world of English

literature. Thus, Seth uses language as a home and a tool, demonstrating how artistic ability can generate a sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

In *The Golden Gate*, spirituality and philosophy are additional aspects of cultural identity. At times, the characters ponder topics such as death, morality, justice, and life's purpose. Being knowledgeable about many different religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and secular humanism, Seth lets these concepts seep into the book. The characters' lack of overt religious identification points to a desire for internal, as opposed to institutional, affiliation. In addition to reflecting a postmodern, post-religious perspective, this also speaks to the pluralistic spirit of Indian spirituality, which emphasizes self-reflection and fluid identity. Vikram Seth paints a picture of contemporary life in *The Golden Gate* that cuts across linguistic, cultural, and national barriers. The work is profoundly influenced by his multilingual, multicultural identity, even though neither the characters nor the setting are Indian. Seth demonstrates his interest in American, British, and Russian literature through the verse novel style. He examines the common human yearning for belonging—a yearning that is heightened, not lessened, in a globalized, multilingual world—through the themes of alienation, love, action, and morality.

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