

The Realistic Portrayal of Post Independent Indian Society: A Study of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

S. N. Marbin Britto

Research Scholar, Research Department of English,
Scott Christian College, Manonmaniam Sunderanar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, India.

Dr. R. Hemalatha

Research Guide & Assistant Professor, Department of English,
St.Jude's College, Manonmaniam Sunderanar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, India.

Abstract: Vikram Seth's second novel *A Suitable Boy* exhibits various aspects of the social lives, the blessings and the sufferings of the people part of the post independent India. Being a socially committed writer, Seth presents the major social problems exist in the present Indian society. The multicultural society is pictured through the fictional town Bramhapur, the setting of the novel. The novel centers on a traditional and cultural event of making arranged marriages for Indian higher caste girls. Through this cultural and familial issue, Seth exposes the communal disharmony between Hindus and Muslims which is instigated by the political intrigues of the post independent India, unlike the religious clashes exposed in *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant singh. Several other issues corresponding issues related to family, such as Love, infidelity also finds its place in the novel.

Key terms: Society, social problems, marriage, culture, disharmony.

A Suitable boy depicts the Post – Independent Indian society. The diversity in culture in the Indian society has been portrayed through four different families of different

origins, from different habitat, living in harmony together. India after the Independence was completely different from the India before independence. Colonialism, had its effect even after the Britishers left the country. In a direct way, they plundered our wealth, changed the system and so on. But, on a larger scale the effect of there is still felt. We are still following the method of Education left by them, their system of family, their clothes and their food habits to a greater extent. They hve left their influence even after they have left. This effect upon the natives is explained in terms of Post Colonial terms.

Hybridity, is simple terms a mixture of two things, in order to form a third object. It is usually associated with Homi Bhabha who speaks about the relationship between the colonizer and colonized and the outcome of it. In the novel, *A Suitable boy* we witness a relationship between the various families which leads to the union of two cultures. Another aspect of Hybridity is seen in the mingling of Indian and European systems, which leads to a state of imitation, explained by the term ‘Mimicry’. It is the system of imitating the Colonizer. In the context of Indian system, we imitate almost everything of the Europeans, which in turn leads to the destruction of the indigenous system and the Identity.

The novel provides a good artistic portrayal of the society. If the locale of Rushdie is Indian bazaar, that of Seth is the locale of Chatterjees, the Mehra, the Kapoors and the Nawabs are the main characters in the novel. All these characters either belong to the highly anglicized society or the upper and lower middle class society of the early fifties, when the use of Indian English was yet to enchant the Indian bazaar or over power the common people. Therefore the Indian society as portrayed in *A Suitable Boy* is confined to the upper or lower middle class society and that has helped the novelist define his characters, their social traditions and their mind-sets in the varieties of Indian English. One hundred and eighteen Indian words and Indian

expressions can be found in the novel. Seth is a master of language and he is one who understood the Indian idiom.

The city of Brahmapur, where the novel is located portrays the rich culture of musicians and courtesans who are once patronized by Zamindars. Zamindars were the group of the wealthy class who were provided the right to collect taxes by the British government and they enjoyed a luxurious life. The life of Zamindars is intimidated by the Zamindari Abolition Bill. The system continues to exist in the rural areas, though the system has not been officially in use. Seth provides a realistic portrayal of the fertile lands that were part of the living of the poor peasants which were brought under the British territory in the form of collecting taxes under the Zamindari system, which were eventually provided back to the peasants after Indian independence, after the abolition of the Zamindari system, but still the poor peasants were maintained to be under the control of the Zamindars even after independence. Zamindari system has been dealt in detail in *A Suitable Boy*.

Seth presents his vehement opposition to the Zamindari views of Begum Abida Khan through Nawab Sahib's reflective contemplation. Begum Abida Khan, one of the important characters in the novel, *A Suitable Boy* presents a defense pointing the social efficacy of Zamindari system. She says:

In every field of life we have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, and the very culture of this place were established by us (304).

Caste and religion cannot be separated in the Indian context. The Indian society has provided greater emphasis to caste and religion. *A Suitable Boy*, provides a realistic portrayal of

the relationship between religions, in this novel between the Muslims and the Hindus. The novel also provides insights on the inseparable condition of castes in India and the relationship of caste with the traditions and customs. The novel moves around through the lives of four families, namely The Khans, the Chatterjis, the Mehras and the Kapoors. While the Kapoors, the Mehras and the Chatterjis were related in terms of marriage, the Khans were the rich Muslims and landowners who enjoyed friendly relationship with the other three. Though these families are portrayed in the limelight, the novel also portrays issues such as poverty, injustice towards the poor, issues on work in the democratic India.

Middle class family is portrayed in a great light in the novel, *A Suitable Boy*. The four families involved in the novel portray the Indian middle class in brighter light. It is through them that Seth turns a mirror to the west. There are many differences between families and also commonalities. The Mehras represent the brown sahibs, a kind of Anglophiliacs, having had their education in the Westernized English medium schools. They take pride in anything that is English and mimic English manners. The Kapoors are different and are Hindi speaking elites who have an eye on the political ladder in the independent India. The Chatterjees are representatives of Bengali intelligentsia who are simple but considered eccentric and amusing. The Khans are Muslims and are feudal land owners. Their language is Urdu and with the end of feudalism they experienced a kind of decline in their culture. They are all Indians, representing different socio-cultural milieu.

In this novel, Seth pictures the lives of four families linked by marriage or friendship in the backdrop of the North Indian culture. Many novels, both Indian and Western are centered on what is happening in a family. In the modern world, value systems have changed and subsequently concept of families and even their structure also gets altered. This change is very

much visible in the western world and in the portrayal of families in the novels written in the west. The influence of the western media and literature also has its impact on the Indian family system. Moreover Indians believe in joined families and a close knit family structure has been altered to an extent. Very often it is male centered society, with a few exceptional society in southern part of India, but everyone in it is important including the elderly members of the family. Though it is a male chauvinistic society, womanhood is respected within the family in certain families, though it is denied in many other families. When father is projected as an image of power and authority, mother is hailed as a symbol of love, sacrifice and tenderness.

When Seth is presenting families in *A Suitable Boy*, it appears as though he removes the roof of the house and peeps into it. With his power of description he makes the reader gaze at every little movement in the families. He makes one feel that all is not well with the Indian family. It may appear to be calm and serene outwardly but deep within there are many commotions. The novel opens with Savita's marriage to Pran Kapoor. There is no romance behind it and the match has been fixed by her mother Rupa Mehra who believes that it is prerogative of the mother to decide on her son- in- law. In the same way in the Kapoor family Makeesh Kapoor believes that he has the right to choose a wife for his son Maan Kapoor. This kind of an attitude may be puzzling to the western readers but seems to be working out in a good manner as Savita shares evincing tenderness towards her husband Pran. Lata, Savita's sister is highly critical of such marriages and romance and she considers the name 'Prem Nivas' a misnomer.

It is this tenderness and love that is projected as the binding force behind the Mehra family in *A Suitable Boy*. Unlike the other families in the novel the Mehra family depends on Rupa Mehra, the head of the Mehra family who exercises enormous influence on her children.

She thinks that it is her right to expect her children to obey her dictates. Even at the very beginning of the story, Seth shows how she, as the head of the family after the death of her husband Raghubir Mehra, has showered sacrificial love in bringing up her children in a highly respectable way. After the death of her husband she runs the family with the help of the

depleted savings, the kindness of friends and lately her elder son's salary. She would not have had to sell most of her jewellery and even their small house in Darjeeling to give her children the schooling which she felt that above everything else, they must have (12).

Her sacrificial love and concern allows the children experience the "benefits of an Excellent English medium boarding school education. And so Arun and Varun had continued to go to St. George School and Savita and Lata had not been withdrawn from St. Sophia convent" (12). The children thus enjoy a liberal human education infused with western cultural practices.

A Suitable Boy can also be read as the mother's concern for her daughter. Mrs. Rupa Mehta views matrimony as a purely mercenary connection. It is this felt responsibility of the mother that makes her insist on her daughter marrying a boy from a Hindu family. Rupa Mehra is projected as a typical Indian mother who asserts her right to take decision for the family in the absence of her husband. Seth also shows that this authoritative approach clothed in love is reciprocated by her children, especially by her daughter Lata, who decides to give up her Muslim lover and accept the Hindu boy of her mother's choice. The harmony of the family is disturbed a lot when there is a tension between the mother and the daughter. This tension affects other members too. Lata is an ordinary woman of flesh and blood and so reacts the way any woman would do when her love affair is objected.

Seth also shows that like any other family across the globe, Indian family can also be tempest tossed on flimsy reasons and in Indian families. Irrespective of religion problems do occur in all families. In the Mehra family the commotion subsides when Lata, the progressive daughter favoring an inter-religious love marriage submits herself to her mother who has been searching for *A Suitable Boy*. At the end of the novel she decides to marry Hareesh, her mother's choice leaving Kabir and Amit Chattejee. If she had not done that, she would have been found dead within a week or a month. The novel itself opens with an arranged marriage and ends with another arranged marriage.

Work Cited:

Seth, Vikram. *A Suitable Boy*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992.

Baba, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Pandurang, Mala. Vikram Seth, *Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001.