

Treatment of Politics in Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Vikram Seth is a brilliant writer and a master of many literary genres, and yet it is his advances that he is associated with in popular imagination in India. Since publishing his *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth has been applauded as the best writer of his generation. Vikram Seth set the novel in the Indian background of the early 1950s when the country had achieved freedom from British rule. The author provided a detailed and documented reconstruction of Indian politics when the first elections were held after the country's Independence. The novel becomes a secular narrative of Indian politics based on Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of 'unity within diversity'. Seth transforms the political personages who have played significant roles after Independence into their fictional counterparts, while Nehru's character appears in real time. Seth's analysis of the political situation in 1950-51 is as masterly as his study of cultural decadence, social mobility, religious fermentation, and the death of old values. Vikram Seth sheds light on the ideology of some party members who favored declaring India a Hindu state and that the Hindus coming from East Pakistan as refugees should be accepted. At the same time, all Muslims should be expelled from the country. But Pt. Nehru was bitterly against this ideology. Seth also laments the horrendous event of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in the novel.

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Vikram Seth is a brilliant writer and a master of many literary genres, and yet it is his advances that he is associated with in popular imagination in India. He is a great writer who is worth reading and paying attention to despite the money he seemingly makes with his writing. Seth is a master of many genres. As a poet, he first made his mark in the literary world, and *A Suitable Boy* wasn't necessarily his first novel – the delightful novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, was his creative work. However, with the publication of this first prose fiction, *A Suitable Boy*, he proved himself to be a prose novelist of great vision. Vikram Seth's unique outlook on life and his broader humanistic vision has continued to hold an undeniable appeal to the modern reader. Seth creates a living, breathing world that enchants and grips the

reader in all his novels. Indeed, in the present times, Seth is undoubtedly one of the most versatile writers.

Since publishing his *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth has been applauded as the best writer of his generation. Veena Noble Das praises Seth in the following words:

Vikram Seth has been a hotter subject in recent years than virtually any other Indian writer in living memory. He has acquired an enviable reputation as a writer and stunned the literary world. (Fiction of the Nineties 10)

A Suitable Boy has been written against the backdrop of the political upheaval of the newly independent India. Vikram Seth set the novel in the Indian background of the early 1950s when the country had achieved freedom from British rule. The book's story revolves around searching for a suitable match for a girl named Lata, the younger daughter of Rupa Mehra. However, the novelist's prime aim is to portray India's social, political, and historical picture. Along with this portrayal, he also succeeds in highlighting many facets of Indian life – its feudal order, prostitution, and politics. Dr. P Madan observes:

Seth interweaves credibly all the more prominent themes of politics, culture, romance, society, and with the ordinary day-to-day human of his faithful-to-life characters that have laughed and cried. A multitude of characters and events throughout the novel, the setting moves back and forth between the cities of Brahmapur, which is fictional, and Calcutta and excursions to New Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow and the remote village in north India. The Indian identity is strengthened and stretched to make Purvapradesh, a fictional state, a representative of India as a whole.

The author provided a detailed and documented reconstruction of Indian politics when

the first elections were held after the country's Independence. The novel becomes a secular narrative of Indian politics based on Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of 'unity within diversity'. According to Pt. Nehru secularism is the only means to achieve a truly integrated nation. He believed everyday political life in India should be above any religion. And if this is not followed and extreme focus is given to religion, it will become the root cause of the breaking up of India. Vikram Seth, as a writer, has strong faith in the power of Indian religions. But he goes on to emphasize that too much focus on religion gives rise to communalism that results in detrimental politics:

[T]he interweaving of religion and politics, the ancient rivalry between Hindus and Muslims, the undying suspicion and resentment that can be blown into flame at any moment by unscrupulous office seekers or bigoted religious leaders. (Robert Towers New York Times).

Seth transforms the political personages who have played significant roles after Independence into their fictional counterparts, while Nehru's character appears in real time. The main political characters are Mahesh Kapoor, the Revenue Minister of Seth's mythical state of Purva Pradesh; S.S. Sharma, the Chief Minister; L.N. Agarwal, the Home Minister; and Purushottamdas Tandon, the President of the Congress Party.

In *A Suitable Boy*, Seth portrays the country's inter-community relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The novel's fictional town is Brahmpur, where most of the novel's action takes place. To quote Neelam Shrivastava:

The author constructs an organic idea of India through the microcosm of Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh... Seth claims to have based Brahmpur on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya. Vikram Seth continues to present a panoramic view of the politically peaceful city of Berhampur and leaves no activity which is purely Indian at its root. Everything goes on usually and peacefully in this city. But this friendly town becomes one of the significant places where the religious conflict begins due to political reasons. After the country's Independence, the communal situation between the Hindus and the Muslims in Brahmpur becomes very troublesome. The dispute arises with constructing a Hindu Shiva temple

adjacent to an existing mosque. The Raja of March, the prime figure in the construction of the Chandrachur Temple, deliberately positions the temple where Muslims gather to offer their daily prayers and kneel to face Mecca. His thinking is that Muslims also must meet the Hindu temple at the time of their prayers. Seth writes about the Raja:

...the Raja of March has title to the house that stands – stood, instead – beyond the western wall of the mosque. He has had it broken down and is building a temple there. A new Chandrachur Temple. He is an absolute lunatic. Since he couldn't destroy the mosque and build on the original site, he's decided to make it to the immediate west and install the linga in the sanctum. For him, it's a great joke to think that the Muslims will be bowing down in the direction of his Shiva-linga five times a day. (*A Suitable Boy* 198-99)

This situation is politically exploited by the hereditary Imam of the Alamgiri Mosque of Berhampur. On Friday, at the middle prayer, the Imam stimulates the religious frenzy against Hindus through an inflammatory speech full of venom and fire and far away from his ordinary sermons of morality. As a result, a Hindu-Muslim tumult breaks out the same evening; two persons die, one young man dies in the firing of the police, and an older man gets crushed by the retreating mob.

Seth drew a detailed picture of this hatred between Hindus and Muslims in another confrontation scene when the Bharat Milap episode of Ramlila and the Tazia Procession of Moharram coincided. Bharat Milap and the Tazia Procession of Moharram were being taken out on the same day in Berhampur. There, the Baitar House Tazia was famous for many years for its magnificent decoration of silver and crystal. Hindu areas were to be avoided as far as possible from the routes of the Tazia Procession. The Bharat Milap episode was going to be performed in the Misri Mandi, where Ayodhya had been located that year for the performance of Ramlila. Suddenly during the performance, the Hindus heard the sound of another drum of the Tazia Procession with the cries of terrible grief and lamentation. The Muslims were beating their chests and cutting themselves with the help of Knives and razor blades in the memory of Imam Hussain.

And the din of the procession grew; the Hindus and Muslims acted against each other and reached the peak of religious madness. Seth draws the picture realistically:

Crazed by the sight of the wounded Rama, the man with fireworks seized a lathi from one of the organizers and led the crowd in a charge against the tazia procession. Within seconds, the tazia lay smashed on the ground, many weeks' work of delicate glass and mica and paper tracery. Fireworks were thrown onto it, and it was set alight. The maddened crowd stamped on it and beat it with lathis until it was charred and splintered. Its horrified defenders slashed out with their knives and chains at these kafirs, leaping about like apes on the eve of the great martyrdom, who had dared to desecrate the holy image of the tomb. (1057)

Seth makes pertinent comments on this religious frenzy and its horrible consequences in the following words:

The sight of the crushed and blackened tazia made them mad. Both sides now were filled with the lust to kill – what did it matter if they too suffered martyrdom? – to attack pure evil, to defend what was dear to them – what did it matter if they died? – whether to recreate the passion of Karbala or to re-establish Ram Rajya and rid the world of the murderous, cow-slaughtering, God-defiling devils. (1057-58)

The political attitude of the country's people also becomes the cause of conflict in the relationship between Lata and Kabir and perhaps between Saeeda Bai and Maan. Mrs. Rupa Mehra does not allow Lata to marry Kabir only because he is a Muslim.

Vikram Seth, in *A Suitable Boy*, also recreates the social and political structure of the Post-Independence India. Seth's analysis of the political situation in 1950-51 is as masterly as his study of cultural decadence, social mobility, religious fermentation, and the death of old values. According to Shyam S. Agarwalla:

Vikram Seth...writes about a decade, the fifties, and more precisely about the period, 1950-51. He shows the India of withering idealism, rotting corruption, pestering communal disharmony, parasitical intrigue of politicians, and the perpetual

fight between the forces of progress and modernity and the forces of tradition and obscure. (Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy: Search for an Indian Identity 19)

In *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth shows a grasp on the politics of the leaders who achieved power in the name of freedom. Some gained positions in the government, while some prominent leaders were deprived of the advantages of the government. Mahesh Kapoor, one of the leading characters and an influential person in the politics of India before freedom, had left the Congress Party and joined the peasants' party for their upliftment. Vikram Seth writes Mahesh Kapoor's purpose was- ...to ascertain from where he could best fight a candidate from the Congress Party for an Assembly seat in the coming General Elections – now that he had left it and joined the newly formed Peasants' and Workers' People's Party – the KMPP for short. The obvious rural choice was the constituency that contained his farm in the Russian subdivision of the Rudhia District. As he walked around his fields, his mind turned once more to Delhi and the significant figures of the strife-ridden Congress Party vying with each other for power on the national stage. (*A Suitable Boy* 953)

Vikram Seth provides a complete introduction and background of influential politicians such as Rafi Ahmad Kidwai and Purushottamdas Tandon. They had the quality of leaving their impact on the party politics and the decisions of the government people. First, Seth talks about a rational politician Rafi Ahmad Kidwai who hails from UP:

Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, the wise, wily, and playful politician from U.P. who had been responsible for a spate of resignations from the Congress, including Mahesh Kapoor's, was anathema to the Hindu-chauvinist right wing of the party – partly because he was Muslim, partly because he had twice orchestrated opposition to the attempts of Purushottamdas Tandon to become President of the Congress Party. (*A Suitable Boy* 953)

When Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India after Independence, he tried to protect his decisions from the possible opposition from the President of the Congress Party, Puroshottamdas Tandon. Two ideological groups within the Congress Party had risen – the Nehruites

and the Tandonites – and these groups were divided on the question of Muslims. The Tendonitis held the view that all Muslims should leave for Pakistan or stay as second-class citizens. Even one of the Tandonites suggested that Pakistan should be taken back by force. But Nehru was against these decisions regarding the stay of Muslims. Vikram Seth narrates:

What made things worse was the steady stream of refugees from East Pakistan into Bengal, which put an unsupportable burden upon the state. They were fleeing because of ill-treatment and insecurity in Pakistan. Several hardliners in India suggested under a theory of reciprocity that for each Hindu migrant from Pakistan, a Muslim should be expelled from India. They saw matters regarding Hindus and Muslims as collective guilt and collective revenge. So successfully indeed had the two-nation theory – the Muslim League's justification for Partition – taken root in their minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally; and were willing to visit upon their heads punishment for the actions of their co-religionists in the other country. (A Suitable Boy 954-55)

This ideology was rejected by Pt. Nehru, who declared that no such steps of retaliation in the form of expulsion of Muslims had to be adopted. Vikram Seth writes:

Nehru...had refused to countenance any retaliatory actions urged on him by many of the dispossessed Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan, the right-wing parties, and the right wing of his party. He had tried to soften some of the more draconian decisions of the Custodian-General of Evacuee Property, who had often acted more in the interests of those who dreamed after evacuee property than of the evacuees themselves. He had signed a pact with Liaquat Ali Khan, which had reduced the likelihood of war with Pakistan. (A Suitable Boy 955)

Nehru's this approach was not liked by those people who were in favor of the expulsion of the Indian Muslims. The right-wing people labeled the charge against Nehru that he was a rootless person who had divorced himself from the feelings of the majority of Hindus. As Pt. Nehru was a secular politician, he believed that his people regarded his decisions right in favor of the Nation:

The only problem for his critics was that his citizenry loved him and would almost certainly vote for him, as it had done since his great tour in the 1930s when he had traveled around the country, charming and stirring up vast audiences. Mahesh Kapoor knew this – as did anyone with the faintest knowledge of the political scene. (A Suitable Boy 955)

Mahesh Kapoor had hoped that Nehru would succeed in implementing his policies even though Tandon and his supporters opposed them. The problem with Nehru was that even his supporters were losing their faith in Nehru's policies:

...Nehru, though his supporters were hemorrhaging away from his party as it drifted into its right-wing orbit, refused to leave the Congress or take any positive action other than to plead, in meeting after meeting, the All-India Congress Committee, for unity and reconciliation. As he paused, his supporters floundered. Eventually, by late summer, a point of crisis had been reached. (A Suitable Boy 956)

In the early years, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru dominated politics as the Prime Minister of India. Shyam S. Agarwalla writes:

The Nehru age had arrived. Gandhi died in 1948; Patel in 1950; and the socialists drifted away from the Congress; Nehru was the supreme boss of the party and the Nation. A Suitable Boy is posited in the early years of our Independence, 1951-52. The early years of the Nehruvian age started with a bang...full of bubbling optimism, robust vitality, and great expectations. (Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: Search for an Indian Identity 33)

When Sardar Patel died, Tandon was elected the head of the organization of the Congress Party. Tandon was seven years senior to Pt. Nehru also belonged to Allahabad but was almost an opponent of Nehru. Vikram Seth writes:

Tandon proved to be a formidable opponent in his own right. In the name of discipline and unity, he attempted to suppress dissenting groups within the party, such as the Democratic Front established by Kidwai and Kripalani (the so-called K-K Group), which were outspoken in their criticism of his leadership. (A Suitable Boy 954) Both Nehru and Tandon followed Gandhi, yet both had different approaches and eyed for power on the national level. Shyam S. Agarwalla writes:

The banishment of Kidwai and Kripalani from the Congress Working Committee by Tandon had given ample opportunity and advantage to Nehru to decry those who "wished to drive out from the Congress who did not fit in with their views or their general outlook"...Nehru was surprised the Tandonites by his "most uncharacteristic unwillingness to back down, to understand their point of view, to postpone unpleasantness, to compromise." (Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy: Search for an Indian Identity* 36)

There were differences in the opinions of the supporters of Pt. Nehru and Tandon both took the question of Kashmir in absolutely opposite ways. Seth writes:

Throughout the year, India and Pakistan had a great deal of mutual snarling across their borders. It had appeared several times that war might be imminent over the problem of Kashmir. While Nehru said war was a disastrous possibility for the two developing countries and attempted to come to some understanding with the Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, many embittered members of his party were in favor of war with Pakistan. (*A Suitable Boy* 954)

Vikram Seth sheds light on the ideology of some party members who favored declaring India a Hindu state and that the Hindus coming from East Pakistan as refugees should be accepted. At the same time, all Muslims should be expelled from the country. But Pt. Nehru was bitterly against this ideology:

Such talk repelled Nehru. The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second-class citizens sickened him. If Pakistan treated its minority citizens barbarically, that was no reason for India to do so. After Partition, he had personally pleaded with several Muslim civil servants to remain in India. (955)

As the confrontation between Jawaharlal Nehru and Purushottamdas Tandon became more and more aggressive, the rift between the secular politicians like Pt. Nehru and hardliners like Tandon became more intense. As a result, Pt. Nehru writes a letter of resignation from the Congress Working Committee and Central Election Board membership.

In response to a letter from the President of the Congress Working Committee Tandon, Pt. Nehru makes his vision of secularism clear:

I have been long distressed at the attitude of some persons who indicated that they wished to drive out others from the Congress who did not fit in with their views or general outlook...

I feel that Congress is rapidly drifting away from its moorings, and more and more, the wrong kind of people, or those who have the wrong kind of ideas, are gaining influence. The public appeal of Congress is getting less and less. It may and probably will win elections. But, in the process, it may also lose its soul...(A Suitable Boy 989)

Seth also presents the same picture as it, later on, happened in Ayodhya. He shows that some citizens of Brahmipur very well know the history that two hundred fifty years ago, Aurangzeb had destroyed one of the holiest temples of Shiva. But somehow, the priests of the Chandrachur Temple secured the holy Shiva-linga in the shallows and sands near the cremation ground by the Ganga. The Shiva-linga episode anticipates the Babri Masjid controversy of the 1990s in the city of epic associations, Ayodhya. Seth says that the book *A Suitable Boy* was in its final stages when that issue flared up. Seth laments the horrendous event of the destruction of the Babri Masjid:

I never imagined things would flare up to this extent. It's sad and distressing. India has weathered many final crises, but this one is severe indeed. It requires us to speak out and say that this is not the country we want India to be. (Robinson, Eugene Washington Post)

The treatment of the political theme in *The Suitable Boy* can be summed up in the following words:

A Suitable Boy can be read as a response to the aggressive communalization of politics in the 1990s by recuperating a Nehruvian vision of the relationship between religion and society. The novel was immensely successful in India, and its translations in Hindi and Bengali met with great critical acclaim, showing that it could be 'translated back' into the vernacular languages represented in the novel. *A Suitable Boy* thus remains an influential secular and realist narrative of India, whose linguistic

creativity and intense engagement with recent history have effectively contributed to its canonical status in the post-colonial literary context.

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