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Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: A Pen Picture of Socio-Cultural Crisscross of Post-Colonial India

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Abstract

Vikram Seth's prodigious and brilliant literary journey so far has encompassed several books of poetry, a travelogue, a verse novel, an epic novel, modernist fiction and a memoir-cum biography. Each book is set in a different cultural landscape and background in terms of form and genre. Every new book of Seth creates a fresh departure in form and theme. His first novel, *The Golden Gate* (1986) in verse about the lives of young professionals in San Francisco, established him commercially as one of the promising Indian English writers. *A Suitable Boy* (1993), his 1474 page voluminous second novel as a postcolonial narrative deals with the socio-political issues that covers the issues of national politics, elections in 1952, inter-sectarian animosity, the status of lower caste people, land reforms and the eclipse of feudal princes and landlords amidst four family saga. This paper is an attempt to re-examine Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* as a pen-picture of Socio-Cultural Crisscross of postcolonial India and its varied ramifications in the socio-political realms. The many different themes and episodes discussed here present an all-inclusive idea of socio-cultural crisscross with all its plurality, challenges and shortcomings to present my views and reading of *A Suitable Boy* as an authentic picture of post-independence India.

Keywords: Modernist fiction, Nationhood, Postcolonial Novel, Socio-Political, Travelogue

Introduction

Vikram Seth is one of the most influential and promising writers of recent times with a powerful expressive flare in almost all the genres of literature. With the complexity and depth of his work in prose as well as verse, Vikram Seth has achieved an unflinching top place in both the genres in Indian English writings. His many themes and concerns, from his interest in land-ceiling in Post-Independence India to western classical music, all were handled with equal ease and aplomb. Vikram

Seth, born in Kolkata, lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar, near Kolkata, Patna, near Danapur and London. His father Premnath Seth was an executive with the Bata India Limited, a shoe Company and his mother, Leila Seth, was the first woman judge on the Delhi High Court as well as the first woman to become Chief Justice of a State High Court at Simla.

Vikram Seth is the first Indian English Novelist to get a fabulous amount of rupees two crores as advance for his epoch-making novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993). He has received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and WH Smith Literary Award for *A Suitable Boy* in 1994. This novel was short-listed for the Irish Times International Fiction Prize as well. *A Suitable Boy* presents a cogent view of the post-independent India through realistic and symbolic narratives of the making of a nation. Seth approaches post-independent India from a secular point of view with a strong influence of Nehruvian ideology. Seth skillfully presents the local subject matters relating to religion, language, region and class in English. It becomes important for a novelist to reflect the culture that is key in the making of a society and consequence of

Dominant ideological investment, powerfully coercive in shaping the subject but since it is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, it can become a site of contestation and consequently of the re-inscription of subjectivities (Rajan 10).

Narratives in the novel mark the realities of India with secular intent. Set against one of key periods in Indian history, the novel reflects the various challenges and issues that the process of decolonization, nationhood and nationalism encountered. 1950s was crucial to the making of India as a nation and the configuration of the Indian identity. Seth examines significant national issues with political coloring in the post independent era, the effects of the partition, the persistence of old traditions, the issue of land reform and the anticipated progress as a nation. The most striking thing about Seth's oeuvre is its variety, as his fellow novelist Amit Chaudhari wrote:

His career has been one of the ceaseless reinvention; from economist to poet, to travel writer, to novelist, to who knows what next. Skipping from genre to genre, it's as if he is not just a writer, but a microcosm of the cultural ethos. (508)

A Suitable Boy depicts an array of national issues in the form of narratives which has political inclinations, the psychosocial implications of the partition between India and Pakistan on the refugees, the condition of the lower, the Hindu-Muslim strife, and abolition of zamindari system, land reforms and the empowerment of the Muslim women. Neelam Srivastava views the novel as 'majoritarian':

First because it has a rationalist approach to the question of religion in the public sphere, secondly because its third-person omniscient narrator embodies the

perspective of a tolerant Hindu subject, and thirdly, because the novel deals with India, how India's politics towards minorities, especially Muslims were played out after Partition"(48).

A Suitable Boy, written into nineteen parts, is set against the background of a period in Indian history in the tradition of the European realistic novel of the 19th century. Vikram Seth's novel, despite being the story of a mother's aspirations to find a suitable husband for her daughter, besets narratives of the making of a nation, in the post-Independence era India. It tells the interconnected stories of four families flung across North India. It is set in a newly post-independence, post-partition India following the story of four families over a period of 18 months, and focuses on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange the marriage of her younger daughter, Lata, to a suitable boy. Lata is nineteen years attractive and who has just passed her graduation. She has to choose her life partner from three suitors, Kabir Durani, Amit Chatterji and Haresh Khanna. Seth elaborately presents these three suitors with all their traits and Lata's affairs with each of them, so that they can be judged objectively and the final choice can be made. There are some interesting parallels with *Middlemarch* by George Eliot published as a serial in 1871-72. There are general elections in both novels and two sentences from Rosemary Ashton's *Introduction to Middlemarch* could apply almost equally to Seth's novel. It is above all about change and the way individuals and groups adapt to, or resist change. In their marriages, in their professions, in their family life and their social intercourse, the characters of the novel are shown responding in their various ways to events both public and private. "The novel connotes on the experiences and entanglements of four moderately rich Indian families connected through marriage or friendship, at a period of time when India was experiencing her post-Independence turbulences" (Mohanty 163).

Panorama of varied characters:

Seth shows the India of withering idealism, rotting corruption, pestering communal disharmony, parasitical intrigue of politicians, the perpetual fight between the forces of progress and maternity and the forces of tradition and obscurantism through his characters. The characters of *A Suitable Boy* present a certain 'double vision' (Bhabha 5) in the wake of the process of decolonization in India. Seth has depicted the modern upper class society who is inbred by the western culture through the Chatterjees. Justice Chatterji, who takes pride of being a Bengali as much as an Indian prefers Subhash Chandra Bose, a Bengali than Gandhiji and considers English as a colonial language. Justice Chatterjee has five children, Amit, Meenakshi, Kakoli, Dipankar and Tapan. Seth writes, "None of them worked, but each had an occupation." (Seth 135) Amit writes poetry, a native of Calcutta considers Bengali as a refined language than Hindi. His glamorous sister Meenakshi is a social butterfly, married to Arun Mehra who was neither a Brahmo, nor of Brahmin stock, nor even a

Bengali. Arun, Mehra's eldest son, is an example of a hybrid postcolonial product who visits London periodically and follows English customs. He mimics the English and admires English style, an Anglicized Indian. Dipankar seeks the Meaning of life and spends his time reading the poets Sri Aurbindo, Kakoli is always on the phone with has string of admires and Tapan, only twelve or thirteen years old, attends a prestigious boarding school at Jheel. This family has a dog called Cuddles and a cat Pillow and hosts three or four grand parties in the course of the year. The Chatterjees have employed two cooks, one for Bengali and the other for western food.

Rupa Mehra a widow with four children, assumes freedom for herself to have things organized for the family. Mrs. Mehra does not like their hospitality she was afraid lest her daughter Lata should contract this disease, though she enjoyed their company. She says to Lata "I do know what is best. I am doing it all for you" (Seth 3). The advances made by Amit Chatterjee towards Lata were abruptly stopped mid-way by her mother who had instantly taken a dislike for the Chatterjees. Mrs. Mehra says to Lata; "I have no intention of accepting things as they come, said Mrs. Rupa Mehra, the unsavoury vision of scarifying yet another of her children on the altar of the Chatterjees making her flush with indignation" (Seth 146) On the other hand, Mrs. Mehra immediately liked Haresh but Lata thinks that Haresh was shorter than she had expected. When Haresh opened his mouth to speak he had been chewing *paan*. If Mahesh Kapoor is progressive and secular, his cabinet colleague, L.N. Agarwal, is obscurantist and communalist. Lata's choice of Haresh instead of Kabir later presents a case of how characters are portrayed, Kabir, who comes from a family which has a history of madness, is a pretense, introvert and self-agonizing being but Haresh is a "generous, robust, optimistic...responsible" (Seth 1291), composed and gentle personality. Lata imagines her mother's reaction of her falling in love with a Muslim boy: "she could see her mother's tears as she faced the horror of her beloved daughter being given over to the nameless 'them'" (Seth 168).

The Hindu-Muslim strife:

The Hindu and Muslim characters are often kept in contrast with each other. Almond observes that in Seth's presentation Muslims "are more serious, more melancholy, more self-disciplined, and with the kinds of goals and expectations which self-discipline connotes somehow more repressed, more unhappy, more replete with possibilities for the tragic" (Almond 46-7). Characters from Hindu and Muslim families embody traditions and the emergent transitions that relates to cultural and individual liberty and the making of identity.

Within its many pages of byzantine sub-plots, up to five at a time working together in a parallel display of Tolstoyan complexity, Seth presents a fairly equal number of Hindu and Muslim sympathetic characters, along with an equal number of authorial remonstrations for the fanatical excesses of both faiths (Almond 43).

Seth uses Hindu and Muslim characters in pairs—Kabir and Haresh, Maan and Rasheed, Kapoor and the Nawab. Maan as a witty and carefree person is a foil to a very sensitive Rasheed. Maan's company always brings in cheer into the novel but Rasheed seems to counteract life. Maan's Muslim friend Firoz though depressed is made happy with the disappointments of Maan. Characters like Rasheed, Durrani and the Nawab are depictions of 'remote' human beings detached from the social. Durrani's total apathy to fellow beings and lack of social skills are evident when he says "What did young people have to do with anything? He wondered. (Or people for that matter.)" (Seth 213). Seth presents religiously considerate and fanatic characters that reflect his lenience toward secularism and tolerance. Seth, despite presents an objective view of the community oriented Indian society, does not ignore the

tragic interweaving of religion and politics, the ancient rivalry between Hindu and Muslim, the underlying suspicion and resentment that can be blown into flame at any moment by unscrupulous office seekers or bigoted religious leaders (Gupta 64).

However, one might see in his portrayal of Muslims a delicate tragic thread inherently involved in the making of the characters and the incidents. Moreover, Seth's portrayal of Muslims, Almond suggests, reflects a sense of inhumanity: "and inhumanity not to be understood as cruelty or monstrosity, but rather a simple indifference to the world of human beings, a carefully-kept distance from the society of Brahmapur" (Seth 44). Suicides, disillusionment, and madness are interwoven with an otherwise cheerful novel. The insanity in Kabir's mother blocks her to identify her own son.

Banyan Tree: The idea of Religious Tolerance

Though Seth starts off with Lata's mother announcing that she will have to 'marry a boy I choose' (Seth 3), there are equally important other episodes that supports the journey of the novel like the trunks supporting the banyan tree. The idea of tolerance is explained through the image of Banyan tree. Banyan tree is a frequent symbol of the emerging post-independent India. It is a quintessence of organic unity where things are interconnected and proceeds with deep affinity. In his presentation of the communal riot in Brahmapur, Seth explains how the Muslim mob wanders around the streets looking for Hindus and also three Muslim drummers who fall as victims to this riot and "lay murdered by the wall of the temple, their drums smashed in, their heads half hacked off, their bodies doused in kerosene and set alight - all, doubtless, to the greater glory of God" (Seth1058). However, in his portrayal of the friendship between Maan and Firoz, Seth raises above religious fanaticism. Maan protects Firoz's life when a Hindu mob was eager to quench their fanatical thirst with Muslim blood. Seth also uses Banyan tree to explain the structure of the novel. When Lata asks Amit about his first novel, he responds saying that he is feeling it like banyan tree:

‘What I mean is,’ continued Amit, ‘it sprouts, and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks and intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks’ (Seth, 483).

Social Untouchability in India:

Seth also portrays the horrendous living conditions of the slum dwellers of Brahmapur, those belonging to the lower castes and the vulnerability of the untouchables graphically. Vikram Seth offers a poignant insight into the social status of the untouchables during the early post-independent India when Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and Dr. Ambedkar, the first Law Minister, ‘the great, already almost mythical, leader of the untouchables’ (Seth 1132) lead the defense against the oppressed. As they proceed to launch changes into the already existent laws, the traditional approach to the caste division comfortably remained untouched. In the villages, the untouchables were virtually helpless; almost none of them owned that eventual guarantor of dignity and status, land. Few worked it as tenants, and of those tenants fewer still would be able to make use of the paper guarantees of the forthcoming land reforms. In the cities too they were dregs of society. Even Gandhi, for all his reforming concern, for all his hatred of the concept that any human being was intrinsically so loathsome and polluting as to be untouchable, he believed that people should continue in their hereditarily ordained professions a cobbler should remain a cobbler, a sweeper a sweeper

Zamindari System prevalent in India:

The novel illustrates the social implications of the zamindari system, the impact and the manner in which the agrarian structure took shape in the post-Independent India through Mahesh Kapoor who recommends the reform and the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, a zamindar. Mahesh Kapoor is presented as a foil to those who are tied to the position of the zamindar. Seth presents a discussion on the land property of peasants and the impact of the closure of the zamindari system that was brought in by the Mughals as part of collecting land taxes from the peasants and maintained during the imperial period. However, the system was abolished after Indian independence and the lands were given back to the peasants. While the British view the abolition of the Zamindari system as a mark of ‘real’ freedom, the farmers in the independent India continue to suffer and this reflected in the increasing rate of farmer suicides. The issue with the zamindari system was mainly related to the land registration. As the land was owned by few landlords, the British reinforced this semi-feudal agrarian system by taking the side of the landlords. Taxes were collected from the people through the landlords who were endorsed by the British.

After having deep perusal of *A Suitable Boy*, it can be concluded that it establishes Seth, not as an Indian expatriate but as an artist interested in socio-political and historical affairs of India. Seth

uses the setting of postcolonial India to portray the Indian life in essence through Lata who justifies her decision to marry Harish. Thus, the novel is analyzed from socio-political and historical perspectives, it can be concluded that the whole gamut of the socio-cultural forces helps to give a historical orientation to the characters' lives oscillating between the individual attitudes and cultural forces.

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