



MARRIAGE AND DOMESTICITY IN VIKRAM SETH'S A SUITABLE BOY

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ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth was born on June 20 1952 at Kolkata. His father Prem, was an employee of the Bata India Ltd. Shoe company, who migrated to post partition India from west Punjab in Pakistan. He is a famous Indian poet, novelist, travel writer, librettist, children's writer, biographer and memoirist. His mother Leila Seth was the first woman judge of the Delhi high court as well as the first woman to become chief justice of a state high court. She was the chief justice of the Shimla high court. Vikram Seth did his schooling from the Doon school in Dehradun. He took his undergraduate degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford University. He was enrolled in postgraduate Economics courses at Stanford University and was also attached to Nanjing University for his intended doctoral dissertation on Chinese population planning.

Vikram Seth's first novel 'The Golden Gate'(1986) describes the experiences of a group of friend's living in California. His other novel, 'A Suitable Boy'(1993) is an acclaimed epic of Indian life. The novel won the WH Smith Literary Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Set in India in early 1950's, it is the story of a young girl, Lata, and her search for a husband. 'An Equal Music'(1999), is the story of a violinist haunted by the memory of a former lover. Vikram Set has also written a travelogue 'from heaven lake' through Sinkiang and Tibet'(1983). The book is an account of a journey through Tibet, China and Nepal that won the Thomas Cook Travel Award. He also wrote a libretto, Arion and the Dolphin (1994) which was performed at the English National Opera in June 1994, with music by Alec Roth. Vikram Seth is also an accomplished poet. His work in poetry include 'Mappings'(1980), the Humble Administrator's Garden(1985), which was a winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize(Asia) and 'All You Sleep Tonight'(1990). Vikram Seth has written a story book for children. Vikram Seth latest work is 'Two lives'. The book is a memoir of the marriage of his great uncle and aunt.

A Suitable Boy' is set in the political hot bed that characterized India during the post-independence, post-partition decade if the 1950's this story examines the inner workings and



travails of four families, the Kapoors, Mehra, Chatterjis and the Khans. Two primary characters in this story are Mrs. RupaMehra and Lata, her marriageable but rebellious youngest daughter. Seth is most proud of his vibrant Mrs. Mehra, who is based in part on Set's grandmother, also named RupaMehra, and whom Seth calls "the muse of the project". RupaMehra is a widow whose mission throughout the novel is to take care of her family, and in particular, the search for a husband of suitable, Hindu character for Lata. However at the same time, Lata is torn by her mother's wishes and her own love for a Muslim boy.

Vikram Seth has become a rising star. A Suitable Boy won The Connect Award in 1993 and launched Seth into a slew of interviews, talk shows and book signings in his book tour. He mentioned, "by the end of this, by the time this is over, I'll be a most unsuitable boy" (Robinson). However many readers and critics alike were dismayed when A Suitable Boy was left out of the race for the Booker Prize in 1993. Seth's work was not among the six novels nominated for the prize, which was ultimately awarded to Paddy Clarke Ha HaHa on October 26, 1993.

Marriage is a socially approved relationship between a man and a woman that legitimizes a sexual and economic union. It is seen as social institution wherein individuals make a commitment to one another. Women from an early age itself are trained to become good wives and mothers. Women, who do not marry, especially in the eastern notions, are thought to be misfits in the society. As many deals with human relationships, it is only natural that issues of love, marriage and domesticity become the major themes in many novels.

In India women constitute nearly fifty percent of the population, but women's status has not changed tremendously. It is true that last two decades has changed a great development in women's status providing them access to education, health and nutrition. Yet women are still culturally conditioned and socialized into star-jacket roles such as mothers, wives, etc. within home they act as wives, mothers and homemakers and outside, as partners and co-workers in all types of enterprises. It is also noticed that the heterosexual Indian environment attaches great importance to a woman's marriage. Indian newspaper and cyber world vie one another to proclaim suitable matches for women. Thus it is no wonder that Seth addresses this issue in his novel, A Suitable Boy.

Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy' (1993) is an entire –voluminous novel written in imitation of Austen, which includes allusion's to the heroines reading of Emma as a code for the marriage choices she faces. Sarat Chandra's novel in Bengali 'swami', Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy' in English, and Pak Wanso's Korean works, 'Pride and Fantasy' and 'A Faltering Afternoon'. Austen in colonial or post-colonial novelistic appropriations is not merely matter for ironic contrast, or un-ironic adaptation: rather inter-textually operates in complex and interesting ways to both structure these novels and to read novels in 'other' ways. Austen's universal themes and interests--sexuality, marriage, conduct, women and domesticity, social relations of class- as well as the 'realism' in which they are encoded, that they find echoes in such different contexts as Korea, Pakistan and India. (Travels In Persia, 1627-1629. Sir Thomas Herbert. p15)

Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy' opens and closes with a wedding. It's a story of a Hindu family trying to find a suitable boy for Lata. The first line in the novel indicates the theme of the novel



when RupaMehra says to the protagonist Lata after her sister's marriage 'you too will marry a boy I choose'(P6). It's not the voice of RupaMehra only; it's the voice of society that the author has tried to depict. The boy will be Hindu boy chosen by her parents. Seth tried to portray the common mentality of Indian families towards marriage. Social pressure and her mother's emotional plea compel the otherwise, rebellious Lata to marry the boy chosen by her mother. Lata was in love with Kabir, a muslim but her mother and family were against her marrying a boy outside their caste.

Set in post-colonial India of 1950's Seth shows the conventional attitude towards marriage. The girl is not given the choice of her husband. Mrs. RupaMehra's attitude towards her daughter-in-law, Meenakshi clearly shows her dislike for love marriage. Her son, Arun had married a sophisticated girl without her consent. In order to get Lata married Mrs. Mehra consults her relatives, writes letters, travels from one place to another in search of a suitable boy for her daughter ".....I want you to find her a boy at once. A suitable boy, she is getting involved with unsuitable boys and I cannot have that....."(p548).(Perspectives on Indian English Fiction.Jaydipsinh Dodiya.p222,223,224)

But the main strength of the novel lies not in the business of matchmaking, but in the depiction of the social panorama of the decade after Independence. Seth manages to interweave in a credible way all the major themes of political, social and religious conflict, with the day to day ordinary human emotions of his true to life characters, over whom countless readers have laughed and cried. A multitude of characters and events through the novel, the setting moves back and forth between the cities of Barhampur, which is fictional, and Calcutta, with excursions to New Delhi, Kanpur and Lucknow and to a remote village in the north, where Mann Kapoor spends a month in exile- Brahampur. (Perspectives on Indian English fiction-JaydipsinhDodiya. p.161)

The story involves a widowed mother's search for a suitable husband for her youngest daughter, but encompasses very much more than that. The story of the Mehra family is interleaved with the stories of the other three families, with whom they are connected by birth, marriage or friendship. It includes plot lines devoted to issues of land reform and religious communalism. Seth also includes several other aspects of Indian culture in the novel, such as the tradition of courtesans, Urdu poetry, and Hindustani Classical music. The novel opens at the wedding of SavitaMehra with PranKapoor, a politician in the Indian National Congress, and the minister of Revenue in the fictional North Indian state of Purva Pradesh. One of Mahesh's Kapoor's most important legislative goals is the passing of the zamindari Abolition Act, which will result in the dissolution of the large estates of the landed Aristocracy known as Zamindars. This act will have negative consequences for Kapoor's friend, The Nawab Sahib of Bihar, who is member of this hereditary class. The twists and turns of local and national politics as the political leaders in the story attempt to force through a bill to reclaim land from the landowners to supposedly redistribute to the peasants is played out in parliaments and in the Indian High court- the high court scenes are particularly interesting and gripping . University life with its internal politics of whether to teach Joyce or not are covered as is how to make pair of leather brogue shoes!. The religious festivals involving biblical numbers of people bathing in the holy river Ganges and



Shia muslim festivals are featured but are explained too, yet you get real understanding of Hindu and Muslim rites. Similarly, Seth brings in a description of the life of a courtesan by creating a plot line involving a doomed romance between Mahesh Kapoor's younger son, Maan, and SaeedaBaiFirozabadi.

No sooner has the wedding ended, that MrsRupaMehra, the matriarch of the family, begins her search for a suitable boy for her younger daughter Lata, who at 19 is determined not to have an arranged marriage, but to fall in love first. Lata is a girl who does not possess the preconceived prejudices of her mother, with regards to inter-religious marriage and class hierarchies: her aim is to fall in love and to experience the emotional euphoria and complexities that it brings. She has only read about true love in books, through the works of Jane Austen and Shakespeare et al, and also through her mother and late father's relationship.

Lata ventures into an alien territory, where all previous poetical notions fly out of the window. She develops a fondness for Kabir, a cricketer and literature enthusiast, who attends college with her in Berhampur, then the inevitable happens, what first began as an awkward affection, quickly develops into a love, so deep and so penetrating. When Lata and eventually her meddling mother find out Kabir is a Muslim, what begins as a pleasant courtship becomes clouded by upset and emotional conflicts. The inter-marriage of Hindus and Muhammedan's and vice-versa, was, and in parts of contemporary Indian society still remains, a cause of much confliction.

Conversations plays a major role in the novel, which reflects Seth's admiration particularly for the works of Austen, Dickens as well as other nineteenth century British writers. It also provides an insight into his inclination towards the "clear window"(Basu 67-69) approach. His dialogues are tools for character explorations, and their gradual exploration.As in the following exploration, and their gradual development. As in the following conversation between Lata and Kabir, where the narrator is absent and the scene has been taken over by the characters, where the pithy dialogues supported by brief reflections convey both the reflections in attitude as well as muted emotional clash:

"Kabir, why didn't you tell me your last name?" "ItsDurrani." "I know." Hearing it may so casually brought all the cares of the world back on her head. "You know?" Kabir was surprised. "But I remember at the concert you refused to exchange last names with me.".... "You are Muslim," she said quietly. "Yes, yes, but why is all this so important to you? Is that why you've have been so strange and distant sometimes?. There was a humorous light in his eyes. "Important?" it was Lata turn to be amazed. "It's all important. Don't you know what it means in my family? Was he deliberately refusing to see difficulties, she wondered, or did he truly believe that it made no difference? Kabir held her hand and said, "You love me. And I love you. That's all that matters?"(171)(Critical Analysis of Vikram Seth's Poetry and Fiction. Seema Mohanty.215)

There are also sections describing rioting between Hindus and Muslims that occur when a Muharram procession happens to cross a performance of the Ram-Lila. Several critics argued that Seth uses these incidents to make a plea for secularism and against religious fanaticism. Seth includes a scene set in the Alamgari Mosque after Friday prayer. For the past few months, a



Shiva temple has begun to be constructed next to the mosque, much to the dismay of the local Muslim community. After a particularly fiery sermon by the local Imam, a riot takes place. The scenes end up with the police shooting at the mob, resulting in several deaths and injuries. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

‘No one knew how they who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighborhood that lay on one side of Chowk became a mob. One moment they were walking individually or in small groups through the alleys towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, excitedly discussing the ominous signals they had heard. After the midday sermon most were in no mood to listen to any voice of moderation. A couple of the more eager members of the Alamgiri Masjid Hifazaat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing-wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. There were cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ which could be heard all the way to the police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had sticks in their hands. One or two even had knives. Now it was not the mosque they were headed for but the partly constructed temple just next to it. It was from here that the blasphemy had originated, it was that must be destroyed.(p251).

A similar incident occurs later in the novel, a stampede at the ‘PulMela’ on the banks of the Ganges. A Suitable Boy is set in Brahmipur, a fictionalized Northern India city on the banks of the Ganges River. The action takes place from about 1950 to 1952, four to five years after India gained Independence from Great Britain in 1947. As such, there’s been a lot of political turmoil in India, with partition, etc. but even though politics plays a big role in the lives of the characters, Seth never lets politics dominate this story. A Suitable Boy is, first and foremost, a book about people.

Man Kapoor, the younger brother of Pran, might be said to play as large a role in the novel as do Mrs. RupaMehra and Lata. And its Mann primarily, through his friendship with the lawyer Firoze Khan, who unites the Hindus and the Muslims in A Suitable Boy.

Everything these characters do impacts the lives of the other characters. All the lives seem intertwined, and the reader gets to know everyone just about equally. When Pran falls ill, it’s not only the Mehra and the Kapoors who are involved. The Chatterjis have reason to visit the patient as well, and Pran’s physician is none other than Imtiyaz Khan, the twin brother of Firoze, Man Kapoor’s best friend. The themes in A Suitable Boy are family themes, of course, but the book also abounds themes given the fact that it’s set in India only a few years after Independence and partition. We see through the eyes of the book characters, the struggles between governmental parties, between the city and the countryside. India is in the process of defining itself, without the British and without the Northern states that were partitioned to Pakistan.

According to Seth the ‘caste matters’ in 1950’s India. The lighter-skinned Indians were very strongly opposed to the darker-skinned Indians. Mrs. Mehra told in no uncertain terms, “ I will not have a black grandchild.” MenakshiChatterji is described as being a bit darker skinned than



the Mehra, and Mrs. Rupa Mehra dearly loves Menakshi's daughter, Aparna, so it is not always a factor in the choice of marriage partner.

The scope is Tolstoyan. Huge epic scenes of riots, stampedes, public processions, parliamentary debates, public processions and political shenanigans among real historical characters are balanced with intimate descriptions of family meals, the ruminations of the fictional characters as they work through their moral dilemmas and relationships, the passing of the seasons; the text is full of portraits of birds, children and the eternal poor of both city and countryside; references to and detailed descriptions of Indian music, movies, foods, festivals, religious mania, poetry, appear as part of the narrative, embedded through the characters, not flashed around as authorial digressions. Everything is presented but never explained.

The characters are all superbly drawn and lifelike; they almost present themselves. The relationships between them evolve and change as the year progresses and as events exercise their inexorable pull. All the characters are highly memorable and take on independent life in the mind of the reader. One wonders about them, and what they are doing when the book is closed. This is huge achievement, given the length of the novel and numbers of characters.

Seth's 19th century theme is family, and marriage, specifically arranged marriages. Other themes include the position of women generally in Indian life and specifically women in purdah, academic life, political life, business life, economic life, cultural life, Muslim-Hindu relations, the caste system, and so on. Each sphere of social activity, each layer of society has a story, and characters to present it, and this is done entirely unselfconsciously: what stands always to the fore is the characters and their situations and how they interact. The whole of India in one year is presented through its people.

CONCLUSION;

When his first novel was published, Khuswant Singh declared Seth 'a new star in the literary firmament saying that the book 'outshines in brilliance anything that I have seen in half a century of star-spotting'. Seth achieved international stardom with the publication of *A Suitable Boy*'. He is now writing the book's sequel, to be called *A Suitable Girl*, and engagingly discusses the complexities of re-visiting his characters.

Seth brings out a huge, thick, and multi-layered slice of Indian life that, in its veracity, serves to widespread false views of India's and improve the world's understanding of our country. The historical scale of Seth's novels invites comparison with 'War and Peace'. Like Tolstoy, Seth writes the history of the recent past from the point of view of individuals whose lives are affected by the great historical events of the time and crosses the boundary between the invented and the historical. Nehru is equivalent of Napoleon. In contrast to the fierce magic realism of Salman Rushdie, Seth writes in 19th century realist mode with a vein of 18th century sentiment, flat at times but generally eminently readable and engaging. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the heyday of Salaman Rushdie and Magic Realism, we have an equally strong school of social realism led by Vikram Seth, whose suitable Boy as much attention on its publication as *Midnight's Children*(1980) had done a dozen years earlier.



Seth's books is original, rich and real, and it is realism that is humorous and tender by turns. Life moves through its vast frame as it does in the world. With a 'charged aimlessness' (Basu 1993), and scenes unfold both elements of laughter and pathos, strongly reminiscent of similar situations in the Victorian novels, particularly in Dickens *A Suitable Boy* owes a lot to Victorian novel-writing tradition in general and to Jane Austen in particular. Seth himself has acknowledged that his books, is in a sense, a novel of manners, in the Austen mold, and not just a showpiece for his considerable literary ability; "My great heroes are the Victorian novelists: Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Jane Austen" (Goswami 1993). (Critical Analysis of Vikram Seth's Poetry and Fiction. Seema Mohanty. p-161,162)

Set brings out the conventionality of the Indian society in the novel. Women does not have the right to choose their life partners. What their parents choose for them should be accepted without question, like Vikram Seth also highlights the roles/restrictions placed on woman in the post-colonial India of 1950's. Muslim girls though educated were not allowed to come out of the world of purdah. Even acting in a play with a boy was considered a shameful act. Lata enacted in a play with Kabir in the college and Mrs. Rupa Mehra could not tolerate to see her daughter acting with a boy. "Stop it, stop it at once! She wanted to shout- is this why sent you to university? I should never have allowed you to act in this play. Never, If daddy had seen this he would have been ashamed of you" (p.1033). here we can that even though Lata has got talent in acting, her mother could never appreciate this, Mrs. Rupa Mehra's conventional attitude that girl from good family should not indulge in such activities prevented her from allowing her daughter to out let her talent.

Seth's women are confined to domestic space after marriage. They have restricted their life within the houses and take the role of housewives and mothers. They are happy with their role as a mother and wife and don't like to venture beyond it. Savita, Veena and Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor are typical housewives who get enough freedom within the family to voice their opinion. Pran Kapoor always discusses his personal and official problems with his wife by supporting him in every way she can. We can't find woman being suppressed in the novel, but their social outlet is confined.

Menakshi is an exception to it. She is a frivolous and unfaithful wife. She is not happy being confined within the house and is shown as an outspoken woman; she is least bothered about the conventional impositions on woman and never goes well with her mother-in-law because of this attitude. She also engages in extra-marital with her husband's friend Billy and is least guilty about her actions. She says to Billy "What does marriage have to do with it? I am married, aren't I? You enjoy it, I enjoy it that's all there is to it." (p1131)

Mehras, Kapoors, Khans and Chatterjis are four families around whom Seth revolves his story and in this family all of them have two daughters and two sons. But it is interesting to note that, none of the girls in the family go out to work. Their space is limited either to their own house or their husband's house. Seth also brought out the confinement of women to private space after marriage through the family of the Khans. Nawab Sahib's daughter Zainab though an educated



and brilliant girl after marriage begins to wear purdah.(20) here woman had to spend their entire life since the age of fifteen in purdah either in their fathers or their husbands house.

Mrs. RupaMehra is an example of how one can be oppressed and oppressing at the same time. she feels that her family members and her daughter-in-law are oppressing her after her husband's death but she shows her dominance as a mother to Lata. She wants later to obey her. She feels "..... What was good enough for her mother and mother's mother and her mother's mother should be good enough for Lata.."(p22). Thus we find that the otherwise outspoken Lata becomes very submissive and silent fulfilling her mother's wish for she knows that would give her mother happiness. After her father's death, her mother focused all her attention for the welfare of her family though she becomes very sentimental at times. Mrs. RupaMehra seems to be a good mother but her way of showing her love, sometimes annoys people due to too much interference.

SaidaBegum , a muslim singer and courtesan can be considered as the embodiment of motherhood, as one finds her protecting her daughter from the evils of her occupation. Tasneem is the result of the illegitimate relationship between her and NawabSaheb of Baitar. She concealed this secret and never let the world know the reality. NawabSaheb occupies a high position in the society and Saida Begum never questioned his prestige. She is very concerned for the well-being of her daughter when she came to know that a married man, Rasheed was after Tasneem. Saida Begum for her part became so concerned about Tasneem's safety that she summoned the watchman and told him that under no circumstances was Tasneem's old Arabic teacher, Rasheed to be admitted to the house.

The predicament of woman to be born into a world which values them of their marriageability alone where culmination of womanhood is to be a wife or a mother is the important notion found in the novel.(perspectives on Indian English fiction-JaydipsinhDodiya. p.227,228,229)

One of the characters in this is a poet who is writing a novel. The novel in progress is described as a river, like the Ganga, with lots of tributaries and creeks. This image, of course, stands as an emblem of the method of *A Suitable Boy* itself and is one of the very rare meta-fictional devices in a book that is otherwise wholly without any trace of modernity. No tricks with narrative sequence or voice or point of view, or implied readers brought to the surface or fractured and blended images, funny voices or inter-textual cleverness.

A Suitable Boy reveals how women lose their individualities and identities and this is not dependent on the age. Every society at any point of time imposes restrictions on women and expects to be socialized and conditioned in society. Due to this expectation, women becomes pars of roles such as wives and mothers and are able to function as women per se.(perspectives on Indian English fiction-Jaydipsinh Dodiya.p231-232)

Seth's greatest achievement is the narrative voice, which is always self-effacing and utterly transparent. Themes and issues are presented with a steady consistency of imaginative objectivity. We see these concerns as the characters see them: there are no distancing devices, no poking through the veil of ideologies, no historical hindsight, no modern gap between what the



narratives presents, and how it is presented. Throughout the book, whether in the Hindu or Muslim sections, issues and institutions are presented entirely without judgment from an external perspective, but from inside the story itself, just as the characters see them. When Lata finally makes her choice as to which of the three men she is going to marry, it is really disappointing after hearing her choice. But we completely agree with it and understand it.

To conclude we can take one of Vikram Seth's character's words as his own, then, in short, Seth compares the process of his novels development with that of a 'Bunyan tree'.

...it sprouts, and grows and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunk or inter-wine with other branches. Sometimes branches die, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks. When you go to the Botanical garden you'll see what I mean. It has its own life-but so do the snakes and birds and bees and lizards and termites that live in it and so on it and off it.'(483)

Like the big and legendary banyan tree at Shivpur in Calcutta that has innumerable props in addition to the main trunk, and has equally innumerable branches, and cloud like leaves, the whole giving the picture of a gigantic creation, both massive and extremely impressive; A Suitable Boy with its main theme of a search of a suitable groom for Mrs. Rupa Mehra's daughter Lata, and innumerable other situations and projections involving four families, and the host of people inhabiting those families, along with multiple moods, motives and whole range of complex emotion; is one of the most fascinating creations in words in contemporary Indian Literature as a whole. (Critical Analysis Of Vikram Seth's Poetry And Fiction. Seema Mohanty.223)

Vikram Seth is quite an anomaly, particularly in this day and age, not just is he a novelist, but a poet, librettist, children's writer, memoirist and biographer. It is as if he's drifted from the pages of some 19th century novel, lost in the mists of time, and ended up here, in this age of ravenous vulgarity and mediocrity, to act as a sought of literary savior.

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