

Marginalization of Women in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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Abstract

Male dominance is asserted through social institutions like the law, education and religion through traditional practices. Patriarchy is the social order, which is constituted by the self-sustaining structures like power, by means of which women's interests are always subordinated. Gender inequality is protested by feminist writers. They want to reconstruct the patriarchal structures of power in economic, educational and professional fields. A new era of equality between sexes would lead a social revolution since women are one half of the human population.

Vikram Seth, a prominent post-independent writer discusses the marginalization of women in his novel *A Suitable Boy*. Saeeda Bai, a courtesan is being victimized by the society.

Saeeda, having suffered painful sexual exploitation, wishes to guard Tasneem, her daughter from a similar disgraced life. By her own protectionism she denied Tasneem any outside contact / communication or association with normal people. This 'non-awareness' is made into a beautiful feminine quality – an asset in young brides to preserve the family system' (236). Both Lata, the protagonist of the novel and Tasneem are conditioned to attain this muted consciousness.

As Anita Desai (23) puts it, 'Although in their rash youth, they (Lata and Maan) might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance, return chastened, to the safety and security of the familial and the traditional in the Indian fashion, by the great God family'.

Keywords: Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, Patriarchy-muted consciousness-marginalization of women by society-female victimhood. Tradition-transition-modernity-self-imposed seclusion-feminism-Woman as other-exploitation of women.

Introduction

'The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, It's a girl' (Shirley Chisholm 1).

Marginalization of women is the major issue prevailing in societies of all eras.

Gender imbalance is the hot topic of not only modern age but of all ages. Tradition, Transition and modernity are the different stages woman is passing through in all periods of history. Male dominance is asserted through traditional practices. In “Image of women in the Indo-Anglican Novel,” Meera Shirwadkar claims “Traditionally, marriage for woman has entailed as most submissive feminine role, she submits to her husband and his family as a slave” (26).

Male dominance is asserted through social institutions like the law, education and religion through traditional practices. Patriarchy is the social order, which is constituted by the self-sustaining structures like power, by means of which women’s interests are always subordinated. Gender inequality is protested by feminist writers. They want to reconstruct the patriarchal structures of power in economic, educational and professional fields. A new era of equality between sexes would lead a social revolution since women are one half of the human population.

In the patriarchal society, woman functions as other which allows men to construct a positive self- identity as masculine. De Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* declares

Woman as represented by men has double and deceptive image ... she incarnates all moral virtues from good to evil, and their opposites . . . He projects upon her what he desires and what he feels, what he loves and what he hates (229).

Freud’s theory suggests that human beings are born bisexual. The construction of masculinity and femininity is not secure. The main goal of femininity is to find ways of confronting and subverting the mechanism of oppression. They question Freud’s concept of sexuality.

In Post-Independence era, there has been an astonishing awareness of various speeds of feminism and it has been redefined by many writers in response to the various clamours. Many writers focused on plights of woman poor living condition and voiced their support for equal rights for women. Among the contemporary writers in post – independent era, Vikram Seth is a unique but a versatile writer with variegated career – a Ph.D. scholar in economics, poet, translator and novelist.

Vikram Seth’s portrayal of woman as marginalized creatures in his novel *A Suitable Boy* is analyzed in this paper. His depiction of woman is taken into analysis in this paper.

The novel *A Suitable Boy* opens with a wedding ceremony in Brahmpur. Mrs. Mehra’s search for ‘a suitable boy’ for Lata is the main plot of this novel. Quest for a suitable boy for her

daughter remains a great task for her to fulfill the social norms such as religion, caste and social status prevailing in the period of early post – independent era.

Discussion and Interpretation

Seth creates a large number of characters in the novel. One such character is Saeeda Bai whose love with Maan Kapoor is purely passionate and sexual attraction. Saeeda is treated in the novel as a sexy female object, primarily positioned as a site of male desire and marginalized on account of her disreputable career. The very system which exploits Saeeda Bai, made her depend on it. She has to satisfy the sexual urges of a range of wide patrons. One such patron was Raja of Marh. The attraction and passion of

Maan with sexual happiness and falls in love with him, knowing very well that he will never marry her.

Saeeda Bai's so called 'younger sister', Tasneem a teen aged girl (whose real identity is revealed by the author at the climax of the plot of the novel) is also in a way similar to Lata in selecting a suitable boy for matrimonial purpose. Although Saeeda and Tasneem do not know who their fathers are, Saeeda governs Tasneem's life, by her own patriarchal 'self', that Tasneem must be protected at all cost from the exploits of this ungentle world. Like Lata, Tasneem also has three suitors. At least, Lata is accorded a freedom of choice to select 'a suitable boy' whereas Tasneem, on the other hand, has neither freedom nor communication with any other persons, leave alone any suitable boy. Saeeda asserts to Mann 'It is not admirers to choose her, but to be chosen by me' (806). Tasneem is kept in purdah, 'spends time cutting vegetables, reading novels and thinking about life' (113) under the ever vigilant eyes of 'sister-mother' Saeeda. Of the three suitors of Tasneem, Rasheed is her tutor for Arabic; Ishaq Khan is the sarangi player of Saeeda's music team; and Firoz is the son of Nawab of Baitor. And ironically, Saeeda considers none of them to be the suitable boy for Tasneem.

Ishaq is the musician 'has no future' (805). Rasheed is already married and 'eccentric by nature' (Mala Pandurang 125) and Firoz is a blood-relation of Tasneem.

Saeeda tells Firoz of the shameful violation of 15 years old Saeeda, molested by his father Nawab of Baitar. She confesses that Tasneem is not her sister but 'the child she had conceived in terror, had carried in shame and had borne in pain ...' (1212). So, any romantic tie between Firoz and Tasneem is out of question. Ironically, Saeeda desires for the respectability of marriage for Tasneem, although 'domesticity and its standard concerns were not object of fond contemplation for her.' (303). Saeeda, having suffered painful sexual exploitation, wishes to guard Tasneem from a similar disgraced life. By her own protectionism she denied Tasneem any outside contact / communication or association with normal people. This 'non-awareness' is

made into a beautiful feminine quality – an asset in young brides to preserve the family system’ (236). Both Lata and Tasneem are conditioned to attain this muted consciousness.

Maan’s sexual and emotional involvement with Saeeda comes a melodramatic end with a sudden rejection of passion as destructive and damaging when Maan visits Saeeda in Pasand Bagh after a long sojourn away on his father’s election campaign, he sees his best friend Firoz in Saeeda’s house unexpectedly. He cannot imagine that his close friend is having an affair with his most attractive woman Saeeda. He could not visualize that Firoz might be in love with Tasneem but not with Saeeda. The sudden feeling of rage blinds his balance of mind and he stabs Firoz with a knife and fatally injures him and escapes from the Pasand Bagh. Consequently, he is, however arrested and put in prison, charged with attempted murder. Mrs. Kapoor visits Maan, and unable to bear the shame and desperation of her younger son in detention, she suffers a heart attack and dies the same night. Then comes the dramatic court room scene where in Firoz, pleads a memory lapse and does not offer evidence against Maan. All ends well, with the inter-communal friendship restored and a repentant Maan released from the prison, much to his family’s relief.

Maan’s shattering experience of his mother’s death has, however resulted in a ‘violent revulsion of feeling’ (1303) against himself, and against Saeeda Bai, for their passionate relationship. He rejects the very physicality that had attracted him earlier and feels only a deep loathing in her presence. On his last visit to her, he realizes with horror that he no longer views her as the sensuous woman for whom he had once felt great sexual desire. Rather, her body now appears physically scarred. ‘Maan, totally indifferent to what he has done to Saeeda’s household, to her reputation, and more importantly to Tasneem’ (1303) returns to Prem Nivas.

As Anita Desai (23) puts it, ‘Although in their rash youth, they (Lata and Maan) might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance, return chastened, to the safety and security of the familial and the traditional in the Indian fashion, by the great God family’.

Maan’s shattering experience of his mother’s death results in an overwhelming sense of guilt moves him into another world – beyond the reach of Saeeda’s attraction. This bitter experience leaves Saeeda more fiercely determined than ever to protect ... Tasneem’ (1228). When Tasneem runs down to prevent a shocked Firoz from leaving, ‘she stands for the first time in her life at the open door of the house, not daring, however, to go further’ (1192). The ‘outing’ from the inner courtyard into a larger world is halted. Tasneem is cut off more than ever from the outer world. She withdraws into a self-imposed seclusion. Three men who had come into her life, each more impossible than other and in each case, she had left her affection grow in silence and had suffered their sudden absence in silence’ (1314). Saeeda’s last statement in the narrative is a

melancholic song; in the song there is an implicit acceptance of Saeeda's status quo, stress a reinforcement of the sense of female victim hood:

'The meeting has disappeared; the moths Bid farewell to the candlelight.
Departure's hour is on the sky
Only a few stars mark the night' (1315).

Conclusion

Marginalization of women is one of the themes of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. In the novel, Saeeda Bai and Tasneem are not suitable for living a respectable life which other women live. Even the protagonist Lata is unable to marry Kabir, her lover. She chooses Haresh as her better - half. But Saeeda Bai and Tasneem do not have this option of marriage too. In the patriarchal society, the women become victims. The voice of the voiceless is never been heard. But 'unheard melodies are sweeter' as Keats suggests.

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