

## Zamindari Abolition, Marriages and Caste Politics in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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**Abstract.** Vikram Seth is one of the most fascinating and versatile writers in Indian English literature. Seth made remarkable contribution to Indian English literature by writing not only novels but also books of poetry, travelogue, biographies and memoirs. He embellished his novels by using different styles like verse, epic and music. He has applied different themes in his novels from various social and cultural landscapes. Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is one of the longest novels in a single volume. Seth sets up religious intolerance, love and marriage as a central theme of this present novel. This novel depicts Indian culture of racial caste and arranged marriage. This novel brings the theme of conflict between an arranged marriage and a marriage escaped on romantic love. In Indian culture it is a system of marriage that not only the boy must be the same religion as the girl but also the boy and the girl should be of same caste. The present novel shows the social realism of post- independent India. It illustrates the social implications of the Zamindari system. It has the story of four families to find out a suitable boy for their unmarried daughters. Religious boundaries become the main hindrance of love marriage between Lata (a Hindu girl) and Kabir (a Muslim boy). They have only one way to get married to elope without their parents' permission. This essay attempts to study the thematic and religious intolerance and social contrast in Seth's *A Suitable Boy*.

**Keywords :** Religious Intolerance; caste politics; social realism; love and marriage; zamindari system

*A Suitable Boy* (1993) is a landmark in Seth's career because it is based on the first time Indian soil. It also focuses on Indian culture, caste politics and panoramic view of society. In India there is a cultural tradition of making arranged marriages from ancient period. *A Suitable Boy* Seth tells the story of four upper middle class Indian families after independence. From those four families Seth creates a panorama of characters, communal and social conflicts, withering idealism, love and passion and marriage and family. This novel portrays a realistic picture of India. Seth shows sign of sensitivity with which he reflects the social

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issues intertwined in the social fabric of Indian life. The theme of *A Suitable Boy* also brings up the conflict between arranged marriage and a marriage escaped on romantic love. Traditional Indian customs, culture, caste system and Zamindari Abolition are the themes of *A Suitable Boy*. Marriage is one of the main themes of this novel. The only difference is the earlier marriage is Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter Savita and the later one is of her younger daughter Lata. Marriages are of three types: Arranged marriage, Love marriage and Court marriage. In the novel neither love marriage is focused nor is any preference given to court marriage. Seth also draws a social demerit by using political point of view that is Zamindari system of villages. In *A Suitable Boy* Zamindari Abolition Law, a historically important legislation finds its expression in the work. Under the Zamindari Abolition Bill, five years of continuous tenancy is enough to establish the tiller's right to the land. The agricultural fields of land lords and Zamindars have been ploughed by labourers who are landless and a portion of the yielding they would be given for their labour and the rest would be submitted to the landlords and Zamindars. This had been the custom and tradition during British regime. Therefore it can be said that Seth sets out to bring the entire post-independence India into his fictional vision.

### **Methodology**

A lot of religions and caste are followed by Indian, even though they live their life without any problem, such a good social relation in India. They are living together as familiar relatives. Out of those all religions Hindu and Muslim are most popular for religious intolerance and Hindus for castism. The relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities, the importance of caste, love and marriage and the family, these concerns are echoed and developed in the lives of four families around whom the narrative is organized. Three of them, the Mehras, Chatterjis and Kapoor are related by marriage the fourth family, the Khans are friends of the Kapoors, a big landowner and also unlike other three Muslim. The stories of these families bring in other issues of the value of work, the process of change, the injustice of poverty and the direction taken by the newly independent and democratic India. *A Suitable Boy* is not only a love story but also an illustration of India and its culture. It portrays the middle and upper classes of north Indian society and zamindari system in the early 1950s. Its depiction is broadly speaking, comic and tone varies but is most light and plot finishes with a wedding, which is traditionally a happy ending of story.

### **Zamindari Abolition**

Seth tells about Zamindari Bill and its far reaching impact on the nation and the hurdles and the challenges the policy makers had to encounter in enacting and implementing the law have been so accurately recorded in the novel. The main story takes place in an imaginary and fictional north Indian state called Purvapradesh, the Chief Minister of which is Sharma and the revenue and home ministers of the state are Mahesh Kapoor and Agarwal respectively. Vikram Seth has structured this fictional state Purvapradesh in such a way that it stands for the whole of north India in all aspects such as, culture, religion, society, geography and politics. Zamindari abolition bill is the brain child of Mahesh Kapoor, the revenue minister of the state who is a staunch loyalist of Nehru and strong supporter of secular principles. In the loosely narrated story of romance between a Muslim boy, by name, Kabir and a young lady Lata, a Brahampur University student numerous episodes dealing with various other themes have been incorporated without affecting the course, effect and flow of the main story. One such sub theme of historical importance is Zamindari Abolition Bill. In the history of modern independent India, Zamindari Abolition Act turns out to be a milestone legislation which played a pivotal role in streamlining land related matters. It is preceded by the annexure of small kingdoms to Indian union, by the then Home Minister of India Vallabhbhai Patel, known as iron man of India. Even after that, Zamindars were in possession of vast acreage of lands and sprawling estates where landless labourers toil hard to earn their livelihood. There is every possibility for the emergence of a situation where people belonging to the lower strata of society have to continue to remain as landless labourers and earn their bread.

In British India, such a scenario, where the economically, socially and culturally underprivileged sections were denied justice was prevalent. But even after attaining freedom, when some sections of the nation live in absolute luxury and the rest of the nation languish in poverty and starvation, it cannot be defended and justified. With a view to equalizing the imbalances, disparities and discriminations among different sects of people in every spheres economy and agriculture, Zamindari Abolition Bill was introduced. Mahesh Kapoor, a strong follower of Nehru and his principles of secularism, and socialism is strongly under the impression that it will bring about equality in the state and the gap between the haves and the have-nots would be bridged to a good extent. Even if it means

that very influential landlords and powerful zamindars are to lose major portions of their estates, fields and land, Mahesh Kapoor does not step behind. One of the affected Zamindars Nawab Sahib of Baitar is a long time and close friend of the revenue minister Mahesh Kapoor.

Notwithstanding that, there is no friction between Nawab Sahib of Baitar and Mahesh Kapoor. The bill, which later becomes a law, imposing a ceiling on the possessions of lands by zamindars and landlords do not damage the mature and refined friendship between the duo. Mahesh Kapoor in the process has to incur the displeasure and wrath of the likes of Raja of Marh who strongly believes that the minister is responsible for the deprivation of their lands. But Mahesh Kapoor is committed to the goals of anti-feudalism, secularism and elimination of zamindari system. On personal front, he is also a determined fighter against feudalism, the evils of communalism and the growing menace of corruption. He is a man of commitment, honesty and integrity. At one point, when Raja of Marh attempts to bribe him to prevent the passage of zamindari abolition bill, he ruthlessly tackles him, by coming hard on him. And he is a man who is capable of outweighing personal relationships for the betterment of larger, general objectives and close friendship with the Nawab Sahib of Baita also helps him in this commitment, in the sense that Mahesh Kapoor's moral principles do not come in the way of their friendship.

In *A Suitable Boy* Zamindari Abolition Law, a historically important legislation finds its expression in the work. Under the Zamindari Abolition Bill, five years of continuous tenancy is enough to establish the tiller's right to the land. The agricultural fields of land lords and Zamindars have been ploughed by labourers who are landless and a portion of the yielding they would be given for their labour and the rest would be submitted to the landlords and Zamindars. This had been the custom and tradition during British regime. With the implementation of Zamindar Abolition act, agricultural workers without their own land toiling hard and long on others' fields for their survival would be entitled to claim their right over the fields and the owners of fields who happen to be Nawabs, Rajas and Landlords would be severely hit by the legislation. They are up in arms against this legislation and they bend over backwards to prevent it from coming into force. Once it is passed in legislature and the governor gives his assent to it, Nawabs, Rajas and the Landlords losing their properties and struggling hard like other common men for their existence and livelihood will be inevitable. Realizing the danger

they will be in, they challenge the constitutional validity of the legislation in Brahampur High Court. Heated arguments are witnessed in the court both for and against the legislation. G.N. Bannerjee, the counsel for the landlords, presented his argument in the following way :

My Lords, the entire way of life of this state is sought to be altered by the executive of this state through legislation that runs in express and implied contradictions to the constitution of the country. The act that seeks, in no citizenry of Purva Pradesh is the Purva Pradesh Zamindari abolition and Land Reform Act in 1951 and it is my contention and that of other counsel for the applicants that this legislation, apart from being patently to the detriment of the people, is unconstitutional and therefore null and void. (*A Suitable Boy*, 686)

### **Marriage**

Marriage is the sole theme of the novel as the novel commences with a wedding and terminates with a marriage. The only difference is the earlier marriage is Mrs. Rupa Mehra's elder daughter Savita and the later one is of her younger daughter Lata. Marriages are of three types: Arranged marriage, Love marriage and Court marriage. In the novel neither love marriage is focused nor is any preference given to court marriage. All the emphasis has been put on arranged marriage. Majority of arranged marriages in the novel gives a view of the mentality of the people in the post-Independence India. In the novel Vikram Seth has shown different types of marriages. Majority of the people believe that love has no place before marriage. They don't believe in love which happens before marriage. According to them it's only an infatuation that a young boy and a young girl feel. Love is the destination that one can achieve only when one gets married. Moreover, the marriage must be within the caste and should be the arranged one. Marriage is a commitment for the entire life that the mates have to follow, so it should be decided with a cool mind

and any kind of haste can prove the marriage distasteful. All the marriages shown in the novel give the strength to test the accuracy of its subservient existence. The four families in the novel – the Mehras, the Khans, the Chatterjis and the Kapoors- all are result of arranged marriages. Vikram Seth along with the emphasis on the arranged marriage has shown the readers different images of marriage, and for this, he uses his characters as the medium to show the realities of life. The novel touches the life of ordinary people and also the VIPs.

Dr. Kishen Chand Seth is re-married to Parvati. He represents and symbolizes the advancement, possessiveness and forwardness of men in taking second wife ravishly, without caring their own age, family and children. They always prefer an unmarried woman, rather than stretching the helping hand towards a widowed or divorced or a woman having children. Dr. Kishen Chand Seth in the novel is one of them. His marriage with young Parvati gave a great shock to Mrs. Rupa Mehra (daughter of Dr. Kishen Chand Seth), “The marriage with Parvati (which have shocked not just his family but Brahmipur at large because of disparity of age).” (878-879) It is the dominative nature that matters a lot rather than caring about the social rituals, customs and family; in other words selfishness of a person who becomes blind in his/her own happiness.

There exists another case of re-marriage, of Abdhur Rasheed, a tutor. He is married to his elder brother's widow with one daughter, accepted her as his wife and had a daughter of his own from her. This time here the marriage is being forced upon the individual by his own mother for the sake of her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. Rasheed wanted to refuse her but he didn't have the heart to do so, a promise that was no doubt good in it but that had tied his life even before he had begun to taste freedom. Among the Muslims four marriages are considered to be legal. That may be the reason that Rasheed's father had a step wife, with her a son called Netaji. Begum Abida Khan, member of Democratic Party, proved to be more effective than her husband in social and political causes. With the coming of the partition, her husband decides to leave India and go to Pakistan, later he went to Iraq on a visit to the holy shrines of the Shias and decided to live there for a few more years. Three years passed but he didn't return. Abida Khan is here in India serving for the country and people, whereas her husband is far from her. This marriage follows separation but there still exists bond of love in both the hearts. No details are given in the novel about their contacts, only it is revealed

that after his departure they had talks on phone only twice or thrice. Since they are apart from each other they are tied with thread of marriage and this cannot be forgotten. Vikram Seth conveys that separation cannot erase love from the hearts; it will linger till the life ends. Marriage is a commitment that cannot be broken so easily.

Next, is the marriage of a politician Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, Revenue Minister of the state of Purva Pradesh; he has a very busy schedule, busy life style and privilege to his work first, works intensely in the office and in house; Mrs. Kapoor is a good mother and a wonderful gardener but for her husband, she is not a suitable wife for him. As she is superstitious, cannot speak English she is nothing but a waste. When she was alive Mr. Kapoor never realized her good qualities, soon after her death he realized the importance of his wife that he never paid any attention. Mahesh Kapoor was amazed by how many people had come to attend the chautha of his wife, whom he always thought of as being a silly, superstitious and narrow- minded lady. He realized that she was the garden of 'Prem Nivas', Veena's music, Maan's generosity the survival of some refugees, Pran's asthma and Bhasker's great grandmother. Indeed for all the Minister of Revenue's impatience, she was his regret. This is a marriage in which husbands are considered as rod and the wife must obey his husband without caring about her own feelings and emotions, Mahesh Kapoor never cared about his wife's sentiments, on the other hand his wife served him her entire life as a slave; serving him and his children without any complain and revolt. Marriage means fulfilment of emotions and sentiments from both the sides but here it was one sided. Though Mahesh Kapoor never gave his wife any kind of physical harassment yet something was lacking in Mrs. Kapoor's life, which has to be filled by Mr. Kapoor, and that is his attention towards her. This marriage can be categorized in the category of a successful marriage, as both loved each other, though there was some vacuity. The reality that Vikram Seth has shown us that the wives of minister usually undergo this type or frustration as Mrs. Kapoor went through. But here the politician is very loyal towards his work and his country.

Saviti and Pran Kapoor's marriage is presented as the most appropriate and the suitable one. Pran Kapoor is a professor and a very intelligent human being. He has all the essential qualities that a man must possess. He is an obedient son of his parents, loving and caring husband, and a devoted professor as for him Honesty is the best policy. Pran Kapoor

is the only one character in the novel that is enriched with all the good qualities, his wife Savita also proves to be a decent wife, an obedient daughter, a simple ordinary woman who lives a simple life with her husband sharing his worries and happiness. In marriage with Savita, he has proved to be a wonderful husband. In the whole novel this is the one couple with a proper understanding among them and is never complaining to each other, a person gains his reputation from the society in which he lives. Society has its own rules and regulations which the person belonging to it has to obey. If he doesn't follow those rules he is considered a rebellion. The quality differs from person to person.

Society deals with all sorts of people good and bad. Seth has show a small specimen of this kind of love which is a reality: young boys very often become the toys in the hands of time and become indecisive, become confused between true love and infatuation as Maan's love for Saeeda Bai is considered as Maan's infatuation. He was infatuated more by her sweet voice, and this sweet voice was gifted to Saeeda Bai along with her physical beauty. So, he was impressed by her physical charms and good voice as well. Whatever may be the situation, Seth a perfect turn to his characters and that is the reason how Maan finally decides to forget his love. *A Suitable Boy*, it seems, is more interested in the interaction between people in society than in the psychology of the individual. The value given to the self-expression in the west is something associated with Romanticism. Although it is nineteenth-century novels to which *A Suitable Boy* is usually compared because of its panoramic depiction of society, in one respect all Seth's writing is more akin to the classicist spirit of the eighteenth-century and its emphasis on universal experiences and values. It is ultimately universal death. Rasheed and Mrs. Kapoor both die during the course of the novel, Firoz, Pran, Bhasker, and Maan are also all in death's shadow at some point. Through these experiences Mahesh Kapoor comes to realize the value of his wife and his son, Maan to understand that passion has to be controlled.

#### **Caste Politics and Social Realism in *A Suitable Boy***

Casteism is also a big fact for the politician of India, as well as religion and secularism. In Indian society caste is an important thing for marriages and social life. In *A Suitable Boy* the politics of caste and racial discrimination of society has been successfully charted by Seth. Vikram Seth realistic, orderly narrative recounts the major upheavals in the Indian

subcontinent such as the partition of India the subsequent animosity between the Hindu and Muslim, the caste system untouchability and abolition of Zamindari system and its consequences. Seth describes the class division on the basis of caste and economical condition of free India. Seth describes the rise of middle class he still includes many characters from all. Seth highlights including the fictional zamindari abolition Bill in his *A Suitable Boy*. Mahesh Kapoor in his role as Revenue Minister is instrumental in bringing forth the Zamindari abolition Bill which would take the land from rich landlords with large and unproductive land holding in the state and would distribute it among the poor, landless farmers. Even though his friend, the Nawab of Baitar would stand to lose from this legislature.

It is worthwhile to mention here that Seth's advocacy of Indian sensibility nourishing its social and religious perspective through his characters, he could not dare to put on before readers inter-caste marriage between Kabir Durraïn and Lata because of result and communal mania in 1951-1952. Therefore Lata lastly selected Haresh as her husband because of he is not only from same caste but also hard working, intelligent and working class self made Indian man.

### **Conclusion**

In *A Suitable Boy* there are different types of themes but religious intolerance and social realism is one of the central themes. Seth focuses caste politics and socio-political aspects to show Zamindari system and its abolition. Caste and religion becomes the barrier for the relationship between Kabir and Lata and it also brings the religious intolerance in this novel. Seth says, "This novel is linear partly because it is multi linear. There are several plots to stand upon firmer footing. Some of themes look expanded at glance but are actually of Seth's meditation on life: and Seth's insights are usually very perspective on human nature represent the society of a generation". (31) Seth has done admirable work in presenting authentic characters, convincing situations permeating the rich network of the novel through suitable language suiting different mindsets and condition. Moreover, Seth is conscious of giving suitable sensibility to the particular novel and all in all he has proved himself as a great genius and presented himself as an ideal for the young rising talents.

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