

Representation of New India in Vikram Seth's

A Suitable Boy

A Dissertation for

Course code and Course Title: ENG-651- Dissertation

Credits: 16

Submitted in partial fulfilment of Master of Arts Degree

(M. A. in English)

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I hereby declare that the data presented in this Dissertation report entitled, “Representation of New India in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*” is based on the results of investigations carried out by me in the Discipline of English at Shenoι Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University under the supervision of Prof. Nina Caldeira and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of a degree by me. Further, I understand that Goa University or its authorities will be not responsible for the correctness of observations/ experimental or other findings given in the dissertation.

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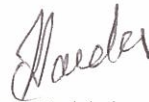
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This is to certify that the dissertation report “**Representation of New India in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy***” is a bonafide work carried out by **Ms. Mizia Emily Dias** under my supervision in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Arts** in the Discipline of English at Shenoi Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The completion of this project has been a major achievement of my college life. I cannot thank enough all those who have inspired and motivated me to successfully complete this project. Without the co-operation and support of my friends, family and teachers, I would've never been able to carry on with my research. First and foremost, I am obligated to thank the almighty God who has been with me every time I felt discouraged and lacked motivation. I would also love to express my deep sense of gratitude to my project guide, Prof. Nina Caldeira, whose timely and scholarly advice has helped me to accomplish this task so well. I am also grateful to my parents and sisters for helping me get through all the tough times and giving their best to support me with whatever they can. I also thank all my friends who have helped me to stay on track and work hard on my paper. I was also very fortunate to do my academic research on one of my favorite authors, Vikram Seth. Lastly, I am grateful to the college for having courses like Indian Writing in English (ENG-621) and A Reading in Postcolonial Theories and Literatures (ENG-526) as a part of our academic syllabus which provided me with all the knowledge required to analyze postcolonial themes and gave me a better understanding of Indian English literature, hence aiding me in conducting this research.

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation titled, 'Representation of New India in Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy', talks about how this novel, set against India's tempestuous post-independence era, brings to light one of the nuanced portrayals of New India. With the help of postcolonial theory, this study aims to understand Seth's unique interpretation of India, achieved by an amalgamation of political commentary, historical retelling and cultural representation of India. This study was initiated in hopes of revisiting the history of India through a literary work to understand how the author's biases and experiences at the time of publication can influence his portrayal of history. The study investigates the degree to which the representation aligns or diverges with the representation of India's history. Seth uses a rationalist secular idea to produce this representation, influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's ideology. This emanates a balanced, neutral portrayal of post-independent India. It wishes to help the reader identify and deal with the reoccurrence of unpleasant history in the future.

Keywords: Representation, New India, Postcolonial, Indian, Post-Independence, Nation

Chapter 1

Unveiling New India: Representation in *A Suitable Boy*

“There are many versions of India as Indians,” This sentence of Rushdie’s novel, *Midnight’s Children* perfectly justifies the purpose of writing this dissertation. Representation of New India by Vikram Seth in his novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993), brings to light one of the many interpretations of India immediately after its Independence. This novel, set against the backdrop of India’s tempestuous post-independence era, encapsulates the intricate tapestry of the nation’s culture, politics and societal transformations. Through his comprehensive storytelling, the author showcases the complexities of a changing nation and how the people of this nation adapt to these changes. This research will delve into the themes, historical context and cultural representation of the novel which helped the author sculpt a nuanced portrayal of new India, unveiling the challenges and aspirations of a nation in transition.

The prefix ‘new’ attached to India signified the hopes, dreams and excitement Indians experienced right after the independence of their country as it allowed them to imagine the endless possibilities of their country’s development. This dream of building a new nation was actualized at the stroke of midnight on 15th August 1947 when India was set free from imperial control and became an independent sovereign republic. However, this new India was a far cry from the desired utopian India the subjects had in mind. The main reason for the non-fulfilment of the people’s dream was because of India’s multiplicity and diversity.

Every person that India housed, had their own discrete dream and plan for new India which conflicted with another person's conception of new India. This resulted in national instability, communal disharmony and an ironical lack of unity amongst people of new India. Therefore, in order to tackle and bring awareness to this issue, Indian writers like Vikram Seth put forward their own interpretation of new India in hopes of uniting Indians by helping them appreciate the diversity of their culture.

This paper aims to explore the author's unique outlook on new India or newly independent India by understanding it through the lens of post-colonial theory. It examines the degree to which Seth's representation of the new India aligns or diverges from the actual reality of India after Independence. It also analyses the impact of colonization on the socio-political scenario of India and how colonial legacy still dominates the official framework of our country.

The study will explore the author's portrayal of India, where he presents a more secular and realistic depiction with a strong Nehruvian ideology. It will also touch upon the elements of nation building and why it is crucial for a post-colonial nation like India. Since, representation of any kind is influenced by the personal experiences and background of the author, this study will also investigate the author's biography and dive into the historical and cultural context of the time the author wrote the text which shaped his idea of new India.

Limitations

- This research is only limited to Indian English literature.
- In-depth study of only one novel has been done, that is Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*.
- Historical and post-colonial study of only India has been done in this study.

- In this study the term ‘New India’ refers to the 20th century implications, related to the newly independent country of India. It does not refer to the vision of ‘New India’ in present politics.

Scope

- This research aims to study Indian English Literature through the lens of post-colonial theory.
- Undertaking a study like this familiarizes the reader with concepts of representation and nation-building and allows the reader to experience history from a personal point of view.
- This study also helps the reader to identify and deal with the reoccurrence of unpleasant history.
- The study of this research is only limited to the time period from colonial rule to the time of its publication. Therefore, it creates opportunity for future researchers to take this study and relate it to current politics.
- The evaluation of criticism will not only include criticism from Indian critics but will also consider the opinions of international critics for broader understanding of the topic.

2. Research Question and Hypothesis

Research question

How does Vikram Seth investigate the representation of ‘New India’ in *A Suitable Boy* and how this representation differs and/or resembles the history of India?

Formulation of hypothesis

Vikram Seth through his works represents New India by presenting an amalgamation of political commentary, historical retelling and cultural representation of India.

3.Objectives of Research Proposed

- To explore the representation of New India in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*.
- To examine how historically accurate the portrayal of India is in the novel and the creative approach taken to build the nation in the novel.
- To study how the language and post-colonial themes showcase the culture, politics, identity and nationalism of India.
- To understand how the personal experiences and background of the author influence the representation of India in his novels.
- To examine the historical and cultural context of the time the author wrote the text influenced his portrayal of India.

4.Relevance and Necessity of the Proposed Research

Necessity in the field of Language and Literature

Representation of India at a specific time period like post-independence enables the researcher to analyse the hybrid language that is Indian English. This nativized English not only shows the blend of native languages and the colonizers' English language but also shows how society adopts colonial legacy while still having firm roots of native culture. This research studies the unique elements of Indian English portrayed in the selected novel as it forms a major part of the representation of new India. This study also allows researchers to examine

representation in Indian English literature which can aid future research in the field of Indian post-colonial literature.

Relevance to Society

This study is concerned with the study of representation of India in Indian English literature. Representation of a country or even a group of individuals facilitates inclusivity and revisitation of historical events in a new light. During the time of Independence, the chaos that ensued made it impossible for people to be seen as individuals and were reduced to mere beings who were part of some community with a common identity. Exploration of representation of new India through the characters designed by Vikram Seth forces us to live the narrative from the point of view of these characters which provides the much-needed individual and personal experiences, allowing us to see history unfold from a different perspective. A study like this is also relevant in the present world of turmoil and violence, where countries are fighting over limited resources like land. This study explores the historical context of a country and comments on the crafty workings of politicians in power which the reader may relate to the present struggles of their own country. Since this study also delves into the post-colonial themes of the novels it prepares the reader to detect and overcome any possible colonialism in the future.

5. Literature Review

The concept of representation refers to the act or process of depicting, presenting or standing for something else. This concept has been adopted profusely in the fields of philosophy, arts, politics and communication. James O. Young, in his work titled *Representation in Literature*, explores this concept and defends it by saying that without representation, literature would have no aim or depth. He states

that representation in literature provides knowledge about the world and the society that we live in giving us a clear point of vantage so that we as people can materialize the necessary and desired changes. He brings to the reader's notice that the use of this concept in literature dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein he described "Poetry as an art of imitation". J.O Young compares the concept of 'Mimesis' to representation, stating that both are simply the reproduction of something that already exists in this world in order to appreciate or critique the object of reference. This explanation of representation supports the research undertaken by me, as the selected novel, though fictional, are still based on authentic and familiar instances.

Representing an actual country in works of fiction have always been an uphill battle. Benedict Anderson says in his work *Imagined Community* that representation of an original idea is always influenced by existing frameworks and notions of a country. However, he adds that patriots almost never take such representations well and endless criticism awaits novels like Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Therefore, understanding representation while examining the criticism of the novels will be one of the aims of my research as it helps in providing a contrast and background to the author's own interpretation of the country.

The selected novel explores the changing dynamics of India, wherein the citizens went from being hopeful to dejected or as Dr. Reena Kapoor would sentence it as "the journey of euphoria to despondence" in her paper *Suitable Boy as a Political Intrigue in Post-Colonial India*. She discusses how the people of India went from having an identifiable enemy, the white people, to unidentifiable enemies in the form of politicians who brought about a mayhem in the country. Thus, people were forced to decolonize from colonial influences but also liberate itself from the

shackles of oppression from its own country. The same point is delved into by Subhash Chander Sharma in his paper, *Constructing the Nation: A Theme in Post-colonial Literature*. In his study Sharma puts forward the idea of nation-building by commenting on the how post-colonial writers represented and recreated nations like India, reinventing narratives in order to decolonize the western constructs. He states that reinventing nations is important because it allows the people to eliminate its images as savages (imposed by the colonizers) and embrace the changing nation.

The challenges of nation-building and decolonization are explored in another paper written by Dr. Prayer Elmo Raj titled *Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy": A National Narrative*. The writer speaks about the difficulties in representing a post-colonial narrative which addresses socio-political issues in new India. However, he adds that Seth as a writer, examines these issues in a rather delicate and empathetic manner, which helps his audience identify with his vision.

Neelam Srivastava in a couple of her papers like *Midnight's Children and A Suitable Boy: Challenges of Rendering Indian Experience into English* and *Secularism in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy': History, Nation, Language* compares and contrasts the two novels on the basis of depiction of religion, literary creativity and political beliefs. She states that Seth's secularism is rationalist whereas Rushdie's is more radical. She adds that Seth's narrative is mimetic whereas Rushdie questions this mimetic historical writing. She concludes by stating that both the authors provide a secular stance and maintain the multiplicity of Indian culture. The concept of multiplicity in *Midnight's Children* is explored further by Shalini Jha in her paper *National and Narrative: The Quest for Form in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children'* who

discusses how the novel examines diverse identities by uniting it with a larger historical narrative. She says that this helps the reader challenge his/her own perception of homogenous nations and makes them identify with the multilayered narrative of the novel and the nation.

Through this review of selected research papers, we see how representation of nations or even a group of people is crucial to literature as it provides depth and background to the narrative. Post-colonial fiction works need to maintain a sensitized take on history as it can hurt the sentiments of the groups represented. Understanding the author's unique representation of his nation helps us realize how diverse a country can be.

Research gap - These researches delve into a lot of the thematic and historical factors of the novel; however, it does not do adequate research on the backgrounds of the author which is necessary in order to truly scrutinize his representation of New India. Thus, in this research, I will study the background of the author to provide a unique understanding of their works. I shall also evaluate the criticism the novel received so that the reader has a better idea of what the masses wanted at the time of its publication and how it affected their perception of new India.

6. Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. It primarily relies on descriptive and analytical research methods. Close-reading of the text will also be done for an original perspective on the novel before referring to any additional references. The data collected through research will be analyzed to identify patterns, themes and perspectives to understand the representation of new India in the selected novel. This research aims to study the novel through the lens of post-colonial theory. A

thorough historical study of the background will be done to discern the author's unique representation of the country. A review of recent and past criticism will also be done in order to evaluate the impact of the selected novel upon the readers.

Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonialism can be understood as a study of the effects of colonialism on previous colonial subjects and how the empire contributed towards industrialization and globalization. What indeed initiated post-colonial works was the independence movement and efforts to gain freedom from these ex-colonies from the colonizer. This helped in putting an end to colonialism and, as a result, surfaced thousands of works related to colonialism and its effects. These works helped the world to understand the power relationship between the West and the "third world" countries. The 1900s showed a rise in Commonwealth literature.

Although Foucault was the one who heavily contributed in influencing future post-colonial critics, it was Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha who set the foundation for people around the world, especially Indians to indulge in the discourse of post-colonialism ("Contemporary Literary Theory").

In his book *Orientalism*, Said speaks against the stereotypes, fundamental ideologies, and concept of 'other' that Western cultural institutes have created in order to make themselves look superior. They often portrayed the 'Orientals' or the 'Orients' as others who were lazy, deceitful and uncivilized. The Oriental is often 'represented' by dominating frameworks and with frequent comparison with the West. (Said)

Gayatri Spivak comments on 'Subalternity'. She is known for her feminist discourse and how it intersects with race, class and gender. She was initially inspired by Antonio Gramsci, who said that 'Subalternity' refers to people who acquire a subordinate position due to their gender, race, and culture. In her essay titled *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She comments on the 'muteness' of women in ex-colonial societies. Women are dominated by the domineering concepts of 'Patriarchy' and 'Imperialism', and due to these, women are often sidelined and ignored. She makes use of the term 'subaltern' to refer to (inferior) women of colour, colonized and belonging to lower strata of social class (Spivak).

According to Homi K. Bhabha 'Mimicry' refers to concept of how colonized people imitate the European powers, focusing on the idea of the norms of civility because it is considered superior. The colonized natives view this in a conflicting manner; they respect the colonizer's mannerisms but also attempt to resist and disobey them, hence giving rise to 'Ambivalence'. An attempt to do both results in the creation of 'unbalanced' or 'unfixed' identities. All this takes place in an 'in-between' or 'third space' where this 'hybrid' nature can be observed (Bhabha).

What is New India?

In the present times, the term 'New India' is popularized by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who refers to it as a development goal for India to restore and celebrate India's heritage and culture while advancing in the field of technology and making India modern. However, according to Mathur and Nayanika, New India is not a new concept. It comes from a more forgotten term, probably hidden or overwritten, to promote the recent connotations of the word (Mathur and Nayanika). The term 'New India' was first used in the 1800s to observe the British Empire's

transition from a company that was an East-India Company to ruling India as colonizers in the decades to come.

However, in the 20th century, the word 'New India' became synonymous with the aspirations, dreams and goals of the people of India. Soon after India freed itself from the clutches of the imperial control and became an independent sovereign republic, the term was excessively used to denote this freedom. On August 15th 1947, headlines such as "Free India" and "New India is Born" were seen in papers like The New York Times and The Hindu ("Free India Is Born": What the Headlines Said on August 15th, 1947"). The notion of 'New India' became synonymous with Nehru's vision, which spoke about the newly independent India as a "daring and new India" ("Nehru's Vision of a New India").

Nehru discusses his plans for India in his work *The Discovery of India*, which primarily celebrates India's rich history from the Vedic era to the British administration in India. He also praised legendary minds like the Buddha. Mahatma Gandhi and Chanakya were people whom he considered integral to the country's development. He discusses how the caste system and sexism of women disrupted social advancement in Indian society. He states his wishes for India to be united through its rich history and not be divided by religion, caste, gender or culture (Nehru).

The term 'New India' in this dissertation intends to incorporate the aspirations and goals of the newly independent India. It also heavily relies on Nehru's vision for India after Independence and how this was showcased by Seth, a firm believer of Nehru's ideologies, in the text. New India also covers the era of post-independence and postcolonial rule, and a comparison has been made to show

how the novel represents this history through the narrative. The term New India was expanded till the early 2000s to explain the globalization and industrialization of India. In the book *A New India*, Dcosta explains this late 20th-century connotation of the word as “a new India, which is different from what it was before, an unstated ‘Old India’ [...] a new India, neither bound by the past nor by provincial thinking. India and Indians are now modern and Global” (D’costa). This referred to rapid globalization taking place in India after Independence, making India ‘Modern’.

Vivek Dehejia compares Modi’s ‘New India’ with that of Nehru’s and considers that Nehru’s vision for New India was rooted intellectually in the colonial past. Even Though India was emancipated from colonial rule, he believes that Nehru’s three fundamental ideas of socialism, non-alignment and secularism were incompetent and only done to achieve the votes of minorities. Whereas Dehejia believes that Modi’s notion of New India stands for postcolonial independence (Dehejia)

On the other hand, Jyoti Punwani stated the opposite. Punwani portrays Nehru in a positive light. She states that Nehru’s new India was marked by truth, but marred by current politics. She says that Nehru led his term with no boastfulness in his speech but instead was concerned only for his people. According to her, Nehru had to overcome the difficulties of the first 12 years by getting rid of the old habits. As Nehru said, “What we want to be, what path we want to take [...] creates a new prosperous Hindustan.” She states that there was an intimacy between him and his people that was lacking in current politics. (Punwani)

Chapter 2

A Suitable Living Legend: Vikram Seth

“If somebody writes clearly, you can pretty much tell immediately if something is shallow or deep, whereas if they write with all this duckweed on the surface, you can't tell if the stream is one inch deep or a hundred fathoms.” – Vikram Seth

Seth's words appear authentic when it comes to his works because they are in no shape or form shallow. Seth's work is one of the best contributions from Indian writers to literature. This can be backed up by the countless, well-analysed critiques of his works, both locally and internationally, proving that Seth's work explores the deeper nuances of life. Known for both poetry and prose, Seth has provided us with an expansive list of works that comment on the Indian identity and nation-building of India. *A Suitable Boy*, the primary text chosen for this research, is his magnum opus and a contemporary literary masterpiece. The novel may seem like an Austenian romance involving a taboo relationship between Lata, a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy, Kabir, in a post-colonial setting. However, this novel offers so much more, from criticism of post-colonial India and the exploration of the heavy themes associated with it to the nostalgia of the mid-20th century Indian culture, customs and conduct. Another aspect that deeply attracts people's attention is the novel's autobiographical nature: *A Suitable Boy* is loosely based on the author's own life and experiences. The characters in the novel are directly inspired by Seth's family members and close ones. Haresh Khanna, a character with such a firm ideology, was based on his father, Premo Seth, an executive of Bata Shoes who, just like Haresh, found solace in the shoe-making industry. We also have the character of Amit Chatterjee, who is Seth's fictional counterpart. He changed multiple courses,

similar to Seth, who went from Law to Economics to give in to the world of literature finally. In the novel, we see how Amit seems to work on this extended piece of fiction that raises a few people's eyebrows.

Similarly, Seth, too, ended up taking eight years to complete his masterpiece. A character that Seth talks about quite often is Rupa Mehra. This character is very dear to Seth because he can resurrect his grandmother's soul through her. In a recent interview by A Suitable Agency, Seth mentions how similar Rupa and his grandmother were ("Celebrating 30 Years of a Suitable Boy: Vikram Seth in Conversation with Shoma Chaudhary"). He adds that through this iconic character, many people, regardless of where they came from, could see their mothers or grandmothers through Rupa. He says that Rupa's character varies in meaning for everyone; some may find her bigoted, some domineering, but to him, she would always be his loving Nani. Through this, one can observe Seth's ability to represent his own life, his country, and the masses by resonating and recreating his emotions, experiences, and histories in a captivating manner.

2.1 Biography of Vikram Seth

Vikram Seth was born in 1952 in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. He came from a decent background, considering that his mother, Leila Seth, was a Barrister who became the first female judge of the Delhi High Court and the First woman to attain the title of Chief Justice of a High Court in India. Seth, in an interview, stated that even though his mother came from such an excellent educational background, breaking records as a woman in a time wherein patriarchy dominated the lives of women, she would still hold on to the traditional manner of thinking ("Celebrating 30 Years of a Suitable Boy: Vikram Seth in Conversation with Shoma Chaudhary").

He recalls how his mother once cried because his sister was still unmarried at 25, something one would not expect to be natural for a woman of her standing. Regardless, Seth was inspired by his parents, who greatly influenced his future work. As mentioned before, Seth's father, Prem Nath Seth, an executive of Bata Shoes, was a man who sought after a relatively rare course during his time, which was in footwear technology, luring him into dropping English literature. When Seth was pursuing his Economics degree, he remembers how his parents thought his interest in writing was just a "dabble" and told him to focus on getting a "proper" job. However, Seth proved them wrong by building such an expansive career in writing.

Seth had a fascinating educational journey: he shifted from place to place in pursuit of knowledge. In his childhood, Seth went to a school in Dehradun called The Doon School, an all-boys institution. It was here that Seth first dived into the realm of writing. He was the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper titled *The Doon Weekly*, which included the contributions of not just Vikram Seth but also many other important figures like Amitav Ghosh, Karan Thapar, Swaminathan Aiyar and Ramchandra Guha. During his time in The Doon School, Seth's eminent influence came from his geography teacher, Gurdial Singh, who not only taught him the importance of the subject but also instilled in him the love for adventure and life, an observation that can be made in his work *From Heaven Lake: Travels in Sinkiang and Tibet*. His teacher later described him as an "indefatigable worker, and he maintains without difficulty his distinguished level in studies...he has put in enormous amount of energy in other spheres of school life, in dramatics, in debating, in first aid, in music, and in editing the Doon School Weekly." (Seth 137) Before attending The Doon School in India, Seth had already been exposed to

Western living. He completed his pre-primary studies in the U.K., which benefitted him when he resumed his studies in Kent at the Tonbridge School. He was once again an editor for his new school, editing a newsletter, Grapevine. He achieved his A levels in English literature and pure mathematics and was granted a scholarship to Harvard; however, he preferred Oxford over it. At Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Seth pursued Philosophy, Politics and Economics, a subject he continued pursuing for his Master's degree at Stanford University in California. In 1980, he made a trip to Nanjing to do field research for his PhD, and although he could never complete his doctoral thesis, his stay in Nanjing spiked his interest in the Chinese language and culture. During his time there, Seth was deeply entranced by the poetry of 8th Chinese poets Wang Wei and Tu Fu. He said that it was not just the appreciation of nature that he admired in their works but also how they dealt with platonic love. Seth was captivated by the great Chinese literary tradition, which compelled him to study Chinese to understand these works better. Seth often incorporates other cultures in his works. He believes that "just because you are born in certain geography doesn't mean you must restrict yourself to that" ("Celebrating 30 Years of a Suitable Boy: Vikram Seth in Conversation with Shoma Chaudhary"). According to him, no country should ever limit one from exploring one's self and interests as that would be a limitation upon one's self, which is not representative of a democratic country. Thus, Seth never restricted himself to writing; he explored his full potential. He even went on to translate Chinese works to English and wrote poetry during his time at Stanford, which won him the Academy of American Poets Prize. He emphasizes the importance of accurately portraying a culture, era, and community, saying that any member of the said community must resonate with the representation in the book, or else Seth will deem the book a failure regardless of

its gains. Seth has represented various cultures in his works, from Russian to Chinese to Indian, which completely justifies his selection of his work for this research.

Vikram Seth has published three novels and eight poetry books to date. His first collection, *Mappings*, was published in 1981 by Writers Workshop. However, his Travelogue titled *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, published in 1983, launched Seth's career as a writer. After just two years, Seth published *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, which won him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize thanks to its compression and musical aspects. However, real fame did not come to him until the publication of his novel in verse form, which was composed of 590 stanzas in *Onegin* based on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. He was initially influenced by Charles Johnston's translation of the same novel. The novel's publisher, Random House, initially rejected it due to its unusual nature. However, the publishing house accepted it after a resubmission, ensuring that the grand Commonwealth Poetry Prize-winning and Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel was saved from inexistence. Vikram Seth's achievements at this point also put his mother, Leila Seth, who was very concerned for her son's future, which she mentions in her autobiography, *On Balance*. However, Seth was never interested in the tangible rewards of writing; he strived for passion and creativity.

Even though Seth did not aim for money or fame, his magnum opus, *A Suitable Boy*, was about to change the course of his life completely. After moving to India in 1987, he started researching and writing *A Suitable Boy*. Though it was first intended to be a novella, the pages kept increasing, and Seth's confidence kept going low. He felt unsure of the novel's length, which made him self-conscious as

this was his first attempt at writing a novel in prose. However, this revolutionary novel sold over a million copies worldwide, making it the longest English-language novel ever published in a single volume. This novel bagged him the Commonwealth Writers Award, the W.H. Smith Literary Award, and countless praises from national and international critics and readers. The publication of a novel by an Indian author was monumental for India, primarily due to the hype of media it received. In order to conduct accurate research for this novel, Seth had to take a deep dive into Indian culture, religions, customs, politics and society. He recalls making visits to shoemakers in Agra, gathering excessive information on Muslim families in these Hindu-majority states, scoping out the gullies of Delhi, and even going as far as to study Urdu for a better understanding of the Muslim community. (“Celebrating 30 Years of a Suitable Boy: Vikram Seth in Conversation with Shoma Chaudhary”)

The novel's famous opening line, “You too will marry a boy I choose” (Seth 3), was not just a quote from his novel but originated from an actual conversation that Seth overheard. This dialogue between a mother and a daughter fascinated Seth so much that he wrote almost a 1500-word epic inspired by it. The novel may have been largely fictional; it was nonetheless sprinkled with real experiences and people. Seth’s mother commented on the similarity between the novel’s fictional setting and Seth’s childhood city of Patna, with its political figures, the Brahmpur university and the mindset of people in the town. One will also agree that even though there are similarities between Patna and Brahmpur, it can be easily observed that Brahmpur is not just one place but an amalgamation of different north Indian cities.

During Seth's eight-year gap while working on *A Suitable Boy*, he published two more collections written in verse: *All You Who Sleep Tonight* in 1990 and *Beastly Tales from Here and There* in 1991. Seth also published his translated work titled *Three Chinese Poets* in 1992, which was based on the three most celebrated Chinese poets of the 8th century: Li Bai, Wang Wei and Du Fu. After achieving the marvellous feat of *A Suitable Boy*, Seth collaborated with Alec Roth to create *Arion and the Dolphin*, published in 1994. This was not the only music-dense work published by Seth, as it was soon followed by his second prose novel, *An Equal Music* (1999). This novel is based on a violinist dealing with love problems which negatively impact their careers. At around this time, Seth and Salman Rushdie's works were being constantly compared to each other's not only because of the choice to write about post-independent India but also because Rushdie too wrote a romance novel centred around music titled *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Despite the choice of working on similar topics, their approach to it was quite different according to various critics; Rushdie's work was considered magical realism, while Seth's was considered a realist novel with Victorian features. After his first non-fictional work, *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, Seth ventured on to writing his second non-fiction work, *Two Lives*, a biographical piece on his grand uncle and German aunt. Like his other works, Seth once again builds himself into the book through its narrative, which is further affirmed by the publishers in its synopsis, "the third life in the story of *Two Lives*" is Seth's. As Seth said in his interview, all work must be represented well. He tries his absolute best to give this novel a German touch, going as far as imitating the handwriting of old-style German. Little Brown's publishing director, Richard Beswick, who paid 1.3 million pounds in advance for the publication of the book, says in praise of Seth, "I

believe he is someone about whom one can genuinely use the word genius.” Following the publication of his magnificent novel portraying friendship and an era of violence, Seth moved on to publish three more works: his latest non-fiction work, *The Revered Earth* in 2011, a work of poetry called *Summer Requiem: a Book of Poems* in 2015, and finally a children’s fiction titled *The Louse and the Mosquito* in 2020. In 2009, Seth announced that he was working on *A Suitable Boy*’s sequel, *A Suitable Girl*, which will be set in the present times. Seth also said he was working on a short novella covering the timeline between *A Suitable Boy* and *A Suitable Girl*. He states that these novellas will be more factual than fictional, focus on the political and cultural changes that took place over the eight decades, and provide context and background for his intended novel. However, as of 2024, both the novel and the novellas remain unpublished. (Prasad 11)

2.2 Criticism of Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*

Undoubtedly, one of today's most exciting and varied writers is Vikram Seth. He is identified as Salman Rushdie's natural rival because, in his book *Midnight's Children*, he defied the post-colonial paradigm's literary style and inclinations. Since Seth, unlike Rushdie, does not believe in bringing in "the 'rest of India' in the form of a cardboard cutout to showcase to the people lining the streets what 'real India' is actually about," Amitava Kumar observes that Seth's narrative is filled with "a deep feeling for vernacular culture" (Amitava Kumar 50). The depth and scope of the author's investigation into the story's original setting are made possible by Seth's creative recovery of the realist style.

Following the publication of *A Suitable Boy* in 1993, which went on to win the 1994 Commonwealth Writers Prize for best novel, a number of critics offered their

insightful and amusing critiques of the book. An attempt has been made to go over some of the significant critiques in this section.

Some reviewers discuss the novel's nature and theme. For example, H. S. Mohapatra states, "Vikram Seth of *The Golden Gate* fame has chosen to write a good deal old realistic novel about India set in the early 1950s 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." (Mohapatra 313) Seth's endeavour to resurrect the 19th-century realist project is appreciated. It is strange that Seth should define his writings as aesthetic almost entirely in terms of clear communication and a casual tone. The issue is that Seth follows the now widely rejected traditional standards of realism, which include verisimilitude, description accuracy, and detail precision.

According to M. Sivaramkrishna, *A Suitable Boy* set a fiction trend wherein exaggerated marketing claims are made before the actual evaluation of a work. He wholeheartedly concurs with Pico-Iyer's suggestion,

"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). Moreover, 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 wilfully radical." (Sivaramkrishna 23)

H. S. Mohapatra also suggests 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.”
(Mohapatra 313)

One writer in *Frontline* (April 1, 1993) called Seth's use of "detailed realism" a "simple matter of reflectionism" that breaks down the complicated question of realism. The book is less realistic because it works with the "orientalist" project of creating an image of India, where "the bizarre and the strange are the norm," as a reviewer in *Hindu* (August 1, 1993) put it (Mohapatra 316). The book has a lot of "local colour," which proves the author's claim in *The Telegraph* (August 29, 1992) that he has not "exoticized India for the sake of foreigners" to be false (Mohapatra). A review of the book that came out on September 11, 1993, in *The Telegraph* said, "*A Suitable Boy* is singularly lacking in the other virtues of 19th-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." (Mohapatra 315)

These two books, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *A Suitable Boy* have a lot in common. *Sunday Review* (TOI June 20, 1993) said that *A Suitable Boy* has a "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" style like Jane Austen's books (Mohapatra 314). It also has a theme that answers the Austen novel. It's a matter of getting married and wived.

The book starts with a planned marriage and ends with one that is both planned and based on Austen's idea of reasonable love. Seth has tried to make the book more realistic by adding the Austenian matchmaking story to a subcontinent undergoing many changes. India in the 1950s was changed by Nehru's communist ideas and the Industrial Revolution, just like it was changed by the Industrial Revolution in Austen's England. Because people in England and India became more industrialized, they became increasingly greedy for money. This created a lower middle class. This lower middle class includes Mrs Bennett and Mrs Rupa Mehra, who looks a lot like Mrs Bennett but is Indian. It is getting harder and harder for them to find good boys for their girls. Agarwalla says, "Seth, who is basically an English brown Sahib and lives away from the growing hopes and frustrations of the middle class, writes beautifully on this subject." Because of this, he is in the same great line as Austen, Dickens, and Narayan (Agarwalla 12).

Many reviewers talked about how *A Suitable Boy* is written, saying it looks like a European novel. "In form and spirit, *A Suitable Boy* belongs squarely in the great European tradition of the novel," says L.K. Sharma (Sharma). The setting of Calcutta gives Seth a chance to look into the snobbery and promiscuity of the city's upper class. The "covenanted" class of people who are moving up is the centre. People from the West who are into literature love this part of *A Suitable Boy* because it makes them feel like they're back in India. Giles Gordon, Seth's writing agent in London, makes it clear when he talks about how interested people in Britain are in the book. "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 is what it was like living in India under the British- the upwardly mobile characters are aping the ways of the departed British." It is hard for Seth to excuse

the British tastes and palates. The main thing that *A Suitable Boy* has in common with well-known European epic stories from the 1800s is its many characters. David Myers says, "The more substantial similarities of *A Suitable Boy* like the epics of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, or Leo Tolstoy is morally quite out of tune with today's Western craze for finding the elusive meaning of life through losing yourself in passion." (Myers 72). Seth says we should reject our passions and keep our control over ourselves in a whimsical way.

It is clear that Vikram Seth is a writer from the 1800s because, in *A Suitable Boy*, he argues that the meaning of life lies in arranged marriages, giving up sexual demons, and being patient while family members get together and laugh. This idea of family being together is essential for understanding national politics. All of this makes David Myers think of Thomas Mann's Joseph-Tetralogy and the Freudian idea that the sneaky ego has to win over the obsessive desire. "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." (Myers 74)

Viney Kirpal notes in his critique of third-world novels that Seth is unique in his use of narrative style, describing *A Suitable Boy* as having "...the loose, circular, episodic loop-like narrative technique of the third world novel that makes it off from the modern western novel." (Kripal 150). There are several different ways to say this. Some tell stories in fables and folktales, while others use the Puranic style of going off on tangents. Still others have been shaped by the Panchatantra and the epics. Postmodern writers like Ruth Siegel base their books

on the Ramayana's episodic and digressive structure. In the Western sense of the word, many books from this time have no plot.

They do not follow strict logic. They are not tightly structured; they beat around the bush, have reverberations, and do not follow the typical pattern of action and development in a Western book. This is not the case with *A Suitable Boy*. A fairytale, a folktale, an epic, the Panchatantra, or a Ramayana story are all types of stories that Seth does not use. It is easy to see why Seth himself says that his "great novel heroes are people like the Victorian or Chinese novelist of *The Story of the Stone* or Tolstoy." That means he looks up to Jane Austen, Tolstoy, and George Eliot (Seth "The Telegraph Magazine").

Like Tolstoy, who wrote *War and Peace* in St. Petersburg, Vikram Seth chose Calcutta to write about India's intellectual elite in 1951 and 1952.

Seth shows how beautiful, exciting, and grand Calcutta is. Agarwalla says it is just another Vanity Fair where "Byronism and dandyism join hands to create a Victorian aura, separate from the group grievance of the rest of the people." (Agarwalla 56)

He further compares *Hamlet* and *A Suitable Boy*. Agarwalla spots similarities between the chaos of *Hamlet*'s Denmark and the crooked king and Seth's New India and the government. He says that the book *A Suitable Boy* is also about an honest Prime Minister in India in the late 1940s and early 1950s who oversees a crooked government. If *Hamlet* is the beginning of the story of a crooked government, then *A Suitable Boy* is the ending.

Anita Desai, a writer who worked with Vikram Seth, calls his book *A Suitable Boy* a "comfortable comedy." She remarks 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." (Myers 89)

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.' (Agarwalla 13)

From what we have discussed, it's clear that many reviewers in India and the West have looked at different parts of *A Suitable Boy*. Most of them said what they thought about Seth's greatness and how he wrote the book. However, very few people have said what they think about Seth's way of telling stories. Many Indian reviewers read the book, but Shyam Agarwalla was the only one who talked about *A Suitable Boy* and gave a thematic analysis of it. However, he, too, does not look at the method closely enough. (*Vikram Seth: The Novelist and His a Suitable Boy*).

2.3 Why did Vikram Seth Write *A Suitable Boy*?

At the time of *A Suitable Boy*'s publications, two significant occurrences were taking place; the first was the National Emergency of India initiated by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and the second was the rise of Hindutva as a national ideology due to Hinduism being the religion of the majority. A new political party gained

momentum after Independence. This party was known as the Bharatiya Janata Party. As mentioned, Seth was a firm follower of the Nehruvian ideology of Secularism and felt the need to write a novel in response to the ongoing political developments. It is said that historical novels often reconstruct a version of the national past as a response to contemporary issues in the world. This was precisely what Seth intended to do.

Seth's idea of a nation was heavily guided by Nehru's vision for India, as mentioned in his famous book *Discovery of India*. He believed India could only be represented as a secular and multicultural nation. Failing to represent this plurality of India through an empathetic, equal, and secular lens would result in India losing its very essence. Hence, Seth's portrayal of India refrained from picking sides and penalizing any religious faith; rather, he showed the vices of corruption, greed, and ignorance.

A Suitable Boy, being an Indian novel written in English, is also a conscious choice made in order to aid his ideas. Sudipta Kaviraj says that adopting the English Language helped the nation-building process regarding Nehru's state policy. English also became the symbol of development in New India. English was no longer the tongue of only the colonizer, but dominated every official framework of India (like the constitution). It became a symbol of status for upper-middle-class Indians so that they could be part of the elite. Hence, writing in English became essential for Seth.

Seth wanted to answer the question of 'Indianness'. Most people at the time of the publication started equating 'Hinduism' with Indianness. This issue received the limelight during the Ram Temple movement in 1991 when the Babri Masjid

was demolished with the reason that it was built on the sacred Hindu ground of Ayodhya. This started the communal conflict similar to the Partition. It was a sad state to observe after almost 50 years of Independence. Seth wrote this novel as an eye-opener to those destroying the nation in the name of politics disguised as faith (Srivastava).

Chapter 3

Echoes of an Unsuitable Era: Tracing Post-colonial India

Through Indian English Literature

A Suitable Boy uses a different style to narrate its story: realism. Seth “imitates” the foundational history from the point of view of secular nationalism. It follows the proper order of tumultuous events that occurred in real life. For example, the first general election followed the Zamindari Abolition Act. The representation of Seth’s “New India” closely resembles India's chaotic history. Seth took memorable and iconic moments of history and created a post-modern “epic saga”. It is more symbolic and is a naturalized metaphor for what it stands for. Hence, to understand the narrative better, one must acquaint themselves with the context or historical background of the novel. This chapter solely provides background and context to the novel so that it aids in the understanding of the paper.

3.1.1 Independence of India

The struggle for India’s independence started way before Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi initiated his non-cooperation movement with Ahimsa; it started with the birth of the Indian National Congress, credit of which was mainly given to a retired civil servant named A. O Hume. However, Congress was not formed due to one particular individual; it was created out of need because of the extensive political, social and economic issues India faced due to colonialism. Hume noticed how the Indians struggled to represent themselves formally and explained the necessity to form the organization in his own words, “A safety valve for the escape of great and growing forces generated by our actions was urgently

needed”; hence he decided to incorporate order and law to these formless, nocuous revolutions. He formed the group named “Indian National Union” in 1884 after writing to “Graduates of Calcutta University.” The group’s name was later changed to the Indian National Congress, which the British government initially supported; however, after learning of its eventual goals, it immediately took back its support. The organization was often ridiculed as a “factory of sedition” and was termed as a “microscopic minority” of the whole population of the country. Multiple organizations were created before the Indian National Congress, such as the British Indian Society and the Bombay Association. The Indian National struggle had three phases: the early phase was called the phase of the Moderates (1885-1905), the middle phase was called the extremist phase, and the final phase was called the phase of Mahatma Gandhi. The first phase included scholarly men loyal to the British government. “Indians were British citizens with a birthright to be free and that they had every right to claim an honorable fulfillment of our British pledged rights....It is futile to tell me that we must wait till all the people are ready. The British people did not -wait for their parliament....Self-government is the only and chief remedy. In self-government is our hope, strength and greatness. I am a Hindu, a Muslim, a Parsi, but above all, an Indian First.” these were the words spoken by one of the Moderate leaders, Dadabhai Naoroji. The moderates believed that achieving self-government while aligning with the rules and regulations of the British was the best way to attain freedom. They believed in peaceful and constitutional methods to achieve their goals. However, some members did not agree with the rules of the Moderates and decided to create their methods of attaining freedom; this sub-section of members was later referred to as Extremists.

Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were the extremist group's leaders. During this time, there was an upheaval in the partition of Bengal, and many Bengalis, including Rabindranath Tagore, protested against this. It was around this time that the Swadeshi Movement came into existence. Many leaders, including Aurobindo Ghose, were arrested for protests and attempts to educate the masses. Important female figures like Annie Besant played integral roles in the Home Rule Movement (1916). This led to many youths being involved in acts of terrorism and violence, which only changed with the introduction of a new leader, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a barrister from South Africa. Gandhi was a great political leader who honestly tried to understand what the masses wanted and needed. When the Rowlatt Act was introduced, Gandhi actively opposed it. The Jallianwallah Bagh massacre (1919) shook the leaders to the core, compelling them to find alternative and effective measures to protest against the British. Around the same time, the Khilafat movement was also launched to protect the Turkish Khalifa from Great Britain.

In the 1920s, Gandhi started his Non-Cooperation movement, wherein people surrendered their titles and posts and avoided using any government-run facility. During this movement, Gandhi asked everyone to follow Ahimsa or Non-violence strictly; however, due to the incident at Chauri-Chaura (1922), this movement came to a sudden halt. Gandhi launched another effective movement called the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, proving one of the most essential movements for India's Independence. A historical episode that occurred during this time was the opposition to the Simon Commission, wherein people greeted the commission with a black flag and slogans saying, "Simon, go back" Many people ended up losing their lives to the Lathi charge that occurred. There was much

internal conflict of interest within the organization during this time; some leaders wanted dominion status, whereas some wanted complete independence from the British. When their needs were unmet, the Congress Working Committee launched a nationwide Civil Disobedience movement under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's Dandi March was an essential step in this process, where they focused on violating the Salt Law. Understanding the intensity of this step, the government banned the committee and arrested Nehru and Gandhi.

During the final phase, however, many freedom fighters took the violent route and ended up killing British officials. Bhagat Singh, one of these young fighters, was hanged for throwing a grenade during a meeting at Delhi's Central Assembly. Due to countless protests throughout the country, the ban was eventually removed, and Gandhi attended the second Round Table discussion in London. However, this was also a failure, and Gandhi resumed his civil disobedience movement. In 1935, the Government of India Act was launched, slowing down the intense revolution. However, the Muslim League and the Congress were experiencing a fallout. The Muslim League disagreed with Congress's claims to represent all Indians, and the Congress, on the other hand, stated that the former only cared about Muslim people's interests. There was a start of a conflict between Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the members of Congress, which was the start of a very traumatic and heart-wrenching separation of two communities as Jinnah announced the plans to create a new country for Muslims, only called Pakistan. Due to the ongoing World War II, the British refused to grant India dominion status, and with the Cripps Mission, the British tried to gain the cooperation of the Indian people for the war. However, this attempt failed as Congress realized Britain did not respect India's opinions and needs. The enraged and offended Congress initiated the "Quit

India” movement on 8 August 1942 with the help of Gandhi. While Britain was discussing handing over the power to India, Jinnah opposed sharing control with the Indian National Congress and initiated Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946, which resulted in communal riots in North India. The final British Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, revealed plans on 3 June 1947 to divide the British Indian Empire into Islamic Pakistan, which would be split into east and west wings on either side of India, and a secular India. • Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister of independent India when it became a nation on 15 August 1947, at midnight. In Calcutta, Gandhi adamantly opposed the notion of a split India and spent the day fasting and praying. Pakistan absorbed the Muslims living in northwest and northeast India. Conflicts between Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus turned violent after that. Conflict over the Kashmir region led to the First Indo-Pakistani War, which broke out in 1947 and lasted until 1949. Both countries were granted complete authority, with the governor-general serving as the king's envoy and the king-emperor crowned as the head of state for India and Pakistan. Veteran Congressman Chakravarti Rajgopalachari succeeded Mountbatten in 1948. As Governor General of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah was led by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan (Chandra et al.)

3.1.2 Hindu-Muslim Conflict: Partition of India and Pakistan

In recent times, one of the discussed topics in India is the ongoing conflict between India’s two religious communities: Hindus and Muslims. This conflict is not recent but a centuries-old dispute between the two communities, aggravated by the Partition of India in 1947. According to an article by The Wire, describing the conflict as “communal” is inappropriate as it does not address the involvement of

national identity. It says that many scholars believe that the conflict is more “ethnic” or “racial” than communal because the Hindus hold the Muslim community responsible for the decline and devaluation of the Hindu Aryan race. Thus, they view Muslims and even Christians in India as alien to the Hindu discourse, rejecting them and considering them smaller in significance. (in-text) In other words, the animosity between the communities goes beyond the recent clashes. It is a deep-rooted dispute traced up to the Islamic Conquest during the Middle Ages. One event, however, completely and permanently destroyed any chances of finding a common ground or reconciliation was the Partition of India.

Britain announced in 1946 that due to the lack of funds to administer the country and because of the constant protests from Indians, it would grant India independence. However, while Britain agreed to fix one issue, it created several more issues. One such issue was the turmoil created between the Muslims and Hindus within the country. They divided political seats and made categories for elections based on religion. There was fear amongst the minority who were Muslims regarding their future in a Hindu-dominated country. As mentioned in the previous section, politicians like Jinnah had different plans for Muslims than what Gandhi and Nehru intended. Partition seemed like the quickest way to settle this issue in such trying times. Thus, British lawyer Sir Cyril Radcliffe devised a plan to divide the country based on which religion dominates which part of India. Hence, the southern and central portions of the country were determined to be secular India, and the northeast and northwest were to be parts of the new Muslim Country that Jinnah wanted. However, the parties involved in this decision-making completely ignored the fact that these communities were spread all over the country. Hence, when the Partition process started, there was large-scale bloodshed and forced

migration. Around 15 million people migrated and left their hometowns while facing communal violence in the process, for example, the killing of 2000 people in Calcutta. According to Dr Eleanor Newbiggin, both sides had their terror groups who would forcefully remove people from their land. This led to the death of around 1 million people due to violence and even diseases. Similar to every war situation, women were the most vulnerable section as they were raped, mutilated or abducted.

The Partition was successful but at a heavy price of a million lives. Though the incident occurred in 1947, its legacy continues to create havoc in the regions involved. India, Pakistan, and, to some extent, China are still debating over the control of Kashmir. The majorities in both regions steadily gain power while the minorities in the region are oppressed and tortured. As Prof Navtej Purewal suggested, India could have been unified if we had had a loose federation of states instead of having a unified state. This would have ensured that such a traumatic event had never taken place in the first place. (Navtej Kaur Purewal and Kalra)

A Suitable Boy embarks deeply into the Hindu-Muslim conflict. There are several episodes of insurgency in the book, which are represented from the point of view of middle-class people. Seth showcases these with a degree of uncertainty. He comments about riots in the following way: "Some riots are caused; some bring themselves into being" (Seth 245). He portrays them to be spontaneously occurring. In the novel, he mentions a fight between Muslims who storm to the construction of a Hindu temple, but the narrator states that he is unaware of how the crowd came to be formed. He strips the crowd of its human attributes and gives it animal-like traits. Seth perfectly captures the uncertainty and chaos that ensue after independence. He showcases how caste and religion shape and outline the politics

of India and shows that even though the country became a democracy, it was still unable to achieve secularism. (BBC)

3.1.3 Courtesans System India

Women's histories were often neglected or not discussed as much when documenting the past, especially the lives of women who belonged to the marginalized sections. Courtesans or Tawaifs were such women whose stories were often underrepresented. Moreover, even if they were represented, it was hardly in a positive light and mostly deemed these women as immoral. Before British rule, there was a specific demarcation between these women based on their class, caste and skill. For example, there were the court musicians called Baijis in Bengal, and the Devdasis of North India, who were the temple worships and the word translated to 'servants of God', and there were also sex workers who belonged to the lower classes (in-text). Even though they were held in high prestige, their value in society deteriorated during the imperial rule. The demarcation between these categories started to blur out, and even the highly regarded and skilled Baijis were seen as sex workers.

The Courtesans were musically and artistically skilled women integral to the royal courts. They were also known as Tawaifs or Baijis and mostly enjoyed economic independence. Their beauty was equally proportional to their good etiquette and talents. Besides entertaining the royal court, the Courtesans were also responsible for teaching tehzeeb to the young princes, as they were considered proficient in the art of conversation. Poets often scout for courtesans who would read their poetry because of the latter's remarkable talent in music and dance. Being a part of a small percentage of women who were financially independent in an era

that was heavily male-driven, they could start their businesses by selling ittar or creating handmade artefacts and clothes (Kaur).

These women were the epitome of grace, beauty and talent; however, with the inception of British rule, these women were gradually pushed into the ghettoized red-light lifestyle, wherein the word tawaif started being used negatively. The British applied their Victorian rules of monogamy and the practice of having mistresses, which affected the reputation of these Courtesans. At times, certain historical writings would use prostitutes and tawaif interchangeably, completely ignoring the hierarchies which existed then. Before British rule, these Courtesans depended on the royal patronage and mercy of the Nawabs. Hence, when the Nawabi rule ended, these women would have to fend for themselves and make do with the little income that came their way. The colonial depictions of Courtesan were very sexual and erotic; they failed to represent all aspects of her being, like her skill, her lifestyle and her community. Courtesans were not just royal entertainers; they also performed on joyous occasions and were the most integral part of these events. Some of the lower-position courtesans indulged in sex work; however, even they had to acquire the right amount of skill in music, art and dance. Some popular dance forms today, like Kathak and Thumri, were popularized by courtesans. Despite these women's ability to generate income, they did not enjoy the same property rights as men. The state often seized their properties after they passed away, which meant that owning and selling land was not possible for these women. Crime against these women was also handled leniently as they were seen more as objects than individuals. Elder Courtesan often adopted young girls in hopes of benefiting from them in their adult years. Young singers and dancers were often recruited and trained by the head Courtesan called the Chandhrayan. These

elderly courtesans were funded by the kings or royalty so that they could easily have access to young, trained courtesans. During the rule of Nizam, women had to adhere strictly to rules like the practice of *pardha*. Women often lived pretty restrictively during these times, but courtesans comparatively lived a more liberal life. After the Nawabi rule, the British continued engaging with the courtesans; however, they were equated with prostitutes or, as they said, *bazaar randis* or *thakahis*, who entertained lower-class people.

The soldiers, according to them, had no *Tehzeeb* and appreciation for art; all they cared about was sexual pleasures. Due to the lack or loss of patronage, the courtesans had to find other means to make a living. Some of these women would opt for full-time sex work, and others searched for opportunities in films. Jaddanbai, the mother of Nargis, was one of the first *tawaifs* to enter the film industry. Fatima Begum, her daughter Zubeida and Wahidan were some of the earlier *tawaifs* who transitioned into the film industry. These women's lives also inspired literature and cinema, and they wrote and created countless movies based on them. For example, *Umroa Jaan Ada*, a novel by Mirza Hadi, delved into these courtesans' lives and exposed the associated crimes. Movies like *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Mandi* (1983) explored the grim realities of these women in a changing society.

During the freedom struggle, especially during the Gandhian phase, women were encouraged to stand up for themselves and their country. However, when it came to Courtesan, people believed that they were not virtuous enough to be included in the nationalist discourse; hence, their rights were not defended adequately. Rekha Pande, in her paper titled *Writing the history of women in the*

margins: The Courtesans in India mentions an editorial piece published in Chaand, which defined a proper woman as

“...she should be free from the present ignorance, bad influences and ill feelings...she should not observe purdah, but this does not mean that she should go out laden with jewels, unnecessarily attracting men’s attention...she should know how to fight oppression and to defend herself with her own hands, singing and keeping merry are her ornaments, but only songs that become a respectable woman, she should be as virtuous as a heroic wife and as courageous as a mother of lions and bear sons who will free India from servitude”

This showed how restrictive and biased ‘New India’ indeed was. Although women were promised freedom and representation in the country, it was not valid for all women. Many courtesans who lived a luxurious life during the Nawabi time were now just reduced to low-paid sex workers suffering from societal discrimination and stigma. (Pande)

3.1.4 Zamindari Abolition Act

The Zamindari system, introduced by the British in pre-independence India, was a land revenue scheme that fundamentally altered the agrarian landscape of the subcontinent. Originating in 1793, the system was a result of Lord Cornwallis’s “Permanent Settlement,” designed to maximize land revenue for the British Crown. Under this system, zamindars (landowners) were made responsible for collecting taxes from peasants, retaining a small portion of the revenue (11%) for themselves, with the remainder (89%) going to the British. This arrangement effectively made

zamindars intermediaries between the British government and the peasantry, granting them significant control over large territories and the lives of tenant farmers.

The British instituted the Zamindari system not only for fiscal benefits but also as a strategic method to exert control over the vast Indian peasantry, thereby stabilizing their rule. Zamindars, now vested with land ownership rights, had the power to levy rents, transfer, and lease their lands, which solidified their socio-economic status and influence. However, this arrangement led to the exploitation of peasants and the perpetuation of a feudal structure that was at odds with the welfare of the agrarian population.

In post-independence India, the newly formed government recognized the need to dismantle the Zamindari system as part of broader land reforms to correct historical injustices and promote agricultural productivity. The abolition of Zamindari was essential for eliminating the intermediary layer between the state and the cultivators, which led to exploitation and inefficiencies in land use. The Indian Constitution, through its First Amendment in 1951, made significant changes, including the introduction of Articles 31A and 31B along with the 9th Schedule, to ensure the legal framework supported the abolition of the Zamindari system and protected agrarian reforms from legal challenges.

Several states, including Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, and Bombay, enacted Zamindari Abolition Acts in 1949, following the recommendations of the G.B. Pant-led Uttar Pradesh Abolition Committee. These acts aimed to transfer the rights, interests, and titles of zamindars to the state, freeing the peasants from their control and initiating a more equitable land distribution. The

primary goal was to empower the actual cultivators by making them owners of the land they farmed, thus incentivizing them to improve agricultural productivity.

Despite the constitutional amendments and legislative efforts, the transition was met with resistance and legal challenges from the zamindars, who saw their property rights and socio-economic status threatened. However, landmark legal judgments in the early 1950s upheld the constitutional amendments and the agrarian reform laws, affirming the government's right to implement such reforms for the public good.

The abolition of the Zamindari system brought about several positive outcomes, including increased agricultural productivity, the eradication of bonded labour, and a significant reduction in poverty levels among the peasantry. It aimed to create a more equitable society by redistributing land to those who worked on it, thus addressing the skewed land ownership patterns that had prevailed for centuries.

However, the abolition also faced limitations. The ambiguity in the definition of personal cultivation allowed some zamindars to retain significant landholdings. Moreover, the emergence of a new class of intermediaries, who leased land from the new owners under informal arrangements, continued the cycle of exploitation to some extent.

Today, while the Zamindari system has been officially abolished, its legacy can still be felt in certain rural areas, where land ownership patterns and agrarian relations bear the imprint of the past. Fully realizing the goals of agrarian reform and land redistribution continues to be challenging, reflecting the deep-seated complexities of land and society in India.

In conclusion, abolishing the Zamindari system was a monumental step in India's agrarian reform journey, which was initiated to rectify historical injustices and promote a more equitable distribution of land. Despite its challenges and limitations, the move towards dismantling this system marked a significant shift towards empowering the actual tillers of the land and enhancing agricultural productivity. The ongoing process of reform and the efforts to address the remnants of the Zamindari system highlight the complex interplay of socio-economic factors in shaping India's agrarian landscape.

One of the most notable accomplishments of Nehru's legislation, the Zamindari Abolition Act, is shown in the novel as the catalyst for one of the most significant social and economic shifts in post-independence India. The story represents the shift from feudalism to the emergence of the middle class, which is often regarded as a pivotal point in the evolution of a contemporary industrialized state. (saumya)

3.1.5 First General Election of India

In 1951, India, a nascent democracy emerging from the shadows of British colonial rule, embarked on the most ambitious electoral exercise of its time. The country, with its rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and religions, had just endured the painful partition that led to the creation of Pakistan and the largest mass migration in human history. Amidst this backdrop of upheaval and transformation, the decision to hold the first general election was not merely administrative but a bold declaration of India's commitment to democratic ideals.

The election, as chronicled by historian Ramchandra Guha, was infused with the spirit of a new beginning, epitomized by Prime Minister Jawaharlal

Nehru's rallying cry, "Naya Hindustan Zindabad" (Long live the new India). This was not just a political campaign but a nationwide endeavour to awaken a collective consciousness towards building a new nation-state that was democratic at its core, inclusive in its approach, and unfettered by the chains of colonialism.

With an electorate of 175 million, of whom more than 80% were illiterate, the logistical challenges of conducting the election were staggering. The task of orchestrating this colossal exercise fell on the shoulders of Sukumar Sen, India's first Chief Election Commissioner. India's geography, with its vast expanses, remote villages, and rugged terrains, posed a formidable challenge. However, the commitment to ensuring every eligible voter had the opportunity to cast their ballot was unwavering.

The election was groundbreaking for several reasons. It was the first time universal adult suffrage was implemented in India, allowing every adult citizen, regardless of gender, caste, religion, or education, the right to vote. This was a radical departure from the restricted franchise under British rule and a significant leap towards inclusivity and equality. The decision to extend the vote to all adults was a statement of faith in the ordinary people of India, an affirmation that the newly independent nation would build its foundations on the principles of democracy and equality.

Preparation for the election began immediately after independence in 1947, with the mammoth task of creating electoral rolls that accurately reflected India's diverse population. This was a crucial step in ensuring the inclusivity and fairness of the electoral process. The Representation of the People Act of 1950 laid down the framework for voter eligibility, while the subsequent Act of 1951 elaborated on

election machinery, vote counting, and related procedures. These legislative measures were instrumental in shaping India's electoral landscape.

One of the most commendable aspects of the election was the efforts to integrate refugees, displaced by partition, and women into the electorate. Special provisions were made to include refugees in the electoral rolls, demonstrating a commitment to inclusivity and compassion. Similarly, directives ensuring women could register in their names rather than as someone's wife or mother marked a significant step towards recognizing and affirming women's rights and identities in the democratic process. Though faced with challenges and resistance, these measures highlighted a conscious effort to dismantle patriarchal norms and ensure broader participation in the electoral process.

The logistical undertaking of the election was monumental. Over 224,000 polling booths were set up nationwide, using government and private buildings and makeshift structures in remote areas. The innovation of using multiple ballot boxes, one for each party with its symbol marked on it, simplified the voting process for the largely illiterate electorate. Indelible ink to prevent double voting was another innovation that has become a hallmark of Indian elections.

The first general election was about the mechanics of voting and the vibrancy and diversity of political competition. The Congress Party, led by Nehru, was the dominant force, but the electoral field was crowded with various parties representing various ideologies. The Communist Party of India, Bharatiya Jan Sangh (the precursor to today's Bharatiya Janata Party), and other parties like the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party and the Socialist Party, offered the electorate distinct choices, reflecting the pluralistic fabric of Indian society.

The campaigning period was marked by Nehru's extensive tours across the country, during which he passionately articulated his vision for a new India free from the scourges of communalism, casteism, and inequality. His appeals to the electorate were not just political but deeply ideological, aimed at fostering a sense of unity and purpose among India's diverse population.

The elections took place over several months, accommodating the country's vast geography and varied climatic conditions. The turnout was remarkable, with an estimated 60% of eligible voters casting their ballots - a testament to the people's enthusiasm for participating in the democratic process. The logistical challenges of reaching remote areas, from the snowy mountains of Himachal Pradesh to the dense forests of Orissa, were overcome with determination and ingenuity. The use of camels in desert areas and the mobilization of tribal chiefs in Manipur to support the electoral process are anecdotes that underscore the sheer will to ensure the success of this democratic exercise.

The election results solidified the Congress Party's position as the dominant political force, with Nehru at its helm. However, the diverse political landscape ensured that voices across the ideological spectrum found representation. The Communist Party of India emerged as the second-largest party, marking the beginning of its influence in Indian politics. Though not as successful, other parties played crucial roles in shaping the political discourse.

The first general election was a watershed moment in India's history, laying the foundation for the world's largest democracy. It was an affirmation of India's commitment to democratic principles and its belief in the power of its people to shape their destiny. The successful conduct of the elections, against the backdrop

of recent independence, partition, and the integration of princely states, was a testament to the resilience and determination of the Indian people and their leaders. It set a precedent for future elections and established democratic practices that have endured and evolved over the decades.

In retrospect, the first general election was not just an electoral exercise but a profound statement of national identity, sovereignty, and democratic aspiration. It was an emphatic declaration that India, despite its diversity and complexities, would tread the path of democracy, seeking to embody the ideals of justice, equality, and liberty for all its citizens. (Munjal)

3.1.6 Nehruvian Ideology

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's destiny during its formative years. His vision for India, often referred to as Nehruvian ideology, is a comprehensive framework that encompasses political, economic, and social dimensions.

Nehruvian ideology is characterized by its commitment to secularism, socialism, and non-alignment. Nehru envisioned India as a secular state where religion and state would remain separate entities, ensuring that India's diverse religious communities coexisted peacefully. Economically, he was influenced by socialist principles, advocating for state-led industrialization and establishing a mixed economy where both the private sector and the state played significant roles. Politically, Nehru's strategy of non-alignment during the Cold War positioned India as a leader among newly independent nations, steering clear of the polarized global power structure.

Nehru's staunch secularism was a response to the religious diversity of India and the partition's communal violence. He believed that for India to emerge as a modern nation, it had to transcend communal divisions and promote a secular ethos. This commitment to secularism was enshrined in the Indian Constitution, which declares India a secular state, ensuring freedom of religion and equality before the law for all citizens, irrespective of their faith. Nehru's vision was to create an inclusive society where diversity and communal harmony were celebrated.

Economically, Nehru was influenced by the socialist model, which he believed was most suitable for addressing India's pressing issues of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. He initiated the Planning Commission in 1950 to guide state-led industrialization and oversee infrastructure development. Nehru's industrial policy focused on building heavy industries under state ownership. At the same time, the private sector was also encouraged to contribute to the economy within a regulatory framework—this approach aimed at balanced regional development, equitable distribution of wealth, and eradicating extreme poverty.

On the international stage, Nehru's policy of non-alignment was revolutionary. Amidst the Cold War's geopolitical tensions, India, under Nehru's leadership, chose not to align with either the Western bloc led by the United States or the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union. Instead, India pursued a path of non-alignment, advocating for peace and cooperation among nations. This policy positioned India as a significant voice for the Global South, advocating for decolonization, disarmament, and a more equitable international order.

Nehru's ideologies and policies laid the foundations for modern India, steering the country through its initial and tumultuous years of independence.

Despite criticisms and challenges, his emphasis on secularism has remained a cornerstone of India's democratic ethos. While achieving mixed results, the economic policies propelled India towards industrialization and played a crucial role in the nation's development trajectory.

However, Nehruvian ideology has also faced criticism. The emphasis on heavy industries is argued to have neglected agriculture and rural development, leading to uneven economic growth. The public sector's inefficiencies and the license raj system, which required businesses to obtain government licenses, have been criticized for stifling entrepreneurship and economic dynamism. Critics often stated that Nehruvians focused on earning global respect for India and its heritage while ensuring the country remains independent and uses its military carefully and morally, promoting strategic caution; however, they neglected to emphasize the international appreciation of Hinduism. These Hindu nationalists prefer self-reliance over global economic integration and have mixed feelings about military power, believing in the potential for Hindu principles to make military force unnecessary eventually. Top of Form

Nehruvian ideology, with its emphasis on secularism, socialism, and non-alignment, has profoundly influenced India's development path. While not without its shortcomings, Nehru's vision and policies were instrumental in laying the groundwork for a modern, secular, and democratic India that sought to balance economic development with social equity. As India continues to evolve, Nehru's legacy remains a subject of study, debate, and reflection, highlighting the complexities of nation-building in a diverse and pluralistic society.

We see how Seth presents Nehru's secular vision for his country in the novel in the 1950s era. It is entirely oblivious to the future of BJP nationalism in India, which strays from the secular vision of Nehru. Even though Seth showcases the disputes between the communities and sections of Indian society, the novel still functions on Nehruvian ideology where minorities and majorities are represented equally. (NBR)

3.2 Representation in Post-colonial Indian English Literature

The history of the Indian English novel can be roughly split into two periods: before and after freedom. Since Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* came out in 1864, the number of Indian English novels published before freedom has been slow. During this time, most writers were influenced by Gandhianism and nationalism. On one hand, their novels showed social problems like poverty, illiteracy, rites and rituals, and bonds and bondages. On the other hand, they used their works to show how the East and West met and to spread the nationalist ideas of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. While R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao both focused on writing about social and national problems in their books, Raja Rao went against the grain by giving Indian philosophy much room to grow in *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*.

People who read novels before freedom were interested in them because they showed how society and politics were changing, which caught their attention. Many of Mulk Raj Anand's novels from this time period are about social change, like how the untouchables, landless peasants, tea garden workers, and factory workers are mistreated and exploited. *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and Bud*, and *Big Heart* are essential stops on Anand's journey to change society. One

reviewer, Aniah Gowda, says that these books were so focused on social reforms that the author is the most dedicated writer, and the writing is like propaganda. Bhavani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* looks at the social and economic effects of the Bengal famine in the early 1940s.

R. K. Narayan started writing about Malgudi with *Swami & Friends* in 1933. He gave the book of social reforms a new dimension and brought back Hardy's tradition of regionalism. Narayan, like Anand, was interested in Indian characters and settings. As M.K. Naik says, "He was a single-minded practitioner of the novel of local colour." (Naik). However, he wrote his best work after India got its independence when the small-town ironies of his microcosm turned into an awareness of the existential irony of human nature and life. Anand included lower-class and upper-class people as main characters in his books. Narayan always focused on Mundane people. He cares a lot about regular people, as he named many of his essential books after regular people: *Mr Sampath*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *The Financial Expert*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, and *the Painter of Signs*. Even though Anand and R.K. Narayan wrote a lot about travel and other cultures, they chose to write about the social facts of Indian life in their books and never included any foreign characters or situations in their stories. Raja Rao, the last of the "Big Three," made a name for himself by writing *The Serpent and the Rope*, which had both Indian and non-Indian characters that he handled very well. This book started a trend of describing strange situations or people in fiction. The idea of an east-west meeting

Those events in this book started a trend of writing about how Asian and Western people and societies interact.

So, before India got its independence, Indian English fiction explored nationalist ideas, social change, the meeting of East and West, the decline of values, conflict between rural and urban areas, the fight for freedom, and the plight of the untouchable and landless poor. The Big Three—M.R. Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao—ruled the literary world, and their work helped the book become a more popular way to show how people live. In Indian English novels written before independence, the fight for freedom was one of the main themes. Even after India was freed, some novelists kept writing about this theme. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Kushwant Singh's second book, was a mix of satire and faith that told the story of the fight for freedom. The fight for freedom during the Gandhian era is limited in Chaman Nahal's "*The Crown and the Loincloth*" because it mixes the real and the imagined, the sad and the funny and the ironic. This theme is also present in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, though the book focuses on making past events seem more romantic.

The harmful effects of Partition moved some Indian-English writers to write moving stories about this unstable political event in their made-up worlds. Some well-known authors in this category are Khushwant Singh, Attia Hosain, Manohar Malgaonker, Balchand V. Rajan, Chaman Nahal, and Raj Gill. Khushwant is the first author to use this theme to tell a thought-provoking story about the traumas that both Muslims and Hindus went through after the split. His first book, *Train to Pakistan*, is the most influential book ever written about Partition. It shows

this terrible political event in a way that makes you think. Like Khushwant Singh, Raj Gill Nahal's book *The Rape* is about the times before and after Partition.

In the same way, Chaman Nahal's book *Azadi* is consumed with giving a complete account of this political trauma. As lousy side effects of Partition, the book also shows how values decline, and systems fall apart. Balchandran Rajan's first book, *The Dark Dancer*, tries to bring together the ideas of Partition and meet people from East and West. However, because the main focus was on the meeting of East and West, Rajan did not handle this theme as well or as effectively as Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal did. *A Bend in the Ganges*, a well-known book by Manohar Malgaonkar about Partition, shows how terrible it was. In his book *Ashes & Petals*, H.S. Gill writes about the most disturbing part of Partition: how young girls are killed by their dads after being attacked by extremists. Attia Hosain is proud to be the only woman author whose only book, *Sun Light on a Broken Column*, shows Partition romantically.

A few Indian English writers who wrote after independence were influenced by politics and history to write books with political events and historical facts as central themes. When she first came out, Nayantara Sahgal was known as the best political writer in the history of Indian English novels. Compared to other people her age, she is most interested in politics. She did a great job writing about important political figures and problems in her novels. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *This Time of the Morning* (1968), and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) are her books. There are many excellent historical novels, but some of the most important ones are *The Devil's Wind* and *The Sea Hawk* by Malgaonkar, *The Sword of Tipu Sultan* by Bhagwan S. Gidwani, *The Monument* by Ahmed Ma Akhtar, *Ambapali*

by Raina, *Single in the Wheel* by Modak, *Nurjahan* by Jafa, and *The Golden Honeycomb* by Kamala Markandaya.

Indian English writers who wrote after independence were more interested in the east-west encounter than any other theme. *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao, *All About the Hatter* by G.V. Desai, *The Nowhere Man*, *Some Inner Fury*, *Possession*, and *The Coffer Dams* by Kamala Markandaya, *Combat of Shadows* by Manohar Malgaonkar, *Too Long in the West* by B. Rajan all wrote a lot about this theme. Most of these books are about how an Indian feels when returning home after living abroad. Some other books look at a different aspect of East-West encounters: the problems and difficulties that Indians faced when they tried to fit in with the new society.

Another important thing about the post-Independence books written between the 1950s and 1980s is that they changed the focus from problems in other countries to problems in the author's own country. The Big Three writers wrote about personal problems in their books, but that does not mean they were committed to existential themes as novelists. Anita Desai and Arun Joshi made a name for themselves in the history of the Indian English novel by writing about people's issues in great detail. In his books, Arun Joshi writes about existential problems like the search for identity, feeling alone, not having a place to call home, and life not having any purpose. Before he died, books like "*The Foreigner*," "*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*," "*The Last Labyrinth*," and "*Adult*" came out. However, in his last book, *The City and the River*, which came out after he died, he stopped writing about existential problems. He started writing about the political situation in India during the Period of Emergency under Indira Gandhi. However, Anita Desai never

wrote about politics like Arun Joshi did in his most recent novel. She did a great job of exploring the deepest parts of the human mind, plagued by existential problems and situations. In her well-known books, like *Journey to Ithaca* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai has written about identity, feeling alone, and not having a place to call home. Like Joshi and Anita Desai's books, *Confessions of an Indian Woman*, *Easter*, and *She and He* by Shastri Brata are about feeling alone, not having a place to call home, and searching for meaning pointlessly. Existentialism can also be found in Nayantara Sahgal's political stories.

Since India gained its independence, one of the most important themes that Indian English writers have been writing about is feminine sensibility. The Big Three started writing about this theme, but it was not as crucial in books written before freedom as in books written after 1950. While Raja Rao's books, especially *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, show what a perfect woman should be like based on our texts, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan did something about the plight of women. Anand's "*The Old Woman and the Cow*" shows Gauri as a cow-like figure who is submissive and quiet. Even though she is obedient, her husband treats her horribly. He cruelly kicks her out of the house and sells her to Seth. In *Guide*, *The Dark Room*, and *The Painter of Signs*, R.K. Narayana writes about women's feelings. The change in how people felt about women after independence has increased their social standing. They are no longer seen as less important than men. This subject has now become the most important thing to most Indian English women writers who lived after independence. Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, and Manju Kapoor are some of the most well-known authors in this category. Some

writers, like Bhawani Bhattacharya, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Sarakia, have also written about women's subjugation and its problems.

The trend of Magic Realism, which was noticeably absent from books written before independence, became the most popular type after freedom. As Magic Realism grew, the practice of social realism became less intense. As M.K. Naik says, Magic Realism is a jealous lady, and once you move in with her, social realism is a guest you do not want. *All About Hatter* by Desai is the best example of Magic Realism. After India gained its independence, most authors wrote in the style of Magic Realism that G.V. Desai got stronger when Salman Rushdie worked with it after G.V. Desai. *The Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's first book that won the Booker of Bookers Prize, is an excellent example of the Magic Realism style. Even though he used this method in later books, like *Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, it did not work as well for him as it did in *The Midnight's Children*. Most well-known examples of Magic Realism are *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor, *The Memory of Elephants* by Boman Desai, *The Crow Chronicles* by Ranjit Lal, *The Circle of Reason* by Amitav Ghosh, *A Clean Breast* by G.J.V. Prasad, *Ravan and Eddie* by Kiran Nigerkar, *An Angel in Pyjamas* by Tabish Kher, *Beethoven among the Cows* by Rukun Advani, *Looking Through Glass* by Mukul Kesavan, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by Vikram Chandra. *The Narrator* by Makarand Paranjape is an excellent example of this style. Magic Realism was also used by a woman writer who was not behind the times. Suniti Namjoshi's "*The Mothers of Maya*" was one of the most famous novels written by a woman in this genre.

Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and modernization are some minor themes often and reliably explored in Indian English novels written after independence. Shashi Deshpande, a novelist from an urban and Western background, used these modern problems to show how the realities of the present day affected them. Rich people who are determined to build their dream cities no matter what cause chaos in country areas full of natural resources, as shown in Kamala Markandaya's books *The Coffee Dams*, *A Silence of Desire*, and *Pleasure City*. After independence, unemployed villagers looking for work and wealthy villagers wanting to use the educational, medical, and recreational facilities moved to the cities. As a result, "the size of the cities started swelling to an enormous and unexpected point, causing new and more complicated problems for the urbanites." The big towns turned into awful orchestras causing strange strains of noise and chaos, stress and worry, and busyness and noise.

Novelists like V.S. Naipaul were interested in the pictures of city life that showed chaos, loud voices, angry tempers, filth, honkers, hornblowers, and breaking streets. Some authors are R.P. Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, and Aravind Adiga. *To Whom She Will*, *The Nature of Passion*, and *Get Ready for Better* by Ruth Prasad Jhabvala all have much to say about city life and its issues. The main themes of Anita Desai's books *Voices in the City* and *Cry the Peacock* are the busy, noisy, mechanized, and dehumanized lives of people in cities like Delhi and Calcutta.

A Handful of Rice by Kamala Markandaya and *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande show how hard modern life is in Madras and Delhi, respectively. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* shows modern man's problems in Dhanbad, Delhi,

and Bangalore, and his second book, *Between the Assassinations*, is about the city of Kittur. Through her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai has continued to write about globalization and the pros and cons of a global society and economy.

Another important difference between the pre-Independence novel and the post-Independence novel is that the latter often uses global events and characters. Although M.R. Anand and R.K. Narayan travelled to and lived in Western countries for a while, they were mostly interested in Indian figures. On the other hand, new novelists broke out of the Indian context and opened up the world through their work. *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth takes place in the United States, and all the characters are from the West. In the same way, the events and people he writes about in *An Equal Music* are British and European. *The Gabriel Club* by Joydeep Roy Bhattacharya is another book about how to write about non-Indian people and situations. Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh are other novelists who have written about foreign people and situations (Criterion.com).

From here on, post-colonial Indian English literature and post-independence Indian English literature are nearly interchangeable. It still makes people think of the effects of colonialism in modern culture. It aims to compete with English-language literature for major international awards such as the Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Fiction Prize. Thematic content abounds in Indian English fiction published after independence. Numerous authors, including Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Kamala Das, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Shiv K. Kumar, Manju Kapur, and

many more, have helped Indian English literature flourish and become more widely read both domestically and overseas. By incorporating Dalit themes, feminist movements, and LGBTQ writings, the field of Indian English literature has also expanded and is still open to new ideas.

Chapter 4

In Search of a Suitable Narrative: Representation of New India in

A Suitable Boy

Vikram Seth has made considerable contributions to the field of historical fiction. He has also made Indian English novels better by adding new themes and writing styles. Many of his writings are very important to history, interestingly showing the harsh facts of time and the mysteries of the past. His historical books bring India's rich social, religious, and family traditions to life like a prism that reveals and spreads light. One of his most important books is *A Suitable Boy*, which takes place in India between 1950 and 1952, which are essential years in the country's history because they saw the rise of the middle class and secularism under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership.

The story of *A Suitable Boy* takes place in India in the early 1950s, when Jawaharlal Nehru was in charge of building the country. What makes the book remarkable is not the business of matchmaking; it is how it shows the social, physical, cultural, historical, and romantic sides of India right after it got its freedom. Seth skilfully weaves together the more significant ideas of politics, culture, marriage, society, and history with the everyday feelings of his believable characters to perfectly depict New Indian sentiments. Seth's book is about India in the early 1950s. It is written in the style of a mimetic historical tale, meaning that the plot seems to have been taken from actual events. His mimetic story can be seen as a symbolic picture of the country because there is no doubt that content and form, meaning and representation, are the same.

4.1 Historical and Political representation of new India

A Suitable Boy is a historical and political work. The politics and history of new India represented in the novel are so intertwined that it only seems natural to analyse the two topics simultaneously. Seth explores post-independent India with a strictly rational secular perspective; hence, history and politics mostly unfold from the point of view of Nehruvian ideology. The novel gives much space to democratic arguments in the Legislative Assembly, which becomes a symbol of building the country; voices of the voters reach each other. But Seth shows that institutions like the Legislative Assembly and the courtroom (where the Zamindari Abolition Act is discussed) are the only places where democracy can work. There is no justification for violent uprisings like riots, and the people who start them are seen as a mob, not as citizens.

4.1.1 Depiction of the Abolition of Zamindari System

The Abolition of the Zamindari System is a predominant event that Seth writes about in his book. Because of the feudal structure, there were problems during that era. Before India got its independence, the Zamindars owned many farmlands. This meant the farmers had to cultivate lands for meagre income while being excessively taxed and ill-treated.

In the book, Abida Shahib, a politician, supported the Zamindari system in the legislature of Purva Pradesh, a made-up state. He rebels against the ruling party, Congress's attempts at making land reforms.

the fact is that it is we Zamindars who have made this province what it is [...] who made it strong, who gave it its special flavour. In every field of life, we have made our contribution, that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. (Seth 307)

This landlordism indicated colonial influence, which Nehru wanted to get rid of as a goal for New India. In his first five-year plan, he said that land reform was the most important problem for the whole country. India's land changes were meant to make the land more productive by helping farmers make more money and to ensure everyone had the same rights by ending all kinds of exploitation.

In his book, Seth explores this idea and shows how, even though people were against the land reforms at first, they finally came to understand that they were necessary to bring the country together and began the path to a more realistic life. India moved toward the modern world because of this change, which also changed the way people lived in India. Despite feudalism being the first step towards freedom, it did not improve the suicide rates of farmers in India, which is probably why Seth decided to work on it in the 80s and 90s.

In order to depict these severe events, Seth decided to represent New India through a fictional north Indian state called Purva Pradesh, wherein Mahesh Kapoor and Agarwal were the Revenue and Home Ministers, respectively, under the leadership of Chief Minister Sharma. In the novel, it was Mahesh who suggested the Zamindari Abolition Bill. Seth showcased how, in British India, the poor and disadvantaged were often denied justice, which lasted well into the post-independent era.

Seth shows the dilemma of Mahesh Kapoor, who being a strong supporter of Nehruvian ideology believes that ending such ill-practice will close the gap

between the have and have nots, however by doing so he will put his relationship with his friend the Nawab of Baitar, a well-known Zamindar in danger. Even though the Nawab is quite understanding, the other zamindars take this negatively and react with anger (Madhan .P 81).

When the Rajas, Nawabs and landlords realize their eventual doom, just as in the history of India, they decide to revolt against the legislation. The counsel for the landlords, G.N Bannerjee, presents his argument interestingly:

“My Lords, the entire way of life of this state is sought to be altered by the executive of this state through legislation that runs in express and implied contradictions to the constitution of the country. The act that seeks, in no citizenry of Purvapradesh is the Purvapradesh Zamindari abolition and Land Reform Act in 1951 and it is my contention and that of other counsel for the applicants that this legislation, apart from being patently to the detriment of the people, is unconstitutional and therefore null and void.

Null and void” (Seth 686)

Despite the landlords’ numerous efforts to prevent this from becoming a law going as far as calling it “unconstitutional” Mahesh’s idea is realized. As David Myres states in his paper, Vikram Seth’s Epic Renunciation of the passions: Deconstruction Moral Codes in *A Suitable Boy* that passing the Zamindari bill meant the number of poor people will decrease but so will the patronage of arts. This will result in the curtailment of culture, especially the loss of art that was supported by the Nawab (David).

4.1.2 Portrayal of Partition Problems

One of the main reasons for the excessive communal violence experienced by the characters in *A Suitable Boy* is the traumatic event of Partition, which takes place only a few years before the beginning of the novel. Seth's representation is descriptive and uncomfortable when it comes to the depiction of the Partition. He knows how crucial it is to bring about this imagery in the minds of the readers so that they truly grasp the gravity of the situation. Most of the characters are either directly affected by the Partition or indirectly affected by it. The communal riots which occur during the course of the novel are just the result of the hatred harboured due to the Partition.

Seth's character, Veena, who is Maan's sister, is one of the characters who has experienced the Partition firsthand. Seth's shows how Veena and her in-laws would never forget the traumatic experiences they endured and the loss they faced during the Partition:

“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, Veen's husband, still had scars on his hands from an attack by rioters on his refugee convoy- Several of their friends had been butchered.” (Seth 21)

Seth writes this to let his audience know that it isn't only Veena's families experience but is the reality to thousands of families to migrated during the partition. Seth shows how the Partition brought about irreversible changes and the possibility of repairing what's broken is close to impossible.

“With partition things had changed. The house was no longer the great community that had been. It had become, in many ways, lonely, uncles and cousins had dispersed to Karachi or Lahore. Of the three brothers, one had died, one had gone away and only that gentle widower, the Nawab Sahib, remained.” (Seth 284-285)

4.1.3 Nehru’s Influence on the Novel

“a man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country, not merely in those early and most dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime, safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious fanaticism.” (Seth 1355)

In India in the 1950s, communal riots were one of the most important political events. Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to find an answer through democratic socialism, which pushed for political freedom, equality, and tolerance. He wanted to keep people's rights, agreement, and ability to compromise, but not to fight. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru wrote about how he built a secular India to show that religious and cultural tolerance was at the heart of Indian civilization.

As Gyan Prakash says in his work, *Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography*, Nehru showcases India as

“a secular entity, not a Hindu nation that had cradled a variety of religions and sets through Centuries, and had acquired a degree of unity while surviving conquests and conflicts. His *The Discovery of India* was a documentation of this unity through history; and for him the nationalist

movement was designed to free this unity so that India could join the world historical march towards modernity” (Gyan 389)

Vikram Seth makes the same strong case for Nehruvian secularism, which is the only way to bring India together again after it has been split up over religious issues. *A Suitable Boy* often explores impossible friendships and relationships, one such case being the relationship between Maan Kapoor and Firoz Khan.

The novel includes letters by Nehru to the Chief Ministers, guiding them with his ideas and advice on how to govern the state in order to keep communal conflicts in check. After the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru had to shoulder the entire responsibility of building the nation after Independence and also manage the workings of the Congress party. Neelam Srivastava says in *Secularism* in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* that as a response to the current state of history and politics, *A Suitable Boy* talks about India's part. In this way, it can be called a historical book. One thing about historical novels is that they shape an ideal present and future for the country by telling a story of the country's past. The historical novel is a way to connect the past to the present and show that the past and the present are connected metaphorically; the novelist not only focused on the politics of the past but also dealt with the politics of the time of publication.

In this book, Mahesh Kapoor, the Revenue Minister of Purvapradesh, is shown to have strongly supported Nehru and equality. On the other hand, Agarwal, who is Kapoor's political rival and the Home Minister of the State, sees himself as Purushottam Das Tandon. Tandon was elected as the president of the Congress party, much to Nehru's disappointment. Nehru believed that people like Tandon, who did not believe in secularism, should not become political leaders. Mala

Pandurang in her work, *Multiple Readings of A Suitable Boy* says, “A considerable part of the narrative is devoted to the crisis in the fiction ridden Congress party” (Pandurang 129).

In his time as India's first Prime Minister, Nehru worked hard to keep the ideals of secularism and openness. Seth comments on this as follows.

“The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second class citizens sickens Nehru. If Pakistan treats its minorities barbarically, that is no reason for India to do so. Nehru has personally pleaded with number of Muslin Civil servants to remain India” (Seth 955).

Seth presents his novel in a rationalist secular manner which is one of the integral concepts supported by Nehru through his ideology.

4.1.4 Representation of the Minority

Despite India unequal number of Hindus and Muslims, Seth's work has an equal number of Muslim and Hindu sympathetic characters. Every Hindu fanatic has a Muslim extremist counterpart. Seth's representation of the Muslim community is done with an open-mind and on the basis of secularism. Unlike the portrayal of Muslims in cinema, Seth's characters aren't divided into 'good' Muslims and 'bad' Muslims. He shows a very genuine and nuanced portrayal of these character. Muslims in *A Suitable Boy* have goals and ambitions like just any other person; they are into sports, part of royalty, teachers of Urdu, unlucky lovers and vulnerable performers. However, one thing that all these characters share is their unfortunate fate which is tragic and unfulfilling. Almost every character of

Seth's experiences loss, tragedy and disappointment. This probably alludes to the unfortunate situation of Muslims in India since the Partition.

Muslims in India have always experienced discrimination and have targets painted on their backs most of the time. We see that Seth alludes to the conflict of Ram mandir issue after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, with his example of conflict between the Hindu and Muslim characters due to the construction of Shiva Temple next to the Mosque. He displays the scene as follows:

"After the midday sermon most were in no mood to listen to any voice of moderation. A couple of the more eager members of the Alamgiri Masjid Hifazaat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing-wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. There were cries of Allah-u-Akbar' which could be heard all the way to the police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had sticks in their hands. One or two. even had knives. Now it was not the mosque they were headed for but the partly constructed temple just next to it. It was from here that the blasphemy had originated, it was this that must be destroyed." (Seth 251)

We can observe how Seth portrays Muslims as victims of violence and unfortunate reality. Even though these characters live in the same world as the others, they are trapped in their misfortune and often come across as melancholic. We have Kabir, who suffers from unrequited love; Mrs. Durrani, who has spiralled into insanity;

and her husband, who has lost all interest in lively pursuits. Rasheed is another character who also falls into the pit of darkness after being repeatedly failed by society. Seth pairs Hindus and Muslims to show the stark contrast between them. We have the playful Maan and pessimistic Rasheed, family-oriented Mahesh Kapoor, an aloof Nawab of Baitar, melancholic Kabir, and motivated Haresh. Through these contrasting and odd pairings, Seth wants to show us how Muslims are more serious, self-disciplined, repressed, unhappy and more prone to tragedy than their Hindu counterparts. They seem to be ‘outsiders’ in the world of A Suitable Boy, just like how the post-independent era viewed them as ‘foreigners’ in India.

In Arun Shourie’s essay titled, *Islamic Fundamentalism: Features, Consequences, Antidotes*, he views Islam as a religion of “dread and paranoia” and Muslims as people who will do anything to attain their goals. Seth portrays Muslims in a similar light. However, he does so to show how these individuals are victims of a majoritarian Hindu society (Arun Shourie). Seth is empathetic towards these Muslims and perfectly represents the psychological deterioration of these characters. We see how these characters, especially Rasheed, feel that they are constantly targeted and conspired against:

“I think,” said Maan after a while [...] “that you should take better care of yourself [...] Sleep. Eat properly. Do not study. And do not exhaust yourself by campaigning for any party.”

Rasheed lifted his head and looked at Maan mockingly. “So that is what you would like?” he said. “Then the path will be clear. Then you can farm my field again. Then you can send the police to break my head with a lathi [...]

I understand when things are connected with each other. It is not easy to dupe me, especially if your conscience is uneasy.” (Seth 1163)

Seth, through Rupa, describes Muslims as “Muslim and mad” (Seth 850). Seth also uses spiritual texts to establish this idea further. Whenever he deals with Hinduism, he uses verses from the Bhagavad Gita to portray the positive aspects of the religion; for example, Rupa says, “soothing Sanskrit”. On the other hand, every religious verse quoted from the Muslim text is prohibitive and cautionary. They are terrifying to the reader and bring about a sense of discomfort. For example, when the Alangiri mosque’s imam states the warning regarding Hindus from the Koran, “God guides not the people/ of the unbelievers” (Seth 233).

Hinduism brings about a sense of therapeutic relief, whereas Islam seems to instil fear and paranoia in the book. By the end of the novel, one can observe that Seth’s portrayal of the minorities and their faith was to shed light on the downside of paranoia amongst the minorities and the harm that was brought about due to the majority’s distorted false perception of the minorities (Almond 89).

4.2 Cultural representation of New India

The cultural details in *A Suitable Boy* show how complex and varied India truly is. They also show the problems and opportunities that arise when Indian culture interacts with other cultures. India was going through a lot of social, cultural, and political changes at the time when the book was written. The book vividly portrays Indian culture, its customs, and the problems people face when they try to live in a rapidly changing society. India has a great cultural history, resulting from numerous influences over a long period of time. New India was a period when these influences found an order and structure. *A Suitable Boy* looks at many parts of

Indian culture, like the caste system, arranged marriages, and religious views, and gives a complex picture of these cultural differences.

A complex view of arranged marriages is given in the book, which shows how they can be both good and bad for the people concerned. Lata's search for a good husband is made harder by the fact that her family wants her to accept a marriage proposal from a good match, even though she doesn't want to. When discussing religious views and practices in the book, Hinduism and Islam are prominent. The novel shows how these faiths affect people's lives differently, giving us a more complete picture of the era.

4.2.1 Language of the novel

Seth's translation from the Indian language to English is meant to show how multilingual the Indian nation-state was during the New Indian era. Seth wanted his language to represent the multilingual nature of India, which is not bound together by a common language like the European nations.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a huge rise in Indian English writing in both the UK and the US. However, despite the "India hype" that has dominated the literature scene over the past few years, it is clear that the creativity of many of these writers is closely linked to the "liberation" of the English language. In order to be free, they had to use English as a nativized version. Using this nativized version of english, seth was able to reinvent an ex-colonial language as his own.

G.J.V. Prasad, Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel, states that in states that Indian English writers are not really translating texts from vernacular languages into English. Instead, they are using different techniques

to make their works sound like translations. Code-mixing, hybridization, and transfer of context are all things that define Seth's work. (G. J. V. Prasad)

English is used in a way that is similar to Urdu or Hindi. There are many different languages in *A Suitable Boy*, but they do not get in the way of Seth's writing, which is smooth and easy to read. There are some examples of code-mixing and hybridization from Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and other languages. Even though the author adopts this style, it does not interrupt the flow of the story. In other cases, mainly when Seth is translating from Urdu, there is no sign of code-mixing. Here is an example of how Seth renders the fancy Urdu speech of Saeeda Bai, a Muslim courtesan and singer, who is scolding her lover Maan for not coming to see her:

"Rumour has it, Dagh Sahib, that you have been in town for some days now. Twirling, no doubt, that handsome ivory-headed cane. But the hyacinth that obtained favour yesterday appears withered today to the connoisseur."
 "Begum Sahiba - protested Maan. Even if she has withered away only for lack of the water of life," (Seth 871)

In this passage, the English is a symbolic use of Urdu. Seth picks a higher register of English to draw attention to how pure the language is. There is no code-mixing with Urdu or other forms of language hybridization in the passage because it is not thought this would accurately translate the beauty of "chaste" Urdu. So, the author makes a symbolic, not material, language that is similar to Urdu and out of a higher range of English. When he talks to people in the village of Debaria, Seth speaks a more straightforward, more direct form of English. Talk to Debaria There is a casual register in Hindi-Urdu that is more country than the sophisticated language of Saeeda Bai. It is full of poetic allusions and quotations. Again, Seth's version of this

village language is more symbolic than literal, and he does not code-mix much. This is what Maan says to a farmer he meets on the train to the town of Debaria.

"Do you speak English?" he said after a while in the local dialect of Hindi. He had noticed Maan's luggage tag. "Yes," said Maan. "Without English you can't do anything," said the farmer sagely. Maan wondered what possible use English could be to the farmer. "What use is English?" said Maan. "People love English!" said the farmer, with a strange sort of deep voiced giggle. "If you talk in English; you are a king. The more people you can mystify, the more people will respect you." He turned back to his tobacco," (Seth 543)

The most interesting thing about the English version of Debaria is that it is a "translation" of an original Urdu form that has never existed. When people translate from other Indian languages, they use Indian English. Indian language used in *A Suitable Boy* is closely connected to the problem of explaining Indian culture to people outside of India. It comes down to how much a Western reader is willing to "work" to understand a text whose social, linguistic, and cultural background differs from their own.

Indian English texts affect how we think about translation because they bring up the main problem of the "ethnocentric" text or translation versus the "foreignizing" text or translation, to use Lawrence Venuti's words. In the ethnocentric view, translation aims to connect the author to the readers; translating will be a process of getting to know each other.

On the other hand, foreignizing has become much more popular over the last few years. Here, the translator intentionally draws attention to cultural features

that are unfamiliar or leave some words untranslated in order to draw the reader's attention to the text instead of away from it:

What makes a translation ethnocentric or ethnocentric depends significantly on where the people who read it are from. This is also true for Indian English books like *A Suitable Boy*, which became massive hits worldwide. People read this text, which is meant for national and foreign audiences, and see them as both familiarizing and unfamiliarizing simultaneously. In some cases, their desire to show the whole of India can make it more dangerous for them to simplify a complex society to make it easier for people worldwide to understand. On the other hand, many Western students find it hard to fully understand these books because they cover such a wide range of cultural topics that they are unfamiliar with.

International Indian writing in English risks losing the details of regional cultures when it tries to show a view of all of India. Neelam Srivastava points out how Amit Chaudhuri says, "Only in the English language do Indian writers have the vantage-point, or at least feel the obligation, to articulate that post-colonial totality called India (and sometimes it feels as if it exists only in the works of Indian English novelists) (Srivastava 50).

A Suitable Boy, even though it strongly suggests that it is for Indian audiences, one cannot deny that it's made for the Western reading experience. *A Suitable Boy* has been helped by how well its Bengali and Hindi versions have been received. People in India seem to think that English, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali are the country's official languages. It is shown that they carry a country's history. On the other hand, the dialect spoken in the made-up town of Debaria is not considered a typical national language, so it is not named. In one of the few dialogues that the

author did not translate, Debaria village-speak, which is sometimes called "rustic Hindi," is not shown as a national language but as a local dialect, without being tied to the specifics of Bhojpuri, which is likely to be its model language.

Seth draws attention to the different kinds of Englishness and English that were available in middle-class India in the 1950s by contrasting Lata's brother Arun Mehra's Anglophile pride with Haresh Khanna's lack of knowledge of the British language. Arun doesn't like Haresh because, as he tells Lata in a letter, Haresh's English isn't good enough for him.

Haresh and Lata speak English differently, and in one episode, their misunderstanding shows how familiar English words can mean different things in Indian and British English. Lata jokes with him, "Oh, don't be mean." Haresh gets mad right away and leaves. Lata used the word "mean" in a very light way, but Haresh has taken it to mean "ungenerous, lowly, base."

English can also be noted as a form of imitation that the characters perform. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of Mimicry which according to can be defined as "an ambivalent strategy whereby subaltern peoples simultaneously express their subservience to the more powerful and subvert that power by making mimicry seem like mockery" (Bhabha) can be aptly applied here. This means that the ex-colonized people imitate the culture of their colonizers because they consider it superior. The best example for this case would be Arun's character who takes pride in establishing himself as a Indian copy of a British man. Seth portrays language in *A Suitable Boy* as a hybrid of the colonizers tongue and the India native languages.

So, unlike the conversations in some other texts of the time, the novel's prose doesn't use many synthetic or calqued words from Indian languages like Hindi

and Urdu. However, *A Suitable Boy* uses a lot of lexical code-mixing, which means that Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali words are often used for things and ideas that don't have a good English translation.

You couldn't mistake Indian English for "bad writing" by the time *A Suitable Boy* came out as it had become standard. It has been used for a long time in Indian creative writing to mix languages in different ways for different results. By using a lot of different registers to show the different dialects and idioms, these books do not see Indian languages as separate units. Instead, they see how Indian people use more than one language as part of a single linguistic continuum.

4.2.2 Arranged marriages and domesticity

Marriages in Post-independent India or New India were predominantly arranged and deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms emphasizing caste, religion, and familial alliances. The period immediately following independence was marked by a firm entrenchment of traditional values, partly as a cultural backlash against colonial rule, which was seen as a period of moral and social upheaval. The enactment of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Special Marriage Act of 1954 were critical developments, aiming to modernize marriage laws by prohibiting polygamy, enabling inter-caste and inter-religious unions, and instituting divorce under specific circumstances. However, the effectiveness of these laws in actual practice was limited by prevailing societal norms that resisted legal mandates. Historians like Rajni Palriwala and sociologists such as Patricia Uberoi have analyzed how these legal frameworks were often overshadowed by the firm continuance of arranged marriage practices that reinforced caste identities and gender roles. For most of this period, the ideal of love marriage remained a distant

reality for the majority, often romanticized in literature and film but rarely manifested in everyday life. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s began to challenge these norms. However, throughout the period up to 1995, marriages in India largely remained conservative conveyances of cultural and social continuity. This era reflects a complex interplay between adherence to tradition and the onset of gradual socio-economic changes, eventually leading to the transformations seen in the late 20th century.

Seth's novel alludes to or aligns with Austen's heroines like Emma, who are searching for a perfect marriage match. The book's main idea is shown in the first line, where Rupa Mehra tells the main character, Lata, "You too will marry a boy I choose" after her sister gets married (Seth 6). This is not just Rupa's but also the society's way of controlling Lata's life. In his writing, Seth tried to show how most Indian families feel about marriage. Lata, who usually does not follow the rules, has to marry the boy her mother chooses because of social pressure and her mother's emotional plea. Her family refuses to let her marry Kabir, a Muslim boy. Contextualized in 1950s postcolonial India, Seth depicts the traditional view of matrimony. The lady is not provided with a choice regarding her spouse. How Mrs Rupa Mehra treats her daughter-in-law, Meenakshi, showcases her aversion to love marriage. Arun marries Meenakshi for her looks and modern outlook on life, much to Rupa's annoyance. In order to prevent a similar fate for Lata, Rupa convinces and even forces Lata to take a husband of her (Rupa's) choice. She talks to her family, writes letters, and goes from place to place looking for a good boy for her daughter. ".....I want you to find her a boy at once. A suitable boy, she is getting involved with unsuitable boys and I cannot have that....."(Seth 548).

However, the best thing about the book is not how it finds matches but how it shows the social scene in the ten years after independence and how marriage differed as a cultural concept in New India. Many readers have laughed and cried over Seth's characters, based on real people. He can realistically combine all the major themes of political, social, and religious conflict with the everyday feelings of his characters. Every custom and marriage situation changes depending on the place and the character's background. The author moves from Brahmipur, Calcutta, Lucknow to even a rural village to showcase the diversity of Indians. Like many people on either side of the communal conflict, Rupa, too, harbours distaste for Muslims and deems Kabir as an unsuitable match for Lata. One can draw parallels between Mrs Bennet and Mrs Rupa Mehra's obsession with finding a suitable boy (Reza 138).

Seth highlights the ugly side of New India by showcasing how marriage was used as a tool to restrict one's children's freedom and agency. Women especially faced the severity of this tradition. Even though Rupa viewed education as a plus point for Lata, she still believed it was shameful for a girl to act in a play.

“Stop it, stop it at once! She wanted to shout- is this why sent you to university? I should never have allowed you to act in this play. Never, If daddy had seen this he would have been ashamed of you” (Seth 1033).

Marginalized women, like the Muslim girls of this era, had to practice purdah despite being well-educated and skilled. Seth's women are confined to their homes, and though they may not be stifled, they are not left with many options to mingle in society. The only few roles accessible to women are that of nurturing mothers and obedient wives. The only exception to this is Meenakshi, who fights against

this confinement of marriage every chance she gets. Her view on marriage differs from what was generally accepted. Meenakshi cheats on Arun without guilt and says, "What does marriage have to do with it? I am married, aren't I? You enjoy it, I enjoy it that's all there is to it." (Seth 1131). This is contrasted with Rupa's attempts at protecting her daughter's "value" and the sanctity of marriage. Saeeda, seen as an epitome of motherly love, also confines her daughter in the name of protection. Tasneem, like Lata, barely has any say in whom she will marry or love. Rupa justifies this by saying that, "..... What was good enough for her mother and mother's mother and her mother's mother should be good enough for Lata.." (Seth 22). The identities and individualities of these women are stripped away in the name of marriage, and sacrifice becomes synonymous with womanhood.

4.2.3 Women in an unsuitable world

The main problem in all cultures is that women are pushed to the edges. Uneven gender roles are a hot topic for people of all ages, not just now. Women have gone through different stages of life throughout history. These stages are tradition, transition, and change. Traditional customs show that men are in charge. Meera Shirwadkar claims "Traditionally, marriage for woman has entailed as most submissive feminine role, she submits to her husband and his family as a slave" The law, schools, and religious traditions all use traditional behaviors to show that men are in charge. It is patriarchy, the social order made up of self-sustaining systems like power, that makes sure women's needs are always put second. Feminist artists speak out against the unfair treatment of women. They want to change the ways that men currently hold economic, educational, and social power. Since women

make up half of the world's population, a new age of equal rights for men and women would start a social revolution.

De Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* declares, "Woman as represented by men has double and deceptive image ... she incarnates all moral virtues from good to evil, and their opposites . . . He projects upon her what he desires and what he feels, what he loves and what he hates." (De Beauvoir)

Since independence, there has been a considerable increase in knowledge of the different levels of feminism, and many writers have tried to define it in new ways to meet the needs of different groups. Many writers wrote about women's problems when they did not have enough money or a safe place to live and spoke out in favour of women's equal rights. Vikram Seth is one of a kind among modern writers who have been writing since India became independent. As Spivak suggests, the idea of a Subaltern woman can be observed here. Women in *A Suitable Boy*, especially Muslim women are subaltern; they are doubly marginalized in society. Firstly, they are neglected and abused because of their gender. Their faith adds another layer of marginalization and are also victims of communal violence in the society. Tasneem and Saeeda are two such women who are doubly marginalized. (Spivak)

In the book, Seth writes about a lot of different people. One of these characters is Saeeda Bai, whose love for Maan Kapoor is based on sexual attraction and emotion. Saeeda is a sexy female object in the book; she is mainly seen as a place where men can satisfy their sexual needs and are pushed to the edges because of her bad reputation. The very system that takes advantage of. Saeeda Bai relied on it. She has to meet the sex needs of a lot of different customers. One of these people was the Raja of Marh. There is sexual happiness and desire between them,

and Maan falls in love with him even though she knows he will never marry her. The so-called "younger sister" of Saeeda Bai, Tasneem, is a teenage girl whose real name is revealed by the author at the novel's end. In some ways, she is like Lata, looking for a good boy to marry. Saeeda and Tasneem do not know who their dads are, but Saeeda rules Tasneem's life by her own patriarchal "self," which says that Tasneem must be protected at all costs from the bad things that happen in this world. Three men want to marry Tasneem, just like Lata did. Lata at least has the freedom to choose "a suitable boy," while Tasneem cannot even talk to other people, let alone choose a suitable boy. Saeeda asserts to Mann, 'It is not admirers to choose her, but to be chosen by me' (806). Tasneem is kept in purdah, 'spends time cutting vegetables, reading novels and thinking about life' (Seth 113) There are three men who want to marry Tasneem. Rasheed teaches her Arabic, Ishaq Khan plays the sarangi on Saeeda's music team, and Firoz is the son of the Nawab of Baitar. In a strange twist, Saeeda doesn't think any of them are good enough for Tasneem. As the artist Ishaq puts it, he "has no future" (Seth 805). Rasheed is already naturally married and eccentric, and Firoz is Tasneem's half-brother. Saeda informs Firoz that at 15, she was raped by his father, the Nawab of Baitar and confesses that Tasneem is actually her daughter and not her sister, however, says that, 'the child she had conceived in terror, had carried in shame and had borne in pain ...' (Seth 1212). Hence, the relationship between Tasneem and Firoz is forbidden. In a strange way, Saeeda wants Tasneem to get married because she thinks that "domesticity and its standard concerns were not objects of fond contemplation for her." (Seth 303). Since Saeeda has been sexually exploited and felt terrible, she wants to keep Tasneem from having the same shameful experience. Because she wanted to protect Tasneem, she would not let her talk to or hang out with normal people. This 'non-

awareness' is made into a beautiful feminine quality – an asset in young brides to preserve the family system' (Seth 236). Lata and Tasneem are both trained to reach this level of awareness.

The death of Maan's mother was a terrible experience that turned him into a "violent revulsion of feeling" (Seth 1303) toward both himself and Saeeda Bai because of their passionate relationship. He turns away from the physical qualities that drew him in the first place and feels nothing but hate when she is around. When he sees her for the last time, he is horrified to learn that he no longer sees her as the beautiful woman he used to have strong sexual desires for. Instead, her body now looks like it has scars on it. 'Maan, totally indifferent to what he has done to Saeeda's household, her reputation, and more importantly to Tasneem' (1303) returns to Prem Nivas. Anita Desai (23) says, "Although they (Lata and Maan) might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance, return chastened, to the safety and security of the familial and the traditional in the Indian style, by the great God family," (Desai)

When Maan's mother died, it broke his heart and made him feel so guilty that he moved into a different world, away from Saeeda's interest. Saeeda is more motivated than ever to protect... Tasneem after this bad experience. Tasneem stops Firoz from leaving, making her stand at the house's open door for the first time in her life, not daring to go any further. She cannot step 'out' into the larger world from her inner courtyard. More than ever, Tasneem can't connect with the outside world. She shuts herself off and does not talk to anyone. There were three guys in her life, and each one was more difficult than the last. She let her feelings for each one grow in silence and had to deal with their sudden departures in silence.

The last song by Saeeda shows her acceptance of this life and implies how unsuitable her life has been with a rather sad ending:

‘The meeting has disappeared; the moths Bid farewell to the candlelight.’

One of the main ideas in Vikram Seth's book *A Suitable Boy* is how women are pushed to the edges of society. In the book, Saeeda Bai and Tasneem are not good enough to live the proper lives that other women do. Lata, the main character, cannot even marry Kabir, the man she loves. Haresh is the man she wants to be her better half. On the other hand, Saeeda Bai and Tasneem cannot get married either. When society is dominated by men, women are the ones who suffer. No one ever hears the voice of someone who doesn't have one. However, through their actions they still attempt to make themselves be heard.

Chapter 5

Finding Suitability: The Conclusion

Vikram Seth's seminal work, 'A Suitable Boy', intricately explores the socio-political fabric of post-independent era or New India, a time brimming with change and challenges. Through its vivid characters and intertwining narratives, the novel not only depicts the era's tumultuous events but also delves deep into the personal and societal struggles that defined the period. Seth's narrative acts as a mirror reflecting the myriad transformations that shaped the nascent Indian state, emphasizing the impact of these changes on everyday lives and how it contributed to creating the notion of 'New India'.

At the heart of 'A Suitable Boy' is the theme of nation-building, a monumental task faced by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, whose vision of a secular, democratic India is embodied through the novel's characters and their interactions. The abolition of the Zamindari system, as depicted in the novel, highlights the efforts to dismantle feudal hierarchies and redistribute power and resources equally amongst the people. This reform is portrayed through the struggles and resistance within the Legislative Assembly, encapsulating the conflict between old regressive customs and new progressive policies aimed at social equity.

The narrative extensively covers the rise of the middle class and the expansion of secularism under Nehru's leadership, portraying these shifts as central to the formation of a new societal structure. Seth's depiction of communal violence and its roots in past traumas like the partition underlines the lingering scars left by colonial divide-and-rule policies and the ongoing efforts required for communal harmony and national integration.

'A Suitable Boy' also serves as a significant commentary on India's cultural and linguistic diversity. Seth's use of hybrid language—mixing Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and English—reflects the polyphonic nature of India's narrative, challenging the colonial linguistic legacy and showcasing the rich tapestry of Indian vernaculars. This blend not only adds authenticity to the narrative but also positions Indian English literature as a critical medium for expressing the nation's post-colonial identity.

The characters in the novel navigate through these cultural multiplicities, with their personal relationships serving as allegories for larger societal issues. For instance, the inter-religious bonds between Hindus and Muslims amid widespread communal strife highlight the potential for unity and tolerance, advocating Nehru's secular ideals.

Furthermore, 'A Suitable Boy' critically examines the role of women in New India. The novel portrays women grappling with newly defined spaces within the public and private spheres, reflecting the socio-cultural shifts and the impact of legislative changes. Through characters like Lata and Saeeda Bai, Seth explores the constraints imposed by traditional norms and the emerging avenues for female agency and self-expression.

The juxtaposition of traditional marital arrangements against the backdrop of a modernizing India reveals the contradictions facing a country at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. This tension is vividly captured through the personal dilemmas of the characters, who must navigate the expectations of a conservative society while fostering their aspirations and desires.

In conclusion, 'A Suitable Boy' by Vikram Seth not only explores the historical and cultural landscapes of a newly independent India but also offers a profound insight into the complexities of personal and political identities. The novel's exploration of themes such as nation-building, cultural pluralism, and gender dynamics provides a nuanced understanding of New India's challenges and achievements. This proves my hypothesis that Vikram Seth through his works represents New India by presenting an amalgamation of political commentary, historical retelling and cultural representation of India.

As India continues to evolve, the questions and themes raised in Seth's narrative remain relevant, reflecting the ongoing dialogue between India's past and its future. The novel's detailed portrayal of a pivotal era in Indian history serves as both a reflection and a critique, urging readers to consider the lessons of the past in understanding and shaping the present. In this light, 'A Suitable Boy' is not just a historical account but a living document that resonates with the continual process of nation-building and cultural integration in India.

Through Seth's empathetic and multifaceted portrayal, the novel invites readers to reflect on India's journey and to appreciate the delicate balance of tradition and change that defines the nation. It underscores the enduring relevance of literature as a powerful lens through which to view and evaluate societal transformations, making 'A Suitable Boy' an essential read for anyone interested in the complexities of post-colonial India and the intricate process of defining a new national identity.

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