



Social Realism in Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy'

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KEYWORDS :

Reminiscent of Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens and Dostoevsky, Vikram Seth creates a supremely imaginative web of characters and plots in his novel, 'A Suitable Boy' (1993) that are rooted in their political and social milieu. Considered to be one of the longest novels written in a single volume, in the English language, 'A Suitable Boy' (1993) covers one thousand four hundred and seventy four pages in paperback. Vikram Seth brought back the traditional art of storytelling, without the compulsions of brevity, with an unassuming simplicity.

'A Suitable Boy' was published at a time when another Indian writer, Salman Rushdie had already received much critical acclaim for 'Midnight's Children' (1980). Rushdie's novel also focusses on similar themes of partition and postcolonialism, but, unlike the social realism prevalent in Vikram Seth's novel, Rushdie uses magic realism, combining reality and fantasy. Seth depicts the socio-political situation of India of the early nineteen fifties, when the new born India was caught between its idealistic notion of trying to create an equal and just nation, yet still struggling with age old practices of untouchability, the caste system, Hindu Muslim intolerance and other prejudices.

Following the nineteenth century realist tradition of novel writing, Vikram Seth attempts to truthfully and accurately represent life, in all its manifestations. Like an adroit artist he convincingly describes the landscapes, the marketplaces, the narrow bylanes of the fictional town of Brahmpur with such minute details that one almost imagines being there. The places Misri Mandi, Nabiganji, The Barsaat Mahal, Prem Niwas and Baitar House acquire a life of their own. The author genuinely holds a mirror to society. The plot revolves around four families—the Mehras, the Chatterjis, the Kapoors and the Khans, three Hindu and one Muslim family. The sheer artistry with which Vikram Seth deftly delineates myriad characters — Maharajahs, zamindars, politicians, shoe manufacturers, cabaret dancers, poets, cricketers — is worthy of praise. The ravishing courtesan Saeeda Bai, the lecherous Raja of Marh, the feisty politician Begum Abida Khan, the hyper sensitive Mrs Rupa Mehra, are characters who will stay in our memory long after we turn the last pages. One is reminded of R K Narayan and his unforgettable characters who inhabited the fictional village of Malgudi.

According to the Dictionary of Literary Terms by Coles, "Realism in literature is a manner and method of depicting life, as it really is, untouched by idealism or romanticism." Realism in literature was a movement, which began in the eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth century and championed the cause of accurately depicting real life characters and situations. Writers like Balzac, Flaubert, George Eliot, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne and Jane Austen depicted it amply in their novels. On a closer look, the undercurrents of Social Realism become visible in the present study. Writers do not write in a vacuum. They reflect the lived reality in their works. Seth has dexterously woven social reality in his narrative — reality as it is, and not an idealized version. He paints the ills as well as the boons of the social life around.

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, Mrs Mehra's younger daughter, the search for whose suitor, the elusive 'suitable boy', forms the epicenter of the novel. Two other main families in the novel—the Chatterjis of Calcutta, whose daughter Meenakshi is married to Mrs

Rupa Mehra's eldest son Arun and the Khans, are also introduced in the first chapter. Through marriages and friendships, the four main families are connected. Maan, Mahesh Kapoor's younger son and Firoz, the youngest son of the Nawab Sahib of Baitar are childhood friends. So are Mahesh Kapoor's daughter and Zainab, Nawab Sahib's daughter. Seth not only tells a story, but also, at every conceivable opportunity, comments on the status and condition of the society. He gives us two extreme examples of muslim women, by telling us that Zainab "had disappeared into the world of purdah" (20) after her marriage, but the fiercely independent Begum Abida Khan "had refused to abide by the strictures of the zenana quarters and the constraints of a mansion, and was now living in a small house closer to the Legislative Assembly" (266). Maan is told by his Urdu teacher Abdur Rasheed, when he visits the latter's village in the heart of rural 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" (512).

Akin to a Jane Austen novel, 'A Suitable Boy' revolves around a mother's search for a suitable match for her daughter, hence the title. The very first statement of the novel, "You too will marry a boy I choose" (3), spoken by Mrs Rupa Mehra to her daughter Lata, sets the tone. Lata meets and falls in love with Kabir Durrani, a budding cricketer and a classmate. Since he is a Muslim, he is considered completely unsuitable in the eyes of Lata's mother, who hearing of her daughter's liaison, quickly whisks her off to Calcutta. Two other suitors Haresh and Amit complicate the plot. Through many twists and turns, Lata eventually chooses the ambitious, hardworking and successful Haresh. But the greatness of the novel is not limited to the theme of marriage and love.

Spanning cities, villages and kasbahs, Seth gives us a realistic portrayal of post-partition, post-independent India. The novel successfully charts the social, political and economic events that were progressively changing India in the dynamic Nehruvian era. Vikram Seth's realistic, orderly narrative recounts the major upheavals in the Indian sub continent such as the partition of India, the subsequent animosity between the Hindus and Muslims, the caste system, untouchability, abolition of the Zamindari system, the land reform act and its consequences.

Like the nineteenth century realist fiction writer, Balzac, Seth gives the reader the 'feel' of the event, almost as if he or she has 'entered' the scene in some way. This holds true for many incidents in the novel such as the riots in which Maan and Firoz are caught or the Ganga Dussehra episode where there is a stampede and thousands are killed. "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" (734).

Deftly blending history and fiction, Vikram Seth mentions real events like the partition and historical personas like Jawaharlal Nehru, even including excerpts from authentic letters written by Nehru, in the text. Using an omniscient third person narrator, Seth describes the post independence period of the early 1950's, which saw the rise of the Indian middle class. And though most of his characters are all from the upper middle class, he still includes many characters from all strata of

society and also manages to show us glimpses of the pathetic plight of the poor. In the Tanners colony that Kedarnath and Haresh visit, "A fearsome stench rose from the entire zone. Haresh felt sick; Kedarnath almost vomited with disgust. The sun shone harshly down, and the heat made the stench worse still" (201).

Vikram Seth highlights the pitiable condition of the poor landless farmer by including the fictional Zamindari Abolition Bill in his narrative. Seth takes the idea from the historical Land Reforms Act of the 1950's. 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 landholdings in the state" (18) and would distribute it among the poor, landless farmers. Even though his friend the Nawab of Baitar would stand to lose from this legislature.

Another important theme in the novel is religion. The novel is set in post partition India. In 1947, when India gained independence from the British, it also experienced the most bloody and violent riots between Hindus and Muslims. People on both sides of the borders had to leave their homes overnight, becoming refugees in the new land they had to make their home. The Nawab Sahib of Baitar, while speaking of his run down and neglected mansion Baitar House, inadvertently mentions the library and the books his brother took with him to Pakistan. "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" (21).

Seth realistically portrays the uneasiness that some Muslims and Hindus still felt for each other. After independence, India prided herself in being a secular state, honouring all religions and all types of people. Yet, it was also difficult for the millions who were displaced and had witnessed violence and brutality to forget and forgive. The wounds were still raw. "She had been willing to tolerate talking to the Nawab Sahib though he was a muslim, but when he mentioned comings and goings from Pakistan, it was too much for her imagination. She felt ill. The pleasant chatter of the garden in Brahmpur was amplified into the cries of the blood-mad mobs on the streets of Lahore, the lights into fire" (21).

Social realism as highlighted by the novelist can be analysed by the social issues portrayed in the novel. Like any true realist writer, Seth deeply probes the social evils and excesses prevalent in the society and shows universal human suffering. In spite of the euphoria attached to the newly acquired freedom, the ground reality had not changed much for the millions of poor. Poverty, Backwardness, lack of health care, lack of education still ailed Indian society. When Maan visits Rudhia district, he sees the abject poverty and the strict caste distinctions prevalent there. "Only two families had their own hand pump: Rasheed's and one other. The rest of the population—about four hundred families in all—obtained their water from one of three wells: the Muslim well, which stood in an open space near a neem tree, the caste Hindu well, which stood in an open space near a pipal tree, and the outcaste or untouchable well, which stood at the very edge of the village among a dense cluster of mud houses, not far from a tanning pit" (520). Kachheru belonged to one of the lowest castes in a village of Rudhia district, the chamars, "The old man and his wife lived by themselves in a single thatched room which they shared at night with their cow and a large number of insects" (524).

'A Suitable Boy' is a realistic narrative of India. The modern realistic novel presents all aspects of life, both the good and the ugly in a detached manner. The joys as well as the suffering of the human being is presented to the reader, as it is. The greatness of literature can be judged by its reflection of the society it speaks for. Though how genuine or accurate is this reflection cannot be stated but it cannot be denied that Seth shows signs of sensitivity with which he reflects the social issues entwined in the social fabric of Indian life.

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