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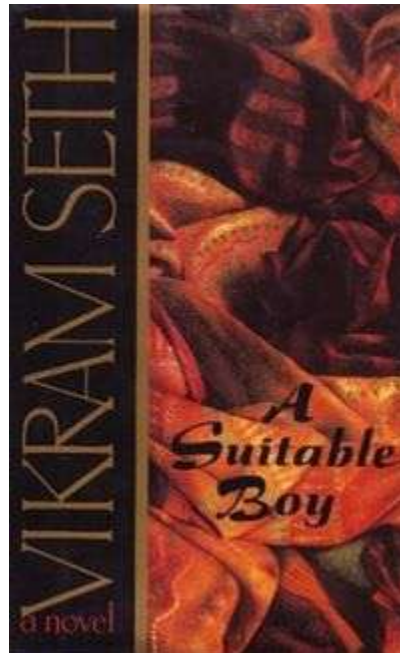
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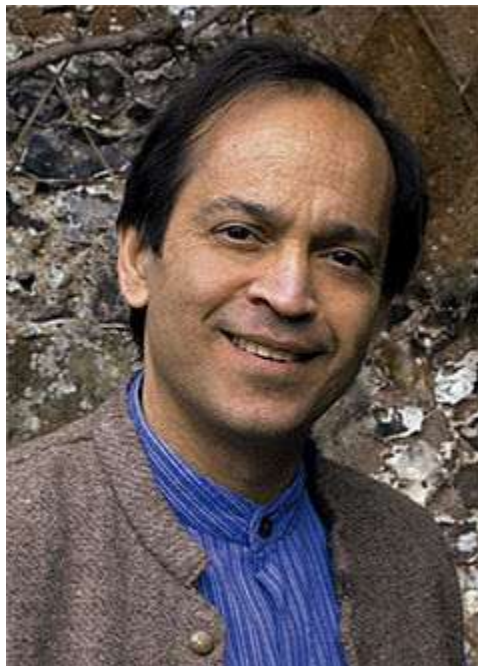
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Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* - An Approach to the Society

A large number of Indian writers in English of the post-1980's boom either lived outside the Indian subcontinent or have spent considerable years abroad as part of the diasporic migration. The work of such writers is open to contradictory interpretations and critical responses. They are, more often than not, appreciated for their extra-literary circumstances. This is particularly so in Vikram Seth's case.

The publication of *The Golden Gate* (1986) – Seth's first Indian novel in verse made an immediate sensation in 1986. *A Suitable Boy* made publishing history in 1993, by attracting unprecedented attention from all quarters and by placing it on track for the highest honor – Noble Prize. All the national newspapers vied with each other to mark him out as “a writer with the golden pen, [...] a writer with a golden touch, [...] and a possible genius” (qtd. in Kumar).

Travel and Literary Career



Vikram Seth

Spatial factors of geographic movement are central to an understanding of the identity of any writer who has experienced a considerable degree of global migration in the course of his career. The extent of travel that a writer has undertaken becomes vital to his literary career. Seth's work thus has an international variety. Seth is able to move with considerable ease from medieval Chinese poetry to San Francisco Yuppiedom and from the Hindi belt in North India to the world of Bach and Beethoven in Britain and Vienna.

Family in Centre Stage

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A Suitable Boy is saturated with the ideology of the family, and this chimes in perfectly with its conservative realistic aesthetic. It is the family that assumes centre stage in Seth's narrative. As Anita Desai puts it,

Although, in their rash youth, they (Lata and Maan) 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, by the great god family (23).

The Background

How a novelist chooses particulars of characters to depict his point of view is an important factor in evaluating any novel. Any novel owes its existence to the interest which men and women everywhere and at all times have taken in men and women in the great panorama of human passion and action. Every piece of fiction, whether it is a novel, a drama or a short story, presents a view of life. Time and place of action embrace entire milieu of any society, including political and social life. Very often reputation of the novel rests on skillful portrayal of life and manners of a particular class, social group or place.

A Suitable Boy is written in the background of social, economic, political and cultural upheaval of newly independent India. *A Suitable Boy* deals with the most eventful period of Indian history.

Every work of literature creates its own world. Henry Fielding who stressed the idea of the novel as a comic epic in prose and sought to encompass the whole of the eighteenth century social life in his works, In *A Suitable Boy* which has more than thirteen hundred pages, Seth sets out to bring the entire post-independence India into his fictional vision. As a writer, Seth is conversant with life at various social levels. Well acquainted with both the high and the lower strata of society in India, he portrays the mid-twentieth century society in all its diversity. He uses the technique of contrasting characters and their lifestyles with remarkable aesthetic effect.

Dealing with a Variety of Passions

The novel does not only deal with sexual passion, but with passion for religion, politics and domestic and public power, and passion for careers. These are all dealt with in a fulsome manner in *A Suitable Boy*. Unless the readers understand Seth's moral intention of writing against all passions in all fields of human activity and his writing in favor of all moderation, tolerance, rationality and self-discipline, they would fail to see the integrating factor that brings the panoramic events of this gigantic novel together. Seth has perhaps shaped *A Suitable Boy* with this manifesto against the passions of sexual love as well as politics and religion. Western readers who find the heroin Lata Mehra's rejection of her passionate love for Kabir puzzling or repugnant, would do well to bear this larger religious and political context in mind.

Religious Passion as Religious Bigotry

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Seth regards passion in religion as fanaticism, bigotry and murderous hatred of other religions. The stupidity and destructiveness of such zealotry are seen as the equivalent of the insane jealousy caused by passion in sexual love. Similarly on the religious scene, Seth shows his distaste for the fanatical ascetics and Swamiji's at the Pul Mela festival; he emphasizes this distaste by viewing this scene through the eyes of the gentle religious seeker Dipankar Chatterji and showing Dipankar's alienation when he realizes that the charade of saintliness masks vanity and power-seeking egoism. Note the deliberate choice of the name: Dipankar. In Indian tradition which includes Buddhism, Dipankar is shown to be one of the older Buddhas, who inspires Gautama in his spiritual journey, which ultimately focuses on *nirvana*. The horror of the mob, stampeding and crushing the elderly and the frail to death, and almost killing Bhaskar, the boy who is a mathematics genius, is a further reinforcement of Seth's moral contrivance in condemning passion in religion.

Condemnation of Sectarian Fanaticism

Symbolically, Seth's condemnation of sectarian fanaticism is made clear, when the obnoxious Raja of Marh's attempt to raise the *shiva linga* from the bottom of the Ganges and erect it, which will enrage devout Muslims, ends in abject failure. The gigantic phallus – a symbol of both the sexual and the religious passions – rolls down the steps of the gate, crushes a priest and returns to the Ganges. The novel is set during the period after the partition of India which resulted in the emergence of two independent nations, Pakistan and India. More importantly, note also that *A Suitable Boy* was published at the time of the Babri Masjid destruction in 1993. The writing is thus more in a prophetic mode. It only means that Seth may have anticipated a bleak happening based on his reading and understanding of what happened during the partition days. His symbolism further reveals his own position in sectarian fratricide.

Forced Migrations as Aftermath of Partition of India

The partition of the country was accompanied by Hindu-Muslim riots, when the old and long cherished human values suffered and lost all relevance. In this loss, the commonly accepted concepts of tolerance and faith were completely shattered. The human instinct was taken over by a new law of the jungle, where blood and death has no consideration. This setback to values was followed by the migration of population from both sides. The migration was on an unprecedented scale and those who attempted to seek shelter in their respective strongholds were tortured and humiliated before and after crossing the borders. The magnitude of this catastrophe was not comparable to any other such event in the history of mankind. This was also a period where people developed a fear complex that continued in the hearts of all those who stayed or left, whether they were a part of the majority or the minority. This sense of insecurity is sustained and remains in the background throughout the novel.

Purva Pradesh, a Parody on Uttar Pradesh?

The novel opens with a political background where the scene is set in a small province of India, Purva Pradesh, away from Delhi, the seat of central power. It is in this province that the

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vibrations of internal political conflicts are evident, just as in any other part of the country. The political instability originated from Delhi where Nehru, a symbol of tolerance, and Tandon, a symbol of aggressiveness, carried their commitment to every corner of the country, Purva Pradesh is no exception. The same conflict or clash is symbolized through Mahesh Kapoor, Minister of Revenue, and L.N. Agarwal, Minister of Home Affairs. They are the persons engaged in struggle for power, where Mahesh Kapoor stands for tolerance and L.N. Agarwal for aggressiveness. The struggle continues throughout the novel.

Vikram Seth is At Home with His Context

This struggle is reflected in all phases of Indian life, culture, faith, economic conditions and personal relationship. In the culture sphere, the author has shown a deep knowledge of innovative music, Rabindra Sangeet, Urdu ghazal, Hindu mythology, Muslim faith and Shia-Sunni conflict. At the same time he also relies on his knowledge of English Literature and preference for change in teaching, so as to include new writers in addition to the ones already in circulation in the university campus. During the discussion, a volume of knowledge and insight is scattered about for students of literature, where the talent of James Joyce finds an echo in the logic and reason of Pran Kapoor, the elder son of Mahesh Kapoor, opposed by Professor O.P. Mishra, the head of the department, who is rather casual in his rejection of the proposal put forward by Pran Kapoor.

The Heroine Lata

The heroine of the novel, Lata is the youngest daughter of the Mehra family. She is under strict scrutiny of Rupa Mehra a highly conventional mother. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is a widow who lost her husband when her children were very young. But she derives her strength from this loss, and whenever there is a crucial decision due, she takes advantage of this position. To select a suitable boy for Lata, she has her own sense of judgment and tolerates no compromise in this respect. At times, Lata does make an attempt to assert her freedom and dignity, but fails to move beyond convention. While making a choice, Lata is faced with three contenders. Of these three suitors the first is Kabir Durrani, and they fall in love at first sight, the second contender is Amit Chatterji and the third Haresh Khanna.

Like Jane Austen's heroine Emma, Lata can just as well say "I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more" (232-233). It is not enough to say that Lata is incapable of love; rather she is cool in both public and private life. Probably no heroine in fiction thinks more of her lover's intelligence than of his good looks, as does Lata. She adopts a rational perspective of the young man's virtues and weaknesses. In the letter to Kabir, she writes in a controlled rational tone:

I have got your note [...] I got your letter too when I was in Calcutta. It made me think over and remember everything. I am not annoyed with you in any way; please do not think so. But I feel that there is no purpose at all in our writing or meeting. There would be a lot of pain and very little point (776).

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In Search of Perfect Adjustments and Harmony

Seth's men and women are in search of perfect adjustments and harmony in domestic as well as in social life. They believe that a harmonious relationship within the family is but a prelude to stable society. It is not that they have no hardships and difficulties but there is no hint of a mutual betrayal leading to an inevitable clash, Seth sees the institution of marriage as a stable one and hence his faith is in stability and solidarity of society.

A Variety of Episodes: A Special Structural Feature

In addition to the main story, there are numerous episodes in the novel, each in the shape of a story, such as Saeeda Bai's relations with Maan Kapoor and Nawab of Baitar; Tasneem's lessons with Rasheed, a young socialist from a rural landed background; Meenakshi's passion for her lover; the Nawab of Baitar's faith of the Shia sect, Mrs. Rupa Mehra's old father Dr. Seth and his eccentric behavior; Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and her religious faith; Zainab (Nawab's daughter) and her effort to save the family's town house, Baitar house from acquisition as evacuee property; L.N. Agarwal's attitude towards minorities, etc. most of these episodes are interrelated and find some relevance with the main plot.

Central Theme

Seth takes love and marriage as the central theme for his novel. He considers both as the fundamental mode of human life. Human nature seems to unfold itself through this most intimate of personal relationships. Seth believes that people ruin their lives with excessive demands, unnecessary anxieties and self-defeating ways. Distrusting romanticism and modernism, as promoting alienation, despair and unhappiness, he disapproves of romantic love, political ideals and causes any kind of intolerance, obsession and fanaticism or frenzy.

Seth revitalizes the literary conventions and forms of the past for the comfort of the writer and the reader. Even sentimentality gets renewed life here rather than as mere postmodernist formalism, yet his relaxed, eclectic use of older styles, rejection of alienation and appreciation of money and success share in the postmodernist formalism, yet his relaxed, eclectic use of older styles, rejection of alienation and appreciation of money and success share in postmodernist aesthetics of recent decades.

Not an Anti-Intellectual

For an extremely successful serious writer, Seth has been shamefully ignored by the academic critical elite, probably because he does not fit into current expectations of the postcolonial. He is, however a major writer, very much the opposite of Rushdie in temperament, interests and attitudes. For all his pretense of middlebrow anti-intellectualism, he is very intelligent, sophisticated and cosmopolitan. He has an interesting vision of life and is one of the best literary craftsmen of present time, who keeps scaling previously unimagined heights. A

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Suitable Boy is at times very witty, at times a bit flat, but it has the fullness of life of the great nineteenth century novels.

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