

USE OF PROVERBS IN VIKRAM SETH'S NOVEL: A SUITABLE BOY

Prof. Sonba M. Salve^{1*}

^{1*}Dept of English Literature, School of Literary Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, (Central University), HYDERABAD. (Telangana), INDIA.

Abstract

The use of proverbs in literature especially in poetry and novels is quite usual in Indian novels. The strong rich anthropological value that the Indian society gives to proverbs in conversation is one of the main reasons for Indian writers to use proverbs in literature. The novel is 1475 pages long and has a latitude of using expansive language for the author to make statements clear with enough explanations. Yet, he makes use of proverbs to give vigor and metaphorical color to his arguments for further enhancement and philosophical appeal. In this article the use of proverbs by Vikram Seth in his novel: *A Suitable Boy* is presented with evidence from the conversational value and universality they have provided to the arguments of the text.

Key Words: Proverb, saying, universality, conversation, metaphor, idiomatic expression, cultural value

Introduction

Proverbs are simple way of expressing a well known truth or adage based on experience. Knowledge taught in proverbs is godly wisdom. Proverbs or sayings full of ancestral wisdom pass down from generations to generations and they become integral part of society's oral tradition. Proverbs are brief statements that are used mostly in conversations to make sense of some idea and give additional meaning. The meaning they add to the conversation is usually colorful and interesting, making them different from the normal kind of communication. As such they are used to enhance the message that people wish to send in a more metaphorical way. In literature they are used to make the same effect by adding vigor and making an interesting read. Elizabeth hood uses the definition given by Cervantes to explain proverbs:

CERVANTES defined proverbs as "short sentences drawn from long experience." Certainly brevity is the most striking aspect of the linguistic form of proverbs, and an effective way of demonstrating its value is by an etymological study such as the following:

I should be foolish to release the bird I have in my hand, in order to pursue another.

Aesop, *Fables: The Nightingale and the Hawk* (c. 570 B.C.) Of more worth is one bird in the hand than two in the bush.

J. Werner, *Latin Sprichwörter*, p. 70 (c. 1400) A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Pt. 1 (1678). Hood, 1967 (1974) The use of proverbs in literature has a cultural value because society uses them in

3 normal conversations and when they find it used in literature they can easily associate and identify with the narratives they read. What may not be achieved with simple argument or conversation may be communicated better through the use of proverbs as they provide general truths and universality of ideas. The society's customs and norms are also carried in the proverbs. Therefore proverbs make an appeal to the anthropological spiritual side of the reader and play an important role in making the argument of the text convincing and realistic to them. According to Abrahams and Babcock :

Proverbs, then, achieve their primary ontological status through their use in actual face-to-face situations where they carry the force of appearing to embody norms and are therefore voiced by ones who appear to represent society. Secondly, they may be detached from such interactional situations and still carry some of the meaning of these norms if not always their power to persuade and move. Abrahams and Babcock, 1997 (415)

In *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth used proverbs to make statement about things that he felt strongly about. The novel is one thousand four hundred and seventy four pages which has more than enough latitude to express any idea that Seth wanted to clarify. Yet he resorted to make his ideas to be registered in the minds of the readers with the use of such appropriate and expressive proverbs and sayings that the proverbs in his novel have become not just a means of clarification but a source of great fascination and delight of morphological prowess. One such outstanding proverb employed in the novel is: "God save us from people who mean well". One might find it a paradoxical contradiction at face value that something negative should be expected out of something good. While anyone desires people to mean well at all times, the proverb implies that an adverse outcome is a possibility out of a well-meaning action by people. This has a strong connotation with realism and pragmatism especially in politics that meaning well and empathy is not necessarily the right course of action when one is leading a people.

The novel *A Suitable boy* provides a lengthy insight into life after the partition of Pakistan from India. And the proverbs used in the novel naturally invigorate the thinking of the times in a socio-economic and political way. According to Bede Scott: Set during the years 1950 to 1952, *A Suitable Boy* covers a period that was crucial to the consolidation of the postcolonial Indian nation-state – and to the foundation of the secularism that would become one of its guiding principles.

The late forties and early fifties were also a time of considerable social and political turbulence in India. The nation had only recently achieved independence, and its long-term viability was far from assured. In addition, the country was still recovering from the trauma of Partition, during which an estimated one million people had been killed and twelve million displaced. Scott, 2019 (58) The mature politician should analyze the situation at hand intelligently and act according to his or her intellect and not emotion. Therefore to imply that a dispassionate decision is necessary to attain the desired outcome in decision making Seth has used the proverb, “God save us from people who mean well” as inadvertent harm may be done with a good intention as well as bad intention. Therefore it is important to have emotional intelligence, which not necessarily prioritize just good intent but one that is fully aware of the situation at hand and is brave enough to make controversial calls when deemed right. In the novel, *A Suitable Boy* the Home Minister advises those who were around him that by meaning well many people have made mistakes that have resulted in adverse conditions for their people and he retorts when someone said to him ‘Panditji means well’:

‘Panditji means well,’ said someone. ‘Means well— means well—’ sighed L.N. Agarwal. ‘He meant well when he gave away Pakistan. He meant well when he gave away half of Kashmir. If it hadn’t been for Patel, we wouldn’t even have the country that we do. Jawaharlal Nehru has built up his entire career by meaning well. Gandhiji loved him because he meant well. And the poor, stupid people love him because he means well. God save us from people who mean well. And these well-meaning letters he writes every month to the Chief Ministers. Why does he bother to write them? The Chief Ministers are not delighted to read them.’ He shook his head, and continued: ‘Do you know what they contain? Long homilies about Korea and the dismissal of General MacArthur. What is General MacArthur to us?—yet so noble and sensitive is our Prime Minister that he considers all the ills of the world to be his own. He means well about Nepal and Egypt and God knows what else, and expects us to mean well too. He doesn’t have the least idea of administration but he talks about the kind of food committees we should set up. Nor does he understand our society and our scriptures, yet he wants to overturn our family life and our family morals through his wonderful Hindu Code Bill. . . . *A Suitable boy*, 1993 (313)

Vikram Seth makes use of another proverb: “Be just to yourself” in the novel, *A Suitable Boy*. This proverb highlights the need for someone to stand up for himself or herself and make sure that self-love is there in order for one to act reasonably toward others. It is also a message that one should not base his or her happiness or fate on the whim of others. First and foremost everyone should think for themselves and strive to respect themselves if they are to stand any chance of respecting others. This self-value message may sound a little selfish at the outward but in the novel Seth uses it to hammer in a statement that the one and only one who can and should represent himself or herself is the person himself or herself because others may have their own agenda for the way they treat him or her. It is only the individual who has the best wishes for himself and there is no one who wants to cause harm to themselves in any way. In the novel, *A Suitable Boy*, when Maan is saying to Saeeda, he becomes emotional and she was emotional to see him depart too. But she gave him an advice that he should not be worried too much and be preoccupied about the welfare of others while neglecting his own. Otherwise he would be no good to any one and would never be able to overcome the hardships ahead if he is so weak emotionally. In taking care of oneself, Seth is emphasizing with his proverb that one generates strength and keeps focus on success which would serve all significant

others in the future. Otherwise if someone is distracted from his or her purpose with sheer concern and worry about the ones whom he or she had left behind and digressed his focus from the path of success, they would all be losers and that the only choice before anyone who dares to face a strong situation or a difficult journey is to be focused and self-conscious at all times. Vikram Seth is not suggesting that one neglects his or her significant others and be heartless or selfish. He is implying that when one does not love and respect themselves enough there is a chance that they may not be able to love others and be good enough for them. In a world when communality and selflessness is preached Seth says that the act of self-respect is equally important and one should not live for others or that his or happiness should not be dependent upon the happiness of others. In the context of the novel, Saeeda gives this advice to Maan mainly because she wanted him to be brave and not be weak because he was leaving loved ones behind. She is rather encouraging him while hiding her own emotions about being separated from him that he should keep his focus on the job at hand and that there is a lot of good he could do by succeeding than by spending his time being emotionally broken and cowering because of sentimentality over loved ones. So she advises that he ought not to put his happiness on the power of others as others may not have the best interest for him more than himself. ‘I will not be able to think of anything but you, Saeeda,’ ‘At least give me a smile before I leave.’ said Maan to which she responded by saying:

Saeeda Bai gave him a smile, but her eyes were still sad. ‘Listen, Maan,’ she said, addressing him by his name, ‘think of many things. Never place your happiness in one person’s power. Be just to yourself. And even if I am not invited to sing at Holi in Prem Nivas, come here and I will sing for you.’

‘But Holi is more than three months away,’ said Maan. ‘Why, I will see you in less than three weeks.’ Saeeda Bai nodded. ‘Yes, yes,’ she said absently. ‘That’s right, that’s quite right.’ She shook her head slowly a couple of times and closed her eyes. ‘I don’t know why I am so tired, Dagh Sahib. I don’t even feel like feeding Miya Mitthu. God keep you in safety.’ *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (1,313)

“Every object strives for its proper place” is another proverb used by Vikram Seth in the novel *A Suitable Boy* to emphasize that people want to be near their loved ones and that they don’t want to be separated from them. The best place to be for people in love is with the one they love, be it in a good situation or a bad one. As a result Maan went up to see Saad Bai who told him that he needn’t have bothered to because she didn’t want him to worry and go to the trouble. But he said

that he did it not for her own sake but for his sake because he wanted to see her. The proverb highlights that it is no trouble when loved ones and close friends go the extra mile to be near someone they care about or do things for them that might be uncomfortable or costly or tiresome but they do it anyway; one because they think that it would help their loved one to know that they are not alone and that people care about them and two, to feel better themselves by being close to or doing something gratifying for the people that they care about. As a result we hear all the time people saying ‘the pleasure was mine’ to imply that what they have done was not for just the sake of the recipient of the favor but in doing what they have done they were also recipients of something pleasurable. This proverb was however used in a rather intricate way because there is a mention of a book that was better off with someone who admired it and at the moment the proverb was said, Saad was reading a book that belonged to Maan. So the book was not in its natural place, vis-à-vis, in Maan’s bookshelf. The ability of the writer to use language in such an idiomatic way by putting the literal with the metaphorical sense of the deep meaning in the dialogue is of such a top quality. A faint-hearted reader would think that they were simply talking about the book, but the cunning metaphor was on the fact that Maan was the topic. Seth uses the metaphor of the book to imply that it was him and not the book that needed to be near its natural place. An eloquent use of proverb to make a statement conjoined with an eloquent usage of metaphoric style makes one thing clear – that the author’s mastery of language was in itself an area of fascination and enjoyment in the novel, *A Suitable Boy*. Therefore Seth has not only used the proverb in the novel to express his philosophy that love and companionship were important but he also showed this in a subliminal mastery of idiomatic expression. Such a quality in conversation suggests to the reader that they are reading a text of the highest quality and adds to their satisfaction of reading the piece of literature. The proverb implies that the theory of attraction is something that can’t be avoided and that it companionship is beyond the control of objective thought. Not only is it an indication that people should try to suppress companionship but they should celebrate it and upheld it in their lives. Saad Bai says to Maan:

Maan looked at her—she appeared a little tired. She was wearing the same red silk sari that she had worn in Prem Nivas. He smiled and said: ‘Every object strives for its proper place. A book seeks to be near its truest admirer. Just as this helpless moth seeks to be near the candle that infatuates him.’ ‘But, Maan Sahib, books are chosen with care and treated with love,’ said Saeeda Bai, addressing him tenderly by his own name for—was it?—the first time, and entirely disregarding his conventionally gallant remark. ‘You must have had this book in your library for many years. You should not have parted with it.’ *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (166)

There is a consistency in the use of proverbs in the novel by Vikram Seth. The above proverb suggested that it was always a pleasure for someone to be near loved ones whatever the cost. The following proverb indicates that having a companion is something that is not only good but something impossible for human beings to live without. The proverb is: “Man without life companion is either god or beast.” The usage of this proverb is so very well thought of that it doesn’t only imply that the idea of not having a companion may be not something unthinkable and it acknowledges that there may be people without life companions but it makes the statement that it is not such an easy feat to be in such a situation. One can deduce many meaning out of this proverb. On the positive note it could be used as to mean that having a life companion is good and pleasurable. So people should not only have a companion in their lives but should strive to have one. On the negative note it indicates that not having a life companion is so difficult for ordinary people to do and that they should not opt to be without one. The most important take from this proverb is then not that having a life companion is good or not having a life companion is bad. It is that those who don’t have a life companion are a rarity and they may not be considered ordinary people. The consequence of living without a life companion is implied in the word ‘beast’. One who doesn’t strive or at least have a life companion by choice is a demented individual and that is an indication of antisocial behavior. No wonder people always see people who keep to themselves with suspicion and that whenever some crime happens the discussion quickly turns to the psychology of the perpetrator because people who socialize and people who have friends and companions would generally not resort to much psychotic criminal acts. In the context of the novel, Biswas Babu was implying to Amit that he ought to get married because that was what was expected of all humans to do in order to ensure the continuity of their generation and to have companions in life. He tells him using the proverb that had ‘god’ and ‘beast’ connotations and asks him to choose which side he wanted to put himself. It was a cunning conversational rhetoric to win the argument by leaving no gray area or a third choice for Amit to pick. But it is a proverb that has a very deep sense and message to all readers and something beyond denial. That makes the reading of the novel very interesting and the arguments realistic not just for the characters who were involved in the conversation but for universal appreciation of the philosophy behind the writer’s usage of proverbs.

Biswas Babu and Amit’s conversation goes like this:

‘So it is about this, Biswas Babu, that you have come to talk to me?’ he said. ‘And you are speaking to me about the matter, not to my father.’ ‘I also spoke to your father. But that was one year ago, and where is the progress?’ Amit, despite his headache, was smiling. Biswas Babu was not offended. He told Amit: ‘Man without life companion is either god or beast. Now you can decide where to place yourself. Unless you are above such thoughts’

Amit confessed that he wasn’t. Very few were, said Biswas Babu. Perhaps only people like Dipankar, with his spiritual leanings, were able to renounce such yearnings. That made it all the more imperative that Amit should continue the family line. *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (487)

Regarding living the moment, Vikram Seth uses the proverb, ‘The ifs and buts of history form an insubstantial intoxicating diet’ in the novel *A Suitable Boy*. Without looking into the past or thinking of the future, one may find it hard to live the

present in a meaningful way. However, too much of the past and too much of the future may also hinder the enjoyment of the present life, which in itself could cause one to make crucial decisions that would affect the future if not the past. People learn from the past, live in the present and hope for the future. They cannot live in the past or in the future. They can only live in the present as the past is gone and the future is not there yet. It is possible to influence the future but not the past. This can be done mainly by living the present in a proper way. But there are some people who spend too much of their present times by asking themselves endless questions about what if such and such things had happened in the past. These constant questions of what ifs are not altogether useless to ponder about if one is to avoid making the same mistakes in the present again. That means, one has learned lessons from the past in order to rectify the present and set good ground for the future. Making the thought of the past an aim in and of itself; however, is impossible because the clock of life doesn't move backward. Similarly there are moments in life when people think about the future that whatever decisions they make in the present has to resonate with what they want to have to happen in their future life. It is a positive and responsible attitude to think like that. The problem comes when thinking about the ifs and buts of the future become an aim in and of themselves overshadowing a proper living in the present. Just as people can't live in the past, they can't live in the future either. They can only shape the future by learning from their past and living their present properly. That's why Seth uses the proverb that even though there might be innumerable questions about both the past and the present, they should not be entertained at the expense of the present life which is much more easier to grapple with and control toward a desired aim. As a result, Seth implies in the novel that the fact that Pakistan was separated from has changed many things inside of India itself. Life in India before and after the separation of Pakistan was not the same. It was not only the people who suddenly found themselves belonging to another country from the Indian subcontinent which had stayed for thousands of years who were affected by the separation but Indians were affected as well. The socio-economic and political structure of India had to adapt to the new normal of life without Pakistan. He mentions that land owners and Rajas had to adapt as a direct result of the separation of Pakistan from India to ways they had not been used to before. But in the end the proverb indicates that there was no point thinking too much about the past because it had already taken place and the best thing to do in the present was to live the present in a proper manner. Nawab Sahib muses:

Perhaps if Pakistan had not come into existence, the landowners would have been able to parlay their way into self-preservation: in a united but unstable India each power bloc might have been able to use its critical strength to maintain the status quo. The princely states, too, could have wielded their weight, and men such as the Raja of Marh might well have remained Rajas in fact as well as in name. The ifs and buts of history, thought the Nawab Sahib, form an insubstantial if intoxicating diet. *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (339)

“The Greater one's need, the greater one's propensity to be mesmerized” is another proverb in *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth. A person who has nothing has got nothing to lose. But if one has been invested hugely in various ways, those various ways themselves have things to bring and situations to lead to that one may not have even expected. Hence the reason for being fascinated and absorbed in such a continuous and busy sets of events. A simple life may be easy to manage but a complex life needs all the resources and attention of the people involved, which requires for them to spend more time occupied with thought and work. As Seth's proverb implies it is the need which leads to such an enormity of involvement in different affairs, which in turn brings surprises after surprises to the person involved that in the end it becomes overwhelmingly mesmerizing and absorbing. In the novel, *A Suitable Boy*, Haresh is described as someone who had risen in life due to his hard work and had succeeded to earn the fruits of his labor. As a result however, life presents him with unexpected surprises that he becomes very preoccupied and immersed in his thoughts as many things keep coming his way. He was an elderly man who had accumulated wealth and success in his life and he himself knew that the time now was to live the life commensurate to his status. There is no doubt that the changes in his life were enthralling but they were not things he never completely failed to expect. Nevertheless, his fascination with the happenings in his life as a result of his own background and needs didn't go unnoticed by Pyare Lal Bhalla who himself almost was caught in a spellbound moment at seeing Haresh make such huge sets of orders. Seth's message is that for those with small ambitions, great fascination is not a guarantee. But when one has a huge ambition and dares to do things differently than the wider population and gets to see the fruition of his endeavors many things change in their lives and their fascination almost never ceases. It even passes to their next generation depending on the amount of the ambitious efforts that had come to produce results. For example Haresh's daughter was not marrying an ordinary man. She was getting married to the son of the highest officer in Punjab. Like attracts like and success attracts success. At the same time it was only natural that the wedding be fittingly different than that of an ordinary wedding in town. Every order that Haresh was giving was to make sure that the wedding reflected his status and the status of his family as a result the wedding was one that had surpassed any wedding that had happened in the whole of Lahore and for many years before and after, it remained unrivalled. Seth captures Haresh's spellbound moment:

Haresh sat down once more. Pyare Lal Bhalla looked at him with such intentness that he was almost mesmerized into submission to his orders.

Of course, the greater one's need, the greater one's propensity to be mesmerized, and Haresh's need, as he himself saw it, was great. Besides, Pyare Lal Bhalla expected deference as an elderly man and as a man of substance. Had not his daughter been married to the son—the eldest son—of a first-class gazetted officer—the executive engineer for the Punjab

canals—in the finest wedding Lahore had known for years? It was not a question of the Services deigning to acknowledge the existence of

Trade. It was an Alliance between them. *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (698)

To sum up, here is one very expressive proverb used by Vikram Seth in *A Suitable*

Boy: “An equation is the same whether it is written in red or green ink”. It is more of the same as the philosophical saying, ‘the end justifies the means’. If one is looking for a certain result the manner the result came about may also be necessary as people are social beings more than anything else. One of the first prerequisite of a social being, one would presume is being ethical. As a result a parent may not advise a child to steal money instead of earning a decent payment of the same amount. A teacher would punish a student for cheating even when the student got all the questions right. The thing is being ethical requires that one needs to get all the desired results in life via a legal and moral means. Therefore a result obtained by questionable means doesn’t count in this sense. What Seth brings forth in this proverb is the fact that as long as a certain thing is not offensive and violating other people’s rights, it would be deemed acceptable if it produced the desired result, albeit in a different mechanism than the normal way of doing things. There must be a diversity of ideas in the world and that people should not hold themselves dogmatically to a one size fits all kind of mentality. In the novel, the Hindu Lata is wandering whether their union would be sanctioned by Kabir’s family because she was a Hindu and he was a Muslim. According to Rita Joshi:

Set in the India of the early 1950s, prior to the first general election of 1952, the novel represents at one level the need to examine the seeds of communal disharmony: the failure of secularism and modernization in modern, post- independence India. The novel describes Mrs. Rupa Mehra's search for a suitable match for her daughter, Lata. Lata has a brief dalliance with a Muslim boy, Kabir, even though Hindu-Muslim matrimonial alliances in India are almost unthinkable. Joshi, 2008 (49)

As much as she loved Kabir she was hesitant that he would stand a chance to marry her without the blessing of his father. So she at the very least wanted him to ask his father for confirmation and blessing first before hoping to be his wife. But for Kabir there was only one thing that mattered – whether or not she loved him. He knew that she did and he believed it. That’s why he was so adamant with himself that there was no power in the world who could change that. Another important thing to note is that he not only knew that Lata loved him, he also knew his father’s mentality very well. For his father religious connotation was not the only thing that mattered. All he ever does was to put boundaries and limits anyway. So it was not that the matter was going to be easy but Kabir thinks that as long as one didn’t cross the lines and hurt anyone, his father wouldn’t mind at all. All he wanted from his son was an offspring and that was exactly what he would get from the union of his son with Lata. Therefore he tells her that as long as she loved him there was no problem whatsoever that could stop them living together. Vikram Seth used this this proverb not in just philosophical manner but also in a racial connotation as well. The use of the red and green color is very important indicator of race and color or religion. So it didn’t matter whether one was black or white or Hindu or Muslim as long as there was the bounding force of love. Hence the proverb could be expanded to be used in other universal contexts as well and that makes the author a writer of a high philosophical thought and inspiration. Kabir doesn’t seem to be bothered by the idea at all as he already bought into the idea that it was love that mattered that he tells her firmly and in no uncertain ways that as long as she loved him and he loved her, other considerations don’t merit to be bothered about. Kabir says to Lata:

Kabir held her hand and said, ‘You love me. And I

love you. That’s all that matters.’ Lata persisted: ‘Doesn’t your father care?’ ‘No. Unlike many Muslim families, I suppose we were sheltered during Partition—and before. He hardly thinks of anything except his parameters and perimeters. And an equation is the same whether it’s written in red or green ink. I don’t see why we have to talk about this.’ *A Suitable Boy*, 1993 (216)

Conclusion:

To conclude the proverbs and sayings that have been used by Vikram Seth definitely wisdom that have been understood by the people through generation after generation. Proverbs are treasure of practical knowledge and wisdom. Proverbs tend to describe universal truth. Through the proverbs the writer Vikram Seth educates not only the character of the novel but also the general and discerning reader about the practical application and practical wisdom in daily life.

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