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A Suitable Boy: Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Non-Fiction

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Abstract

Vikram Seth was the son of a judge and a businessman was raised in London and India. He has written about a variety of themes and topics including music, travel, work environments, family, homosexuality and Catholic belief. He wrote poetic novel *The Golden Gate* and turned to prose in his epic novel, *A Suitable Boy*. It functions as a political fable, a roman a clef, showing the emerging polity of the newly independent India. Seth has used a variety of

characters to show how in the very first decade after independence the mood of the people changed from euphoria to despondence. While debating the role of students in politics, Seth briefly mentions his central theme thus, “Their post-independence romanticism and post-independence disillusionment formed a volatile mixture” (p. 815). His diagnosis-vote-bank politics and communalism as an election tool have corroded the soul of the fledgling Indian democracy.

Keywords: Campus novel, Fiction, Conflict, Politics, Irony, Human follies, Narration

Seth’s ambitious mega-novel, *A Suitable Boy* is a multi dimensional work, almost impossible to slip into a comfortable slot, to thrust into a convenient niche. Basically, it is a novel which displays an attitude-flippant, irreverent, even cynical. Seth maintains an ironic stance throughout the novel, gently mocking at the follies and assumptions of the rapidly ‘modernizing’ Indian society of the 1950’s. At its core it remains a novel of manners a la Jane Austen, focusing on the unique South Asian phenomenon of ‘arranged’ marriage. Like a typical Austen novel, it opens with one marriage and ends with another.

At another level, the novel functions as a satiric campus novel popularized by the ‘angries’ of the 1950’s. Kingsley Amis launched the genre with *Lucky Jim*, a hilarious fable of a young History lecturer, Jim Dixon. Other well-known such novels are Malcolm Bradbury’s *Stepping Westward*, and David Lodge’s *Changing Places*. In *The Suitable Boy* Pran Kapoor is an aspirant for readership in English at Brahmipur University. His Professor and Head of the Department, Dr. O.P. Misra, cannot bear his irreverent erudition. The Professor and the young lecturer first cross swords at the issue of the inclusion of Joyce in the University syllabus. However, a Joycean short is accepted on the syllabus as a compromise formula. The novel portrays the prevalent corruption in the field of education and selection processors. There is nepotism and contaminated method prevalent in all fields of life.

The political characters Vikram Seth uses fall into three categories. In the first group there are certain national figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, and Rajrishi Purushottam Das Tandon who appear in their real names. Vikram Seth minutely observes their role in Indian politics, and points out their feet of clay. In the second category are some leaders who appear with changed names but their personalities are identifiable. There is the Purva Pradesh (Uttar Pradesh?) Chief Minister called SS Sharma who looks like a spitting image of

G. B. Pant. Then there are two state ministers-the secular Mahesh Kapoor who seems to be dramatized version of Damodar Swaroop Seth, and L. N. Agarwal who echoes the personality of C. B. Gupta. In the last group are fictional characters who represent the emergent forces in the Indian polity. Among these the two important figures are the successful subaltern, Waris Khan, and the doomed idealist, Abdur Rasheed.

Mahesh Kapoor, a freedom fighter and an idealist, stands at the core of the political fable in *A Suitable Boy*. He is a fictionalized version of Damodar Swaroop Seth, a Nehruvian from Rohilkhand whose memory is preserved in Bareilly at a park consecrated to his name. He is, in essence, a symbolic figure representing those idealistic Congressmen who were hugely disillusioned by the decadence of the post-Independence Congress. The tragic denouement of his political career is the culmination of a rapidly rotting culture when manipulation, nepotism, and communalism totally perverted the Indian political value system. As Mahesh Kapoor ultimately resigns from the Congress and joins the KMPP, he reminisces about the genesis of the Congress infighting, and the resultant dilution of political ethics. Since Independence the Congress had been split between the leftist followers of Nehru, and the conservative right-wing led by Sardar Patel. The Patel loyalists saw "Nehru as rootless deracinated Indian whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism and who was divorced from the majority of his Hindu citizenry" (p.955). The challenge to Nehru's supremacy arose in the form of Purushottam Das Tandon who fought for, and won, the office of the Congress President in spite of Nehru's strong opposition. The inevitable Nehru-Tandon clash was set into motion by the constitution of the new Congress Working Committee. Tandon packed the CWC with his conservative colleagues, and "did not include- and had indeed refused to include- either his defeated opponent- Kripalani- or Kidwai, who had planned Kidwai's campaign." (p.954). The Nehruites and the Tandonites differed on ideological grounds, but most of all on the Muslim question. Nehru emerged as an astute political strategist. Outmaneuvered by the Tandonite party-bosses, he played his trump card. He resigned from the membership of the CWC. Nehru's move caught the Tandon faction by surprise. They lost confidence, fearing a rout in the forthcoming General Elections. To save face, Tandon offered his own resignation from the Congress Presidency. Main mounted offensive. Vikram Seth admires Nehru's charismatic leadership, but he not blind to the fact that even great men like Nehru have feet of clay. and that wrong means cannot be justified on ground of noble ends. Nehru regains the reins of power, but he does so at the cost of alienating a huge body of Hindu Nationalists, and thus sows the seeds of a communalised

polity. Vikram Seth supports the common perception that Nehru stood like a huge banyan tree under which nothing could grow.

Let us cast a glance at the political fortunes of those whom Nehru's political somersaults left in the lurch. JB Kripalani never regained his political eminence; Rafi Ahmed Kidwai survived as he played a double game; and Mahesh Kapoor was ruined. In the novel, Mahesh Kapoor goes back to the Nehru led Congress, but his electoral prospects are hugely damaged by his days in political exile. He is defeated by a rank outsider, Waris Khan, by dubious means, and is broken by his ignominious defeat.

Mahesh Kapoor's benefactor, the Purva Pradesh Chief Minister SS Sharma, is another interesting political person in *A Suitable Boy*. He is shown as a fictionalised version of the former U.P. Chief Minister, Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant:

Sharmaji was a rather hulking man with a perceptible limp and an unconscious and slight vibration of the head, which was exacerbated when, as now, he had a long day. He ran the state with a mixture of guile, charisma, and benevolence. Delhi was far away and rarely interested in his legislative and administrative fief. (p.17)

He is a good administrator; honest and impartial, with impeccable secular credentials. Yet, after the General Elections he is kicked upstairs and called to Delhi. His successor, though he seems to be grooming Mahesh Kapoor for the job, is L.N. Agarwal, a rank political opportunist who plays the Hindu-Muslim card for political gains. Yet this entire clamour amounts to nothing in the world of real politik, and LN Agarwal, at the end of the novel, is all set to occupy the Chief Minister's chair in Purva Pradesh.

In the political success of people like LN Agarwal lies the significance of *A Suitable Boy* as a political fable. Seth finds the emergent Indian polity sliding towards two black holes - communalism and lumpenization. The shadow of communal politics looms large in this novel, objectified as a mosque-temple dispute. The Alamgiri Mosque standing cheek by jowl near an ancient Shiva Temple, is a fictional rendering of the Kashi Visvanath-Gyanvapi Mosque dispute in Varanasi, with echoes of the Babri Masjid cacophony in the background. Seth introduces his readers to the incendiary situation in Brahmpur. As the resurgent Hindus try to rebuild the temple to consecrate the holy linga once again, Brahmpur goes up in flames. A huge riot engulfs the city fuelled by rumours and aggravated by the mismanagement of the security forces. The villain of the piece is the controversial Home Minister, L. N. Agarwal. Events reach the flash point as that year, unfortunately, Dusseharra and Moharram coincide in the coincide

in the lunar calendar. The Bharat Milap procession intersects the route of a Tazia procession, and all hell breaks loose. The actor playing Rama is injured in the altercation, and the crowd goes berserk. The denouement of the temple-mosque controversy in *A Suitable Boy* is typical of Vikram Seth's flippant irreverence. The huge linga is hauled out of the Ganga bed, and dragged up the stairs of a ghat by a cartful of labourers.

The threat of lumpenization of the Indian polity is objectified in the meteoric rise of Waris Khan in electoral politics. Waris is a village bumpkin, uneducated and uncultured. The Nawab of Baitar puts him up as a dummy candidate in his area during the Assembly elections to cover up the possibility of Mahesh Kapoor being denied the Congress ticket. As the elections draw near, Mahesh Kapoor's son is involved in a violent act, injuring the Nawab's son. Waris deems him now an enemy of his Nawab, and decides to defeat Mahesh Kapoor by hook or by crook. He refuses to withdraw vote to his favour. Finally, he manages to beat Mahesh Kapoor by the proverbial whisker. As Waris Khan, the newly-crowned MLA, visits the Baitar Fort, his erstwhile boss- the Munshi- prostrates himself at his feet, begging pardon for a thousand obscenities and indignities he may have hurled on Waris in his days of servitude. Waris is generous: "All right, you sister-fucker, I bless you" (p. 1281). As Mahesh Kapoor reads his character, Waris is as fool. He would make perfect servant, but horrid master. He not evil per se, but ignorant of that and noble in human character, social values and political culture. Vikram Seth's worry that people like Waris going hold the reins of power Independent India, she hardly need any enemies to ruin her. It is use blaming an individual, broods Vikram Seth, the fault lies within the system that India has chosen to govern her people. huge crop of Waris Khans has erupted over India, snuffing out the promising idealistic youngsters like Abdur Rasheed. Rasheed, the only truly tragic character in novel, is secular and educated Muslim boy who fights for rights of the landless labourers in feudal society. He hounded by people, rejected by his family, and driven suicide. His death scene evokes true pathos, and tragic sense 'waste'. The brief scene differs from the generally mocking tone the novel:

Rasheed walked along the parapet of Barsat Mahal, thoughts blurred with hunger and confusion...

No Satan, no God, no Iblis, No Gabriel.

Endless, endless, endless, the waters of Ganga.

Ant the stars above, below.

... and some were seized by the cry, and some

we made the earth swallow, and some we
Drowned....

Peace. No. prayers. No. more prayers.

To sleep is better than to pray....

A spring in paradise.

O God, O God, (p.1315)

The triumph of Waris and the suicide Abdur Rasheed are objective correlatives that point the dead-ends of India politics as it grew in the 1950's. Hence my assertion that *A Suitable Boy* is a Roman a Clef presenting thinly-disguised realistic picture of the Nehruvian polity. Vikram Seth does hold on to fictional garb, but it keeps slipping to reveal living historical personages.

Works Cited

Seth, Vikram. *The Suitable Boy*. Penguin India, 1993.

All subsequent references are this edition only and page numbers have been given in parenthesis.