

Exploring Post-independence India's Social, Political, and Religious Crisis in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on reading the most well-known Indian English novelist of the 1980s is Vikram Seth. He was a well-known postmodern fiction experimentalist. His novel *A Suitable Boy* is an epic prose work that helped in establishing the fantastic epic genre. Despite Vikram Seth's travels overseas, his opinions on Indian heritage and culture have been thoroughly researched. He is knowledgeable about four different cultures: China, America, India, and England. He is a genuine representative of India's civilization and cultural heritage since he is a social realist. His book captures the social, political, and religious climate of 1950s India after independence. In *A Suitable Boy*, happenings, episodes of unexpected revelation, discoveries, lucky breaks, odd coincidences, and astrological forecasts are described. Seth uses the daily struggles and home issues of four families—the Mehrahs, the Kapoors, the Chatterjees, and the Khans—to convey the social, political, and religious struggles of post-independence India. The fates of four upper middle class north Indian families are the central theme of the book. With his unique construction ability, he narrates a story that perfectly balances facts, realism, fantasy, and romance. Every family has a plot, and some of the subplots help the main plot find a good boy.

Keywords: Religious crisis, political situation, racial differences, post-independence India, etc.

Introduction:

The tale of four families is told in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*, which is set in early 1950s India, just after the end of British administration there and the creation of the partition between India and Pakistan. Arranged marriages and racial castes are features of Indian culture as described in the book. *A Suitable Boy* depicts social reality, including numerous well-known Hindu and Muslim religious celebrations. Old Nawab, a refined old-fashioned person, is one of the most popular characters. He has not many delusions concerning his class's future. He knows in his bones that the Zamindari Abolition Bill, a piece of legislation curiously backed by Mahesh Kapoor, will have a negative impact on it and that it will not survive. He is a politician who is true and honest and wholly committed to his work. A profoundly religious woman, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is pleased to take care of her family. She maintains a lovely garden at her home and performs private family prayers every day in the puja room. She is a plain and unattractive woman who was only severely mourned by her

husband and son Maan after her passing. She is the moral protagonist of the story and has a highly upbeat demeanour.

The central theme of the book is search, which gives it cohesion. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is looking for a good boy for her daughter Lata, Mrs. Chatterjee is looking for a good boy for her daughter Kakoli, Mahesh Kapoor is looking for a political base, Dipankar is looking for a spiritual base for Sri Aurobindo, and Nawab Sahib is looking for feudal stability in this novel. All of these searches took place in India around 1950. The nation was starting along the path of establishing a stable foundation both internally and externally at that time. The social, political, and historical aspects of the historical search were entwined with the domestic searches. Lata and her mother's efforts to find a good boy for Lata are the focus of the book *A Suitable Boy*. All of the female characters mentioned in this book gravitate around Lata. The work accurately captures the situation in newly independent India from January 26, 1950, to July 1952. This extensive, lengthy work demonstrates Seth's ingenuity in telling the occurrences that occurred throughout these two and a half years. The novel covers a variety of topics, including university life, the contemporary upper middle class lifestyle in Calcutta, the disappearing world of ghazals and courtesans, parliamentary speeches, the trauma of partition, racial tensions, the first general election of India, and the Zamindari Abolition Bill. With a comprehensive view of society's unification and a strong rejection of anti-secularism and corruption, Vikram Seth focuses on the issue of bringing society together. In his account of the weddings of Savita and Lata, the raising of Shiva-Lingam, the Kumbh Mela, and its religious celebrations, Indian demography and communal events are represented in vivid detail.

A Suitable Boy is like an epic with various, intriguing storylines and subplots, as well as noticeable character disagreements. The political conflict between Tandon and Nehru, the legislative assembly's debate, the Chatterjees' uncontrollable rhyming, and the poetry reading at the Brahmipur Literary Society are all shown. Mrs. Mehra's search for a spouse is connected to many other characters' searches and ways of living. The artist Vikram Seth is considered as having produced a comprehensive portrait of the diverse Indian way of life. As a result of the Hindu-Muslim religious tension, the Raja of Marh chose to erect a Shiva temple next to the Alamgiri Mosque. Since the Shiva monument was placed in between the Mosque and Mecca, the Imam was concerned that things would get worse. Muslims were in a frenzy, and there was even a genuine prospect of a large assembly occurring in the city. Hindus and Muslims were divided after India and Pakistan were split apart. The intercaste marriage proposal from Lata to Kabir is rejected by Mrs. Rupa Mehra due to the cultural differences between Muslims and Hindus. Mahesh Kapoor also declines his son Maan's romantic proposal to Saeeda Bai, a Muslim courtesan. Muslim female MP Begum Abida Khan criticises L.N. Agarwal in the legislature. The novel is becoming increasingly trite.

Drawings by Vikram Seth represent the Ram Mandir and the Babri Masjid in a realistic manner while using the fictitious names of Alamgiri Mosque and Siva Temple. The

contentious debate between the mosque and the temple is objectified and shadowed by *A Suitable Boy*. He depicts the Babri Masjid's actual destruction, which was depicted in the book. In the grounds of a mosque, the Raja of Marh plans to erect a Shiva temple. The Muslims reject him, and a Maulvi then delivers a provocative speech. As a result of the Hindus' refusal to abandon the plan, the situation has escalated into violence. The administration has not offered to send in enough police to put an end to the uprisings.

Vikram Seth implies that while water wipes the blood taint away, the communalized politics will be more difficult to remove. He depicts the actual destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Hindu-Muslim strife. He incorporates a genuine view of Indian society into the creation of his fictitious people and events.

Seth's masterpiece, *A Suitable Boy*, is a landmark in Indian literary history. He expertly conveys the political climate of 1951–1952, delving deeply into the churning of culture, religion, and class mobility. The novel conducts a thorough analysis of post-independence India in all its facets. According to Vikram Seth in an interview with Seema Paul, the book contains multiple plot lines. The novel *A Suitable Boy* stands out for its ability to cover practically all Indian life events and facts in a condensed amount of time.

Seth accurately depicts numerous facets of society in his capacity as a social realist. This book clearly describes present events, traditions, customs, and culture. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of Indian history, the author did extensive study on India before writing this book. He read historical newspapers from India before and after it became independent. He also conducted interviews with independence warriors. Together they spent weeks interacting with musicians, judges, and even parrot owners in rural Uttar Pradesh villages. By doing so, he recorded the historical occurrences of the independent age and produced a narrative that featured the important parts of India's complex history. In his interview with Markarand Paranjape, he details his effort and role in compiling the data in following words:

Reading just to get a spirit of those times, meeting people, ex-freedom fighters, people who had visited courtesans at that time and then staying in different places like Benares, Allahabad or in the countryside or staying with 96 a shoe making family in Agra, just a few years doing this sort of thing because how can you claim to write about something unless you know it, if not from the heart of it, then somewhere from the inside of it (Paranjape 21).

It displays a stunning and fascinating era in Indian history. Seth introduces a large cast of people to illustrate events that transcend class, caste, language, and religion. The anglicised Paris, money-minded Marwari businessman, the Anglo-Indian secretary, and the South Indian Professor Jaikumar known for his humorous English pronunciation are all stereotypes that are reflected in the book. Seth says of a rural community like Brahmpur:

There was just enough room for Tonga to get through among the bullock carts, rickshaw walls, cycles and pedestrians who thronged both the road and the pavement-which they shared with barbers plying their trade out of doors, fortune tellers, flimsy tea-stalls, vegetable stands, monkey trainers, ear cleaners, pick-pockets, stray cattle, and the odd sleepy policeman sauntering in faded Khaki.... Young and old, aggressive and meek, leprous, maimed or blinded, who would quickly invade Nabiganj as evening fell, attempting to avoid the police as they worked the queues in front of the Cinema Hall (*A Suitable Boy* 89).

Seth paints a picture of Indian life in the excerpt above. By outlining the characters' relationships and activities, he precisely portrays the manners, customs, traditions, rituals, and moral ideals of realism.

The marriage-seeking endeavour of Mrs. Rupa Mehra unites all the people and events in the story as its main topic. Her words, at the beginning of the novel, are; "You, too, will marry a boy I choose" (*ASB* 3) to her younger daughter Lata. The book describes how women are treated in Indian society, where parents have complete freedom to choose their children's brides and grooms. The two daughters of Mrs. Mehra, Lata and Savita, represent different facets of Indian women. Savita is the embodiment of the traditional girl who values morality, whereas Lata is the picture of the evolving modern Indian lady. As in the first scene for Savita's wedding celebration, people are gathered once more for the wedding ceremony of Lata, Mrs. Mehra's younger daughter, in the novel's last scene. The mother is overjoyed that she was able to find the perfect husband for her daughters, and she repeats her instructions to Varun. She says; "You too will marry a girl I choose" (*ASB* 1343). According to her mother, Haresh Khanna is the boy Lata should be married to. Between the two marriages of Savita and Pran and Lata and Haresh, Seth has created a world. Through a variety of people, he illustrates the various aspects of India's recent independence, the traditional values that predominated there, and various areas that were recently liberated from the British Raj during the division.

The traditional values of Indian society have undergone a significant transformation since the country's independence. Mrs. Rupa Mehra represents a world that is coming to an end, whereas Lata represents a modern woman's new world. With her children, Mrs. Mehra looks forward to a foreign and new world, but she and her husband look backward to a bygone era. Her husband worked for the Indian Railways, which makes her feel nostalgic for the British Raj. Everything used to be great when the British government was in power, but now she regrets it and longs for a better time. According to D.H. Lawrence, nostalgia is a perpetual torment for the soul. She revealed her feelings for Lata on the day of her older daughter's wedding because she had an illustrious past when her spouse was still living in following words:

Mrs. Rupa Mehra believed of course, in reincarnation, but at moments of exceptional sentiment, she imagined that the late Raghubir Mehra still inhabited the form in which

she had known him when he was alive: the robust, cheerful form of his early forties before overwork had brought about his heart attack at the height of the Second World War. Eight years ago, eight years, thought Mrs. Rupa Mehra miserably. ‘If he had been here, I could have worn the tissue-patella sari I wore for my own wedding’, sighed Mrs. Rupa Mehra. ‘But it is too rich for a window to wear’ (ASB 3)

Immediately after independence, the division of India and Pakistan caused a sense of unease among the populace, and the terrible memories lingered in their thoughts. In this book, the Hindu-Muslim conflict and violence that resulted from the Mandir-Masjid debate in Ayodhya at the beginning of the 1990s are also depicted. Thus, Seth paints a realistic image of the political events of the Nehru-Tandon era, the parliamentary discussions on the Zamindari Abolition Bill, and the religious controversy surrounding the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. By providing proof, he exposes a variety of historical occurrences and expertly imitates Indian society. Through the historical justification of the Indian subcontinent, Vikram Seth consistently illustrates the narrative of social performance. *A Suitable Boy* is a realistic portrayal of Indian society, including the values of the nuclear family, romantic tensions, the land reform movement, upper-class living, and the difficulties faced by those attempting to start their own businesses after independence. Through current social, political, and religious crises, he demonstrates his mastery of storytelling and narrative tactics. Supriya Karunakaran opines, “Vikram Seth is a very conscious craftsman, with a purpose” (Karunakaran 96).

People who have recently become independent experience difficulty adjusting to a new setting. When there is novelty and freshness, people cannot live in joy, and they also cannot go back in time. They make an effort to extend life's potential and ensure survival. The novel depicts the ambiguity of culture and the precariousness of life. The new era brings out the necessary critical elucidation of the regal hangover. The domestic quest is contrasted with India's post-independence era as tradition becomes modern and old order becomes new order.

The political upheavals and catastrophes of India's transitional period are depicted in *A Suitable Boy*. Villages and cities experienced changes as the nation's understanding of its wounds began to heal and the independence's initial joy gave way to disappointment. In the transitional phase, the congress party encountered numerous issues with rightists and leftists; the expansion of communal forces despite Nehru's secular attitude; the retirement of some congress party leaders; and the formation of new political organisations. Even the leaders of Congress and freedom fighters are troubled by the nation's and the party's predicament. Under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership, the newly independent India is preparing for its first general election. India has also witnessed significant changes in politics, religion, culture, and customs at the same time. Justice Chatterjee is disappointed as he contemplates on his beliefs that, “Who would have thought that things would have changed as much and as swiftly as they had?” (ASB 468). The smile leaves his face as he hands along the list of Calcutta Gazettes for 1947–1948 for the following reasons; “In microcosm these two pages reflected

the passage of empire and the birth of two countries from the idea-tragic and ignorant that people of different religions could not live peaceably together in one” (ASB 469).

Through characters like Begum Abida Khan, Mahesh Kapoor, Agarwal, and others, Seth imparts experimental knowledge about current politics. The events of 1950–1951 are covered in the Nehruvian period novel *A Suitable Boy*, which is set in that era. Additionally, it covers the first general election the newly independent country had to face, and it is more concerned with the daily interactions and lives of its people. Politics has an impact on people because it happens all around them. Whether they choose it or not, they are taking part in politics. Seth's attention is mostly on Mehra's search for a spouse as well as societal culture, historical political events, and religious upheavals.

Seth paints a vivid political portrait of 1950's freshly independent India. It demonstrates how political power is transferred from one person to another, as when Waris Khan defeated Mahesh Kapoor in the election. In the fight for India's independence, Mahesh Kapoor had a significant part to play, although he was ultimately defeated in the general election. He decides to argue in Rudhia's rural district. Waris Khan, a former faithful devotee of Nawab Sahib, is his political rival in the race. Waris Khan has turned into a petty politician from his political ambitions. To get the local Muslim populace to reject Mahesh Kapoor as a result of Maan's attack on the Muslim youngster Firoz, he asserts that Maan's attack on him had common overtones. His violent behaviour has ended his father's political career and altered the course of his entire career. In the story, Seth depicts how Nehru's views and his former friends had evolved into political adversaries.

Nehru has written numerous letters to the chief ministers of various states outlining his ongoing concerns for their governance and populace security. Seth goes into great detail about events like the division of India and Pakistan into Hindu and Muslim populations. He deals with the rightist and leftist beliefs, the Socialists quitting the Congress Party, the creation of the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party, the conflict between the Nehruites and the Tendonitis, and Nehru's resignation as he forces Tandon to resign. It demonstrates that Seth is aware of the Congress incident, which is full of petty conflicts that later recur. Nehru believed that Hindus and Muslims are equal. Seth writes; “The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second class citizens sickened him. If Pakistan treated its minority citizens barbarically that was no reason for India to do so” (ASB 955).

It contains the seeds of unhappiness and disillusionment that the Indian people had to deal with after the thrill of independence. It displays Nehru's character and the Congress Party. Seth paints a realistic portrait of India as a whole through the many event descriptions. *A Suitable Boy* demonstrates how the newly independent India's political landscape and the general mood of the populace went from joy to hopelessness; “Their post-independence romanticism and post-independence disillusionment formed a volatile mixture” (ASB 815).

To sum up, *A Suitable Boy's* characters seem to be quite real. Seth has been successful in bringing the futuristic settlement of Brahmpur to life and its social, political and religious crisis.

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