

## CHAPTER II

### Vikram Seth: The Novelist And His A Suitable Boy

After taking a brief look at the major fiction writers in Indian English Literature an attempt has been made to account for the important contribution to fiction by Vikram Seth. As per the information available in Who's Who (1995-96) and other journalistic material the following note on Seth is presented.

Vikram Seth was born in 1952 in Calcutta, India. It is remarkable that along with his literary career he has had brilliant academic career. He educated at Doone School in India. At the age of seventeen he left India. Afterwards he sought admission at Tonbridge School in United Kingdom. He acquired a B.A. Degree from Corpus Christi College, Oxford and M.A. degree in Economics from Stanford University. He spent twelve years or so in the States interrupted by two years in China in the early eighties. Therefore he speaks and writes Chinese. He acquired a diploma degree in Chinese from Nanjing University, China (1980 – 82 ). Afterwards Seth lived in California for ten years. He has grown and experienced different cultural bases, India, England, China, and America. But he has always thought of India as his home as it is India where he spent more than half of his life with his parents Premnath and Leila Seth.

Philip Larkin is Seth's most favourite poet. His favourite novelists are Jane Austen and George Eliot. He has affinity with these two great writers, so he is compared with them. But in case of such comparison, Seth himself says to Ashoke Sen in his interview that

There are two kinds of problems in such comparisons. The first is, it would be absurd for me to say if there is any real comparison with regard to quality. But perhaps, people are looking at the style, the kind of concerns that are at the centre. The answer is 'yes' and 'no'. May be more of Jane Austen in its comedy of manners elements, but more of George Eliot in its approach to the society around it. I can only say that I admire these writers, but I admire lots of other writers, including the great Chinese and Russian novelists.<sup>1</sup>

Seth gave inspiration to Pico Iyer, Ajay Sehgal, Sisir Kurup. He inspired Pico Iyer's romantic, part fictional, part autobiographical The Lady and The Monk and Ajay Sehgal's wickedly comical satire on Hollywood in the Pool. Indeed, Seth's experiment with verse was as responsible in inspiring Sisir Kurup to become a playwright as it prompted Ajay Sehgal to write for the screen. Seth's brilliant ballad to the city San Francisco set the model for Indian's writing on settings other than India.

It will not be an exaggeration to call Vikram Seth a literary phenomenon when one looks at his track record. At the age of 41 he is the proud author of six books of poems :

Mappings (poems), 1980,

The Humble Administrator's Garden (poems), 1985,

The Golden Gate (Novel in verse), 1986,

All You Who Sleep Tonight (poems) 1990,

Beastly Tales from Here and There (Tales), 1992,

Three Chinese Poets (Translations), 1992.

Plus he wrote a travelogue and the novel:

From Heaven's Lake (Travelogue), 1983, and

A Suitable Boy (Novel), 1993.

At the outset of his career, Seth wrote a collection of poems Mappings (1980).

This book was published by the Writers' Workshop in 1981. The poems in this book have written in Seth's twenties, when he was a student in England and later, California. More immediate if less polished than his later work, these poems enchant and impress with their classical learning, wit, perceptiveness and lyricism.

Before coming to Delhi in summer of 1981, Seth has travelled through many of the areas described by three greatest literary figures of China; Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu (poets) as well as through Sinkiang and Tibet. During this journey, he wrote about his various experiences. He also took lots of photographs. With the inspiration of his father and mother, he wrote a very attractive description of this journey and afterwards it was published in 1983 under the name of From Heaven's Lake. Seth came to public notice with the publication of this travelogue describing a hitch-hike across much of China into Tibet. It is an account of what Seth saw, thought and felt as he travelled through China as a student. It is not intended as a summary of the political or economic situation of that country, although he did occasionally digress into such ruminations in the course of writing this book. He described the situation in China in 1982 in the following words :

No miracle will ever clean  
 The memory, bestial and obscene,  
 Of these who, having fouled their trust,  
 Grew warped with dread and powerlust –  
 And ordered fire on the squire,  
 On unarmed people everywhere,  
 Brave people seeking to be free  
 Of rottenness, of tyranny.<sup>2</sup>

It is, inevitably, a very human document. It won the appreciation of readers across the globe. It also introduces the reader to the traveller no less than to the travel. Seth, in the words of Gopal Gandhi, 'is not only an obvious talent for shifting the worth-seeing from the not-so-worth-seeing, but an equally strong sense of the 'done' and the 'not done'.<sup>3</sup> From Heaven's Lake won the Thomas Cook Prize (1983) for travel books. While admiring the content of this book the Financial Express reviewer says : " the book has a charming timelessness, not simply due to the people in its pages, but because it always rings true."<sup>4</sup>

A volume of autobiographical poetry appeared in 1985 under the title The Humble Administrator's Garden. While commenting on the poems in this book Donald Davie writes:

- Vikram Seth's poems are above all well-mannered and graceful. Yet they should have an impact far beyond much noisier pieces: for when did we last see a volume in which the poet's eye is on what is objectively before him, rather than on the intricacies of his own sensibility? Seth knows (not as a tourist, but from the inside) four cultures: his native India; England; California; communist China. Here he inspects them all respectfully and eagerly, and without partisanship or facile ironies balances each of them against the others.<sup>5</sup>

When Seth was working on his economic dissertation, one day, by taking a break from his studies, he wandered into a bookstall at Stanford University. He was feeling quite exhausted, so he thought he would take something different and moved towards the poetry section with the idea of picking up something just to refresh himself. And he began reading the translation of Eugene Onegin by Charles Johnston. He had never read Alexander Pushkin before, but he found this translation so wonderful that he just found himself entirely inspired. His dissertation went out of the window and he began writing a novel set in California, based in the same way on the idea of a novel, though in verse. This novel was published under the name of The Golden Gate in 1986.

The Golden Gate has been something of a literary sensation. It is classical in the true, orthodox sense of the term. It has the identical stanza with the rhyme scheme that Pushkin had invented. It adheres to techniques of proved efficacy: rhyme, metre. While telling about the greatness of this verse novel Ashoke Sen says: “ It elicited enthusiastic response from either side of the Atlantic, with a special commendation from D.J. Enright, who hailed the work as a technical triumph, unparalleled in English.”<sup>6</sup>

Curiously enough, The Golden Gate begins in terms of a fresh use of the conventional form of the sonnet, although it is the loneliness of the human condition – man’s extreme isolation from the rest of his kind – that serves to be the distinguishing mark of the consciousness for the unheroic hero of this novel in verse. Use of the conventional form of the sonnet in a slight variation of its a rhyming pattern abab ccdd eff egg contributes to heighten the theme of existential anguish, which seems to set self-conscious protagonist apart in a gratuitous attempt to come to terms with impulses actuating his consciousness. For it is this drama of the self-conscious suffering human psyche in terms of an individual such as Jhon that Seth takes upon himself to enact in his narrative in verse. Seth’s use of verse as the staple means of expression in The Golden Gate could appear as a tour de force, but it appears to be the out come of a deep choice. He goes on to use it to communicate wider areas of experience in it. It is recognized as something of a triumph of craftsmanship.

Seth’s latest collection of poetry: All You Who Sleep Tonight published in 1990, is a collection of miscellaneous poems out of different contexts and phases in

his life. Some of these poems, it appears, were either written prior to the publication of The Golden Gate or they have their origin in the contexts of experience that also led to the latter. In this collection of poems, since The Golden Gate, the best selling novel in verse, Seth's marvellous facility with language is once again displayed to full effect. But, beyond this, he demonstrates a new range, perhaps best exemplified in the second section 'In Other Voices', where he relives the experience of others - a Nazi concentration camp commandant, the poet Ghalib, a doctor in Hiroshima on the day the atom bomb fell. The poems in the other four sections reflect, for the most part, our own times and are rewarding for the manner in which life is faithfully and often poignantly restored in poetic shape. All You Who Sleep Tonight is another major triumph from one of the world's most important poets. The reviewer of The Hindustan Times says, 'Seth's poems touch the heart- and here in lies their appeal.'<sup>7</sup>

In Beastly Tales from Here and There (1992) Seth evinces his superb art in creating a verse form in fables. The tells, in this book, are not merely rhymed doggerels. If Seth went to fabular stuff from different traditions to fashion these tales, his kinship to La Fontaine in using varied rather than free or regular verse in fashioning these tales bears witness to unusual resourcefulness in turning these fables to art constructs as well.

Ravi Shankar illustrates, "From the impish to the brilliantly comic, Vikram Seth's animal fables in verse can (like Diwali Sweets) be enjoyed by young and old alike. Familiar characters in a new and magical form, such as the greedy crocodile who was outwitted by the monkey or the steady tortoise who out-ran the hare, here take their place beside a newly minted gallery of characters and creatures who are

quirkily, comical and always fun.”<sup>8</sup> Of the ten tales told here, two come from India, two from china, two from Greece, two from the Ukraine, and two, as the author puts it, “came directly to me from the Land of Gup.”<sup>9</sup> while talking about the quality of poems in this book, the reviewer of The Sunday Observer says: ‘ Every tale in Vikram Seth’s book is a pleasure to read. It proves that the beastly tale is alive and well and has found a new teller.’<sup>10</sup> This is a book that displays the astonishing versatility of the poet. That is why, Ravi Shankar points out, “ The flair and delight of Beastly Tales from Here and There is proof that Vikram Seth can try on the most unusual clothes without in the least losing his unique poetic identity.”<sup>11</sup>

Seth’s another book Three Chinese Poets (1992) is a translation. the three Chinese poets translated here are among the greatest literary figures of China. Wang Wei with his quiet, even quietistic, love of nature and Buddhist philosophy; Li Bai, the Taoist spirit, with his wild, flamboyant paens to wine and the moon; and Du Fu, with his Confucian sense of sympathy with the suffering of others in a time of civil war and collapse: responding differently to their common times, they crystallize the immense variety of China and the Chinese poetic tradition.

The world into which these three almost exactly contemporary poets were born can be sensed in many specific aspects of their poetry; for example, their stance with respect to the court and affairs of state and the value they placed on friendship in a world of slow transport and great distances, where parting from a friend held the real possibility of never seeing him again. Many of the poems of these three poets are in identical forms. The centre of gravity of their work, the characteristic emphasis of their most characteristic poems, is distinct and individual.



Recently Seth wrote a novel A Suitable Boy (1993). This is his second novel and the first one in prose. He has stunned the literary world with this first and longish novel. He has got worldwide reputation, because of this novel, perhaps, than any other Indian writer. Because of the popularity of this book L.K. Sharma calls Vikram Seth as ‘the latest literary lion.’<sup>12</sup> A Suitable Boy is a large work of fiction and is like a long stretched canvas where multiple colours are painted in a sequence of moving scenes of Indian life. This is an attempt as a ‘character-led story’ and ‘story-based novel’ – where the story and characters interact throughout the span of the novel. The novel is set during the period after the Partition of India. It was a time when the country had attained independence from the British rule, but while this was a significant achievement, it also meant a set-back to the unity of the country. The partition of the country was followed by Hindu-Muslim riots, when old and long cherished human values suffered and lost all relevance.

At the heart of it, A Suitable Boy<sup>13</sup> is really a love story. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, widow-mother of four children, is looking for ‘a suitable boy’ for her younger daughter Lata. In fact, the story begins with the wedding of her elder daughter Savita. Mrs. Rupa has chosen the boy, Pran Kapoor, a lecturer in English department in Brahmipur University, who is the son of Revenue Minister, as husband for Savita. Mrs. Rupa insists that Lata must marry the boy whom she herself will choose. She, again and again, is telling this to Lata. But Lata does not take it seriously. So Mrs. Rupa is annoyed with Lata and she recalls her late husband, Raghbir Mehra and becomes sentimental and miserable as is her habit whenever she feels sad or has a problem. She thinks that Lata has always been a difficult one, with a strange will of

her own like St. Sophia, who wanted to be a nun. Mrs. Rupa thinks that Lata is a vine and must cling to her husband but it does not affect Lata. Mrs. Rupa tries to find a match, a suitable boy for Lata in Calcutta but is not successful. So she promises to herself that she will find her another son-in-law in the same city, Brahmpur.

Lata is a student of English literature at the University of Brahmpur. She has three main suitors. Her first suitor, Kabir Durrani, a fellow student of History Department, a cricketer and a Muslim. Though a "Non – Khatri Hindu", Lata falls in love with him gradually, thinking him to be a suitable husband. Both Lata and Kabir feel happy in each other's company and are eager to meet again. But when Lata comes to know that Kabir is Muslim, she becomes very sad. Lata's friend, Malati advises her to forget him. Lata herself knows that it is impossible to marry a Muslim boy as her mother will not accept it. But when she finds that Kabir is a good bowler and a fair batsman, she finds herself more and more in love with him. She tells herself again and again that the path of true love never runs smooth. So she is ready to face the consequences. She persuades Kabir to take her away somewhere leaving everything, as she does not care for anyone. But kabir does not accept her request and asks her to wait for two years. Lata becomes very sad and angry and decides not to see him again. She feels heartbroken and humiliated. Now she thinks that she is sick of her mother, of Kabir, of the mess that life is.

To avoid Kabir Mrs. Rupa takes Lata to Calcutta as per her father's advice. Here Lata is spending a lot of time with her sister-in-law, Meenakshi's family, the Chatterjis. Amit, the eldest of the Chatterji children, starts to take interest in Lata. Amit is a poet and Lata hardly believes that. Both Lata and Amit like Indian classical

music and poetry. She finds that he is so cheerful but cynical sometimes. Amit thinks that Lata is quite sincere in her judgements and wonders what will she say about his poetry. For Amit she is the nicest girl he has met for a long time. Lata is grateful to the Chatterji children as they bring her out of her stupid, self-created misery.

When Mrs. Rupa knows that Amit takes interest in Lata, she does not believe that and also does not want it to happen. That is why she goes to Delhi and requests Kalpana Gaur, family friend's daughter to find out a suitable boy for Lata as early as possible. Fortunately, Mrs. Rupa meets Haresh Khanna, a cobbler who has come to meet Kalpana. Mrs. Rupa likes him and his achievements very much. She tells Lata about Haresh that he is 'a very suitable prospect' and for this Lata complains that her mother treats her as a child. When Lata and Haresh meet, both of them like each other's good qualities. Lata thinks that Haresh is lively, optimistic, correct in his views, appears to like her. On the other hand Haresh thinks that Lata is intelligent without arrogance, attractive without vanity. Afterwards the exchanges of letter between the two become useful for them to know each other more and more.

Meanwhile Meenakshi and Kakoli like Lata as a suitable match for Amit. Therefore, they try to impress Lata by telling her his good qualities and how it is good to marry a poet. But this does not affect Lata instead she avoids them. Afterwards when Amit proposes to Lata, she denies because she cannot convert Amit into a husband who could be her friend and guide.

Afterwards when Lata and Haresh meet, Haresh finds it difficult to talk to Lata freely in privacy. Lata likes Haresh but does not want to give him false hope. Lata explains that they should meet and talk more and more before taking the final

decision of marriage as it is most important in her life. On the other hand Haresh wants to marry Lata as early as possible because his love, feelings for her has grown with time he assures her that he will improve with her instruction. But he is misguided by Lata's use of the phrase 'do not be mean', which she means nothing to hurt his feelings, but he takes it seriously. He irritates but afterwards feels sorry for his anger and writes Lata a letter-explaining apology. Now Lata finds Haresh generous, robust, optimistic and responsible. She feels that there is something adventurous in losing herself entirely in a world of this man whom she has trusted and has begun to admire because he cares for her so deeply and steadily. She thinks that he is quite attractive and also has given a lot of time to learn to love him. So on the same day Lata writes to Haresh, without consulting anyone, accepting his often-repeated offer of marriage with gratitude and warmth..

Finally, Lata marries Haresh, the boy chosen by her mother accepting the traditional value of life. Both Amit and Kabir are impractical lovers for Lata and therefore, she rejects them in favour of personal relations, actualities of material life, represented by Haresh.

The other thread in the novel is that the Minister of Revenue's son, Maan falls in love with Saeeda Bai Firozabadi, a courtesan, whose patronage is dying away because of the abolition of zamindari. Maan and Saeeda Bai meet for the first time on the evening of Holi at Prem Nivas. Saeeda Bai is the singer to celebrate Holi. On that day she sings, as per one audience's offer, the ghazal 'Where have those meetings and those partings gone?' Maan is very much affected by that ghazal. He finds that he is

falling irresistibly in love with her. The exchange of lines of ghazals between them shows his interest in her and her attempts to avoid him. While taking leave she says :

‘Now Mir takes his leave from the temple of idols-

We shall meet again ...’

And Maan completes the couplet :

‘... if it be God’s will.’(88)

But afterwards when Maan goes to her house she welcomes him and sings for him. Now he uses to visit her whenever he gets the time. Once he gives her a book, The Poetical Works of Ghalib. An Album of Pictures by Chughtai in gift. It has contained pictures of languid men and women in various romantic settings. It has entire collected poems of great Ghalib. She becomes very happy at his present and thinks that Maan is the only man she likes and has a complete control over him.

Maan is deeply involved in Saeeda Bai. To him she is everything. If she will refuse to love him he will find himself in danger. He cannot go without her in the harsh world. She knows his seizing by a frenzy sexual desire but gives him satisfaction whenever she herself is in good mood. But whenever she keeps him away from her, he suffers from acute jealousy. He feels exhausted so drinks and gambles away much of the money that has been reserved for the business

When Maan tells his father that he loves Saeeda Bai, he orders Maan to leave the house and also the city. Maan is ready to leave the house but not the city in which Saeeda Bai lives. She is pleased by his passion but thinks of love as ill-natured thing which makes enemies even of friends. Both do not wish to separate from each other.

But afterwards there is quarrel between them because of Rasheed's and Firoz's interest in Tasneem. Maan does not understand the reason behind her upsetting when he mentions his friend, Firoz's interest in Tasneem. Then again when Maan mentions the Nawab Sahib's promise to help his father in election, she is disturbed and asks Maan to go away. Thus she becomes upset again and again whether at the mention of Nawabzada or at the mention of the Nawab Sahib but does not tell the reason and Maan takes it differently. Consequently, there is misunderstanding between them. So when he tells her that he will not be able to think about anything except her, She suggests him to think of many things without placing his happiness in one person's power and to be just to himself.

During the days of canvassing, Maan is so busy that Saeeda Bai does not often enter his mind. But at night, just before going to bed, he remembers her. For Maan it is a new experience to be obsessed by one woman for so long. After a long absence when Maan returns to Brahmipur, he first visits her. He is in good mood but he does not get the expected response from her. Suddenly, she tells that she has no time for him as she is expecting someone in a little while. Because of such insult he feels very much jealous and stands at the gate of her house to see who is coming to meet her. After a long time, he sees Firoz going inside. So Maan goes inside to make it sure whether he has gone to see Saeeda Bai or anyone else. Saeeda Bai becomes angry because of Maan's arrival at that time. So Maan takes it as Firoz has come to see Saeeda Bai, with whom he is in love. Maan is extremely agitated thinking that the woman he has loved has betrayed him and now she is taking delight in mocking his love and his misery, so his hands reach her throat. Saeeda Bai shouts for help and

Firoz , who is trying to know the truth whether Tasneem is his sister , comes to settle the matter. Seized with blind rage Maan hits at Firoz 's stomach.

After the inquiry Maan is put behind the bars. Saeeda Bai blames herself for his tragic outburst and violence. In the midst of his regret and repentance, Maan still feels that he has to see her. He asks his brother, Pran to convey to her his bitter regret and continuing love. Now Saeeda Bai also realizes that she loves Maan very much. But when Maan is free on bail he finds that he has inexplicably lost his eagerness to see her. She is frustrated by his behavior. She wishes to rebuke him for his indifferent attitude towards her. She tells Maan in complaining tone that he does not love her and Maan shows his fury over the word 'Love '. Finally Maan is released. She thanks God for keeping him safe. She loves Maan though he has moved away from her. She sees Maan with all his faults, but cannot cut him off from her life. Perhaps, for the first time in her life, Saeeda Bai herself has loved.

The family drama of the matrimonial quest is interwoven with the politics of the immediate post-independent India, 1951 – 52. Politics has changed dramatically from good to bad, from service to people to service to self, in the immediate first four or five years of independence and has a stage in which the people has broken their heads fighting for freedom are now breaking each others' heads. The political freedom, all of a sudden, has converted agitators into rulers, bureaucrats into public servants, the lathi-wielding police into friends and ruled into rulers. The Nehru Age has arrived. Nehru is the supreme boss of the Congress Party, the party of independence and of the nation.

The main character in the political history of 1951-52 is Nehru and three fictional characters, S. S. Sharma, Mahesh Kapoor and L. N. Agarwal are props to enlarge the small presence of Nehru in the novel. The Congress is divided into two camps-one led by Nehru at the national level and Sharma and Kapoor at the state level and the other led by Purushottamdas Tandon, Agarwal and some others. Nehru has sought to protect his policies as Prime Minister from any possible onslaught by the activist Congress President by proposing party resolutions on each of his main policies, all of which has been overwhelmingly passed by the assembled party. But passing resolutions by acclamation is one thing, controlling the personnel of the party – and the selection of candidates – another. Nehru is left with the uneasy sense that the lipservice that is being paid to the policies of his government will change once the right-wing gets its own state of MLAs and MPs into parliament and the state legislatures. Therefore, Nehru does not want to have a pliable and non-interfering President but Tandon as President proves to be a formidable opponent in his own right. On every important issue his views are opposed to those of Nehru or his supporters. So Nehru resigns from the Congress Working Committee and the Central Election Board. He finds that the Congress is rapidly drifting away from its moorings. In a noble gesture and knowing fully well the impropriety of Nehru's tactics Tandon resigns from the Congress Presidency and Nehru takes over the Congress Presidency. Nehru is as hungrier for power as Tandon and Agarwal. The only difference is that Nehru represents Anglicized Indians and Tandon, the traditionalists.

Mr. S. S. Sharma, Chief Minister, an old freedom fighter, secular and aloof, is also a supporter of Nehru but votes for Tandon against Kripalani, for the Congress



Presidency. And at another time he says that they cannot do without Nehru, the country cannot do without him. Thus he is half-Tandonite and half-Nehrute. According to him the Congress, after all, is the party of Gandhiji, the party of independence. He, a traditionalist, hitches himself to Nehru, knowing the truth that Nehru has future.

Mahesh Kapoor, Revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh, is a veteran freedom fighter, close to Nehru, and is a radical socialist. He is determined to abolish the feudal system of zamindari in Purva Pradesh. His friend, the Nawab, is stubbornly determined to fight him on this issue to protect what he has. Mahesh Kapoor successfully pilots the Zamindari Abolition Bill in the state legislature. Politics for him is a means to serve his people. Though he is a Hindu, is well-known for his tolerance towards other religions. Therefore he is liked and respected among knowledgable Muslims. He finds that the Congress Party is the party of good deal else besides : nepotism, corruption, inefficiency, and complacency that Gandhiji himself has wanted it dissolved as a political force after independence. So he has resigned from the Congress party and has joined the KMPP, led by Kripalani. But because of the insistence of Chief Minister S. S. Sharma and others, he rejoins the Congress Party.

The election takes place in 1952. It is in fact that to be the largest election ever has been hold anywhere on earth. It endowes with universal adult suffrage, six times as numerous as those have permitted to vote in 1946. It will involve a sixth of its people. The selection committee guided by his rival L. N. Agarwal, denies Mahesh Kapoor to fight from his regular constituency, Misri Mandi and also Rudhia (West)

where he has his field and somewhat quite familiar. He has managed at least to be selected as the Congress candidate from Salimpur- cum- Baitar. Now he is about to fight for his political life and ideals from a constituency where he is a virtual stranger. Besides his son Maan's involvement with Saeeda Bai, Maan's attack on the Nawab's son, Firoz are some points of vulnerability which Mahesh Kapoor's opponents use, with cruelty, against him. As a result Kapoor has lost the election and has destroyed politically not because he is corrupt but because he has failed to come to terms with the forces of corruption.

On the contrary, L.N. Agarwal, Traditionalist and obscurantist, is a follower of Tandon. He strongly supports the reconstruction of the Shiva Temple and the Muslims resist it with all vehemence. He has enjoyed the power that goes along with being Home Minister. He is a good manipulator. He hails from the trading community and the caste consciousness never deserts him. Though he is the Home Minister of Purva Pradesh, he has never forgotten to cultivate his constituency that is populated by his caste-men. Once the Jatavs, shoe-makers make strike and therefore the shoe-traders have been in financial straits. Some of the shoe-traders are his friends and some supply him with election funds. For this self-interest he sacrifices the law and orders to fire if the crowd of Jatavs does not disperse, to maintain order.

For the politicians like Agarwal politics is like the coal trade. These coal traders, in the name of religion, serve their own interests and for them religion in politics is like hors-d'oeuvre. That is why corruption, in 1950-51, has begun to eat into the rationing system and the system of government contracts has surpassed anything known under the British.

As the novel progresses, no stone of social India is left unturned and, therefore, naturally it also discusses another hot topic of the early fifties, the condition of the scheduled castes. The Jatavs try to force themselves onto the local Ramlila Committee. They say that at least one of the five swaroops should be selected from scheduled caste boys. Naturally no one listens to them at all. Thus the call of Gandhi to abolish untouchability and the relentless war of Ambedkar against Chaturvarna find their echoes.

Thus Vikram Seth writes about a decade, the fifties, and more precisely about the period, 1951-52. He shows the India of withering idealism, rotting corruption, and pestering communal disharmony, parasitical intrigue of politicians, and the perpetual fight between the forces of progress and modernity and the forces of tradition and obscurantism. In fact, the novel shows how the world has changed between 1947 and 1951 or how a country is moving towards an understanding and control of its own fate.

While commenting on the content of A Suitable Boy, Peter Kemp says, “written as though modernism had never occurred, it lines up with its 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors in combining depth of imagination with breadth of appeal.”<sup>14</sup> And The Sunday Telegraph reviewer praises Vikram Seth for his latest creation saying Seth is a “master of melodrama, comedy and the minutiae of everyday life.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Criticism:**

A Suitable Boy came out in 1993 winning the 1994 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best novel, and many critics came up with their sharp and witty reactions regarding the book. In this section an attempt has been made to review some of the important criticisms. Some critics talk of the nature and theme of the novel: For instance, H. S. Mohapatra says, “ At a time when it is fashionable to write metafiction a la Calvino’s or fiction of magic realism a la Kundera’s and Rushdie’s, Vikram Seth of The Golden Gate fame, has chosen to write a good deal old realistic novel about India set in the early 1950s.”<sup>16</sup> Seth’s this effort to revive the realist project of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is surely welcome. What is odd, however, is that Seth should pose his novelist aesthetic almost exclusively in terms of a transparent language and an easy-going style. The problem is that Seth cherishes the much discredited traditional criteria of realism such as verisimilitude, accuracy of description and precision of detail.

To M. Sivaramkrishna, “ Seth’s A Suitable Boy seems to suggest an important trend in fiction- the tendency of the inflated blurb and monstrous media-hype making advance claims before actual evaluation.”<sup>17</sup> He fully agrees with Pico-Iyer, who had suggested,

Two strands of Indian fiction seem to emerge distinctively: that of compassionate realism (exemplified by R.K Narayan, and recently, Rohinton Mistry) and that of pinwheeling intention (the mode of Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and I. Allan Sealy). And in A Suitable Boy Seth firmly allies himself with the former. Indeed, this novel is seen as a counter-Rushdie epic:

Relatively secluded and old-fashioned where Rushdie is determinedly topical and international, somewhat conservative in style and temper where Rushdie is willfully radical.<sup>18</sup>

H. S. Mohapatra also opines that Seth practices realistic narrative:

As Russian Formalists would say that nineteenth century novels are more “plotted” than “storied”, involving that necessary fracture of realism. In contrast to this A Suitable Boy is a straightforward realistic narrative which neither achieves that close living substance nor incarnates that vision of a whole of many interlocking parts. It is a treasure house of detail.<sup>19</sup>

In Seth’s hands complex question of realism is dissolved into simple matter of reflectionism, involving a resort to what one reviewer in Frontline (April 1, 1993) has termed as “detailed realism”.<sup>20</sup> the novel’s realism is compromised by its collusion with the “orientalist” project of conjuring up an image of India where, as a reviewer in Hindu (August 1, 1993) has put it, “the bizzare and the weird are the norm.”<sup>21</sup> The abundance of “local colour” in the novel assures that the author’s claim in The Telegraph (August 29, 1992), that he has not “exoticised India for the sake of foreigners”<sup>22</sup> is not true. A recent review of the book in The Telegraph (September 11, 1993) has pointed out, “A Suitable Boy is singularly lacking in the other virtues of

19<sup>th</sup> century narrative realism such as the absolute ironic control of Austen, the “mordant vein” of Thackeray and the deep psychological insight into character and situation one finds in Charles Dickens.”<sup>23</sup>

There is affinity between Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and Seth’s A Suitable Boy. H.S Mohapatra quoted from Sunday Review (TOI June 20, 1993) that A Suitable Boy has Jane Austenian “ what-you-see-is-what-you-get style.”<sup>24</sup> It also has an answering Austenian theme. This is a matter of getting wived and husbanded. The novel opens with a marriage that is arranged and closes with one that is as much arranged as it is inspired by the Austenian rational love. Seth has, of course, tried to enlarge the scope of the novel’s realism by grafting the Austenian tale of matchmaking on to the subcontinent in a state of transition. Just as the Industrial Revolution affected the England of Austen, Nehru’s socialist and Industrial Revolution affected the India of fifties. An outcome of the industrialization in England and India, the insatiable greed for money, led to the birth of a lower middle class. Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Rupa Mehra, who is a recognizable Indian version of Mrs. Bennett, are members of this lower middle class. They find it increasingly difficult to search suitable boys for their daughters. Agarwalla observes, “Seth, basically an English brown Sahib, sitting away from the growing and unfulfilling aspiration and consequent frustrations of this middle class, writes marvelously on this theme. This alone places him in the great tradition of Austen, Dickens and Narayan.”<sup>25</sup>

Many critics mentioned the form of A Suitable Boy, which has similarity of an European novel. L.K. Sharma comments: ‘ In form and spirit A Suitable Boy belongs

squarely in the great European tradition of the novel.’<sup>26</sup> The Calcutta setting provides Seth with an opportunity to explore the snobbery and the promiscuity of the Calcutta high society. The focus is on the upwardly mobile “covenanted” class. This aspect of A Suitable Boy has been an absolute hit with the Western literati for whom this is an opportunity to indulge in a bit of Raj Nostalgia. Giles Gordon, Seth’s literary agent in London, makes the matter explicit while explaining the British interest in the novel. He says, “This book is going to be around in English literature for many years. It is a very European novel. It is the Indian side of the Raj even though it is set in the 1951-52. It’s what it was like living in India under the British- the upwardly mobile characters are aping the ways of the departed British.”<sup>27</sup> Seth can absolve the British tastes and palates only with difficulty. The greatest similarity of A Suitable Boy with the famous European epic novels of the nineteenth century is that it has a large cast of characters. According to David Myers, “The more substantial similarities that of A Suitable Boy like the epics of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot or Leo Tolstoy is moralistically quite out of tune with today’s Western craze for finding the elusive meaning of life through losing yourself in passion.”<sup>28</sup> Seth proposes that we deny passion and remain, whimsically in control of ourselves.

Vikram Seth is a nineteenth century old-fashioned writer as in A Suitable Boy he suggests that the meaning of life must be found in arranged marriages, the renunciation of sexual demonicism, and tolerant participation in the comic parliament of family togetherness. This theme of family togetherness is to be successful foundation of tolerance in national politics. It all reminds David Myers like most of Thomas Mann’s Joseph-Tetralogy and his Freudian theme of the necessary victory of

the crafty ego over the compulsive libido. He says, "Like Thomas Mann, Seth argues in favour of humour, self-discipline, marital order and the work ethic as bulwarks against the chaos of passion and the breakdown of civil order and productivity."<sup>29</sup>

While commenting on the third world novels Viney Kirpal writes about A Suitable Boy that Seth is distinct in his narrative technique: "...the loose, circular, episodic loop-like narrative technique of the third world novel that makes it off from the modern western novel."<sup>30</sup> There are a number of variations to this. Some use fable and folktale form and some others employ the Puranic, digressive way of story telling. Still others have the influence of the Panchatantra and the epics. We notice the post-modern writers like Ruhsdie pattern their novels after the episodic, digressive mode of the Ramayana. Many novels of this period are plotless in the Western critical sense. They lack formal logic. They are loosely- structured, circular, reverberative, and they do not follow the usual pattern of development and action in the Western novel. It is not so with A Suitable Boy. Seth adopts neither the fable nor folktale form nor the Puranic nor the epic and the Panchatantra nor the Ramayana form of narrative. The reason is obvious. As Seth himself says that his ' great heroes in the novel form are people like the Victorian or the Chinese novelist of The Story of the Stone or Tolstoy."<sup>31</sup> So Jane Austen, Tolstoy, George Eliot are his models.

Vikram Seth has chosen Calcutta to write on the intellectualelite minority in India, in 1951-52, like Tolstoy who chose St. Petersburg for his novel War and Peace. Seth shows the elegance, the splash and the grandeur of Calcutta. It is, according to Agarwalla, one more Vanity Fair, in which " Byronism joins hands with dandyism to create a Victorian aura, detached from the group grievance of the rest of the people."<sup>32</sup>



He also says that the play Hamlet is about a corrupt king in a corrupt polity – something is rotten in the State of Denmark. He further says:

In the same way the novel A Suitable Boy is about a reasonably honest Prime Minister running a corrupting polity, in India, in the late forties and early fifties.... If Hamlet is a prologue to the drama of a corrupt polity, then, A Suitable Boy is its epilogue.”<sup>33</sup>

A contemporary writer of Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, sees his novel A Suitable Boy as a ‘comfortable comedy.’ She says that Seth “is too fond and too tolerant of his characters to want to transform them. Although in their rash youth, they might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance, and the unknown, they learn their lessons and return, chastened, to the safety and security of the familiar and the traditional, represented here, in the Indian fashion, by the great good family.”<sup>34</sup> And while discussing Seth’s characters in A Suitable Boy Agarwalla feels, ‘Unlike Thomas Hardy and E. M. Forster, Austen and Seth examine the society of their times by tools of humour. They create humour through characters.’<sup>35</sup>

From the above discussion, it is obvious that many Western and Indian critics have analyzed some of the aspects of A Suitable Boy. Majority of them expressed their opinion regarding the greatness of Seth and his style of the novel. But very few mentioned their opinion regarding Seth’s narrative technique. Among the many Indian critics who scrutinized the novel, it is Shyam Agarwalla who thoroughly discussed A Suitable Boy giving its thematic analysis. However, he too does not

analyse the technique sufficiently. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to probe into the technicalities of novel writing and tries to make a critical statement about it.

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