

## **Social Milieu in Vikram Seth's Novel '*A Suitable Boy*'**

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### **Abstract**

The social environment, social context, socio- cultural context or milieu refers to the immediate physical and social setting in which people live or in which something happens or develops. It includes the culture that the individual was educated or lives in and the people and institutions with whom they interact. Social realism is exact replication of social reality in all its details. It is a mode of writing that observes complete fidelity or pure faithfulness to the observed objective world. It documents topography, social customs, political happenings, local habits of life and festivals as well as rituals. It describes characters in all their perceived appearance and narrates their experiences in a linear logical sequence. It recounts events exactly as they are constructed as happening along with rational causes and perceived effects. Social realism is like a moving photograph of a changing world, a photograph unlike a painting which is made up of subjective impressions. Social realism cannot escape subjectivity because even the selection of detail is the choice of an author and reflects the understanding by an individual's subjectivity, but it strives to remain true to the material substance of a physical world rather than internal states of mind.

**Key Words:** culture, experience, ideology, impressions, life, sequence, social, topography

### **Introduction**

*A Suitable Boy* is saturated with the ideology of the family and this connects perfectly with its realistic and conservative portrait aesthetically. It is the family that assumes centre stage in Seth's narrative. As Anita Desai puts it, "Although, in their rash youth, they {Lata and Maan} might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance and the unknown, they learn their lesson and return, chastened, to the safety and security of the familiar and the traditional, represented here, in the Indian fashion, by the great God family."

Thus, it is evident that *A Suitable Boy* is a novel of social milieu as it is showing a clear mirror to the society of post-independent India in various shades right from family values across the spectrum containing rituals of marriage, the position of the fairer sex in the society, the impact of the courtesans on the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony, breakdown of which caused communal disturbance which is detrimental to the development and the psyche of the society. Vikram Seth has gone a long way in successfully depicting the society which was still emerging from the shadows of slavery and partition.

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individual's subjectivity, but it strives to remain true to the material substance of a physical world rather than internal states of mind.

A large number of Indian writers in English of the post-1980 either lived outside the Indian subcontinent or have spent considerable years abroad as part of the diasporic migration. The work of such authors is subjected to contradictory interpretations and critical responses. This can be applied in the case of Vikram Seth. How a novelist chooses particulars of characters to depict his point of view is an important factor in evaluating any novel. Every piece of fiction, whether it is a novel, a drama or a short story, presents a view of life. Time and place of action embrace entire milieu of any society, including political and social life. Very often reputation of the novel depends on skilful portrayal of life and manners of a particular class, social group or place.

*A Suitable Boy* is written against the background of social, economic, political and cultural upheaval of newly independent India. The novel deals with the most eventful period of Indian history. Every work of literature creates its own world. In *A Suitable Boy* which has more than thirteen hundred pages, Seth sets out to bring the entire post-independent India into his fictional vision. As a writer, Seth is conversant with life at various social levels. Well acquainted with both the high and the lower strata of society in India, he portrays the mid-twentieth century society in all its diversity. He uses the technique of contrasting characters and their lifestyles with remarkable aesthetic effect. Vikram Seth attempts to represent life in all its manifestations truthfully and accurately. He convincingly describes the landscapes, the market-places and the narrow by-lanes of Brahmapur with such minute details that one imagines being there. The places like Misri Mandi, Nabiganj, Barsaat Mahal, Prem Niwas and Baitar House acquired a life of their own. The author genuinely holds a mirror to society. Seth begins his epic novel by introducing us to the Mehra's and the Kapoor's. The occasion is the wedding of Mrs. Rupa Mehra's daughter Savita, to Pran Kapoor, whose father Mahesh Kapoor is the minister of revenue. We are also introduced to Lata Mehra for whom the search for the elusive 'suitable boy' forms the epicentre of the novel. Two other families – The Chatterji's of Calcutta, whose daughter Meenakshi is married to Arun Mehra, the son of Mrs. Mehra and the Khans also come in the picture through deep friendship between Maan Kapoor the other son of Mr. Kapoor and Firoz the son of the Nawab Sahib of Baitar.

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Marriage is a very big social responsibility taken up by the elders of a family where a choice is made between a girl and a boy and it is to be fulfilled by the pair and one has to ponder upon so many traits for selecting a suitable boy. Seth takes love and marriage as the central theme of his novel. He considers both as the fundamental mode of human life. Human nature seems to unfold itself through this most intimate of personal relationships. The heroine of the novel, Lata is the youngest daughter of the Mehra family. She is under strict scrutiny of Rupa Mehra, her mother. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is a widow who lost her husband when her children were very young. But she derives her strength from this loss, and whenever there is a crucial decision due, she takes advantage of this position. To select a suitable boy for Lata, she has her own sense of judgement and tolerates no compromise in this respect. Lata is faced with three contenders. Of these three suitors the first is Kabir Durrani, and they fall in love at first sight, the second contender is the poet Amit Chatterji, who is the brother of Meenakshi and the third is the shoemaker Haresh Khanna. It is not enough to say that Lata is incapable of love; rather she is cool in both public and private life. She adopts a rational perspective of her suitor's virtues and weaknesses. In the letter to Kabir, she writes in a controlled rational tone: "I have got your note (...) I got your letter too when I was in Calcutta. It made me think over and remember everything. I am not annoyed with you in any way; please do not think so. But I feel that there is no purpose at all in our

writing or meeting. There would be a lot of pain and very little point.”

Seth comments on the status and conditions of women in the society when Maan is told by his Urdu teacher Abdur Rasheed, when he is on a visit to Debaria village in the heart of Purva Pradesh that “the Muslim women of the lower castes need to work in the fields, so they can’t maintain purdah. But we Shaikhs and Sayyeds try to. It is simply a matter of honour, of being the big people in the village.”

It was fashionable during those times to entertain courtesans in the mansions by those who loved to flaunt their wealth and tastes to the world and to say how rich they are. This is seen in the novel when Mahesh Kapoor who is the revenue minister in the Congress Government of Purva Pradesh hosts Saeeda Bai Firozabadi, the famed singer and courtesan in his house during Holi to entertain people. Whenever she sings, all the men praise her but because of her reputation she is hated by women who feel that she is enticing their husbands and sons: Upstairs on the balcony two of the {less modern} women looked down through the slits in a cane screen and discussed Saeeda Bai’s dress, ornament, face, manner, antecedents and voice. “Nice sari, but nothing special. She always wears Banarasi silk. Red tonight. Last year it was green. Stop and go. Look at that zari work in the sari. Very flashy, very flashy- but I suppose all that is necessary in her profession, poor thing. I wouldn’t say “poor thing”. Look at her jewels. The heavy gold necklace with the enamel work- It comes down a bit too low for my taste- well, anyway, they say it was given to her by the Sitagarh people! Oh. And many of those rings too, I should think. She’s quite a favourite of the Nawab of Sitagarh. They say he’s quite a lover of music. And of music-makers? Naturally. Now she’s greeting Maheshji and his son Maan. He looks very pleased with himself. Is that the Governor he’s—Yes, yes, all these Congress-wallahs are the same. They talk about simplicity and plain living, and then they invite this kind of person to the house to entertain their friends. Well, she’s not a dancer or anything like that. No, but you can’t deny what she is! But your husband has come as well. My husband!” The two ladies—one the wife of an ear, nose and throat specialist, one the wife of an important middleman in the shoe trade—looked at each other in exasperated resignation at the ways of men.

Though a courtesan is and should be talented in the arts of singing and dancing she is never given a place of honour in our society. Now brothels have taken the place of cultured houses and the courtesans are now treated as the objects of minting money in the present society. They are treated in a cruel manner. They are beaten and starved if they go against the wishes of the customer and brothel owners. Previously they were cultured and well-mannered as compared to the illiterate girls who have taken their places. Even if they are rescued, most of them return because of crunch in their finances. The need of the hour is to educate and give them suitable job so they do not have to come back in these hellish places.

The novel does not only deal with sexual passion, but with passion for religion, politics, domestic and public power and passion for careers. Seth has perhaps shaped A Suitable Boy with this manifesto against the passion of sexual love as well as politics and religion. Seth regards passion in religion as fanaticism, bigotry and murderous hatred of other religions. The stupidity and destructiveness of such zealotry are seen as the equivalent of the insane jealousy caused by passion in sexual love. Similarly on the religious scene, Seth shows his distaste for the fanatical ascetics and Swamiji’s at the Pul Mela festival; he emphasizes this distaste by viewing this scene through the eyes of the gentle religious seeker Dipankar Chatterji and showing Dipankar’s alienation when he realizes that the charade of saintliness masks vanity and power-seeking egoism. The horror of the mob, stampeding and crushing the elderly and the frail to death, and almost killing Bhaskar, the boy who is a mathematics genius, is a further reinforcement of Seth’s condemnation of passion in religion.

“Dipankar had been among the spectators on the other side of the main route. He watched with horror the carnage that was taking place less than fifty feet away but—with the nagas between him and the ramp—there was nothing he could do. It was a hellish scene, like humanity gone mad, each element indistinguishable from the other, all bent on a kind of collective suicide.”

Religion for some people is like a soothing medicine when they are sad but if religion gets entangled in superstition it becomes poison and brings death and sadness to all. It is seen that in religious fairs deaths occur due to the poisonous concoction of religion and superstition. These tragedies are invited due to lack of safety arrangements and bad crowd management. It is expected that people should use their minds when organising and attending such fairs.

Symbolically, Seth's condemnation of sectarian fanaticism is made clear, when the obnoxious Raja of Marh's attempt to raise the Shivalinga from the bottom of the Ganges and erect it, which will enrage devout Muslims, end in abject failure. The gigantic phallus-a symbol of both sexual and religious passions- rolls down the steps of the gate, crushes a priest and returns to the Ganges. The novel is set during the period after the partition of India which resulted in the emergence of Pakistan and India as two independent nations. More importantly, *A Suitable Boy* was published at the time of the Babri Masjid destruction in 1993. The writing is thus in a prophetic mode.

The partition of the country was accompanied by Hindu-Muslim riots, when the old and long cherished human values suffered and lost all relevance. In this loss, the commonly accepted concept of tolerance and faith were completely shattered. The human instinct was taken over by a new law of the jungle, where blood and death has no consideration. This setback to values was followed by the migration of the population from both sides. The migration was on an unprecedented scale and those who attempted to seek shelter were tortured and humiliated before and after crossing the borders. This was also a period where people developed a fear complex that continued in the hearts of all those who stayed or left, whether in majority or minority. This sense of insecurity is sustained and remains in the background throughout the novel.

"At the word Pakistan, Veena's mother-in-law, withered old Mrs. Tandon, flinched. Three years ago, her whole family had had to flee the blood and flames and unforgettable terror of Lahore. They had been wealthy 'propertied' people, but almost everything they had owned was lost, and they had been lucky to escape with their lives. Her son Kedarnath, Veena's husband, still had scars on his hands from an attack by rioters on his refugee convoy. Several of their friends had been butchered."

Communal riots happen every now and then in India whether in Muzaffarnagar or in Gujarat. People are prodded to hate and kill people of other religions. They are made to believe that their religion is in danger. In order that peace should be prevalent we should remain calm and not come under sway of selfish people whether Netas or ultra-orthodox people by listening to their fiery speeches full of venom. We should have love in our hearts and if we give love we receive love.

Thus, it is evident that *A Suitable Boy* is a novel of social milieu as it is showing a clear mirror to the society of post-independent India in various shades right from family values across the spectrum containing rituals of marriage, the position of the fairer sex in the society, the impact of the courtesans on the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony, breakdown of which caused communal disturbance which is detrimental to the development and the psyche of the society. Vikram Seth has gone a long way in successfully depicting the society which was still emerging from the shadows of slavery and partition.

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