

“CULTURAL MIRAGES IN KINSHIPS” THROUGH VIKRAM SETH’S ‘A SUITABLE BOY’

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ABSTRACT

The greatest gift of the British Raj to the Indian Subcontinent was probably the English language and its rich, varied literature. During the British regime, Indians (natives) had to learn the language for the purpose of education as well as to earn their livelihood by securing a government job. The Indian intelligentsia and men (also women) of letters who had sufficient mastery over the language, thought differently. They tried their hand at poetry, prose and fiction. It was a unique combination: The Indian literatures describing their environs and social milieu in a strange language that belonged to a faraway land as part of the Indians’ interactions with the Europeans, and the British, individuals from the affluent classes went abroad for their education, married foreign women, spoke English better than their mother tongues, lived in and toured the Continent, several times. Their progeny enjoyed tremendous advantage both in terms of exposure and language skills. The originality in Vikram Seth’s works and the language style he employs established him as a major writer of our times. The westernization of Indians as portrayed through the juxtaposition of the power relations between Western and Third world cultures, and the power relations provides a gap in relations between parents and children, elders and youngsters, employers and employees are seen to be quite similar to the power relations that exist between the colonizer and the colonized.

Keywords: Colonialism, Power Relations, Culture, Westernization

A Suitable Boy is complex historical fictional system which embodies multiple narratives which comprises the backdrop of political upheaval in the post-independent and post-partitioned India of the 1950s. The author weaves a compelling narration revolving around the four families

and their love, hatred, sadness, daily chores, lives, etc. and deals with the common man in times of crisis and a society that is a blending of different cultures, communities, and castes undergoing a change. These ordinary people are busy and trapped in the web of their own complex social and personal relationships, having their own prejudices and ambitions. Though not an 'epic novel' in its traditional sense, *A Suitable Boy* is certainly epic in scale and range, over 1,400 pages in length, deeply rooted in Indian culture. A great deal of effort is put forth on the part of a family to find a "suitable boy" for their unmarried daughters. It narrates the story of everyday life during 1951-52 in India.

The background of the novel is the underlying Hindu-Muslim conflict which flooded the period immediately after independence of India and Pakistan, and which is even today a threat to the South Asian subcontinent. The fictional system shows the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the fictional city of Brahmipur. Particularly, the narrative deals with the life of Mrs. Rupa Mehra (a widow) and her youngest daughter Lata for whom Mrs. Mehra is looking for a suitable boy. Lata is of marriageable age but quite an independent and rebellious kind of a girl who is already in love with a Muslim boy. Mrs. Mehra's sole aim in life is to look after and take care of her family, especially finding a suitable match for her youngest daughter.

In *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth allows his heroine the opportunity of choosing between three men who are totally different from each other in their appearance as well as in their behavior. The first suitor Kabir, a cricketer, dashing and handsome, but a Muslim. The second suitor Amit Chatterji, Bengali poet and novelist, sophisticated, rich and a Brahmin, and the third suitor Haresh, an energetic and bright young man determined to make a career for himself in the shoe manufacturing industry. Lata and Kabir's love relationship is the main connecting strand of the novel that weaves the whole fabric of the plot. Every woman has an inherent desire for seeking the pleasure of male companionship. "One of the by-products of Savita's marriage was a whole new family to worry about."(478)

Lata enjoys the pleasure of the company of Kabir and seeks emotional satisfaction in his company. But Lata finds herself discontented because she demands the confirmation of it with the repeated act of loving. It is more the feeding of her sense of insecurity rather than the exhibition of faith and love. When Lata finds Kabir is a Muslim her immediate reaction is that this would distress her mother. She is aware that her relationship with him is impossible knowing

the taboos against Hindu –Muslim unions in the cultural and religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. "It is rare for religious feeling to be entirely transcendent, and Hindus as much as anyone else, perhaps more so, are eager for terrestrial, not merely post-terrestrial blessings."(1178)

In a country as big and ethnically diverse as India, religion has always played a very important part in the life of an Indian. Religious rituals pervade the lives of Indians. Religious considerations are sometimes more vital than even economic factors. And for majority of Indians no other factor is more powerful and influential than their religious beliefs and faith. They are usually insistent on following their religion and religious practices. Lata and Kabir's ill-fated romance is set against the backdrop of communal conflict in post partition independence in Brahmipur. Seth also brings out the conventionality of the Indian society in this novel. Women do not have the right to choose their life partners; who their parents choose for them should be accepted without question. Vikram Seth highlights the roles and restrictions placed on women in the postcolonial India of the 1950's.

A Suitable Boy is the story of several Indian families whose paths intersect continually over a period of about a year. India has only recently gained its independence from the British, and in his lengthy tour Seth takes us through all the ramifications of that momentous change, from the modern city to the backward country, and from the political to the intensely personal. But, as the title suggests, *A Suitable Boy* never strays far from the subject of love and marriage. 'The Suitable Boy' is the central theme of the fictional system *A Suitable Boy*. The traditional norms of Indians for the wedding:

There is no point in talking about it. Even [a rich family's] normal expectations for the wedding will be too high. We'll have to feed a thousand people. Of these, probably seven hundred will be guests from their side. And we'll have to put them up, and give all the women saris. (597)

The idea comes from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls with several points that comprise the ideal match. First, the boy must be of the same religion as the girl. This becomes the main hindrance between Lata, a Hindu, and Kabir, a Muslim. The only way they could have married was to elope and marry without their parents' permission. Another

consideration is the caste or social standing of the boy and his family. Much of that is based on appearances. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is able to arrange a marriage for her daughter Savita into the Kapoor family without a large dowry by the fact that Pran Kapoor is dark complexioned. His skin coloring precluded his marriage to a girl from a wealthier family.

In western love stories there are two typical courses for a love which faces opposition from the family. Either they can run away, or true love overcomes all obstacles, the family is reconciled to marriage, the lovers are united and it all ends happily. In the case of *A Suitable Boy*, either Lata can defy everyone, marry Kabir and live separated from her family, or Rupa Mehra can be made to change her view of her daughter marrying a Muslim. Lata does not deny that her decision is partly due to Kabir's religion, but the reader is not led to believe that she shares her mother's prejudice. Lata reiterates her disapproval of anything passionate. Lata is scared of losing her virginity with Kabir, but she is under control when she is with Haresh. Lata's innocence becomes very much evident when the narrator comments that after she has read the Dutch author's sex manual she was as much repelled as fascinated by what she had to offer.

The hall mark of the fictional system is the construction of an intermingled upper class Hindu Muslim milieu, reminding the readers what is still possible. It is made quite evident by the author that despite the constant straining under the forces of division and fundamentalism, a fragile thread of unity is still binding together all the Indians. For instance the second occurrence of communal violence also brings out the tolerant and composite culture of Brahmpur. Unlike the first riot, two central characters Mann and Firoz are caught in the midst of this second carriage. Since, they happen to be trapped in a Hindu mob in a predominantly Hindu neighbourhood; the Hindu Maan saves his Muslim friend Firoz from the bloodthirsty mob. This man is my brother, more than my brother," he warns one of the leaders. "If you harm more than one hair of my brother's head... Lord Rama will seize your filthy soul and send it flaming into hell" (24).

Thus the fictional system demonstrates that if people are capable of terrible violence, they are also the site of an everyday ethics of tolerance and peaceful existence. The friendships between Mann and Firoz and their fathers Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Bihar, the romantic world of Urdu poetry and Hindustani classical music all endorse the composite culture of Hindus and Muslims in Brahmpur and Purva Pradesh. The novelist attempts to create a thickly textured

interwoven and coexistent world, despite of the scar of the partition and the emergence of the right wing Hindu elements.

The realization of the significance of the family and the community and the need to control passion in order to achieve balance between oneself and the larger social, cultural group with which one is affiliated is finally the driving force behind Lata's decision. Lata finally selects Haresh who considers his work as his religion, and disregards caste restriction on working in the leather industry that supposedly is polluting. It seems to be a sign of modern ideas of economic progress and social egalitarianism. The conflict between individual desire and family duty is an Indian concern and individual desire is given less importance in India than in the west, sometimes the conflict resolving itself neatly into two issues, duty to the family and personal fulfillment. The fulfillment of oneself, however, is a desirable goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society. It has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family. Sexual love and personal fulfillment which are the prime concerns of the western society cannot have similar significance in the Indian society.

The concern of the author is evident that Muslims , in order to become Indian citizens 'fully' had to forgo a vital part of what constituted their past, their culture and in short their identity. Seth considers it essential that in spite of Muslims being transformed into a minority body, their previous religious and cultural identity must be subsumed into that of the secular India. Being passionate about anything or over anything is worthy of momentary bliss. In Seth's theory romantic passion must necessarily end in some loss, since life is too frail to endure ecstasy. Passion is always synonymous with disaster. In Seth's novels couples who share passionate relationships do not end up in the 'happy married life ever after'. Opening and closing with a wedding, the fictional system is ostensibly the story of a Hindu family trying to find a suitable husband for their younger daughter, Lata. *A Suitable Boy* portrays arranged marriage brings with it an inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance. His characters suffer but they also understand and their understanding derives from a proper exercise of rational thoughts rather than from emotional or passionate entanglement. Seth, through his characters proposes that we deny passion and remain as far as possible in control of ourselves. Thus the great prolific writer Anita Desai says that Seth's characters,

Although in their rash youth they might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance and the unknown, they learn their lessons and return chastened to the safety and security of the familiar and the traditional represented here in the Indian fashion. (Mohanty 199)

Seth's writing is more akin to the classical spirit of the 18th century Age of Reason and its emphasis on universal experience and common humanity. Thus, undoubtedly the fictional system *A Suitable Boy* is a composite whole, representing the linguistic, cultural and political diversity of India and also performs the ideological function of projecting a pluralist and secular idea of India. It particularly displays the middle cognitive level of consciousness, above the material / physical plane, as it were, but below the top level of spiritual consciousness. However *A Suitable Boy* stands as a hallmark of traditional Indian customs and culture.

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