

**Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: A Study in Personal Relationship**

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**Abstract**

Vikram Seth's second novel *A Suitable Boy* presents a panoramic view of Indian society of the years immediately following independence. Seth tells the story of four upper-middle class families belonging to India of the immediate post-independence era. He gives flashes from the lives of these four upper middle class families and creates a panorama of characters, conflicts, withering idealism, rotten corruption, communal disharmony, changing times, love and passion, marriage and family and so on.

**Key Words:** Love, Passion, Relationship, Middle Class, Conflicts

The central strand of *A Suitable Boy* that connects all the characters and events is the matrimonial quest of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. The novel opens with her command: "You too will marry a boy I choose, 'Said Mrs. Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter.'"<sup>1</sup> This imperative is uttered at the wedding reception of Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter Savita who ties the nuptial knot with Dr. Pran Kapoor, a young lecturer in English at the Brahmipur University. Arun Mehta, the elder son of Mrs. Mehra, has married a Bengali Brahmin girl, Meenakshi Chatterjee, much against his mother's wish. It is a love-marriage.

Lata, like most of the persons of her age identifies love with romantic passion only and thinks it incompatible with arranged marriages. She too toys with the idea of a love marriage, first with the dashing and young cricketer, Kabir Durrani and later with an Indian poet-novelist-Amit Chatterjee, Vikram Seth's mouthpiece.

However, she gradually realizes that she cannot give up her family. Her realization

about family is clear when both Savita and Pran are, hospitalized: "With life and death so near each other here in the hospital, it seemed to Lata that all that provided continuity and protection was the family." This realization helps her to make up her mind finally regarding Kabir. She rejects Kabir whom she loves passionately as her passion causes him to lose self-control. When her friend Malati persuades her not to give up Kabir. Lata cries out against passion:

'I don't want to, ' cried Lata, 'I don't want to. If that's with passion means, I don't want it. When I thought that Kabir was seeing someone else, what I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion. Passionately and forever.'

Thus, Lata rejects Kabir's romanticism and Amit's lyricism. She opts for self-control and rational calm. She agrees to her mother's choice for arranged marriage. She takes a practical view of life and marriage. She values the innate qualities of her future

husband. Finally, Lata marries Haresh Khanna- a suitable boy, who is best, suited to her and is approved by her mother. In the last scene, as was in the first scene, Mrs. Rupa Mehar having got a suitable boy, found celebrating the wedding ceremony of Lata and repeating her earlier command to her younger son, Varun. "You too will marry a girl I choose."

Apart from the marriage of Lata and Haresh, the novel abounds in marriages and married couples. The list is spear-headed by D. Krishan Chand Seth, Lata's grandfather and Parvati, Arun Mehra and Meenakshi Chatterjee, Savita Mehra and Pran Kapoor, Pran's sister Veena and Kedarnath Tandon etc. Perhaps, it is for this reason, Sarla Palkar observes: "A Suitable Boy is not concerned with issues like exile, hybridity and so on but with familial and marital relationship and togetherness."<sup>2</sup>

Through Lata Seth projects the theme of sensibility in love and marriage. The two marriage-the Pran-Savita arranged marriage and Arun-Meenakshi love marriage-are held in juxtaposition throughout the novel. The arranged marriage works in spite of the fact that Pran lacks any kind of glamour and brings home a meager salary. Hence, the love marriage is in shambles with numerous escapades and mutual recriminations, though Arun is glamorous as he is an executive. To sum up, one can say that marriage and family is a stable relationship. It is the most prized thing in the novel.

Similarly, in *The Golden Gate*, Liz and Phil prefer such a marriage and family which could be well-thought of and stable one.

A quasi-historical novel, *A Suitable Boy*

chronicles a saga of four inter-generational and interconnected families: the Mehras, the Chatterjees, the Kapoors and the Khans. The plot of this novel is too vast to be summarized in detail and nor would such a summary have much meaning. The novel is set against the backdrop of post-independent India inching its way towards the first general Elections. It is structured into nineteen sections. The novel opens with a wedding that gives Seth a chance to introduce all these families and several major characters. It is the wedding of Savita, the widowed Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter, to Pran, a university lecturer and the son of the State Revenue Minister, Mahesh Kapoor. Present at the wedding are members of the Anglicized Chatterjee clan and the Khan family of the Nawab of Baitar who is Mahesh Kapoor's close friend. Apart from the Khans, the other three families are connected with the ties of matrimony. Lata is Mrs. Rupa Mehra's younger daughter and the story of the mother's search for a suitable boy for Lata drives the logic of the plot and forms the main interconnecting thread of the novel. The other character who links diverse geographical and cultural ties of the novel is Maan, Mahesh Kapoor's younger son, with his 'unsuitable' liaison with a Muslim courtesan Saeeda Bai.

Maan's erotic connection with a Muslim is paralleled in Lata's falling in love with a handsome young Muslim student Kabir Durrani. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is shocked and horrified by her daughter's rebellious act and whisks her off to Calcutta, to the home of her eldest born Arun Mehra who is married to Meenakshi, daughter of Bengali judge Mr. Chatterji. Amit Chatterji,

Meenakshi's brother, is a well-known poet, who in his lazy fashion falls in love with Lata. Since marriage is seen as a duty and an obligation, other members of the family and her friends assist Mrs. Rupa Mehra in finding a suitable boy, so adding to the vast canvas of Seth's novel more characters and situations. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts in searching out a suitable boy result in her discovery of Haresh, a boy from the right (Khatri) caste who works in a leather manufacturing industry. Which of these three suitors will Lata marry and who, in fact, is the most suitable boy are the questions that the novel unhurriedly plays out.

If the Mehras and Kapoors represent the Hindu Middle classes of North India, the Nawab of Baitar stands for feudal Muslim aristocracy. The aristocracy is fast fading in its relevance which is symbolized by the Baitar library falling to pieces in neglect. The Nawab's two sons Firoz and Imtiaz are lawyer and doctor respectively, and their careers look forward to the end of the feudal structure, even as the Zamindari Abolition Bill is being discussed in legislature and court. Their friendship with Maan, like their fathers' friendship, is a part of the syncretic traditions of India. Haresh who considers his work as his religion, and disregards caste restrictions on working in the polluting leather industry, seems to be a sign of the modern ideas of economic progress and social egalitarianism. The Anglicized Chatterjis give Seth a chance to Amit and show a colonial metropolis like Calcutta coming to grips with political independence from the British.

Like the 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel A

*Suitable Boy* is a long leisurely work encompassing the saga of four upper middle-class families and their meandering fortunes that covers a large canvas and a wide array of social issues. While the narrative is necessarily tittered through bourgeoisie preoccupations and perceptions, the structure itself undergoes a modification whereby the novel is split into 19 parts, each made up of several short chapters. The three similes quoted above used to describe the novel – banyan tree, the Ganges and a raag – imply largeness, volume and a natural organic structure. Anita Desai, perhaps taking off from Raja Rao's famous Foreword to *Kanthapura* where he described the rambling and episodic narratives of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, compares the narrative in *A Suitable Boy* with "the Sanskrit epic in which, through all the digressions and diversions, the thread of narrative is maintained". In order to translate the cultural and social life of his characters and the setting into the narrative of his novel, Seth has to modify the genre into a more episodic and looser structure. The modification grows organically out of the representation of a tradition and a way of life that is completely communal in nature.

Seth follows Pushkin's structuring for all his novels. Perhaps Seth finds this structure more useful in representing the social diversity and the interactions of individuals within it, which is his chief concern. Given the diversity and heterogeneity of the Indian milieu and Seth's interest in and celebration of society, this structure helps him take up a character or an event, move on to the next and gently get on with narrating the web of connected lives and characters. Chapters

explore the conflicts of a character's experiences with the world with charm and often with gentle irony. Seth does not care too much to explore the psychological depths of his characters' minds. Perhaps he is too tolerant and kind, and his affection for them allows him to see their faults with sympathy Critics have complained that there is not much development in his protagonists,

and that every character is reduced to one or two characteristics or even mannerisms. But Seth is able to connect, through this structure, to several widely different characters, setting and events. The vastly varying canvas of experience represented in the novel and the sheer diversity of lives engross the readers and whet their lively curiosity.

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