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## **A CRITICAL STUDY ON VIKRAM SETH'S *A SUITABLE BOY*: FROM SOCIO- POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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### **Abstract**

*A Suitable Boy* is set in post- independence Indian life of 1950s. Having gone through present work, we also come across with Seth's opinion on secularism. Keeping his feet in the History, Seth has woven the texture of this novel from various perspectives like socio- political and historical. Seth has very exquisitely delved historical, political and social discerns embedded in the society. Bunch of burning and glaring questions inviting speculation are set forth before the reader. Under the social, political and historical mantle problems of identity-personal, religious and national are discernible in this bulky work. *A Suitable Boy* is considered a social satire and globally a social history. Mostly issues displayed by the novel are dealt with national Indian politics in the period leading up to the first post- independence national election of 1952, Hindu- Muslim animosity, the status of lower princes and landlords, empowerment of Muslim women, academic affairs etc. Through the protagonist Lata of the novel *A Suitable Boy* Seth, nourishing Indian sensibility, shows the triumph of reason upon passion. Despite Love is essential but it cannot be ultimate goal of life. The novel preaches one thing that passion should be reformed reasonably.

**Keywords :** Secularism, Connoisseur, Hypochondriac, Impetuous, Stampede, Hybridity ,Zamindari system, Postcolonial Literature

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One of the best Indian novelists, cartographer of the senses Seth secured worldwide recognition on the dint of the brilliant success of the realist novel, *A Suitable Boy*. "This work is well proved to be the most fecund as well as the most prodigious work of latter half of this century (20th). Since its publication Seth has been applauded as the best writer of his generation who ought to have won the Booker Prize in 1993. Its vast amount of work did not fail to impress reviewers and critics all over the world. More than 8 lakh words kneaded in 478 sections of nineteen parts in its 1347 pages weighing about fifteen hundred grams" (394). This well discussed novel is one of the longest novels ever published in a single volume in the English language containing social, political and historical

discerns. Readers are taken through a gamut of emotions. The book includes everything from straight up action to long brooding descriptions from fast paced dialogue to moody soliloquies from lovely portrayals of India and its landmarks to involving emotional moments.

The present paper endeavors to examine *A Suitable Boy* from socio- political and historical perspectives. Novel is set in post-independence and post- partition of India but it covers especially post-independence Indian life of the 1950s. Seth's narrative technique has invited comparisons with novelists such as R.K. Narayan, George Eliot, and Leo Tolstoy, because his novel displays a rare belief in the possibility of representational, authenticity which it seeks to get through an impressively detailed and documented reconstruction of Indian society around the time of the first general elections. *A Suitable Boy* exhibits Seth's secularism. It is not basically a psychological novel and its validity lies in its clear socio- cultural implications. The social nature of the novel's vision is revealed in the first and second part questions the validity of the contrast through which this vision is revealed. With this more burning and glaring question inviting speculation are raised here than answered. Under the social, political and historical mantle problems of identity personal, religious and national are discernible in this bulky work.

It is worthwhile to mention here that Seth's secularism is articulated within the boundaries of the nation- state. Compared to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* which questions the viability of the very concept of nation, Seth is already within an accepted idea of the nation and is concerned with more specific issues of making it work, such as communal harmony and economic improvement. *A Suitable Boy* is considered a social satire and globally a social history. Mostly issues shown by the novel, dealt with national Indian politics in the period leading up to the first post-independence national election of 1952, Hindu cost peoples, land reform and the eclipse of the feudal Muslim animosity, the status of lower princes and landlords, empowerment of Muslim women, academic affairs etc, order to construct an organic ideology which can present a national representativeness. In the portrayal of various aspects of India Seth's naturalness is applaudable along with a great achievement. Familiarization is a re-current authorial strategy and is characterized by an information yet affective tone, calculated to make the reader "feel at home" in every setting. Seth, with his impressionistic quality, makes us 'enter' the scene in some way, as if we were present at it. This technique resembles that of nineteenth -century realist fiction such as Balzac's. Where the stylistic unity of the description is not established rationally but presented as a striking and immediately apprehended state of things, purely suggestively, without any proof (471).

Many social, political and historical discerns are embedded in *A Suitable Boy* recalling the time of 1952's. In the support of his views Seth has invented different types of characters. Certain part of the novel explores the theme of love but left part, the problem between marrying for love and marrying for tradition/ family/security. Lata's part in the novel exhibits old fashioned structure. *A Suitable Boy* is remarkably close to the definition of a historical novel as described by George Luckacs. The Kapoors, Sharmas and Maans are types combining in them all the human and socially essential determinants. There are several recognizable types: the playboy (Maan), the rebel (Varum) the social climber (Arun) the Hypochondriac connoisseur of gloomy future visions (Mrs. Rupa Mehra) historical fiction- and *A Suitable Boy* incorporates historical data to lend an air of authenticity and verifiability. Thus the lengthy legislative debates about the Zamindari System-has its root in actual events in past 1947 India- suggests that the functionality of Seth's narrative is

verifiable as history. Further, there is Seth's relegation of historical personages like Nehru to secondary roles. The real purpose appears to be to again lend authenticity to the fictional world of Brahmpur. The inclusion of extracts from actual Nehru's letters (1947-55) serves the same purpose. Hence, it can be said that *A Suitable Boy* is distinguished blending of fiction and history.

*A Suitable Boy* imbricates the family with the national, the personal with the political. The common denominator in each of these "realms" is the degradation that is somatically seeping into music, marriage morals and politics that is asthmatically seeping into morals and politics. The novel has none of the sweep, philosophical grasp or permanent truth- of human nature that underline these epic narratives in the history of the novel. Seth uses the set-ting of postcolonial India. The concerns of language, style, presentation and technique are absent as the novel consciously emulates the great tradition of the mainstream English novel from Fielding to Hardy. In fact, as noted academic and critic C.D. Narasimhaiah comments, "Seth has achieved little in this novel except to display his infinite patience to observe trivia in upper class Indian society and record it meticulously to what end; only he can tell" (122). The novel bears images of a gentle India swaying daily through the patterns of a monotonous routine, but the predominant picture which emerges is of a contained world of Edenic qualities, where decisions have few consequences beyond one's immediate surroundings, families care little beyond the tinkle of rich crystal and success and happiness is measured in terms of one's capacity to marry the right person. The novel may be known for its "Uneventfulness, its surpassing dailiness, the way in which Seth caught a life sized human, unextraordinary India" (637). Seth presented the picture of India from the outsider's vision, we get that Seth shows lack of involvement. Indians adopted English as a means to earn a fine living and they are not ready to give up their Indian sensibility. Amaresh Datta writes of creative writers, writing in English in India and says:

But one still wonders if English became the language of our dreams, of the nuance of our social and English can become the language of our dreams, of the nuance of our social and personal relationship and of elemental passions oriented in a particular way by our environment and tradition. In any case, the literature produced by Indian authors in English cannot perhaps avoid some kind of artificiality whether it centers round non- Indian experience or India (100).

Vikram Seth wrote a monumental work which, although clearly set in a definite socio-historical context, makes direct reference to various elements and creates a new hybrid world. Dominating character of the novel Lata seems reluctant to follow to so-cial customs and rituals. Shyam S. Agarwall's points out: "Lata's unconcern for the concern of her obsessional and hysterical mother. But truly speaking she has never been away from her own history and social norms. She is well aware of the fact that any deed taken by passion may be harmful not only for herself but her family also. By her deed and decision she nourishes social tradition. Love is Seth's central theme with India's politics also. Lata states the theme very early along when she denounces love as a boring subject. The dreamy poet, Amit, who apparently spends time just working at poems and the practical Haresh with his much admired work ethic. Kabir Durrabni is her suitor. He is also passionate, impetuous endowed with a resolute common sensuous boy and level-headedness. The novelist rounds off Kabir's character as a conflation of the better qualities of Amit and Haresh. For instance, "As a wooer of Lata he comes across as another romantic, arranging boat trips being love sick and such" (199- 200). By his good qualities he has always been in her good book. But Lata's rejection,

based almost entirely upon her religious identity is also Seth's comment upon the tenacious influence of family "values" and preferences have upon Indian women. On other hand, Maan also meets as a play boy with political connections, a sad end with his stabbing of his closest friend Firoz. Lata does not design to marry either of the two romantics in her life Kabir and Amit. Hence, it cannot be said that Seth gradually leads his characters towards the reformation of their passion. Our ideas and values cannot be survived only by charming and fascinating methods of chap.

Lata is very clear and bold in making her decision. She does not advocate the union of Hindu and Muslim. Through character Lata on one hand Seth presents his negligence against communal harmony and on other hand he advocates that expressed in the book through the relationship of Maan and Firoz or that of Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab Sahib. They were all good friends then problems separate them but even when they ultimately come together and become friends again. No one knew what to talk about (1341). Viewed like that it will be insane for Lata to marry Kabir any way it will be safer not to stress her Hindu Identity too much, but accept the structural reason that it emphasizes the recurring idea of the book that Hindu- Muslim harmony, though highly desirable, is still a practical impossibility. Seth advocates that intimate friendship is possible between Hindu and Muslim. Despite it, Seth stops sort of marriage between them. Lata also adheres to Hindu identity. No matter she loves Kabir more than other. She cannot be sure that she is doing the right thing in rejecting Kabir. "Even now I almost feel it's he who left me and I can't bear it" (1332). Even after promising to marry Haresh, she keeps drifting passionately towards Kabir. Readers always observes soft corner for him in her heart. But she is too smart and intelligent to let her emotions free. She knows well her responsibility for her family. She can make distinction between passion and reason. She denounces love as a boring subject (33). When she is criticized by Malati for her decision to marry a man whom she does not love (Haresh Khanna), Lata plainly points out that passion had practically broken their family (a reference to Man). These events, she argues, were enough to make her hate passion, passionately and forever, as she puts it (1417). Thus, two types of marriage appear before us first marrying for love, and marrying for tradition (family/security). By Lata's attitude it appears that she will marry for love but her decision of marrying for family shatters all of us. Indirectly she nourishes Indian culture displaying social responsibility. It can be concluded that all romantics and characters given to passion have either failed or reformed.

It is worthwhile to mention here that Seth's advocacy of Indian sensibility nourishing its social and political perspectives through his characters he could not dare to put on before readers inter- caste marriage between Kabir Durrani and Lata because of the result and communal frenzy in 1951-52, it was unthinkable, on the part of the novelist. Even in 1995, by *Bombay*, Mani Ratnam raised dust of controversy among Hindus and Muslims showing marriage of Hindu girl with a Muslim boy. Advancing reasons for Lata's not marrying Kabir, Caryl Campbell says: "Lata, a Hindu knows that she cannot marry a Muslim, and she also realizes or she persuades herself, perhaps with more prescience that is entirely convincing that romantic love is not necessarily the best prelude to marriage" (77-80). David Myers suggests: "Another reason for the rejection of Kabir by Lata. It is her rejection of passion from her life. She selects Haresh because he was not only a hard working, uncouth, intelligent and pusher but also a symbol of a new India ambitious programmatic anti-snobish, working class, self made Indian man" (84).

*A Suitable Boy* dealt with the early 1950 s. Lata, having fancy dream regarding life style and

husband chooses Haresh with his habit of paan. It proves at least to a certain extent, her sense of national identity, her pride in being an Indian, and her refusal to hang on to the colonial values, thus it becomes clear that her personal motives become significant mainly in the social context.

Vikram Seth as an expatriate Indian succeeds in showing the gap between romantic, courtly assumptions and culture behind the form against the dull, dry and highly practical life of the yuppies rather than interrogate the socio- cultural assumptions (52). Seth has poured too much acquainted colours in mostly scenes having adherence to Indianess. From the view of an outsider everything has well been presented. Marjorie Perloff, in fact, states in the *American Poetry Review* that as an Indian, educated at *Oxford* and hence having the vantage point of the outsider witness on the California scene, Vikram Seth has been praised all around for his sharp eye for social nuances (37- 46). Yet the picture created re-mains and outsider's vision of India, one for whom the traumatic and cataclysmic consequences of political action retain only their theoretic import. The political prostitution and feudalism too are dismissed without much aplomb for the repercussion on the common man even on issues like prostitution and feudalism are dealt in equally asinine fashion:

As he washed his hands, Mahesh Kapoor thought about his old friend, the Nawab of Bailar. He would be one of these most deeply affected by the pas-sage of the Zamindari Abolition Bill...If the lifestyle of a good few men like the Nawab Sahib had to be sacrificed. For the For the greater good of millions of tenant farmers, it was cost that had to be borne (264).

After having deep perusal of *A Suitable Boy*, it can be concluded that *A Suitable Boy* it establishes Seth, not as an Indian expatriate but an artist interested in socio-political and historical affairs of India. Highly praised and compared to Tolstoy's and Dickens' fiction, *A Suitable Boy* has none of the sweep, philosophical grasp or permanent truths of human nature that underline these epic narratives in the history of the novel. Seth uses the set-ting of postcolonial India. Although the picture of the 1950s, India has been portrayed in the novel yet it is a gentle tale which wears the reader away from the cruel realities of life where people survive riots, famines, even a stampede at the Kumbh Mela from which a ten- year old Bhaskar is rescued. The Hindu- Muslim riots over the presence of mosque other momentum, but the characters are lucky enough to conclude the incident without too many casualties. The District Magistrate looked around at his men

A couple of them were trembling most of them were jubilant. None of them was injured. He caught the head constable's eyes. Both of them started laughing with relief, then stopped. A couple of women were waiting in nearby houses. Otherwise everything was peaceful, rather, still (238).

Love, passion and sexual power appear to be sacrifices necessitated by the compulsions of everyday existence where imperatives of loyalty and continuity remain of paramount import. This is how Lata justifies her decision to marry Harish. The book abounds with examples of self-destructive passion also as in the case of Rashed or Maan it is tempting to conclude that she lacks the heroic spirit to plunge into life and love and passion. *A Suitable Boy* having being analyzed from socio- political and historical perspectives, it can be concluded that the whole gamut of the socio-cultural forces helps to give a historical orientation to the characters' lives oscillating between the

individual attitudes and cultural forces, and often obviating the differences between the two, individual lives are shown as the unconscious working out of the historical forces.

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