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**A SUITABLE BOY : SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL
PERSPECTIVE**



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ABSTRACT

A Suitable Boy is a novel by Vikram Seth, published in 1993, the English language book is one of the longest novels published in a single volume. A Suitable Boy is set in a newly post-independence, post-partition India. The Suitable Boy is the central theme of the novel by that name. The idea comes from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls with several points that comprise the ideal match. First, the boy must be of the same religion as the girl. This becomes the main hindrance between Lata, a Hindu, and Kabir, a Muslim. The only way they could have married was to elope and marry without their parents permission. Another consideration is the caste or social standing of the boy and his family.

The theme of The Suitable Boy also brings up the conflict between an arranged marriage and a marriage escaped on romantic love. Lata raises the question at the wedding of her sister to Pran Kapoor and concludes that it is good for Savita but possibly not good for her. Mrs. Rupa takes the matter seriously and solicits help from relatives and close friends to keep an eye out for The Suitable Boy for Lata. To keep peace, Lata appears to go along with whatever her mother is doing, but she secretly questions whether she will follow her heart and marry Kabir with or without her mother's blessing. Interestingly, Lata eventually selects Haresh Khanna to be her husband, even though she does not love him. She comes to her conclusion, to the horror of her friend Malati, by recognizing religion would eventually create serious problems for her and Kabir and by the feeling that the love of literature would not be enough to sustain a marriage between her and Amit. Lata's reasoning includes the ideas that, eventually she will come to love Haresh, he

will be able to support her comfortably, and she will enjoy stability in her married life. In antithesis to The Suitable Boy theme is Malati, Lata's friend, who is a free spirit and given to have relationships with whatever boy turns her fancy. In that regard, the theme of The Suitable Boy stands as a hallmark of traditional Indian customs and culture.

The novel follows the story of four families over a period of 18 months, and centres on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange the marriage of her younger daughter, Lata, to a "suitable boy". Lata is a 19-year-old university student who refuses to be influenced by her domineering mother or opinionated brother, Arun. Her story revolves around the choice she is forced to make between her suitors Kabir, Haresh, and Amit. The novel alternately offers satirical and earnest examinations of national political issues in the period leading up to the first post-Independence national election of 1952 including Hindu-Muslim strife, the status of lower caste peoples such as the jatav, land reforms and the eclipse of the feudal princes and landlords, academic affairs, abolition of the Zamindari system, family relations and a range of further issues of importance to the characters.

KEY WORDS

Intolerance, partition, intrigues, land reforms, abolition

RESEARCH PAPER

Vikram Seth's novel, *A Suitable Boy* has some themes such as, Religious Intolerance, Love and Marriage. *A Suitable Boy* is the story of four families in India in the early 1950s after British occupation has ended and the India/Pakistan partition has taken place. The novel insists to recognize a positive point under the Indian culture of racial castes and arranged marriages. A great agreement of attempt is put into vision on the part of a family to discover a suitable boy for their unmarried daughters. Vikram Seth creates a supremely imaginative web of characters and plots in his novel, '*A Suitable Boy*' (1993) rooted in their political and social milieu. Seth depicts the socio-political situation of India of the early nineteen fifty's, 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. He convincingly describes the landscapes, the marketplaces, the narrow by lanes of the fictional town of

Brahmpur with such minute details that one almost imagines being there. 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. 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. On a closer look, the undercurrents of Social Realism become visible in the present study. 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 Sahibs 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" after her marriage, but the fiercely independent Begum Abida Khan "had refused to abide by the structures of the zenana quarters and the constraints of a mansion, and was now living in a small house closer to the Legislative Assembly". 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. It is simply a matter of honour, of being the big people in the village”.

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 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. “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. Vikram Seth highlights the pitiable condition of the poor landless farmer by including the fictional Zamindari Abolition Bill in his narrative. 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. 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. 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, honoring 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. 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 attached 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.

Vikram Seth sets up the major conflicts in the novel. The cultural tradition of making arranged marriages for Indian children of the higher castes, he manages to insert the sense of disenfranchisement between Hindu and Muslim in reference to political intrigues at the time. These political involvements are kept from being dry historical facts by the active involvement of the various members of the four families in the novel. Lata and her best friend, Malati, serve as foils for discussion of the social situations in the novel. Its depiction is broadly speaking, comic and tone varies but is most often light, and the plot finishes with a wedding, which is traditionally a happy ending. The idea comes from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls with several points that comprise the ideal match. First, the boy must be of the same religion as the girl. This becomes the main hindrance between Lata, a Hindu, and Kabir, a Muslim. The only way they could have married was to elope and marry without their parents permission. Another consideration is the caste or social standing of the boy and his family.

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Kabir and by the feeling that the love of literature would not be enough to sustain a marriage between her and Amit. Lata's reasoning includes the ideas that, eventually she will come to love Haresh, he will be able to support her comfortably, and she will enjoy stability in her married life. In antithesis to The Suitable Boy theme is Malati, Lata's friend, who is a free spirit and given to have relationships with whatever boy turns her fancy. In that regard, the theme of The Suitable Boy stands as a hallmark of traditional Indian customs and culture.

The theme of Religious Intolerance runs heavily throughout the novel. Religious difference prevents Lata and Kabir from fulfilling their hearts desires for each other. The Raja of Marh becomes the arch symbol of religious militancy with his erecting the Temple of Shiva next to a mosque. The phallic symbol of Shiva he intends to use as the pride and joy of the temple is an act of spite designed to insult Muslims. On both sides, riots and attacks occur in the name of religion. Saeeda Bai, the courtesan, is disdained by the Hindu society more for her religion as a Muslim than for her lifestyle. When the holy days of both religions happen to agree, even death results when neither side is willing to give way to the other. The Religious intolerance theme occurs when Maan travels to visit the family of Rasheed. He is only begrudgingly accepted by most of Rasheed's family after he demonstrates not so much his tolerance of their customs as his indifference to religion in general. That conclusion, runs thin after Maan is accused of attempted murder of the young Muslim man, Firoz Khan. The relation between Muslims and Hindus as the Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai Firozabadi entertains at a party on the event of Holi, a Hindu festival. The festival which features throwing of bright colored pigments on people is thoroughly enjoyed by the younger Hindus but often shocking to the older generation who happen to get dry with color. There is a great deal of an Indian alcoholic drink passed around during Holi, and Maan Kapoor has a decided taste for the drink. Lata and Kabir had been to India's most romantic spot, the Barsaat Mahal, and now Maan goes there where he finds Firoz who fills him in on the latest conversation about him and Saeeda Bai. The Raja of Marh, visiting Saeeda Bai, rips a page out of a book of Urdu poems given to the courtesan by Maan. The Raja of Marh is firm to raise a Temple to Shiva just west of the Alamgiri Mosque, which is bad enough in so far as the Imam is concerned but to make matters worse, the future Temple will have as it focus the recently found Phallus of Shiva which will be placed directly between the mosque and Mecca. L. N. Agarwal, the Home Minister, becomes the attack point in the governmental inquiry over the police handling of the riot. Begum Abida Khan, a female Muslim MP, attacks Agarwal in Parliament.

The main political conflict in the story is the Bihar Zamindari Act which is popular with the lot who may gain land but unpopular with the zamindaris who stand to lose important holdings. In the course of the conflict between Begum Abida Khan and L. N. Agarwal, the house of Begum's family is almost lost. The self-conscious situation continues into the entrance hall where Lata faces the old question from her grandfather as to why she is not married. Back at school, Lata suffers a complete block as she stares at the questions on her English exam. Outside the exam, Lata meets up with Kabir again by accident. Lata goes to her friend Malati where they discuss Lata's interest in the boy from the bookstore. Two days later, Lata and Malati run into the handsome boy again at a music recital. Malati recognizes that Lata is falling in love with Kabir. She begins by meeting him at a poetry club gathering which soon graduates into walks and eventually a river boat trip to Barsaat Mahal. The two young people fall in love in spite of Lata's discovery that he is Muslim. She confides in her sister, Savita, who advises that she not tell their mother talk however, travels fast and Mrs. Rupa Mehra soon learns of the situation which she

fears will forever spoil any chances of marrying Lata off to a suitable boy. Mrs. Rupa carts Lata off quickly to Calcutta. Kabir has learned of Lata's whereabouts and sends her a letter which she does not open for fear that her mother will come in any minute. Lata finally gets enough solitude to read Kabir's letter which reawakens the confusion and suffering in her. The outing with Amit produces a level of emotional attachment in Lata who enjoys his knowledge of poetry. The subject of sexual prejudice comes up when Lata finds a newspaper article about how employment in the Foreign Service can employ only those women without encumbrances. Lata finally makes up her mind to answer Kabir's letter, expressing her feelings for him. Haresh is looking for a new job. He meets Mrs. Rupa who believes she has never seen him anywhere before, although Haresh is convinced he has seen her. Mrs. Rupa believes Haresh might be a suitable boy and sends for Lata, but Haresh has gone to Kanpur. Lata is angry that she had been brought from Calcutta on false pretenses. Kalpana writes to Haresh promoting a match between him and Lata. Haresh's life is one of effort and hard work, a fact of which Mrs. Rupa approves. Lata likes Haresh, but the thought of marrying him is unreasonable to her. Lata compares Kabir, Amit, and Haresh, and Haresh comes in a distant third. Haresh turns out to be an excellent host and takes great care of Mrs. Rupa and Lata. The interesting twist of connecting Haresh, Kabir, and Amit offers the reader an opportunity to consider the various merits of each of these characters. The man Lata finally chooses comes as rather of a surprise twist. Kabir does not attend the wedding, and Malati maintains her opinion that Lata has made a big mistake. Clearly Lata likes but does not yet love Haresh. There is a certain poignancy to her throwing food to the monkeys as the train pulls out, taking her to her new married life. The novel continues throughout the novel centering mostly on the "suitable boy" theme played out in sub-plots involving Maan Kapoor and Saeeda Bai, Ishaq and Tasneem, and most especially Lata and Kabir and suitable boys to whom she is introduced in Calcutta. In the end, Lata resolves to give up Kabir and marry a suitable boy she likes but does not love. Aside from Lata's heartbreaking decision not to marry Kabir, there is little real ugliness in the novel outside of inter- and intra-family intrigues which Seth somehow manages to make interesting reading.

A Suitable Boy is saturated with the ideology of the family and this connects perfectly with its realistic and conservative portrait aesthetically. 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. 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. It documents topography, social customs, political happenings, local habits of life and festivals as well as

rituals. 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. 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. 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. The author genuinely holds a mirror to society. 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." 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. 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. 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. 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. Symbolically, Seth's condemnation of sectarian fanaticism is made clear, when the obnoxious Raja of Marh's attempt to raise the Shiva linga 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.

Being born in India and studied abroad he had acquainted himself not only with Indian culture and tradition but Western culture also. In Indian culture he has made the readers familiar with the culture of the Hindu and the Muslim religions and in Western he has described about the American and European cultures, traditions, their way of living, and their mentality. Seth's

literature is multi-dimensional, multi-layered and it does not focus on single event or character but there are many stories within the main plot and a host of characters with distinct qualities providing distinct messages. He has pin-pointed all the issues of the country or community he has depicted in his novels and made the readers to visualize it with the eyes of their mind without leaving their place. His works leave a lasting imprint on reader's mind. He has ability to write on any subject and issue about Hindu marriage system in northern India but aspects of marriage in Muslim community also find place in *A Suitable Boy*. It is not easy to have insight and understanding of distinct traditions and rites of different nations and Seth could make himself master of these rites and traditions because of his longing for travelling and his stay in different countries. He has visited different countries and accustomed himself with distinct cultures and traditions. Describing about these different countries, Seth has enabled himself to compare and contrast the marriage rites of these countries. In Indian marriage system, a bride is clad in red not in white like a western bride.

Seth has tried to erect a true picture of India in her fifties by touching all the possible aspects. He has described religion in politics and politics in religion. As for his socio-cultural insight, Seth has made us to look deeply into the lives of poor country people, untouchables, women — Hindu and Muslim, their critical situation in their inlaws where their freedom is curtailed, and even prostitutes — without any identity and proper place in the society. Vikram Seth has described about a society where most of the women are “completely neglected and accepted only as a provider of sexual pleasure to man and as a producer of his off spring” (Majumdar, 2004, 7). The pathetic condition of the scheduled caste also find place in the novel where Kachheru, a very old, bonded labourer works earnestly on Rashid's father's land throughout his life but Rasheed's father takes pride in exploiting the helpless tenant and wants to keep him subservient to him. Indian women are presented as living “like clock-work, performing her duties at home without a question or doubt of any sort” (Narayan: 1977, 108).

Through Saeeda Bai, Seth not only refers to the deep love of Maan for the courtesan but also to the continuance of “the tradition that encourages such evils to plague especially the princes, rajas in Indian provinces thereby defaming family's name and reputation” (Sinha: 2007, 65). Even the helplessness and discomfiture of Saeeda Bai, who silently bears the brunt of Nawab Sahib's lust in drunken position and becomes unwedded mother of Tasneem, is depicted explicitly. Vikram Seth's versatility is seen in his depiction of the procedure of child birth and the unbearable birth-pain. There is a description of Savita's breaking of water-bag, coming of contractions, nurse's advice to hold on the railing and to push and her lips' falling apart in agony of unbearable pain. As the baby's head comes out, Savita feels “a tearing sensation below, then a sudden warm gush. Then more stretching and such pain that she thought she would pass out” (Seth: 1993, 872).

Vikram Seth has presented northern India as a whole before the readers to know it, to appreciate it, particularly its moral values, ages-old culture, traditions and to learn and adopt it in their lives. Seth has also described about Indians' faiths, beliefs, superstitions, and women's regard for their husbands — their life-long owners. He has presented north India with the descriptions of the life of doctors, professors, ministers, house-wives, prostitutes, shoemakers, scheduled castes, businessmen, lawyers, tenants, landlords, poets, saints, and university scholars and painted every aspect of their lives explicitly on a vast canvas. The life in boarding school and

bullying of the younger ones by their seniors; conflicts, competition and struggle in university professors for higher post; politics in ministers and personal hatred and jealousy is also pointed out here. People's faith in religion is described through the references of Pul Mela, descriptions of saints, Nagas, Sanki Baba, adherence to rituals and a simple faith in the superior wisdom of a Guru, Dipankar's wandering in search of knowledge, descriptions of Ram Lila, Bhart Milap, Karva Chouth, shraddhs, funeral ceremony, as well as Muslim festivals like — Muharram, Bakari-Id and process of their celebrations. Through the character of Dipankar Seth has criticised the irrationality of the educated man who runs behind the superstitious people striving to seek knowledge or blessings from the sadhus or Babas. Seth's message is that going on a pilgrimage, having a dip in Ganges to purify their sins, or relying on Baba's assurance only explains people's need and desire, but not faith in God. Seth has depicted the mentality of Indian people about romance, love and marriage thoroughly. In India, romance, love, passion, and love-marriages are discarded totally and more preference is given to arranged marriages. It has been proved through the marriage of Arun and Meenakshi that love-marriage, based on passion ends in failure as they are not satisfied with each other, do not share their feelings and ideas, and there is no mutual understanding, trust or faith between them which is the basis of successful marriage. On the other hand, the other couples enjoy the bliss of married life and there is a hope of Lata and Haresh's marriage being successful, as their marriage is based on the strong foundation of trust, mutual-understanding, and regard. By Lata's sane decision about marriage with Haresh, Seth has propound his theory about victory of certain virtues over passion. Thus Seth has explored many aspects of Indian life: "arranged marriage, independence, love, family, prostitution, politics, poverty, culture, and individualism—all under the grab of a gently-paced tale of social manners" (Gupta: 2005, 62). In *An Equal Music* Seth has created a living, breathing world that enchants and grips the readers and as a love-epic of Michael and Julia, it depicts the concepts of romance, love, and marriage thoroughly. Seth has presented them as music students, lost deep in love but fall apart before their love could bear any fruit. They meet again after ten years' parting and they establish physical relationship despite of Julia's being married to James. So, Seth has made her to recognise the value of marriage and to return back to her loving, caring, helpful, and understanding husband renouncing her passionate love for Michael who later goes to call girls to have solace. Seth has made the two lovers realise that they cannot resume their earlier intimacy because of the existing facts of life.

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