

## Social, political and Religious Issue of India in Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy"

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### ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth's '*A Suitable Boy*' is an effective thought on life. He describes contemporary reality and portrays the four upper middle class families of India in 1950s: Mehra, Chatterjis, Kapoors and Khans. Brahmpur is the fictional town in the novel and the main action is located. Seth has composed the chorography of this town keeping in mind and the historical associations typical of larger north Indian provincial towns. Each family has a plot and there are some sub-plots here to help the main plot, the search for a suitable boy. The sub plots of the novel: The academic skulduggery, the political parallelism between Nehru and Tandon, on the one hand; the political rift between L.N. Agarwal and Mahesh Kapoor, on the other hand.

Mrs. Mehra is in search of a suitable boy for Lata. Dipankar is in search of a spiritual base. Mahesh Kapoor is in search of a political base and the Nawab is in search of his feudal stability. All these searches are centered in the period of 1951-52, the period of newly-free country, embarking on the path of finding a permanent footing, internally and externally. India was searching within itself and outside itself. This historical search is interwoven with domestic searches and the novel assumes a social-political and historical form.

The main character in the political history of 1950's is Jawaharlal Nehru and three fictional characters: S.S. Sharma, Mahesh Kapoor and L.N. Agarwal. The search of India for a suitable place in the comity of nations is interwoven with the search of Mrs. Mehra for a suitable boy for Lata. The story of the Nawab Sahib is intertwined with Mahesh Kapoor, they are very intimate friends and in spite of the Zamindari Abolition Act and they remain spiritually good friends. The search of Dipankar finally lands him in the materialistic world, and job in Grindlay Bank. But the central stand of the novel, the matrimonial quest of Mrs. Rupa Mehra is

connected with the quest of so many characters life styles and mindsets. It is also the quest of Vikram Seth, who was born in the year 1951. *A Suitable Boy* has the body of Indian theme and clothes of western novel. All important characters assemble at the wedding of Lata. The novel begins with Savitha's marriage and ends with Lata's marriage.

**Keywords:** matrimonial, Zamindari Abolition Bill, Hindu Muslim riots, political rival and religious conflicts

## II. INTRODUCTION

Vikram Seth was born in an upper middle class family in Calcutta on 20 June 1952. His father, Premo Seth was an executive of Bata Shoe Company and his mother. Leila Seth was the first woman judge of High Court in Delhi. After his basic education in India, he was sent to England for higher studies at Kent where he studied English Literature, Mathematics and German language as his optional subject. He did his graduation in PPE at Corpus Christ College of Oxford University. He moved to the Stanford University of California to pursue Ph.D. in Economics. He began his literary career with poetry. He has written variety of genres as poetry, travel writing, Children's Book, novel in verse, translation of Chinese poetry and novel in Prose. He got many awards for his work as Thomas Cook Award for the best travel writing for *From Heaven Lake*; Commonwealth Poetry Prize for *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, a collection of poems; Sahitya Academy Award for *The Golden Gate*, a novel in verse; *A Suitable Boy* (1993) won W.H. Smith Literary Award in 1994 and also it won Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999; Cross Word Book Award in 1999 for *An Equal Music*. As a novelist, he exhibits various cultural synthesizes through his novel. His first novel *The Golden Gate* is about California, and his second novel *A Suitable Boy* is on European. He has written three novels about three different places and cultures of different countries.

### A Suitable Boy (1993)

*A Suitable Boy* is an epic novel in prose; it reflects the social and political life of Post-Independence India. The novel revolves around four upper middle class North Indian families; the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Chatterjees and the Khans. Seth describes the different aspects of the society with real incidents. He presents the contemporary events, customs, conventions, culture and political struggle with clearly described in the novel. He had spent half of his life in abroad, so he had to do a lot of analysis about India and interview with freedom fighters. He collects the material about Zamindari Abolition Act, Books, and journals of that time for an understanding of his history of India. Seth explains his efforts in an interview with Makarand Paranjape:

Read just to get a spirit of those times, meeting people, ex-freedom fighters, people who had visited courtesans at the time... and then staying in different places like Benares, Allahabad or in the countryside or staying with a shoe making family in Agra, just a few years doing this sort of thing because something unless you know it, if not from the heart of it, then somewhere from the inside of it (P. 21–22).

His novel presents a panoramic view of Indian society of the year immediately after Independence. He portrays four families and creates a panorama of characters, conflicts, withering idealism, rotten, corruption, communal disharmony, love and passion, changing times, marriage and family. Lata is the prominent character as a girl for whom a suitable boy is being

sought of her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra. Through his novel is in favors of arranged marriage for stable life and happiness.

*A Suitable Boy* opens with the arranged marriage of Savita with Pran Kapoor, a lecturer in Brahmampur University. Savita's mother the widow Rupa Mehra is finding a suitable boy for her second daughter Lata. The novel starts with her words,

'You will marry a boy I choose' Mrs. Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter (p.3)

The word establishes the status of the custom of Indian society where it is parents who choose brides and grooms for their children. Savita and Lata are two sides of the same coin which represents the Indian womanhood. Lata falls in love with Kabir, a good-looking, well-read fellow student. They meet various places as Literary Club, University and Barsaat Mahal. She has three suitors; Kabir Durrani, Amit Chatterjee and Haresh Khanna. She rejects her first suitor of Kabir is a Muslim and inter community marriage cannot be accepted her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra. Another one reason that she cannot wait for two more years as desired of Kabir for the sake of his career.

Lata rejects her second suitor Amit Chatterjee; he is a poet and son of a High Court Judge. In her opinion that a poet is a dreamer can never make a responsible husband. At last, she accepts Haresh as her husband; he is the only suitable boy in the eyes of her mother. Mrs. Rupa Mehra chooses him to be a very suitable, prospect in all respects and his superiority more than other suitors. He is not interest in dowry and it makes him more acceptable of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. This is the real reason of Lata behind her decision to accept Haresh's proposal. Mrs. Mehra for a suitable boy for her daughter is like pilgrim's progress; they are pious religiously and dutifully devote their entire time to reach only one goal. As her, only goal is choosing a suitable boy for her second daughter, Lata. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's matrimonial quest is interrelated with the politics of the immediate post-independent India & 1950's. The novel is structured around search and it gives force that coherence to the novel. Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Mrs. Chatterjee are in search of a suitable boy for their daughters Mahesh Kapoor is in search of a political based; Dipankar is in search of a spiritual based of Sri Aurobindo and Nawab Sahib is in search of his feudal stability. Vikram Seth in an interview to Seema Paul,

This novel is linear partly because it's multilinear. There are several plots in it (P. 9).

Mahesh Kapoor struggles for the abolition of the Zamindari system; it might affect his best friend the Nawab Sahib of Baiter. He is revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh; a freedom fighter, true follower of Pt. Nehru and radical socialist. Mr. S.S. Sharma is a Chief Minister; an old freedom fighter and supporter of Pt. Nehru. L.N. Agarwal is a traditionalist and follower of Purusottom Das Tandon. The congress is divided into two camps; one led by Pt. Nehru at the National level and State level leads by Sharma and Kapoor; the other led by Tandon, Agarwal. He successfully pilots the Zamindari Abolition Bill in the State Legislature. In the words of the speaker;

The question before the House is that the Purva Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Bill of original date 1948 as passed by the Legislative Assembly, amended by the Legislative Council and further amended by the Legislative Assembly, be passed (P. 287).

Mahesh Kapoor's opinion is about politics means to serve his people. But Agarwal's opinion about politics is like the coal trade. Seth makes the Indian of withering idealism,

pestering communal disharmony, raving corruption, parasitical intrigue of politicians, the fight between the forces of progress with modernity and the force of tradition with obscures. The following conversation is an example of it.

After a pause, Netaji said, "you must have a lot of contacts."

"Contacts?"

"Yes, contacts, contacts, you know what I mean."

"But\_\_\_"

"You should use your contacts to help us," said Netaji bluntly. "I'm sure you could get me a kerosene dealer's license. That should be easy enough for the Revenue Minister's Son."

"Actually, all that is under a different ministry," said Maan, unoffended. "Civil supplies, I think," "Come on, that doesn't matter. I know how it works." (P. 617).

It is one of the examples of the withering idealism of the pre-independent India and the rotting corruption of the post-independent India. *A Suitable Boy* is about a generation which remembers the British Raj and partition of India and Pakistan.

Vikram Seth shows the religious conflict between Muslims and Hindus. The Raja of Marh is intent to erect a Temple to Shiva in opposite of the Alamgiri Mosque. Iman and the Muslims are against him. But the proposed Temple will have as its centerpiece the recently found Phallus of Shiva which will be placed directly between the mosque and Mecca. It becomes a big issue in the city and makes an argument between Hindu and Muslim. The crowd stamped on it and beat it with lathes charge until it was charred and splintered. Hindus refuse to go back and the government fails to control the situation, as a result that communal riots breakout. The controversial issue of the Babri Masjid was actually raised first during the fifties in India. As social realists, Seth offers a blend of the fictional with actual historical characters and events. According to Shyamala A. Narayan,

Social realism is the keynote of *A Suitable Boy* (P. 10).

Seth exposes to various social customs and conventions among the Hindus and Muslims in India. He describes the problem of dowry and the practice of an Indian wife not mentioning the name of her husband. He gives a detailed account of the Muslim's customs in practice of the community. Mrs. Rupa Mehra rejects her daughter's intention of marrying Kabir, a Muslim. She is saying about Muslims customs

He'll marry you-and next year he'll say "Talaq talaq" and you'll be on the Streets (P.196).

Seth presents a Muslim practice of divorce; the practice of Pardah system and early marriages among the Muslims. Rasheed's father expresses that the Muslims consider late marriage to be a kind of 'adharmā' and a married man is more respected in the community; polygamy is neither infrequent nor a crime for them. Saeeda Bai is a courtesan Muslim girl; she is singing of ghazals,

concerts and illicit affairs with others are all based on common facts of the society. Another Muslim lady, Begum Abida Khan is the modernist and participates on political events as Zamindari Abolition Bill.

Dipankar studied Economics and his quest for spiritual progresses from Sri Aurobindo to Sanaki Baba. At last his search land in the materialist world and practical life. He settles his life that finding a job in foreign bank of Grindlay. The academic skulduggery is taken of Prof. Mishra, Head of the Department of English and Pran Kapoor, a lecturer of English in Brahmipur University. Through these characters, Seth shows that the political corruption of India. The following lines of Vice-Chancellor of the University as,

I don't know what is going on but something certainly is, and I am not going to be part of it, and if there is one thing I refuse to deny, it is merit. That young man has merit. That young man has merit. I am sure he makes a very stimulating teacher. He should get the job (P. 1274).

The whole incident seems that the corruption of higher education in India. Dr. Ila Chottopadhyay truly represents a destroying breed of honest scholars. The novel gives a realistic picture of India of 1950's through the description of various narratives that were the integral part of the Nation.

Vikram Seth exposes social, political and religious issue of India through these characters and events; the political feud between Mahesh Kapoor and L.N. Agarwal; social issue through Mrs. Rupa Mehra's matrimonial and Zamindari Abolition Bill; the Religious issue of the Shiva temple through the Raja of Marh and Muslims. He describes the academic corruption of the society and contemporary issues reflect in his novel. All the characters are interwoven with the main theme of marriage; the novel begins with Savitha's wedding day meeting and ends with Lata's marriage. *A Suitable Boy* presents the contemporary issue of Post-Independent India of 1950s.

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