

Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy': Women's Role in Post- Partition India

Shilpa Gupta

Research scholar

Vinoba bhav University

Hazaribag, Jharkhand

&

Rajesh Kumar

Head

University Department of English

Vinoba bhav University

Hazaribag, Jharkhand

Of all the writers contributing to the vast and varied corpus of Indian writing in English, Vikram Seth is one of the best among them. He has been in the field of writing for more than three decades and is eventually regarded as one of the most influential writers of the modern age. Indian writing in English has become the powerful tool of literary expression. This literary journey started with (Gurudev) Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. They influenced a number of writers to establish their own place in the field of creative writing. The authors get the inspiration from the estimation and observation of life and more from the personal experiences. Infact their imagination comprehend reality in such a way that a new vision of life is introduced to the readers. Social life in a country of the size of India is so full of vagaries and varieties that the novelist with an observant eye and an understanding heart will find the material spread out before him to be literally inexhaustible.¹

A Suitable Boy is a magnificent work by Seth. Infact it is a simply a masterpiece. It's much more than Mrs. Mehra's finding a suitable boy to marry her daughter Lata Mehra, who is wooed passionately by cricketer Kabir, pleasantly by writer Amit and sensibly by shoe trader Haresh. Therefore, the novel follows a young woman's search for love and identity. The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights. Vikram Seth has skillfully woven women's role in his narrative. He not only tells a story but also comments on the status and condition of women in the Indian society. 'You too will marry a boy I choose.'²This very first statement of the novel spoken by Mrs. Mehra to her younger daughter Lata sets the tone.

Woman has always been a subject of discussion in relation with their desires and ambitiousness. The single question which remains to be addressed is just with reference to the status of Indian women. This is the point where gender bias too plays its significant role and this can be applied in the context of marriage. Moreover there is one common belief in that 'the changing status and position of women in different periods and civilizations have

very greatly motivated her upbringing as well as education. In olden times, women were completely overlooked and accepted only as a provider of sexual pleasure to man and also as a producer of his off spring.³ Society was patrimonial and the status of women was defined by men.

Only in post-colonial India, girls' education started being considered important but somehow its importance is also connected with the better chances in matrimonial market. It is quite clear that education not only provide good career but also good marriage. This very feeling is aroused in Indian minds even in the present times. Infact, feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings. *A Suitable Boy* witnesses the role of women in post partition India which is not only limited to cultural customs like arranged marriages but there is also an up surging shift in their role in the Indian culture.

A desperate mother ventures to deploy
Fair means or foul to net a suitable boy.⁴

Obviously there is an idea from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls and boys with their ideal matches. 'Caste endogamy or inter caste marriage has remained a critically unfavorable point in arranged marriages but what if a woman tries to go for inter caste marriage .This is where Seth moves a little further from Jane Austen and puts question mark on the consequences.'⁵Lata, the central character in Seth's *a suitable boy* is left with no option except to marry the boy of her mother's choice. The author says about the novel "it's really a love story". It presents multiple shades of love such as friendship, romance, lust, love and marriage. He doesn't allow elopement to reach its climax, because of traditional background of Indian culture.

Lata's mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra's character is really unforgettable and remarkable too. Her dialogues are filled with energy, wit and vitality. She represents a typical Indian mother who is eager to see her children settled well in their life as early as possible. Her statements express her annoyance and anxiety as she remarks; 'her younger daughter was going to prove more difficult than her elder'⁶ and 'what is good enough for your sister is good enough for you'⁷. What on earth had got into the girl? What was good enough for her mother and her mother's mother and her mother's mother's mother should be good enough for her. Lata, though, had always been a difficult one, with a strange will of her own; quiet but unpredictable- like that time in St Sophia's when she had wanted to become a nun! But Mrs. Mehra too had a will, and she was determined to have her own way, even if she was under no illusion as to Lata's pliability.⁸

But Lata very soon reacts by saying boldly 'we can't both marry Pran'⁹. Here we can sense the author's moral ideology behind this humorous reaction of Lata. Her mother's thinking is that if the intelligent and beautiful savita is happy with lanky, dark, gangly and asthmatic

Pran Kapoor then Lata should also be remain satisfied and happy. The story begins with Savita's marriage and ends with Lata's marriage. "The Mehra's were a complicated family and nothing was what it seemed."¹⁰ When the wedding ceremony of Savita and Pran is going on, Lata seems to be confused and indecisive regarding love marriage and arrange marriage. From her perspective:

She watches the ceremony "with an attentive mixture of fascination and dismay" and tries to imagine her sister's thoughts. Accommodating and gentle as her sister is, she also has views of her own. The predominant question in Lata's mind is how Savita could have agreed to marry an unknown person whom she had met only an hour, and feels for him the special concern and tenderness that shows on her face.¹¹

In a suitable boy, Seth's versatility is seen in his delineation of the procedure of child birth and the intolerable birth pain. Through Savita's character the author has described the usual cry of a woman during the delivery that she cannot bear it and she never wants to have another baby. Such a pain is experienced by every mother of the world. Being a male it is not possible to feel or to describe the labour pain but he has described in such an extraordinary manner that the readers begin to feel a kind of sensation. Infact there is a description of Savita's breaking of water bag, coming of contractions, nurse's advice to hold on the railing and to push and her lips' falling apart in anguish of unbearable pain. As the baby's head comes out, she feels a tearing sensation below, then a sudden warm gush, then more stretching and such pain that she thought she would pass out.¹²

Lata meets and falls in love with Kabir Durrani, a classmate and a budding cricketer in the Brahmipur university team. Malti Trivedi and Lata Mehra are close friends. Malti acts as a prime source of gossip, giving required details about Kabir. He is considered absolutely unsuitable in the eyes of Lata's mother's just because of the fact that he is a Muslim. When she comes to know about her daughter's affair with Kabir, she immediately whisks her off to Calcutta. This speaks of her imperative attitude towards Lata. Infact her mother wants to see Lata settle down same as every Indian mothers want for their daughters. She initiates the search and performs the role of a traditional matchmaker. Malti is bold and frank; she has an instrumental role to play. She acts as a foil for Lata's personality and is highly praise worthy for justification of Lata's choice of husband. Mrs. Mehra believed she could, so she did as the most beautiful make-up of a woman is passion. Lata, the protagonist of the novel explains to her best friend Malti why she relinquishes her love for Kabir, and instead marries Haresh, a suitable boy:

.....I am not myself when I am with him. I ask myself who is this – this jealous obsessed woman who can't get a man out of her head- why should I make myself suffer like this if I am with him." "oh, Lata-don't be blind" exclaimed Malti. "it shows how passionately you love him." "I don't want to" cried Lata, "I don't want to .if that's what passion means, I don't want it. Look at what passion has done to the family, Maan's broken, his mother's dead, his father's in despair. When I taugth that Kabir was seeing someone else, what I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion, passionately and forever.¹³

Except Malti Trivedi, Illa Chattopadhyay, Kalpana Gaur and Begum Abida khan, rest of the women engage themselves in family issues. Mahesh Kapoor wanted his wife to be in private sphere and gives her no room in public. Illa Chattopadhyay is another strong woman who is a friend of the Chatterji family. One of the most startling of the liberated woman in the novel is Begum Abida Khan. She represents the rarity of a female member of parliament. She is a Muslim woman, living alone and very active in politics and she is never affected by the gossip of traditional people around her. Infact, she is the mortal enemy of those who support the Zamindari Abolition Bill. Her bold and strong character is best demonstrated by the exchange of comments with The Honorable Minister for Home Affairs, Shri L.N.Agarwal and the Honorable Minister of Revenue, Shri Mahesh Kapoor. She refuses to adhere to the rules of the House. Kalpana Gaur is a lively, affectionate and intelligent woman and she is close friend of Mehra family too.

The traditional characters like Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor; savita Kapoor and Mrs. Chatterji represent the old ways of social custom. Seth portrays savita as an ideal wife of Pran Kapoor. Both trust each other and their love and affection help them to overcome all the hurdles and difficulties of their life. She is Maan's infatuated love but such a relationship is not acceptable in Maan's family. Moreover the Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai comes into the category of a traditionalist. Her occupation as a courtesan is regarded as the oldest profession in the world and the entertainers are not culturally held in high social esteem. Though a courtesan is talented in the art of singing and dancing, she is never given a place of honour in our society. Even if they are rescued, most of them return in these hellish places due to financial crisis in their lives. The need of the hour is to educate them and provide suitable jobs. Rather she follows most of the cultural rules and habits.

'I kneel within the Kabba of my heart and to my idol raise my face in prayer.'¹⁴

The status of women in India has been a matter of many great changes over the past few millennia. The Indian women have changed a lot since last few decades. Traditionally she stays at home and fulfills everyone's needs just like the character of savita, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, Mrs. Chatterji and Mrs. Mehra. Traditionally parents have been very domineering, making choices about career and marriage for their children. Truly speaking the women in post-partition India had a different role to play. It was to a great extent, a role of survival, the strength and passion to retain her existence was truly inspirational and estimable. Our culture is especially about family bonding and it continues to be as strong as it has always been. Family responsibilities and understanding are very strong.

‘Meenakshi dropped in first with a question about whether it was possible to love more than one person- utterly, desperately and truly.’¹⁵

But the modern women move outside the walls and make their own identity in society whether it is education or any kind of social activities like Malti, Meenakshi and her sisters portrayed in this novel. Meenakshi, Mrs. Mehra's daughter-in-law is too much selfish and even does not hesitate to use those two beautiful gold medals won by her late father-in-law, which Mrs. Mehra had given to her at the time of her wedding as a gift to the bride of her elder son. Today women work and earn for their family like men. At the same time, society also gives her respect and recognized her contributions to it. However, it is true that modern women enjoy more freedom as compare to the traditional women. The dramatist George Bernard Shaw had very rightly said ‘progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.’¹⁶

Some women in the novel represent the post-partition modern Indian women. Malti has broken with tradition by going about on her own way. She easily accepts the favour of young man she find appealing. Meenakshi the Medal- Melter, Mrs. Mehra's daughter-in-law, is also a truly liberated woman who indulges in licentious affairs that have nothing to do with her relationship to her husband, Arun Mehra. Feelings are transient as we see in case of Meenakshi whose unfair relations present a dark side of marriage. Moreover she dresses spectacularly, goes out at her will, and most of the time thumbs her nose at gossips who criticize her behavior. Even her younger sister Kakoli Chatterji is also a young woman engaged in an affair with a young German boy Hans. A beautiful woman delights the eye; a wise woman, the understanding, a pure one, the soul.

Listen my friend, and know the reason why:
All beauty lies in the beholder's eye.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, Lata represents the middle ground as she is traditional in her great respect for her mother and her preeminent choice of marrying the man whom her mother appreciates and recommends.. She also questions traditional practices and takes a few steps on her own as a modern young woman. It is quite clear that it is not just the love story of a girl Lata but it is a story of her family, her religion, her sex and especially about a changing nation too. Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women. However we can say that the novel provides an identical look at post- independence Indian life of 1950 in many ways.

The fact cannot be denied that empowerment and emancipation of women is always in the interest of the society. Finally torn between duty to her family and the wonderful excitement of romance, Lata embarks on an epic journey of love, marriage, desire and heartache as three different suitors vie for her hand and in this way; the novel follows a young woman's search for love and identity in a newly independent India. Lata has tremendous strength and stamina and she is much devoted to her family, all of which I admire. Family drama and Indian woman's history develop around her. As a matter of fact, the theme of A Suitable Boy stands as a hallmark of traditional Indian customs and culture. In a scene Lata feels uncertain and lonely just like the 'kimkartavyavimudh Arjuna' of the Mahabharata, weeps a lot and says:

I should run away, far from Haresh, far from Kabir, far from Arun and Varun and ma and the whole Chatterji clan, far from Pran and Maan and Hindu and Muslim and passionate love and passionate hatred and all the loud noises- just me and Malti and savita and the baby, we'll sit on sand on the other side of the Ganga and go to sleep for a year or two. ¹⁸

Mahesh Kapoor's daughter Priya and Nawab sahib's daughter Zainab are childhood friends. Seth gives us two remarkable examples of Muslim women by telling us that Zainab "had disappeared in the world of purdah" after her marriage but the boldly independent begum Abida khan "has refused to abide by the restrictions of the zenana quarters and the limitations of a mansion and was living in a small house closer to the legislative assembly. Even Maan is told by his Urdu teacher Abdur Rasheed at his village "the Muslim women of the lower castes need to work in the fields, so they cannot maintain purdah. But we Shaikhs and Sayyeds try to. It is simply a matter of honour, of being the big people in the village"¹⁹. This heartening aspect has been the realization of the rural women about their rights. They have done heavy work such as plowing, clearing trees, building homes as well as planting, harvesting and sowing. They also carry things on their head.

Generally what happens in our country, women are brought up in such a secure and convenient atmosphere before marriage that requires immense courage and strength of mind to break the

strong family bond. In case if anyone breaks free, it is almost impossible to get back into the family. This type of situation also occurs in this modern time. However 1950s was the period when Seth's story is represented and it was almost unimaginable. On the other hand, the Indian women portrayed in the novel are fully insecure in the economic and social world because they are fully dependent on either father or husband. At the same time their virtues, values, intelligence and individuality, all are assessed in the marriage market.

“In our country's male dominated tradition even in Vedic, classical, medieval and modern Hinduism, the rituals, doctrines and symbols are masculine”²¹. Men have traditionally had esteem for ruling their homes like dictators. A married woman is expected to treat her husband as if he were God and bow to him and touch his feet as sign of respect. Our old tradition restricts the women to live within the boundary of casteism and gender differences which makes life too difficult. But on the other side, women lack the spiritual and moral values due to modernity which is the main identity of Indianness. It is quite clear that it is not just the love story of a girl Lata but it is a story of her family, her religion, her sex and especially about a changing nation too. When she finally decided to marry Haresh, she feels...there was something adventurous in losing herself entirely in a world that she did not know with a man whom she trusted and had begun to admire...²¹. An extract from Manusmriti in a letter to Lata from Malti:

“Day and night, women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. In childhood, a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and in old age to her son; a woman must never be independent because she is innately as impure as falsehood...the lord created woman as one who is full of sensuality, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.”²²

Thus, Seth describes the status of women in the post-independent India in the early years, which is not so much different from today's India. That was a period of an amalgam of more traditionalism and less modernism but it is an age of less traditionalism and more modernism. Undoubtedly 1950-1952 was the period when the women folk in India definitely needed better status and privileges. There was still a lot more to do in order to improve their condition. Empowerment of the women in real sense was the need of the hour. The time has come when women must be restored to the status she occupied in ancient India. For achieving this goal, we must combine the best of the past and the present, of the West and the East.

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