

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: Women's Citizenship in the Discourse of the Nation**Vinita Chandra**Associate Professor
Department of English
Ramjas College
University of Delhi**Abstract**

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, set in the years 1950 to 1952, covers the major events in the life of the newly independent nation that was moving towards modernity while at the same time devoting space to its traditions, rituals, religious festivals, and feudal and patriarchal structures. Where does Seth situate women in this vast narrative? What are the spaces that the new modern nation provides for its women in this novel's panoramic sweep of identity construction? Does Seth conceive the modernity of the nation's institutions as capable of countering systemic, structural patriarchy to give women greater agency? Seth's representation of gender is one that systemically exposes and interrogates patriarchal structures, and his discourse of the nation emerges from those very domestic spaces that are usually marginalised and invisibilised in the mega-narrative of constructing national identities. Seth thus makes an attempt to relate 'women's issues' to the 'larger' one of national identity by aligning them with, and placing them on the same level as, that of national politics, religion, democracy, etc.

Keywords: Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, gender, feminism, national identity, English novel, post-colonialism.

Introduction

Vikram Seth's *magnum opus* *A Suitable Boy* was published in 1993 to great acclaim, having taken a period of 8 years to write with intensive research by the author in the many different aspects of India that it covers. The period of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s in which the writing of the novel took place was a crucial one for the country as it came post the 1975-77 Emergency and the first non-Congress government on the political front and encompassed the 1991 liberalization on the economic front. This was also the time when the nascent Indian feminist movement organized widespread protests for legislative and judicial reforms, winning several crucial battles. The outrage following the 1972 Mathura rape case resulted in the amendments to the Indian rape law in 1983; the Dowry Prohibition Act was amended in 1986 to strengthen the penalties for giving, taking, or demanding dowry; the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act was passed in 1994 in response to women's activism to stop female foeticide. Although *A Suitable Boy* is set in the early 1950s Seth is clearly informed by his contemporary material conditions in his representation of the newly independent nation and its potential for fulfilling the promised freedom to its citizenry.

Seth's 1400 page novel very consciously attempts to be the colossal, definitive literary work on the Indian nation. It is set at a crucial moment in the history of the country covering the period of 1950 to 1952 when it is moving out of colonial rule and finding itself straddled between tradition and modernity. Seth explores the parameters of the newly acquired modern institutions of the country through the parliamentary debates, judicial processes, and the

enormous task of electoral democracy in holding the country's first elections. The novel devotes a significant part of the narrative to the Zamindari Act for land reforms which strove to give greater rights to the disenfranchised, the Hindu Code Bill which tried to modernize Hindu society by replacing religious traditions with common law, and the first nationwide elections with the universal franchise with one voice one vote overcoming class, caste, and gender hierarchies. In covering such vast events through a plot that never fails to keep the reader's attention, Seth is credited with meticulously documenting the major events in the life of the young nation that was moving towards modernity while at the same time devoting space to its traditions, rituals, religious festivals, and feudal and patriarchal structures. Where does Seth situate women in this vast narrative? What are the spaces that the new modern nation provides for its women in this novel's panoramic sweep of identity construction? Does Seth conceive the modernity of the nation's institutions as capable of countering systemic, structural patriarchy to give women greater agency? In titling the novel *A Suitable Boy* and building up its plot around the search for a marriage partner for its female protagonist, it would seem that Seth is suggesting that even in the modern nation the future of its women is restricted to the traditional one of marriage. However, I would like to argue that Seth's representation of gender, although not radical, is one that systemically exposes and interrogates patriarchal structures, and his discourse of the nation emerges from those very domestic spaces that are usually marginalised and invisibilised in the mega-narrative of constructing national identities. Thus, Seth makes an attempt to relate 'women's issues' to the 'larger' one of national identity by aligning them with, and placing them on the same level as, that of national politics, religion, democracy, etc.

Gender and the Nation: 'Suitable' Marriages

In keeping with his choice of the realistic novel which gives a rich, historical documentary account of the peoples that make up the nation Seth portrays the brute force of patriarchy to which women must submit. Priyamvada Gopal writes,

In 1952, the newly written Constitution was being interpreted in legislation and policy; this was a project in self-fashioning that had ramifications not only in the social and political spheres but also for familial structures, interpersonal relations, and structures of feeling and being in the world. The heft of a novel like *Boy* is best understood in terms of the magnitude of the task that it sets for itself: that of understanding, through the lives of four families, how this self-fashioning took place.” (110)

Seth does not concentrate on those 'women's issues' that are usually the area of focus such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and other exploitations that women battle on a daily basis except for passing references to female infanticide and illiteracy, and the one episode of Dr. Sahgal's sexual abuse of his daughter. Instead, he explores the idea of the nation through familial structures and the interpersonal relations they inhabit. *A Suitable Boy* takes us into the everyday lives of heteronormative families to expose the structural inequality of gender relations and the way in which power 'naturally' functions within the home. It is relevant here to remind ourselves of Joan Scott's use of 'gender' in place of 'women' as a useful category of historical analysis. In her 1986 article she writes,

“Gender” as a substitute for “women” is also used to suggest that information about women is necessarily information about men, that one implies the study of the other.

This usage insists that the world of women is part of the world of men, created in and by it. This usage rejects the interpretive utility of the idea of separate spheres, maintaining that to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that one sphere, the experience of one sex, has little or nothing to do with the other. In addition, gender is also used to designate social relations between the sexes. (1056)

In a novel whose title gestures at 'suitable' marriages, Seth sharply critiques the institution of marriage through the 'social relations between the sexes' in which women exist in a world created by men and governed by them. Gopal writes about the 'structures of feeling and being in the world' and Seth uses the form of the novel to narrate the lives of women and men in their complex, multifaceted relationships with each other, allowing for an analysis of gender based on the power dynamics that operate within the family, and by extension, in the formation of the nation.

The rambling story of *A Suitable Boy* is built on four families and their interpersonal and extended relations; in the tradition of the realist Victorian novel, the community thus created becomes representative of the nation in microcosm. Seth portrays an array of different marriages through the novel, but in all except one he represents spousal relationships in which the women are invariably suppressed and neglected by their husbands. He portrays married women in the oppressive confinement within the home - and in purdah in the case of Muslim women - after marriage. The generation of older men, Nehru, Mahesh Kapoor, the Nawab of Baitar and L.N. Aggarwal all reflect on their neglectful treatment of their wives only after the death of their spouses. Seth writes into the consciousness of these men the realization of their wives' selfless devotion to their comforts and of the brief period of understanding and mutual caring in their relationships towards the end of their long-married lives. Seth's portrayal questions the dominant patriarchal ideology which socializes women to believe that their primary function is to care for their husbands and cater to their needs, and for men to expect sacrifice and duty without reward from their women. This ideology which is internalized by women and passed from mother to daughter to perpetuate the system is parodied by Seth through Rupa Mehra who attempts to impart the same training to her daughter. While plotting to get Lata married off to a suitable boy of her mother's choice, she thinks, "Lata was named after that most pliable thing, a vine, which was trained to cling: first to her family, then to her husband...Suddenly [she] burst out with the inspired remark: 'Lata, you are a vine, you must cling to your husband!'" (22) A traditional marriage set in patriarchy needs not just a suitable boy but also a woman who is trained to be a 'pliable thing'. Seth's critique of the requirement of training women to be silently sacrificing wives for the success of their marriage can be interpreted from his caricature of Rupa Mehra as his spokesperson for this ideology

Seth makes a consistent representation of the way gender functions in the patriarchal institution of 'suitable' marriages through his portrayal of the disparate worlds of women's domesticity and men's careers, sharply focusing on their intrinsic relatedness to each other. Several years after the publication of the novel Marxist feminism has given a theoretical framework within which to analyze Seth's critique of the institution of marriage through the Social Reproduction Theory. In her introduction to *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* Tithi Bhattacharya writes, "If the formal economy is the production site for goods and services, the people who produce such things are themselves produced outside the ambit of the formal economy, in a 'kin-based' site called the family" (16). For all the male characters in the novel work *naturally* took priority over their wives,

but Seth's gender politics can be perceived through his portrayal of the unhappiness and frustration of the wives who enabled these men to become part of the formal economy system by using their social labour. He gives a voice to the silent sacrifice that goes into the domestic labour of the wife and exposes the patriarchal myth that women's happiness is to be found in selflessly caring for the husband and children. In the more extreme case of Mrs. Durrani, her sons Kabir and Hashim point to their brilliant mathematician father's negligence of his wife as the cause of her descent into loss of memory and reason, or 'insanity', as she was unable to cope with the irrational conditions of the structural inequality of married relations.

Even in the educated young women of the next generation Seth gives little hope of any palpable change within marriages. The Nawab's daughter, Zainab, is required to live in purdah after marriage and forced to accept her husband's extra-marital affairs without complaining. L.N. Aggarwal's daughter, Priya, married into a wealthy Hindu family, is not allowed to step out of the home of her in-laws where she lives in a joint family and therefore paces like a caged animal on the terrace of the house to release her frustration. Even Lata, who is studying toward a bachelor's degree in English literature, has to suffer parental and societal pressure to get married as soon as possible. When Kabir asks Lata to wait for two years to get married so that he can finish his degree and get a job, she emits "a low cry of almost physical pain..." "You're not a girl. You don't understand. My mother might not even let me come back to Brahmpur - ""(186). Through his representation of the constrained circumstances in which all women, even educated, independent minded ones are forced to exist in a society that refuses to grant them a status equal to that of men, Seth shows the two separate, dissimilar worlds that men and women inhabit. Although the narrative does not include incidents that would be considered specifically 'women's issues' Seth systemically exposes the powerless status of women in the system of arranged marriages and joint families, incarceration within the husband's home due to a social code of honor that forces daughters-in-law to carry the weight of representing the family's social status, and lack of personal freedom and choice. If the canvas of the novel is the grand narrative of the nation through its legal, judicial and political processes that espouse equality, Seth emphasizes the point that the basic unit of the heteronormative family is founded on the unequal status of its women.

Feminist Utopia in Feminine Spaces

In 'Feminist Reading of *A Suitable Boy*' Mala Pandurang concludes her analysis by writing,

A Suitable Boy attempts to present the female subject as a social participant in the theatre on the postcolonial Indian state. Seth, however, falls short of inscribing agency to his women characters, or of investing in them the potential to transform traditional mindsets. The novel does not therefore challenge existing gender conventions. A sincere effort to offer the option of praxis to Saeeda, Tasneem and/or Lata could, on the other hand, have elevated *A Suitable Boy* from the level of gentle satire to a stringent critique of social and sexual inequities. (129)

I would like to argue that *A Suitable Boy* does, indeed, offer 'a stringent critique of social and sexual inequities' consistently, throughout the narrative, in its depiction of the domestic and public spaces that men and women occupy nationally. Academic and activist feminist work has alerted us to the fact that there are no easy solutions by which traditional mindsets can be

transformed. Patriarchy is so intrinsically networked into the nerves and sinews of individuals and societies that finding idealistic solutions can only be escapist. What Seth does meticulously is to challenge existing gender conventions, and his option of praxis lies not with individual female characters but in the solidarities of sisterhood, which is the feminist utopia. It is in Seth's construction of islands of societies of women as idealized spaces and places to escape to from the brutality of patriarchy that form his most powerful and empathetic portrayal of the intrinsic strengths of women's world. Seth draws a powerful character in Malati, the most independent, intelligent, strong young woman in the novel, and locates her strength as deriving from her background in which she "had been brought up, fatherless and brotherless, in a circle of very supportive women," (8) a fact that he refers to a number of times in his narrative. When Lata is exhausted with the pressure of making decisions between the suitable, not-so-suitable and unsuitable boys who have proposed to her, she wishes that she could run away, "just me and Malati and Savita and the baby...[to] the other side of the Ganga and go to sleep for a year or two" (1333). After the birth of Savita's daughter while her husband is confined in hospital due to heart problems, Seth writes, "Cushioned by her mother, daughter, and sister in a feminine and loving world, Savita felt the days pass placidly and happily" (890). It is to Seth's credit that he does not offer an apologia for structural patriarchy by offering a few good men by way of male characters to plot the convenient alternative of male heroism overcoming women's systemic oppression. It is the women who provide solidarity and sustenance to each other through conversations and companionship as an alternative to established gender relations between men and women. Seth does not fall into the patriarchal trap of fashioning a male hero who sweeps in to save the women.

Feminist Battles in Patriarchal Spaces

However, Seth's representation of women in the novel is not simplistically restricted to the opposing binary formed by the idealized utopia of isolated societies of women and the pessimistic portrayal of the continuing oppression of women. He also represents the change that is occurring, slowly but steadily, in the position of women in Indian society. Towards the end of her essay on gender Joan Scott asks,

If significations of gender and power construct one another, how do things change? The answer in a general sense is that change may be initiated in many places. Massive political upheavals that throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being may revise the terms (and so the organization) of gender in the search for new forms of legitimation. But they may not; old notions of gender have also served to validate new regimes. (1073-4)

Seth situates the change in the status of women in the material institutions of modernity that came as a result of the "massive political upheavals" of not just political independence from colonial rule but also the economic shift from feudalism to industrialization with all its implications of labour, working conditions, and urbanization, and the impact of these changes in revising the terms of gender and power. *A Suitable Boy* weaves into its narrativization of the nation an exploration of those institutions that are being put in place to allow avenues for women to participate in the nation as equal citizens.

At the national level Seth points out that in the first general elections held in post-colonial India in 1951 due to the right of universal suffrage irrespective of gender, women had the

right to vote, and this forced the government and politicians to pay attention to them. In a world dominated by men in all spheres, the right of women to stand for electoral office allowed Begum Abeer to break out of purdah, take the decision to not join her husband when he migrated to Pakistan, and to be elected to Parliament as an outspoken, relentless advocate of Muslim rights. Breaking the glass ceiling for a senior academic position, Dr. Ila Chattopadhyay, an eminent English literature scholar "learnt that when it is necessary to speak, one must" (1275) and is instrumental in promoting Pran to readership despite the "political rascality" that would have denied him what he deserved through merit. Rupa Mehra insists on making use of the gender-neutral laws that define citizenship for the new nation in solemnizing Lata's marriage through a civil ceremony because "She felt that she had to protect her daughter from the injustices of the traditional Hindu Law; marriages solemnized before a Registrar were governed by laws that were much fairer to women". (1335) The system of education available to women ranged from studying for a bachelor's degree in English Honours to being a medical student: Malati is studying to be a doctor, and the newly independent nation has infrastructure for women to take up the profession of medical doctors. Savita decides to take up a career in law after being inspired by a woman lawyer in the High Court; Seth's own mother took up the study of law at a whim and went on to become the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India. Although Lata makes the (disappointing) pragmatic choice of marrying the 'suitable' Haresh her co-educational college life as an undergraduate student gave her the opportunity to meet an 'unsuitable' boy and experience the passion that she finally rejects as unsustainable.

Of the four men from the older generation that Seth portrays from the older generation, Mahesh Kapoor's son, Pran, is shown to treat his wife with all the care and attention that his father neglected to give his mother. Pran and Savita's marriage is the only one in the novel that Seth paints as one which is based on a healthy relationship between husband and wife, in a family unit that reverses the patrilocal tradition and instead consists of his mother in law and sister in law, and in which he does not play the role of patriarchal authority. The daughters of the Nawab of Baitar and L.N. Aggarwal are forced to suffer a fate not much better than their mothers' but they have the understanding, sympathy and support of their fathers who are cognizant of the injustice their daughters are suffering. And Nehru's daughter, of course, went on to become the Prime Minister of India for a decade and a half. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor and her daughter Veena discuss the merits and demerits of women ruling the world rather than men. Veena asks her mother,

'But do you think a woman would have ordered that lathi charge on the students?'

'No, maybe not,' said her mother. 'At any rate, it's pointless thinking about such things. Women will never be called upon to make such decisions.'ⁱ

'Some day,' said Veena, this country will have a woman Prime Minister or a woman President.'

Veena's mother laughed at this forecast. 'Not in the next hundred years,' she said gently... (860)

By making this obvious reference to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the high profile policewoman Kiran Bedi who ordered lathi charge when needed, references that his readers in the 1990s would immediately recognize, Seth is connecting the material institutions put in place at the time of the birth of the nation with the position that these powerful women were able to occupy just a few decades later.

Conclusion

In order to cover all the different areas that are necessary for constructing a national identity Seth creates a number of characters who serve as protagonists for different sections of the novel. However, the narrative opens and closes with Lata and it is her character that justifies the title of *A Suitable Boy*. By titling his magnum opus *A Suitable Boy* rather than, for instance, *War and Peace*, Seth is gesturing towards the important place of domesticity, dominated by women, in any discourse of the nation, and it is indeed through seemingly trifling domestic episodes that the narrative of the nation emerges in this novel. The Indian Constitution guaranteed women the right to live with dignity and to not be discriminated against on the basis of gender. Ratna Kapur writes in her essay ‘Hecklers to Power? The Waning of Liberal Rights and Challenges to Feminism in India’,

The discourse of upliftment of women developed alongside the discourse of gender equality over the course of the twentieth century, a period that was marked by a distinct liberal faith in state institutions and the rule of law. Laws were passed guaranteeing gender equality and special provisions for women in the areas of employment, politics, education, and some aspects of family law. But such benefits sat in tension with the construction of an ideal Indian womanhood, which, even within the feminist movement, served to distinguish Indian women from their Western counterparts. (335)

Seth gives a nuanced evaluation of the tussle between the “construction of an ideal Indian womanhood” which is still steeped in structural patriarchal tradition, and “faith in state institutions and the rule of law” which are meant to put material systems in place to ensure gender equality. If he portrays marriages where women are oppressed he also ends with a marriage which puts its faith in the rule of law that guarantees equality to women as a safeguard against traditional ideas of Indian womanhood; if he has even the progressive Mahesh Kapoor believe that women should be educated but should not work after marriage then he also creates the character of the son, Pran, encouraging his wife to become a lawyer; and if Rupa Mehra is rooted to the idea that her daughters must marry men of her choosing then Malati’s mother’s character balances the scales by wanting her daughters to work. In constructing a national identity Seth is clear that the nation will not fulfil its “tryst with destiny” until its women are truly free.

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