



REVIEW OF RESEARCH



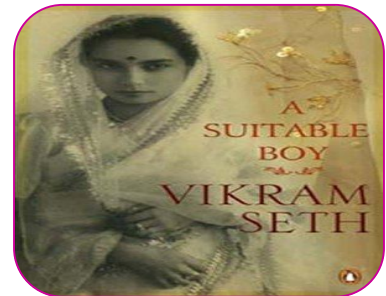
LATA MEHRA AS 'A SUITABLE GIRL' IN VIKRAM SETH'S A SUITABLE BOY

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ABSTRACT :

This paper is an effort to show the representation of women in the Indian English literature post-1980 with special reference to Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy (1993). Vikram Seth is a celebrated Indian novelist of the present time whose writing gives minute observations of the world on this period. His first novel, The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse (1986) goes on presenting experiences with certain friends living in California. The other acclaimed novel, An Equal Music (1999) giving a violinist's story haunted by the memory of a former love, and his magnum opus A Suitable Boy showing the story of a young girl named Lata Mehra. The novel is a thorough representation of the institution of marriage in India. A Suitable Boy throws a light on the variety of cultures, religions, and people in India. However, the main focus of the novel is the theme of the institution of marriage and the family system. There are four main families mentioned in the novel. The first is of the Mehras of which Mrs Rupa Mehra is one of the central characters, mother to Lata, searching for a suitable boy. She is having four children in all, Arun, Savita, Varun and Lata. Her elder son Arun is married to Meenakshi (from Chatterji family), Savita marries to Pran (from Kapoor family). Lata is Mrs Rupa Mehra's last daughter of the list for getting married. A large portion of the novel, as well as the title, describes her mother's determination to marry Lata off to "a suitable boy". However, as a patient reader, what we get to know at the end of the novel is that Lata is smart enough to come to a final decision of her selection and firmly turns her back on the romance. In the course of time, and with the growing age and maturity, she learns that love, lust, and romance are something different than that of a stable marriage and a stable life, and she discards her love relations with Kabir. Her rejection of Kabir is not because of her mother's opposition of Kabir for being a Muslim, but her own planned decision for her future. She observes Kabir from a different angle and finds that probably he will not accompany her as far as her expectations are concerned and disapprove him. The novel portrays undergoing changes in the decision-making process of Lata and finally, she takes a firm decision. After rejecting Kabir and Amit, she finally chooses Haresh, a suitable boy, as a life-partner.



KEYWORDS : suitable boy, marriage, womanhood, institution of marriage.

INTRODUCTION :

The early decades of the twentieth century gave a trio named Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan to the world of Indian writing in English. In the same manner, the concluding decades of that century also gave a trio named Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth. Perna Sinhapraises the name and fame of these three Indian writers as:

“...*A Suitable Boy* made Vikram Seth rich and famous like his two other contemporaries, Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. These three authors have achieved for Indo-Anglican writers a position which any Englishman would have envied. These authors have traversed a long path from a mere Third World category creating greater milestone.” (37)

The one more important thing about these later three is that they wrote continuously and produced a good amount of literature. Their works have created a new imprint in the world of literature. Though they belong to the third world countries, they are specifically different from the so-called established writers.

Moreover, the 1980s established a new path for Indian Writing in English. With the introduction of Indian Writing in English as a separate paper around 1980, the study of Indian literature written in English has become an integral part of the syllabi in almost all the departments of English. This is the same period where the world recognition won by Nissim Ezekiel, Jayant Mahapatra, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, and others gave a strong impetus to the study of Indian literature in English. Of all these, Vikram Seth is known as a multifaceted personality and known for his poems, novels, travelogues, biographies, and children’s literature.

His *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is a representation of the institution of marriage in the Indian scenario. Set in post-independence, post-partition India, the novel follows the story of four families over a period of 18 months where a mother searches for a suitable boy to marry her daughter, Lata. The 1349-page novel alternatively offers satirical and earnest examinations of national political issues in the period. In the words of Seth himself, *A Suitable Boy* was mainly intended to be a “short book of about two hundred and fifty pages concentrating mainly on Lata or Lata’s mother’s search for a suitable match for her”. However, Seth remarks, “but having begun it with a wedding and having lots of characters come to that wedding, I realised that I was writing a different kind of book. (in Mohanty: 197)

There are four main families mentioned in the novel. The first family is of the *Mehras* of which Mrs Rupa Mehra is one of the central characters, a mother to Lata, searching for a suitable boy. She is having four children in all, Arun, Savita, Varun and Lata. Her elder son Arun is married to Meenakshi (from Chatterji family), Savita marries to Pran (from Kapoor family). Lata is Mrs Rupa Mehra's last daughter of the list for getting married. A large portion of the novel, as well as the title, describes her mother's determination to marry Lata off to "a suitable boy." The other three families are of Kapoor, Chatterji and Khan. Kapoors have Mr Mahesh Kapoor, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor and their three children Veena, Pran and Maan. Among the Khans, we have Nawab Sahib of Baitar and his three children Zainab, Imtiaz and Firoz. The final family of the Chatterjis has more number of children Amit, Meenakshi (married to Arun Mehra), Dipankar, Kakoli and Tapan. No doubt, these four families and their interconnection go very complicated for the readers while reading the novel in its fourteen hundred pages. However, the family tree supplied by Seth helps to solve this puzzle. Apart from this, there are some hundred plus characters directly or indirectly referred to in the novel.

In *A Suitable Boy*, the marriage and family institution remain at the centre stage. Salve writes:

...amongst the family relationship and the centre stage of narrative, the images are built around the opposite concepts of marriage and family life, on the one hand, and sex-life outside the home and family, on the other. The majority characters of Seth's novels are the victims of romantic passion, alienation, isolation, materialism, loneliness and frustration. (24)

For Seth, "Marriage is the symbol of peace, tranquillity, quietness, progress, prosperity and happiness. The obscenity of any kind is the symbol of irreligion, and results in frustration, unhappiness and loneliness." (Salve: 25) Moreover, it throws a light on the variety of cultures, religions and people along with its another theme of the family system.

Vikram Seth paints a giant canvas of characters and setting in *A Suitable Boy*. However, the major part of the novel deals with the female characters. Lata, being the protagonist, steals the show and remains at the forefront for almost half of the scenes of the novel. There are also some other women characters who are presented strong enough to keep the attention of the readers. These "women of conformity and women of conviction are having their own qualities," K. Vijaya continues:

...these characters are needed to this male dominant society to keep the peace of mind and unity in the family and the society. Women are created as very strong and sensitive, loveable and responsible, confident and determined as they realise their potential and the special power within themselves. All these women must understand and be aware of their original beauty within themselves than the other beauty. (43)

A reader can find that it is an attempt on the part of the author to show that in the male dominant society, women have lost their beauty. It is the expectation of the writer that they should understand their original beauty.

Talking about the representation of women in this novel what we find is that almost all the major women in Seth's novel are confined to their private space. They are house-wives and restricted within the four walls of their house. They are discharging their role as a wife, a mother, a mother-in-law etc. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, Savita, Veena, Zainab, Mrs Rupa Mehra, all are the same. Describing this confinement of the women characters in Seth, Kalpana and Gangadharan observe:

Nawab Sahib's daughter, Zainab, though an educated and brilliant girl, begins to wear *Purdah* after marriage. Here women had to spend their entire life since the age of fifteen in *Purdah* either in their father's or their husbands' house. (228)

However, this confinement does not teach them not to forward it in the following generations. These women are oppressed in their confinement but they also do the same to their successors. For example, Mrs Rupa Mehra is an example of how one can be oppressed and oppressing at the same time. She feels that the family members and her daughter-in-law are oppressing her after her husband's death but she shows her dominance as a mother to Lata and wants her to obey her.... Thus, we find that the otherwise outspoken Lata becomes very submissive and silent fulfilling her mother's wish, for she knows that would give her mother happiness. (229)

One can hardly summarise that *A Suitable Boy* is a good example of women losing their identities. It is an age-old fact that women are restricted by the society. Their identity remains only to the motherhood and being a homemaker. But this discussion represents the other side of the novel. The main theme of *A Suitable Boy* is, of course, a search for a suitable boy. The marriage institution is the central point and the whole story moves around it. Mehra family is at the centre of the story and the novel also begins with the marriage. The elder daughter of Mehra family, Savita, is getting married to Mr Pran Kapoor who is a Lecturer by profession. This is an arranged marriage and Mrs Rupa Mehra (as Mr Mehra is no more, now she is the head of the Mehra family) is being relieved of a major responsibility after the death of her husband. She has two sons and two daughters: Arun, Varun, Savita and Lata. Arun is married to a Bengali girl; Savita is getting married. Now the only responsibility she has to shoulder is a job for Varun and a suitable boy for Lata. The novel begins with her words to Lata, "YOU too will marry a boy I choose," (03) over which Lata gives an impudent remark, "Hmm," which annoys her mother and Mrs Mehra remarks:

'I know what your hmms mean, young lady, and I can tell you I will not stand for hmms in this matter. I do not know what is best. I am doing it all for you. Do you think it is easy for me, trying to arrange things for all four of my children without His help? (03)

Mrs Mehra is a traditional Indian woman, a mother, who believes in the traditional Indian marriage system. She rejects the choice of her daughter and pressurises her daughter by her choice. Regarding her firm belief in the Indian marriage institution, and the marriage industry itself, Perna writes:

In India, marriage is a well-established and sacrosanct institution which presupposes various values, issues and obstacles. Marriage does not mean merely the meeting of two individuals in a relationship; rather it signifies mixing and mingling of two families and involves respecting and understanding the custom and tradition as well as the members of each other's families. (45)

Mrs Mehra is always concerned about these values regarding her daughter and that is why she always scolds Lata and forces Lata for getting married with a boy that she selects for her. But Lata differs from her mother. She is a young girl of her own visions. She, along with Maan, are presented as the representations of upcoming youth. They do whatever they wish to do. However, at a certain moment of time, as an anti-climax in a drama, both, Lata and Maan, surprisingly revert their decision of love marriage with their respective choices.

Malti Sharma, in her 'Human Bonds and Vikram Seth,' finds the protagonist's human bond with her mother. The beginning shows Lata's disagreement with her mother in respect to her marriage, but she takes a "cool-headed decision in favour of stability." (177) She writes:

She enjoys falling in love with Kabir – a Muslim boy and justifies her claim to take her own decision... Still, in the end, she decides to marry a clear-headed, practical-minded Haresh who happen to be her mother's choice. An important factor along with others, in rejecting Kabir, is the fact that her mother is unable to accept Kabir. So marrying Haresh, keeps the bond between mother and daughter almost undisturbed. (177)

Sharma also compares the arranged marriages and love marriages in her 'Human Bonds and Vikram Seth.' She writes that the act of love marriage is an uninteresting and non-existent bond of relationship between Arun (Lata's brother) and Meenakshi (Arun's wife). She writes:

The absence of mutual faith and respect in this marriage leads to a final ruin of family and individuals. Having fallen in love, at a point of time, doesn't come to save their marital bonds. (177)

The characters are having many choices. For example, Maan has to choose between Saeeda Bai and his father's reputation; Lata has to choose between her first love of her life (Kabir) and the happiness of her mother. The characters are presented in a state of dilemma. They have to make their own choices. But it seems that they either are unable to make the choice rightly or if they do, they commit some mistakes in it.

In the context of marriage, Seth's observation is realistic. He gives importance to the relations established by the bonds of marriage. They are enough strong to face any kind of problem. The example of Savitri in Indian mythological context is well known. The novel gives references to various relations and cross relations established by such marriages. Seth writes in the novel:

The marriage may break but the bonds are forever. There's no denying the fact that they are strained from time to time but their spirit is mighty enough to go through any kind of trial. To save the parallel bonds from the strain, Lata chooses the self-effacing cobbler as compared to the dashing young cricketer or the poet-novelist. (178)

Seth has also presented the men characters, and ofcourse women too, having a strong sexual desire. Both the central characters, Lata (Mehra) and Maan (Kapoor) are either concerned with or involved in the sexual motifs. Where on the one hand Lata's too much attachment with Kabir gets dissolved as he rejects her proposal to elope with her, Maan's sexual attachment with Saeeda Bai forces him to commit an act of homicide. The other example is that of Meenakshi, the daughter of Justice Chatterji. She is married to Arun, the elder son of Mr Rupa Mehra. However, her marriage is not that much successful as she is in an illicit relationship with her husband's friend Billy. Seth presents her as an unfaithful woman who hates to remain in the house for all the time. She is not on good terms with her mother-in-law and objects her all the time. She breaks all her family bondage and openly enjoys her illicit relationship with Billy. Kalpana and Gandadharan find her as:

...frivolous and unfaithful wife...not happy being confined within the house, an outspoken woman, least bothered about the conventional impositions on a woman. ...engaged in an extramarital relationship with her husband's friend Billy and is least guilty about her actions. (227)

Meenakshi says: "What does marriage have to do with it? I'm married, aren't I? You enjoy it, I enjoy it, that's all there it is." (1131)

However, in the end, it is very interesting to know that Seth does not allow his characters, though male or female, to stroll around. At the end or in between his characters pick-up the good path and go realistic. Gupta observes:

Lata could just as easily have chosen Kabir – and become estranged from her mother and her entire cultural moorings, and Maan could have continued his sad little liaison with an ageing courtesan and let his life slip through his fingers in the process – but Seth cares too much about his characters to allow them to do that. Seth creates the world, not clouded by unrealistic dreams, but firmly entrenched in the reality of life. (66)

Lata is having three options as suitors of which the first one is a Muslim, Kabir. However, Lata's mother Mrs Rupa Mehra is not happy with this proposal as she is afraid of the religious intolerance. India after its independence went through a severe issue of religious intolerance and the overall relation between the Hindus and the Muslims was in trouble. In this connection, Mrs Mehra objected Lata's decision. Gupta observes:

... it is not difficult to appreciate the dilemma of Mr Rupa Mehra regarding Kabir as an unsuitable boy, in the aftermath of partition. ... the communal bloodshed that ensued is an experience that few who lived through it can ever forget. Though Seth maintains a secular tone, he does not downplay the "tragic interweaving of religion and politics, the ancient rivalry between Hindu and Muslim, the undying suspicion and resentment that can be blown into flame at any moment by unscrupulous office seekers or bigoted religious leaders." (65)

In the course of time, Lata undergoes a mental change and takes a firm decision. She rejects Kabir and Amit and finally chooses Haresh as 'a suitable boy'. About her decision, Gupta claims:

...the sanest decision she has ever made – not at her mother's behest or her brother's, but as an independent decision. She knows that Haresh does not meet her brother Arun's snobbish standards and neither is her mother really sure that he will be able to keep Lata happy, yet she chooses him because she perceives in Haresh's sincerity a quality that she instinctively finds extremely appealing for a stable married life. (65)

Coming to the closure, what we find is that, Seth has represented Lata smart enough to come to a final decision of her selection. She firmly turns her back on romance and in the course of time, and with the growing age and maturity, she learns that love, lust and romance are something different than a stable marriage and a stable life. Her rejection of Kabir is not because of her mother's opposition but it is her own decision. She observes Kabir from a different angle and finds that probably he will not accompany her as far as her expectations are concerned and she disapproves him.

Lata decides to forget Kabir and select Haresh Khanna. She justifies her decision in her own words: "...the one, merely excites, unsettles and makes you uneasy; ... the other is calmer, less frantic love, which helps you to grow where you were already growing." (1299) Here, Lata alters her choice for her better future. So to say, in talking about representation of women in this novel what we find is that Seth has presented his protagonist Lata as a mature enough to take her final decision.

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