

**Problems of the Post Independent Indian society as portrayed in Vikram Seth's**

**A Suitable Boy**

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Indian writing in English has recorded, responded to and interpreted the socio-political climate of the country, right from the time of the Nationalist movement. Post-Independent Indian writing in English has provided a significant depiction of the political and religious issues in the nation. Vikram Seth is a pioneer in the field of literature, in particular of his analysis of the problems revolving around the Indian society. Caste and Religion are deciding factors to any incident in the Indian society. The research paper analyses Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, and deals with the religious and caste tensions that are prevalent in the Indian society. Moreover, the attitude of individuals towards fellow human beings is also analysed in this research work.

Key words: Indian Writing, Political, Religion, Caste, Post-Independent.

Seth's mentioning of Indian politics is not accidental. Seth in fact wanted to write five novels that would serve as a commentary on the Indian politics. India and recent Indian history as most of the novels following the lead of *Midnight's Children* or *Shadow Lines* testify have become the major concerns Indian English fiction. In their attempt to critique the nation-state the recent novelist seem to be intent dragging their characters into

the bogwaters of post independent politics and history. *A Suitable Boy* also has its fair share of politics and politicians. Through the characters like Mahesh Kapoor, Abida Khan and others we are acquainted with the politics of the day, national as well as regional. The novel is set in the Nehruvian era, to be exact it covers the events that take place in the time span of one year, from 1950 to 1951. It also deals with the first election that the independent nation faced. But politics is not “the dominant” note in *A Suitable Boy* as the novel is more concerned with the ordinary intercourse and lives of its characters. If the lives of the people are affected by the political events that are taking place around them, they also in turn willingly or unwillingly contribute their share to the political happenings.

Though one cannot say that Seth consciously and deliberately presents a novel on national integration and communal harmony in effect it is so. He wants to show that India is a land where people of different faith live. Though he points out that there are good and bad people in all religions, he was able to see beyond the confines of a narrow minded religiosity. But at the same time in this book most of the Muslim characters does not bring happiness. As Ian Almond presents it, ‘there is are subsequently, no Muslim happy families in the text and very few happy individuals. In this sense Seth’s Muslims are technically ignorant the flexibility of their response to an ever changing fabric of reality. Unlike Maan, they cannot accept and affirm life.

Various political developments became responsible for making many Hindus think that India belongs to the Hindus and the Muslims should go to Pakistan. This resulted in the fight between two groups resulting in a lot of blood shed both the nations had to face a lot of problems in controlling riots.

What made things worse was the steady stream of refugees, mainly now from East Pakistan into Bengal, that put an unsupportable burden on the state. They were fleeing because of ill treatment and insecurity in Pakistan, and several hardliners in India suggested under a theory of reciprocity that for each Hindu migrant, a Muslim should be expelled from India. They saw matters in terms of Hindus and Muslims, of collective guilt and collective revenge. So successfully indeed had the two nation theory- the Muslim leagues justification for partition- taken root from their own minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally and were willing to visit their heads punishments for actions for their co- religionists in other country, (*A Suitable Boy*, 954-55)

Seth does not want to be judgmental as far as the fight for between the Hindus and the Muslims concerns but wants to be impartial in his assessment. He doesn't want to blame anybody but wants to show that everyone is responsible. He is a humanist who is not able to see any sense or reason behind communalism. He shows that the tranquility of the nation is disturbed when communal feelings are ripped up. Brahmipur is known for its communal harmony but has a history of communal tension.

Late Mughal and British records attest to a series of Hindu-Muslim riots around this spot. It is not clear what exactly incurred the wrath of the emperor. He was a less tolerant of the great emperors of his dynasty, true, but the area around Brahmipur had been spared his worst excesses. The re-imposition of the poll-tax on unbelievers, a tax rescinded by his great grandfather Akbar, affected the citizens of Brahmipur as it did those through out the empire. But the razing of the temples usually required some extraordinary impetus, such as the indication of that it was being as a centre of for armed or political

residence. Apologists from the Aurangzeb were apt to claim that he had a worse reputation as for intolerance than he deserved and that was as harsh with Shias as he was with Hindus. But for the more orthodox Hindu citizenry of Brahmipur, the previous 250 years of history has not dimmed their loathing for a man who had dared to destroy one of the holiest temples of the great destroyer Shiva himself. (*A Suitable Boy*, 197)

Brahmpur is a typical Indian town where one finds temples and Mosques. In post independent India political leaders whipped up communal passion for narrow political end. Seth wrote *A Suitable Boy* after the demolition of the Babri Massjid. He does not make any direct reference. But it is there in the back of his mind. He presents L. N. Agarwal as the villain. When Dussara and the Muslim festival Moharam coincide in the lunar calendar, the Muslims and the Hindus take up processions. This lead to tensions and an altercation in which the man who had taken the role of Rama is injured. Hell breaks out and every one becomes blood thirsty.

*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 osmotically 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 setting of postcolonial India to present the story of the novel in an effective way.

Seth excels in showing how individuals can go beyond the divisions created by institutions, when Maan a Hindu saves his friend Firoz from the communal riots during

the Dusshera and Muharram. Seth is of the view that only friendship can conquer communalism. Seeing these riots Mrs. Tandon's mind "turned to the days of Partition in Lahore and her memories and thoughts were those of absolute terror" (1062). Communal harmony is the pertinent problem of our society. Gujarat has seen the worst communal riots in the last three decades. It shows that Gandhian principles of love and non-violence are not very effective in bridging the gap between two communities. As the novel progresses, no stone of social India is left unturned and, therefore, naturally it also discusses another hot topic of the early fifties, the condition of the scheduled castes.

"Well, my sister says that the jatavs tried to force themselves on to the local Ramlila Committee this year. They said that at least one of the five swaroops should be selected from scheduled caste boys. Naturally, no one listened to them at all. But it could spell trouble" (1035).

The call of Gandhi to abolish untouchability and the relentless war of Ambedkar against Chaturvama find their echoes in these lines. 'Can you imagine,' said old Mrs. Tandon: 'Rama or Bharat or Sita — a chamar!' (1036). But Jagat Ram, as a leader of the untouchables argued that since the "brahmin stranglehold over the parts of the heroes had been broken in favour of the other upper castes, it was a logical next step to allow the so-called lower castes and scheduled castes to participate. They contributed to the success of the Ramlila as spectators and even to a small extent as contributors; why not then as actors?" (1038).

Everything was left in uncertainty. At this Jagat Ram realized: "The world was a place of brutality and cruelty and the exclusion of people like him from the rites of

religion was almost the least of its barbarities” (1038). Seth suggests that though Ramlila is “an enactment of faith by the community” (1038), but the scheduled castes are exempted from expressing their faith by taking part as swaroops in the Ramlila.

“In the villages, the untouchables were virtually helpless; almost none of them owned that eventual guarantor of dignity and status ... In the cities too they were the dregs of society” (1039).

It seems that the Hindu society has not learnt lesson from history. It has further divided itself into the elites and non-elites. The so-called elites are really snobs, self-centered, selfish, mean and perverted. They care for their own values and pleasures forgetting the state of the masses living below poverty line. The tremor of discontent and self-assertion already being felt and voiced by the new generation in cities and remote villages, along with innumerable events of so many private lives — have all been put in place by Seth in his magnum opus.

Seth’s multilinear narrative effectively bring out the tumultuous economic, political, and communal upheavals of a period in India, which was not too remote from the years of our struggle for independence. As Justice Chatterji notices in the pages of All India Reporter, which list out the names of the Judges in the High court of Calcutta,

In microcosm these reflect the passage of an empire and the birth of 263 two countries from the idea-tragic and ignorant-that people of different religious cannot live together in one” and he asks “...that things would have changed as much and swiftly as they had? (468-69).

Seth becomes the honest chronicler of such changes undesirably engulfed in the Indian society.

*A Suitable Boy*, constitutes an Indian novel largely mirroring the open-mindedness, secularism and sophisticated tolerance of its author. Seth's work is not a secret document of Hindu prejudice, concealed as tolerant, unbiased fiction, but rather because of an unsettlingly elusive quality which seems to characterize each manifestation of Islam in the novel. Regardless of whether they are introverted: mathematicians and their mad wives, gloomy Nawabs, victims of unrequited love, mentally unbalanced teachers of Urdu, dreamy and vulnerable singers, Muslims and their faith seem to acquire a subtle sense of the tragic, seem to be implicitly involved in the darker world of gloom, disappointment, suicide and madness which underpins Seth's essentially happy novel; as if Islam itself were the dark sub-text within *A Suitable Boy*, a morose vocabulary half-hidden in the text, brooding threateningly over the happy bustling of the Mehra, Kapoors and Chatterjis.

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