
TREATMENT OF DEATH IN VIKRAM SETH'S NOVELS

Prof. Sonba Salve ([drsAlvesonba8@gmail.com](mailto:drs Alvesonba8@gmail.com))

Head, Department of English Literature

The English and Foreign Languages University (Central University)

Hyderabad - 500 007

Abstract

Among the most frequently treated subject in literature, death seems to be one of the favourite subjects among the writers. The modern writers frequently presented death as the ultimate existential dilemma; one which arouses terrible anxiety as it offers an avenue towards authentic self-discovery. However, death is often perceived as natural cycle of decay and renewal. As far as the literary expression about death is concerned, it can be said that death in literature is as old as literature itself. The paper discusses, in brief, the treatment of death in Vikram Seth's novels such as *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*.

Keywords: Treatment of Death, Solipsism, Alienation, Noble Purpose, Regeneration, Realization of the Cosmos

Introduction

Today, a number of Indian writers in English have contributed substantially to the modern English Literature. Fiction, being the most powerful form of literary expression has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English Literature. It is generally agreed that the novel is the most suitable literary form for the exploration of experiences and ideas in the context of our time and Indian English fiction occupies its proper place in the field of literature.

Among the most frequently treated subject in literature, death seems to be one of the favourite themes among the dramatists, poets and the novelists. Modern writers frequently presented death as the ultimate existential dilemma; one which arouses terrible anxiety as it offers an avenue towards authentic self-discovery. Death is often perceived within a larger context, as part of the natural cycle of decay and renewal. Yet death remains the great mystery of existence. Indeed, death in literature is as old as literature itself.

In the modern novel, death has achieved a nearly ubiquitous presence. It is perhaps not surprising

that the numerous writers have attempted to tackle the subject of death. However, the treatments of death are as varied as authors who write them. In literature, death can represent many different themes. Death in literature also carries with it a range of symbolic implications, over the years having been aligned with ideas of retreat into solipsism, escape, alienation, and ultimately with the source of meaning and the creation of literature itself.

Theme of Death

Theme of death is recurrent motif in Vikram Seth's novels. The novelist has talked about death in all his novels. The writer seems to have presented it for multi-purposes, such as:

- Death for noble purpose
- Death for regeneration
- Death for realization of the cosmos

Analysis

Seth shows the death for noble purpose through the death of Rusheed who is the son of a traditional Zamindar of Debaria village. Rusheed has leftist leanings in spite of his traditional upbringing. Being sensitive, socialist and idealistic person, Rusheed is pained by the condition of the land labourers and landless farmers. He expresses his anguish about their miserable condition. **“We are tied to earth by such fine threads. And there is so much injustice—so much—it drives me mad.” (525)**

In this way, unable to bear the plight of the poor people of the society, he rebels against his family and the feudalism and gets his land transferred to his ploughman and servant Kachhru's name and consequently gets himself disinherited by his family. In his ensuing struggle for others and society, he commits suicide. (1316) Evidently, Rusheed dies for society and his death stands for noble purpose. Here one can venture to say that Seth appeals to the feudal society to take a lesson from Rusheed who died for the noble cause.

Further, in *The Golden Gate*, the protagonist John is hurt and angered by the marriage of Liz, his former wife, and Phil, his friend. In view of the reconciliation of the strained relationship, Janet

organizes a party for all friends but unfortunately it cannot materialize as she dies in an automobile accident while giving invitation to all friends. (281) John is greatly pained due to Janet's death. He so grieves over the death that he sees her image everywhere and hears her voice saying: **“John, pay what are your own heart's arrears. Now clear your throat, and dry these tears.”** (307)

Thus, after listening to the voice of dead Janet, John takes a positive view of life. He is prepared to accept life as it comes. Here, death plays the role of regeneration and emboldens him to face the challenges in the rest of his life. Similarly, after the death of Liz's mother, Phil and Liz are sorrowful. Here too death brings about a positive change in both Liz and Phil. They grow more tolerant towards John. They appeal to John for friendship through a letter. Their letter announces the death of her mother and the birth of their child. The letter reads thus:

**It says, Dear John, we have a son.
We hope that you'll be his godfather
Have you that any other friend.
Please speak to us, John. In the end,
We'll all be old or dead or dying.
My mother died two weeks ago. (306)**

The news of birth and death touches John deeply who considers death and its relationship with life. To John, it is second news of death of his near and dear ones. Due to the death of Jane and Mrs. Dorati, there is regeneration and reformation in John who not only accepts the invitation but also prepares to befriend Liz and Phil.

Death also plays a positive role in *A Suitable Boy*. After the death of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, Maan perceives that his self-indulgence and thoughtless passion have brought about his mother's premature death. He regrets after his mother's demise. Now he is a remorseful person: **“This is my doing, Ammaji. It is what I did that has led to this. I will never forgive myself and no one in the family will ever forgive me.”** (1220) Thus, his mother's death brings about a positive change in Maan who decides to abandon obsession for passion and lead rest of his life with cool and calm. Indeed, here death serves the purpose of regeneration and reformation in Maan.

In the same way, Michael in *An Equal Music* increasingly becomes aware of the world after the death of his benefactor, Mrs. Fromby. The death of his mother pains him a lot (27) but Mrs.

Formby's death compels him to face the harsh realities of life. As a result, his world-view expands: **"The views have widened as the world's grown bare."** (361)

The death of Mrs. Janet Dorati of *The Golden Gate*, the death of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor of *A Suitable Boy* and the death of Michael's mother and Mrs. Fromby of *An Equal Music* definitely function as the realization of the cosmos. The old has to die and the new one has to take birth.

Conclusion

To conclude, death leads man on the right path of his existence and saves him from falling prey to senseless passion, disappointments, despair and destruction. It is the means of drawing back to the world of reality from the world of disillusionment. Death brings about positive changes in the worldviews of Seth's men and women thereby giving them greater understanding and wisdom of the ground realities of life. Seth has employed the theme of death in his novels to present the fact that life is short and the end is inevitable. It seems to be appropriate to say that the treatment of death in different perspectives depicted in the novels shows the gradual evolution of Seth's concept of death. It can be concluded that in the writings of contemporary authors' death pervaded the story and its protagonists' minds, and offers an absurd commentary on the brevity and meaninglessness of their lives and the finality of their deaths.

Works Cited

- Seth, Vikram, *The Golden Gate*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1986.
Seth, Vikram, *A Suitable Boy*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1993.
Seth, Vikram, *An Equal Music*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1999.
[https:// www.enotes, death-literature/critical essays.com](https://www.enotes.com/death-literature/critical-essays.com), downloaded on 10th July, 2017.
<https://www.papermasters.com/death-literature.html>, downloaded