



A Suitable Boy: More Than A Mother's Concern for Her Daughter

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Abstract: Vikram Seth is considered one of the most distinguished Indian English novelists of today. He has gained world-wide popularity in the world of Literature with the publication of his well-known novel *A Suitable Boy*. He has published two more novels after the *Suitable Boy*. The main plot of the novel *A Suitable Boy* is a mother's search for a suitable husband for her younger daughter. There are various sub-plots intertwined through throughout the novel. They are social, political and religious, touching upon Hindu-Muslim strife, and abolition of the Zamindari system, land reforms and empowerment of Muslim women of 1950s in India. This novel revolves around four families describing numerous events such as weddings, funerals, child birth, festivals, and communal riots and so on. The main female character in the novel is Mrs Rupa Mehra who is a widow and typical Indian mother. She struggles to find an appropriate boy for her younger daughter Lata who believes in liberalism and modern thinking. She has no influence of her strict mother and prejudiced brother Arun. She is obliged to choose her suitor among Kabir, Harish and Amit. Vikram Seth has beautifully described the two opposite worlds of a traditional mother and that of a modern daughter.

Key Words: Marriage, Zamindari System, Hindu-Muslim Strife, Families.

Introduction

Vikram Seth ranks as one of the best modern Indian-English Fiction writers though he has written only three novels, all the three set in different geographical and social background. *A Suitable Boy* is set against the backdrop of the newly awakened India after it has gained independence after about 200 years of foreign rule. For the same reason the main theme of the novel, which is a mother's search for a suitable husband for her younger daughter, is very much intertwined with the various sub-plots-social, political and religious-touching upon Hindu-Muslim strife, abolition of the Zamindari system, land reforms and empowerment of Muslim women of the 1950s in India and so on. The story of the novel revolves around four families describing numerous events such as weddings, funerals, child birth, festivals, communal riots and so on. The main female character in the novel is Mrs. Rupa Mehra who is a widow and a woman of orthodox thinking. She struggles to find an appropriate boy for her younger daughter Lata who has is modern and has radical ideas about life and society. The novel is set in a fictional town Brahmpur and Delhi, Calcutta, Kanpur and other cities in India. Lata is a nineteen-year-old college girl who has her own life style and believes in freedom. She has no influence of her authoritarian mother and narrow-minded brother Arun. She is forced to choose her suitor among Kabir, Haresh and Amit.

Vikram Seth knits together extensive range of characters in this novel. He has done a commendable work by handling very dexterously the vast group of characters. He grows characters in the course of the novel while dealing with the intricacy of India's historic background. Even the most minor characters are distinguishable from each other. At the end of the novel, the reader feels that he knows each one of them personally. The novel centres on the practices of four upper class families connected to each other through marriage or friendship. The story is set in India just after independence when the country was passing through a period of much turmoil and confusion. The novel is thus also about the social, religious and familial customs of India. The vast cast of characters in the novel serves as tools to illustrate the legitimacy of these customs. All the members of four families-the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Khans and the Chatterjis in one way or the other experience a series of raging emotions. All these experiences force them to face harsh realities of life and its hardships.

The most important female characters of this novel are Mrs. Mehra and her daughter Lata. The author points out that the character of Mrs. Mehra resembles the real character of author's grandmother. Her

character is drawn as emotional and of a typical Indian mother, who is always seen worried about her younger daughter Lata's marriage. She has only one mission left in her life i.e. to find a 'suitable boy' for her younger daughter, Lata. Mrs. Mehra is a woman determined to take care of her family at any cost. There are certain generation gaps in the ideas between her and her children. She ultimately reaches a sort of agreement with them. She takes care of her children who do not wish to be taken care of. She is a traditional widow. She ultimately comes across as a sympathetic mother who wants the best for her children.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra represents the traditional Indian parent holding firmly to traditional religion and long practiced Indian culture. Seth sums up her as: Mrs. Rupa Mehra, torn between solicitude for Pran, concern for Savita who was due to deliver at any day now, and desperate anxiety on behalf of Lata, would have liked nothing better than to have an emotional breakdown. But the press of events would not allow it at present, and she therefore abstained.

The depiction of the central personality of the novel, Lata shows Seth's profound perception, honesty and frankness in depicting an ordinary Indian girl's progress to adulthood. She is first seen at the wedding of her sister Savita to Pran Kapoor. At the beginning of the novel Lata is an immature girl of nineteen years and at the end she is twenty. But during the course of one year, she has grown up and is almost matured. It is obvious when she discusses her decision of marrying Haresh Khanna, instead of Kabir Durrani whom she loved passionately, knowing the bitter consequences that passion can bring in her life:

"I don't want to" cried Lata. "I don't want to. If that is what passion means, I don't want it. Look at what passion has done to the family, Mann's broken, his mother's dead, and his father's in despair. When I thought that Kabir was seeing someone else, that I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion, passionately and forever. (*A Suitable Boy 1296*)

When she takes the decision of marrying Haresh, her mind has not ceased to feel the ardent attraction for Kabir. She does choose Haresh not because of her mother's compulsion but she wants to marry a man like Haresh. Her choice is not the result of her sense of social recognition or status; rather it is her cry against the stifling snobbery and blinding passion. Lata has the opportunity of choosing between three totally different men. Kabir, Amit and Harish are different from each other in their personalities as well as behaviours. Regarding Lata's choice for Haresh, David Myers opines, "Lata is not marrying Haresh: She is marrying a symbol of what Vikram Seth would like to proclaim as his hope for a new India-an ambitious, pragmatic, anti-snobbish, working-class, self-made Indian man" (1994).

According to Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Kabir Durani is the most unsuitable boy among the three suitors because of his being a Muslim. His character has been portrayed by Seth with a touch of sensitivity. Kabir's sensitivity is portrayed in his love of literature, especially poetry. It is a passion that he shares with Lata and provides a convenient meeting place at the Literary Society. Seth has not revealed any aspect of his personality as to make the reader feel negative towards him. He succeeds in winning Lata's heart but fails in winning her hand. In fact, owing to his failure in getting Lata, he is able to get the sympathy of readers at the end of the novel.

Symbolically speaking from the vantage point of the thematic concern of the narrative, Kabir stands for platonic idealism which would ultimately lead to failure in practical life. Here a suitable boy for Lata parallels a suitable boy for the new independent India as an emerging political sovereignty and economy. The juxtaposition is Kabir's idealism as against Haresh's industriousness. The fact that the economically precarious Kabir cannot feed Lata for life matches with the novelist's clear message that it is not idealistic citizens that can run a country but practical ones with good sense. The conundrum of Lata's abandoning Kabir and choosing Haresh Putting a garb of being too practical to accept Kabir, is to be seen in the backdrop of this sub-plot.

The character of the gifted, intelligent and witty Amit is also an important and interesting one as Seth mocks himself in the guise of his character. He is often seen as sitting about all the day staring out of window, as Seth himself used to do. Amit is Meenakshi's elder brother, who meets Lata more often as a relative than as a suitor. He is presented as a materialistically spoiled and outlandish character. Amit is influenced by the physical fascination, straightforwardness and goodness of Lata. His courting of Lata is not as fanatical as that of Kabir but it has its own appeal as it emanates in the form of a poem.

Haresh Khanna is a young man of ambition in the shoe manufacturing business. He is both polite and diplomatic. As far as being a "suitable boy" for Lata, his work-ethics and position make up for the fact that he is an orphan. He wins over Mrs. Rupa quickly. Although at the end of the novel Lata does not love Haresh, she is confident that she will learn to love him and that he is the best and most practical match for her. Haresh is the representative of a home-spun middle class having its own charm. His clothes, the co-respondent shoes and his pan-stained lips, his educational background, deplorable English accent, the upper caste and his profession in the polluting leather and shoe making from an English technical institute make him a mixture of Indian and Western culture. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is influenced very much by his confidence and is very sure

that he would be an ideal partner for her daughter. Lata is impressed by his crinkly smile, agrees to correspond with him before making her decision.

There are a number of women characters on the huge canvas of the novel. Besides Lata and Mrs. Mehra, there are Savita, Malati, Veena Tondon, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and her mother-in-law, the fashionable Chatterji sisters; Kakoli and Meenakshi, Mrs. Tondon, Muslim women; Zainab, Abida Khan, Saeeda Bai and Tasreen. Seth presents a patriarchal world where the male head of the family celebrates the ideal domestic space, whereas women live within the specified role. Some women in the novel are portrayed as subordinate to men. They are bound to perform the role of domestic duties. Veena Tondon wishes to pursue her passion for classical music but she faces restriction from her mother-in-law., and Zainab, the Nawab's daughter disappears into the world of purdah after her marriage. However, by depicting the restrictions enforced on women Seth in a way poses the question of woman's space in a male dominated society. Actually, Seth is much more concerned with the happy domestic scenes of married life than in describing the oppression of women in the society.

Seth's characterization should be viewed in the context of his social realism. The Novel focuses on the social, political, religious and familial situations of India of 1950s. He is much more concerned about the social realities of the time; his characters serve as means to reflect the picture of the society. The novel on the whole gives a faithful picture of the society during the period of transition. Thus, it is found that the novel centres on Mrs. Mehra's attempts to get a suitable boy for her self-willed daughter, Lata. The word 'suitable' here primarily means a person or boy who belongs to the same religion. But Lata has a different perception and idea in her mind about marriage and life. *A Suitable Boy* tells a love story which concentrates on the efforts of the two figures Mrs. Mehra and her daughter Lata. Mrs. Mehra tries to suppress the individuality of her daughter and insists her to marry a boy of her choice, the boy whom she considers suitable for her daughter.

It may be concluded that *A Suitable Boy* is a search of a traditional mother who struggles to find an appropriate suitor for her daughter. It also displays the conflicts between the traditional and modern values as well as between an orthodox mother and a practical daughter. Vikram Seth has presented the tussle between the two generations, one, the orthodox and the other, the modern through a prejudiced mother and her radical daughter, finally the tradition winning over the modern or in other words sense and sensibility winning over sensitivity and passion.

Thus, *A Suitable Boy* can be considered a saga of the life of a country that takes place in post-colonial India. The plot of the novel covers the period of the end of colonial rule and the beginning and awakening of a nation that aspires to be a developed country. The period chosen by Seth is very significant. It is the period of great socio-political, economic and cultural upheavals. For the country that had just come out of the bloody partition and the aftermath, it is the period of abolition of provinces and establishment of States based on language. This period also witnessed a food crisis and consequently the priority to the growth of agriculture was given in the first five-year plan. In short, this decade was of great upheavals in all the spheres of life. With this background, Seth's narrative of Mrs. Rupa Mehra's looking for a suitable boy for Lata has something more than meets the eye, and has a subtle reference to 'a suitable boy' for India as well. This suitable boy represents none other than the future citizens of India who ought to be sensible, industrious and compassionate who only can mould the country's destiny.

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