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Dr. P Prayer Elmo Raj

Abstract

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* assumes nation as an encompassing conceptual assertion that moves beyond the spatial to inherently embrace the transition from the self to the locality to state and disembark the nation. What Vikram Seth envisions in his extensive narrative is an organic notion of India. Seth formulates an imaginary state in Purva Pradesh placed in North India and Brahmapur becomes the microcosm of India. Moreover, he brings in an assortment of cultures from North Indian cities like Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna and Ayodhya. Seth's specific creation of North Indian locality recollects the procedure in which nation-forming becomes part of the making of nationhood. Idealization of historical episodes, religions, and linguistic traditions are the basis to for an organic ideology of nationhood that mirrors the representativeness of a nation or national claim. Narratives in the novel mark the realities of India with secular intent. Set against one of key periods in Indian history, the novel reflects the various challenges and issues that the process of decolonization, nationhood and nationalism encountered. 1950s was crucial to the making of India as a nation and the configuration of the Indian identity. When the nationalist struggles saw their close, India as a nation-state began to establish itself in the making. Seth examines significant national issues with political coloring in the post independent era, the effects of the partition, the persistence of old traditions, the issue of land reform and the anticipated progress as a nation. *A Suitable Boy* as a postcolonial narrative swathes the socio-political issues that covers the post-colonial India. This paper is an

attempt to read a Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* as a (postcolonial) national narrative of the making of India as a nation and its varied ramifications at the socio-political realms.

Keywords: *Vikram Seth, postcolonial, nation, ideology*

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, despite being the story of a mother's aspiration to find a suitable husband for her daughter besets narratives of the making of a nation—the post-Independent India. Atkins states:

> The novel is not only a love story but also a depiction of India; however, it does not attempt…to represent the whole of that vast nation. It portrays only a specific slice of it, the middle and upper classes of North Indian society in the early 1950's (21).

The novel portrays varied dynamics of Indian society and the manner in which societies contribute to the makeup of Indian nation. The novel connotes on,

> The experiences and entanglements of four moderately rich Indian families connected through marriage or friendship, at a period of time when India was experiencing her post-Independence turbulences (Mohanty 163).

Characters from Hindu and Muslim families embody traditions and the emergent transitions that relates to cultural and individual liberty and the making of identity. Seth also portrays the horrendous living conditions of the slum dwellers of Brahmapur, those belonging to the lower castes and the vulnerability of the untouchables graphically. *A Suitable Boy* depicts an array of national issues in the form of narratives which has political inclinations--the psychosocial implications of the partition between India and Pakistan on the refugees, the condition of the lower, the Hindu-Muslim strife, and abolition of *zamindari* system, land reforms and the empowerment of the Muslim women. Neelam Srivastava views the novel as "majoritarian": first because it has a rationalist approach to the question of religion in the public sphere, secondly because its third-person omniscient narrator embodies the perspective of a tolerant Hindu subject, and thirdly, because the novel deals with India, how India's politics towards minorities, especially Muslims were played out after Partition" (48).

I

A Suitable Boy presents a cogent view of the post-independent India through realistic and symbolic narratives (of the making of a nation). 1950s is a key period in the coadunation and making of the modern India. Seth approaches post-independent India from a secular point of view with a strong influence of Nehruvian ideology. The many different themes and episodes present an all-inclusive idea of nation and nationhood with all its plurality, challenges and shortcomings. Seth skillfully presents the 'local' subject matters relating to religion, language, region and class in English. It becomes important for a novelist to reflect the culture that is key in the making of a society and consequence of "dominant ideological investment, powerfully coercive in shaping the subject; but since it is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, it can become a site of contestation and consequently of the re-inscription of subjectivities" (Rajan 10).

Vikram Seth offers a poignant insight into the social status of the untouchables during the early post-independent India when Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and Dr. Ambedkar, the first Law Minister, "the great, already almost mythical, leader of the untouchables" (Seth 1132) lead the defense against the oppressed. As they proceed to launch changes into the already existent laws, the traditional approach to the caste division comfortably remained untouched:

> In the villages, the untouchables were virtually helpless; almost none of them owned that eventual guarantor of dignity and status, land. Few worked it as tenants, and of those tenants fewer still would be able to make use of the paper guarantees of the forthcoming land reforms. In the cities too they were dregs of society. Even Gandhi, for all his reforming concern, for all his hatred of the concept that any human being was intrinsically so loathsome and polluting as to be untouchable, he believed that people should continue in their hereditarily ordained professions: a cobbler should remain a cobbler, a sweeper a sweeper (Seth 1131).

The characters of *A Suitable Boy* present a certain "double vision" (Bhabha 5) at the wake of the process of decolonization in India. Some of the characters, Rupa, Mahesh, Rasheed's father, though conventional, attempt to mimic the British. Rupa, a widow with four children, assumes freedom for herself to have things organized for the family. She says "I do know what is best. I am doing it all for you" (Seth 3). Lata imagines her mother's reaction of her falling in love with a Muslim boy: "she could see her mother's tears as she faced the horror of her beloved daughter being given over to the nameless 'them'" (Seth 168). Arun, Mehra's eldest son, is an example of a hybrid postcolonial product who visits London periodically and follows English customs and wants his brother Arun to alter his clothing in European style. He mimics the English and admires English style—an Anglicized Indian. Arun "had the irksome habit of throwing an improving book her way now and then, and Meenakshi felt his suggestions were more in the way of subtle commands" (Seth 64) which is a reflection of the colonizing attitude. Amit Chatterji, a native of Calcutta considers Bengali as a refined language than Hindi. Mehra favors that her granddaughter should address her as "Daadi" in Hindi and not "Grandma" in English. Justice Chatterji, who takes pride of being a Bengali as much as an Indian prefers Chandra Bose, a Bengali than Gandhi and considers English as a colonial language.

> The rustic Urdu spoken at Debaria is made to sound different from the courtly grace of Saeeda Bai's conversation, and Haresh Khanna's studied English is evidently worlds apart from the casual doggerel-spouting wit of the Chatterjee family in Calcutta. In an unobtrusive way Seth manages to capture the linguistic diversity of Indian life even though he is writing in English (Seth 184).

II

The land narrative in *A Suitable Boy* is set in the state of Purva Pradesh during the early 1950s. "For here it burned in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmapur, which was the capital of the state of Purava Pradesh, which lay in the center of the Gangetic Plains, which was itself the heartland of India" (Seth 16). The action is split between the village of Debaria and the city of Brahmapur. The city of Brahmapur portrays the culture of musicians and courtesans who were patronized by *zamindars* and whose life was intimidated by the *zamindari* Abolition Bill. In the city the legislation is constantly challenged at the courts but in the rural areas the system continues to exist. Seth presents a discussion on the land (property) of peasants and the impact of the closure of the *zamindari* system that was brought in by the Mughals as part of collecting land taxes from the peasants and maintained during the imperial period. However, the system was abolished after Indian independence and the lands were given back to the peasants. While the British view the abolition of the Zamindari system as a mark of 'real' freedom, the farmers in the independent India continue to suffer and this reflected in the increasing rate of farmer suicides. The issue with the *zamindari* system was mainly related to the land registration. As the land was owned by few landlords, the British reinforced this semi-feudal agrarian system by taking the side of the landlords. Taxes were collected from the people through the landlords who were endorsed by the British. Vikram Seth explains:

> The British had been happy to let the zamindars collect the revenue from land-rent (and were content in practice to allow them whatever they obtained in excess of the agreed British share), but for the administration of the state they had trusted no one but civil servants of their own race, selected in, partially trained in, and imported from England – or later on, brown equivalents so close in education and ethos as made no appreciable difference (Seth 305).

The novel illustrates the social implications of the *zamindari* system, the impact and the manner in which the agrarian structure took shape in the post-Independent India through Mahesh Kapoor who recommends the reform and the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, a *zamindar*. Mahesh Kapoor is presented as a foil to those who are tied to the position of the *zamindar*. Nawab's active presence in the historic discussion on the revolutionary Bill on the abolition of the *zamindari* system, though strongly contested by Begum Abida Khan, Nawab's sister-in-law is an example that "Not all of them tie their friendship to their land" (Seth 20). Begum Abida Khan, however, presents a defense pointing the social efficacy of *zamindari* system. She says: "In every field of life we have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, and the very culture of this place were established by us" (Seth 304). Seth presents his vehement opposition to the views of Begum Abida Khan through Nawab Sahib's reflective contemplation:

> For most of the landlords the primary question of management was not indeed how to increase their income but how to spend it… for the most part the princes and landlords had squandered their money on high living of one kind or another: on hunting or wine or women and opium. A couple of images flashed irresistibly and unwelcome across his mind. One ruler had such a passion for dogs that his entire life revolved around them: he dreamed, slept, woke, imagined, and fantasized about dogs; everything he could do was done to their greater glory. Another was an opium addict who was only content when a few women were thrown into his lap; even then, he was not always roused to action; sometimes he just snored on (Seth 305-6).

Barbara Pozzo views these oppositional views as "the confrontation between…two approaches and states of mind" (54). Moreover, Vikram Seth, through these conflicting views, attempts to bring out the struggle between the ancient and the modern/Old and New in the making of a nation. Through the words of the Prime Minister Vikram Seth presents his vision for an independent India: "India is an ancient land of great traditions, but the need of the hour is to wed these traditions to science…We must have science and more science, production and more production…We must make progress or else we will be left behind…" (Seth 354).

III

"Within its many pages of byzantine sub-plots, up to five at a time working together in a parallel display of Tolstoyan complexity, Seth presents a fairly equal number of Hindu and Muslim sympathetic characters, along with an equal number of authorial remonstrations for the fanatical excesses of both faiths (Almond 43). Seth presents religiously considerate and fanatic characters that reflect his lenience toward secularism and tolerance. Seth, despite presents an objective view of the community oriented Indian society, does not ignore the "tragic interweaving of religion and politics, the ancient rivalry between Hindu and Muslim, the underlying suspicion and resentment that can be blown into flame at any moment by unscrupulous office seekers or bigoted religious leaders" (quoted in Gupta 64). However, one might see in his portrayal of Muslims a delicate tragic thread inherently involved in the making of the characters and the incidents. Moreover, Seth's portrayal of Muslims, Almond suggests,

reflects a sense of inhumanity: "and inhumanity not to be understood as cruelty or monstrosity, but rather a simple indifference to the world of human beings, a carefully-kept distance from the society of Brahmapur" (44). Suicides, disillusionment, and madness are interwoven with an otherwise cheerful novel. The insanity in Kabir's mother blocks her to identify her own son. The Hindu and Muslim characters are often kept in contrast with each other. Almond observes that in Seth's presentation Muslims "are more serious, more melancholy, more self-disciplined, and with the kinds of goals and expectations which self-discipline connotes somehow more repressed, more unhappy, more replete with possibilities for the tragic" (Almond 46-7).

Seth uses Hindu and Muslim characters in pairs—Kabir and Haresh, Maan and Rasheed, Kapoor and the Nawab. Maan as a witty and carefree person is a foil to a very sensitive Rasheed. Maan's company always brings in cheer into the novel but Rasheed seems to counteract life. Maan's Muslim friend Firoz though depressed is made happy with the disappointments of Maan. Lata's choice of Haresh instead of Kabir presents a case of how characters are portrayed—Kabir, who comes from a family which has a history of madness, is a pretense, introvert and self-agonizing being but Haresh is a "generous, robust, optimistic…responsible" (Seth 1291), composed and gentle personality. Characters like Rasheed, Durrani and the Nawab are depictions of 'remote' human beings detached from the social. Durrani's total apathy to fellow beings and lack of social skills are evident when he says "What did young people have to do with anything? He wondered. (Or people for that matter.)" (Seth 213). Mahesh, however, is presented as a person who is politically active and part of dynamic family life. "Melancholy and Islam seem somehow interconnected throughout Seth's otherwise lively and life-affirming narrative" (Almond 47). Rasheed is presented as a complicated being, self-reflective and coming from a difficult family background but meets a sad end suggestive of the susceptibility to suicide and disorientation. Seth presents Rasheed's psychic as an outcome of Islamic worldview:

> Look all around you'', he said. ''Or look at history. It's always been the same. The old men cling to their power and their beliefs, which admit all their worst vices but exclude the least fault and strangle the smallest innovation of the young. Then, thank God, they die, and can do no more harm. But by then we, the young, are old, and strive to do what little mischief they left undone (Seth 651).

IV

Banyan tree is a frequent symbol of the emerging post-independent India. It is a quintessence of organic (notion of India/n) unity where things are interconnected and proceeds with deep affinity. In his presentation of the communal riot in Brahmapur, Seth explains how the Muslim mob wanders around the streets looking for Hindus and also three Muslim drummers who fall as victims to this riot and "lay murdered by the wall of the temple, their drums smashed in, their heads half hacked off, their bodies doused in kerosene and set alight - all, doubtless, to the greater glory of God" (Seth 1058). However, in his portrayal of the friendship between Maan and Firoz, Seth raises above religious fanaticism. Maan protects Firoz's life when a Hindu mob was eager to quench their fanatical thirst with Muslim blood.

Seth also uses Banyan tree to explain the structure of the novel. When Lata asks Amit about his first novel, he responds saying that he is feeling it like banyan tree: "'What I mean is,' continued Amit, 'it sprouts, and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks'" (Seth 483). Though Seth starts off with Lata's mother announcing that she will have to "marry a boy I choose" (Seth 3), there are equally important other episodes that supports the journey of the novel like the trunks supporting the

banyan tree. The idea of tolerance is explained through the image of Banyan tree. Vikram Seth elaborates:

> A banyan tree has lots of roots, you can't even tell sometimes what the original trunk is, how do you say 'the trunk is rooted here, or is it rooted there, or is it un-rooted?' People think if you can understand more than one kind of culture you must necessarily be some kind of rootless cosmopolitan. I don't think so at all. I think that is true of Spain, to give you an example, some people are rooted in more than one culture — certainly that is true of Granada. And the same applies for people in India: Hindu culture, Muslim culture..." (Quoted in Sanchez 51).

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