

INTRODUCTION

The present dissertation seeks to provide a comprehensive critical statement on A Suitable Boy of Vikram Seth (b. 1952). A major novelist, a poet, Seth began his writing career in the 1980s and he still writes. After the brilliant collection of poems, All You Who Sleep Tonight (1990) and a collection of stories Beastly Tales (1992), Seth has produced his Magnum Opus, his latest novel, A Suitable Boy, a 1349 – page tome, which has earned him a staggering Rs. 2.6 crore in advance, something unprecedented in the world of Indian publication. Vikram Seth was in Calcutta on 4 and 5 March to launch his new book. During that session Ashoke Sen interviewed Seth whom Sen asked the following question about the narrative technique:

AS: could you tell me about your narrative technique? Do you take the role of an omniscient observer while telling the story?

The answer to this question given by Seth inspired this dissertation.

VS: There are two aspects of omniscience: the tone of omniscience, i.e., the permission the writer gives himself or herself to any thoughts of the character, he or she may be interested in. Secondly, when you determine what the characters will do. As far as the first is concerned, I am sometimes omniscient, sometimes semi-omniscient, sometimes ignorant.

I allow myself whatever works. I allow myself a flexibility or degree of knowledge. But I have a very ad-hoc attitude towards literature – if it works, it works. If it convincing, it is convincing, otherwise it is a failure. So I am not particularly concerned whether Henry Jamesian – like I have to decide if I can see the world through these characters, or whether Tolstoy – like I am omniscient. I do not care. The other question is whether I am omniscient in the determination of my characters. That I am certainly not. In fact many of the characters which I thought would be minor characters, became very important in the scheme of the novel. So it was not that I with some kind of super vision was able to see till the end of their lives. Sometimes I could, sometimes I could not.

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The present dissertation is an attempt to provide a detailed analysis and evaluation of A suitable boy with reference to its thematic patterns and narrative techniques.

Chapter I provides a brief survey of Indian English Fiction. The main ground covered in this section is the important male as well as female fiction writers from 1864 to the present period. This survey is based mainly on M. K.

Naik's book A History of Indian English Literature and Iyengar's Indian Writing in English. However, the recent development in writing in Indian English Fiction has been gathered from very many sources like Indian English Fiction 1980-90: An Assessment by Bharucha and Sarang and The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s by Viney Kirpal and Fiction of the Nineties by Dass and Dhawan and many journals and newspapers. The survey is updated including Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997).

Vikram Seth, chronologically speaking, appears in the history of the fiction writers of the 80s. However, A Suitable Boy (1993) and his author works needed a separate treatment outside the normal brief survey. Therefore, Chapter II is devoted to place Vikram Seth into the tradition of fiction writers of Indian English. This part of the dissertation is meant for a brief biographical account of Seth and discussion regarding his other works. This chapter also provides a review of the criticism of Seth and A Suitable Boy with the view to look into the opinions of the critics and to decide about assessing the novel for the thematic patterns and the narrative technique.

Chapter III undertakes to discuss the criteria for the critical analysis and to provide a detailed textual analysis of A Suitable Boy dealing with the socio-political experience presented in it. This chapter also seeks to provide the theoretical statement on the scope of the thematic and narrative technique with the aspects of the novel: plot, character, dialogue, setting and the point of view.

Seth uses his acute sense of the Indian social class and caste and religious structures and shows how its emotional fabric is torn apart by the collective

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trauma of Indian independence and the aftermath of the struggle for political power.

Chapter IV sums up the entire argument of the thesis by accentuating its findings.

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