



VIKRAM SETHAS A RECOGNIZED HUMANISM WRITER IN 20th CENTURY IN A SUITABLE BOY

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Abstract:

Seth, a master of many genres at once is a poet, a travel writer, a novelist, and a writer of children's stories. He is perhaps the first Indian writer who is truly transnational. His novels provide a humanitarian worldview in the age of pop culture and global consumerism.

A Suitable Boy is a true Indian novel in English. In its representation of linguistic inclusiveness, it reaffirms Nehru's secularism and nationalism. It elaborates the discourse of modernity in the third world, particularly in the manner in which this modernity is negotiated. It also addresses the contemporary problem of communal violence that has gripped India and the subcontinent in the post-independence period. Through a subplot in the text involving an inter-religious love story, it contextualizes the Indian political scene. As a result, the public and the private domains of the characters do not remain mutually exclusive categories. The Golden Gate, Seth's verse novel of Californian life, was a dandified virtuoso performance in Byronic stanzas, filtered through Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, its metrical constraints counterpointed by occidental freedoms. Readers who delighted in it may at first be disconcerted by the apparent narrative literalness of *A Suitable Boy*. The story begins at the wedding of the sister of its heroine, Lata. Her widowed mother, Mrs Rupa Mehra, wishes to find her headstrong daughter a good Hindu boy of the right caste to marry. The year is 1950, three years after Partition. But there is no friction evident, on this gala day, between the Hindu and Muslim families, all respectable and prosperous, who seethe among the flowers in the garden of the groom's parental home. Seth uses these characters as separate strands in the densely textured plot he is weaving towards a final pattern.

The love story of a girl in the West could not sustain the weight that the story of Lata and her various suitors conveys, for hers is also the story of her family, her religion, her sex, and of a changing India. The boy who is least suitable is most attractive; he is Muslim. The boy with whom she has most affinity, Amit, a poet and writer who resembles his author ('Yes, I'm the clever one,' he is made resignedly to say), is too like her. The boy of the right caste has tiny eyes, chews pain and says 'Cawnpore' in the British way, instead of Kanpur, which irritates clever, emancipated Lata.

Her decision is the aesthetic making of the book. It comes at the latest possible moment, illuminating the interconnected narratives of the novel with a recognition of compromise and weakness that can bear comparison with the great image in *Middlemarch* of a candle held to innumerable spots on a cracked mirror. Lata's irresolution - 'I like everything,' she says brightly, 'but at different times' - holds in tension the large political themes: the dismantling of huge private estates, the keel of rural immutability that has endured in India for thousands of years, the sudden irruption of violence often linked to religion. Once again, it is Seth's sympathy that suffuses this book - for the ageing courtesan with her secret that almost brings death; for her green parakeet; for the prodigiously mathematical little boy who sees Euclidean configurations on the ceiling of a tent; for a pompous English don inveighing against Joyce; for a man at prayer on his roof for one brief paragraph only does Seth's modest mimetic prose rest on a heightened note. The burden of this short meditation on death is the sad, necessary, reassuring, atomised recurrence of things, a theme that runs through the novel and of course through Hinduism in the form of the river Ganges. Flying over the book like a kite on a sacred thread is the promise of reconciliation.

The movement and music of the writing in *A Suitable Boy* take time to absorb, but its unobtrusive, powerfully rational sweetness eventually compels the reader to its way of seeing. By the end, Seth arrives at a use of adjectives so glancing and internal in their suggestion that they can be fully understood only by a reader who has come the whole way with him. It is difficult to imagine a European narrative as complex and emotionally based as this told with such want of pretension or neurosis: the absence of Freud is indeed one of its distinguishing marks. Seth's seemingly egoless style allows India's confusion, and its tendency to coherence, to be seen with more light than refraction.

A Suitable Boy is set in fictionalized North India and deals with a particular historical moment. Seth translates a North Indian society into English, charting the transition of a feudal society to a modern one. The novel is positioned at a particular historical juncture in India and within the institution of the family in postcolonial India. Seth projects the Indian perspective on human relationships in *A Suitable Boy*. Human life is

dependent on mutual contact, cooperation, relatedness; these form the foundation for personal and social harmony. Human relationships are structured and they function within the twin domains of the self and society. Western society endorses individualism, whereas then on-western societies pin faith on networking or interconnectedness of relationships, in the solidarity of a community. The socio-cultural structure and the value system of the society also condition the pattern of human relationships and the basic instincts that govern life and people's attitude, for example, love-hatred-jealousy-passion infatuation.

The social-cultural structure also governs institutions like marriage: for example, the arranged marriage system in India though now in the 21st century the scene has changed which is contrasted with the love marriages in the west, where the emphasis is on familiarity between individuals. *A Suitable Boy* interpreted in the light of the Indian socio-cultural context of India after independence. Seth becomes an authentic spokesperson of India's identity, cultural heritage and contemporary reality. The novel is culture-specific involving people who have lived and shared the centuries old Hindu-Islamic socio-cultural-intellectual milieu. The Mehra, the Chatterjis, the Khans, the Kapoors and their interconnected lives are portrayed with a close understanding of the human and individual emotions and the socio-cultural structure and patterns existing in India. In a tradition bound society like India, issues like marriage, jobs, occupations, profession are not exclusively limited to a person's private domain; individualism is not celebrated or accepted in 19th century realist novel. Fixing marriages of girls does not remain a private affair. An individual's life is contained not only within the family but also within her community-caste-class-religion. Thus, individual plight, personal passion and the social norms do not synchronize; they are always in conflict. Human relationships bring along with them a gamut of emotions. Lata, too, suffers inwardly because of her passionate love for Kabir. This relationship places her in predicament because there are caste-religion variables attached to it; Lata never seems to be at peace when she is involved in a relationship with Kabir. She gets the impression that she has become someone other than herself. She wonders whether her acceptance of Haresh was a reaction to her failed relationship with Kabir. Despite Haresh's encouraging letters and her own cheerful replies, Lata begins to feel uncertain and lonely. Lata seriously contemplates on the pain and suffering she undergoes in her passionate relationship with Kabir; she juxtaposes personal longing, passion with societal norms, stability and order in life. She weighs one against the other and speculates.

"A Suitable Boy" explores the relationship between literature and the formation of the Indian nationalist identity. Seth uses the mimetic mode; the historical references alluded to in the novel constitute the notion of India as a unitary entity, a single nation with its internal diversities. Seth very minutely draws out the varied socio-cultural peculiarities inherent within the nation. The idea of an invented, imagined nation comes from Benedict Anderson's thesis in *Imagined Communities*. The part played by literature in the construction of national and cultural identity is important. Since India's independence, the novels written in English language have been instrumental in constructing the images and style of national imagination. The predominant mode of Seth's fiction, in general, and *A Suitable Boy*, in particular, is cast in the frame of 19th century European novels with the sociological realities and the discursive instabilities of an imagined and a real nation. The imagined nation becomes like the plot of the novel in which actions are plotted. Like the realist novel, the imagined nation gets a strong sociological base. Seth does not summarily dismiss the factionalism, the class-caste factors, and religious fundamentalism that threaten the stability and authority of the secular-socialist nation state. Seth does not obscure the multiple realities myths about India nor does he dismiss any illusion that one might have about the unity of the Indian nation state. He writes, "We should think above divisions, splits, cliques! We must pull along like a team, a family, a battalion....this is India, Hindustan, Bharat, the country where faction was invented before the zero. If even the heart is divided into four parts can you expect us Indians to divide ourselves into less than four hundred?" Seth does not challenge the idea of the concept of nation-state as a fictional construct; he is neither sceptical about the 'national Indian identity'. In the process of upholding the image of unified secular India, his novels celebrate the resilient nature of India that affirms and honours differences. Seth does not deny that India is not a cohesive cultural entity and that despite the existence of differences among the inhabitants of the various communities the country has not disintegrated. However, the growing factionalism in the political parties, the rise of leaders more interested in power than in ideals, the growing frustration and disillusionment.

Seth has come from a background where higher education seemed unattainable. In his own life, he tried to reconcile everything -family life, learning, calligraphy, personal honour, order, ritual, God, agriculture, history, politics into comprehensible whole. The Jatav, Jagat Ram's presence and participation in Lata and Haresh's wedding are also marginal. Seth deals with another subaltern figure Kaccheru, landless labourer, the peon who works for Arun Mehra, Professor of English. He portrays the Indian English educated middle class, and it is ironic that the English speaking Indian middle class make the presence of these subalterns invisible. In the character of Arun Mehra we find the remnants- sceptre of colonial past looming large- of his westernized lifestyle turns him into a mimic man.

Seth presents differing viewpoints on the theme of marriage and sex. Mr. Biswas Babu explains that an arranged marriage with a sober girl is advisable and that marriage as an institution is necessary for procreation and for controlling the baser human instincts. Data's decision to denounce passion is probably the projection of

Seth's philosophy of taking up the middle path, of moderation and control and refraining from excesses. Seth reiterates that unsettling passion could prove disastrous. The virtues of serenity, calmness and security that love brings figure prominently in Seth's next novel, *An Equal Music*. Lata oscillates between bouts of serene optimism and terrifying attacks of uncertainty; she feels that sharing life with Haresh will allow her to grow and the aspirations of an ideal domestic life will be fulfilled. Contrary to conventional norms, Lata and Haresh would first have a civil ceremony and then the traditional wedding because Rupa Mehra feels that she had to protect her daughter from the injustices of the traditional Hindu law; marriages solemnized before a Registrar were governed by laws that were much fairer to women. At the close of the novel, all the major characters, who were for Rupa Mehra, it is like a mission accomplished. In the opening scene of the novel involving Savita's wedding, the mood is one of belonging to the community - easy sociability - brotherhood - congeniality. The novel ends with Lata and Haresh leaving for Calcutta, leaving the reader to imagine what Lata's future would be like. By opting for the realist mode, Vikram Seth is attempting to contextualize the diversities of India within the British literary tradition - it is not an attempt to privilege the English novel as a literary genre. Moreover, by writing in English language the novel cuts across the diversities of India, familiarizing the reader through shared knowledge.

Conclusion:

A Suitable Boy, written in the tradition of 19th century classics looks at the patterns of life, its social behaviour and challenges to the social fabric of the nation. It presents a social history of India, a domestic history of parents, families and communities, set in the 1950s. It is far less concerned with political struggles than with smaller dramas of everyday life in which there is struggle, heartbreak, and chaos. Seth emphasizes the redeeming aspects of the private lives of individuals, of families a secure haven for individuals and love that binds and connects human beings across national and transnational borders. His humanism may be questioned in the present multinational, globalized world, but he has successfully crossed *The Shadow Lines* to create *An Equal Music*.

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