



MUSICAL IMAGES AND METAPHORS IN VIKRAM SETH'S 'A SUITABLE BOY'

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Abstract:

A Suitable Boy, perhaps the longest modern Indian English novel, running in more than 1300 pages, authored by Vikram Seth in 1993, received unprecedented publicity and rave reviews. It rendered Seth a status unparalleled in the history of English Literature. With this novel, Seth is a great success. His egoless style, clear, simple language, complements his art of characterization, which helped in imparting a more composite picture of a living society. Most of the events of the novel take place in an imaginary state of Poorva Pradesh with an imaginary capital at Brahmapur. Depicted against the post-independence background of two years from 1950 to 1952, it narrates the compendious saga of four families, the Kapoors, the Mehra, the Chatterjees and the Nawabs (Khans), with their members' private and public lives of joys and sorrows. In this novel, the main interest is divided among these families and only two; Lata and Maan approach the conventional heroic types. They are central to the novel. Seth has imparted them roundedness; both evolve gradually, learning from their mistakes and ennobling themselves as the novel itself seems to be.

Key Words- Compendious saga, Epic novel, Musical Predilections

A Suitable Boy centers on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange the marriage of her younger daughter, Lata, with a "suitable boy". At the heart of the novel it is a love story, set in a young, newly independent India. Lata is a 19 year old college girl, vulnerable, yet determined to have her own way, and not to be influenced by her strong mother and opinionated brother, Arun. Her story revolves around the choice she is forced to make between her suitors Kabir, Haresh and Amit. The novel is not simply based on one story. This epic novel covers the various issues faced by post-independence India, including Hindu-Muslim strife, abolition of the Zamindari system, land reforms and empowerment of Muslim women. The novel is divided into nineteen parts, with each part focusing on a different story and eventually coming back round' again. Each part is described by a rhyming couplet on the contents page. The four main families mentioned in the novel are: The Mehra-Mrs. Rupa Mehra. a mother searching for a suitable boy for her daughter. Arun. Savita, Varun and Lata are Mrs. Mehra's four children. Arun is married to Meenakshi Chatterji. Savita to Pran Kapoor. Lata is Mrs. Rupa Mehra's youngest child. A large portion of the novel as well as the title describes her mother's determination to marry Lata off a "suitable boy".

The Kapoors - Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and their three children are Veena, Pran and Maan. The Chatterjees - Mr. Justice Chatterji and Mrs. Chatterji and their children are Amit, Meenakshi, Dipankar. Kakoli and Tapan. The Khans - Nawab Sahib of Baitar and his three children are Zainab, Imtiaz and Firoz. Four families' tree is provided in the beginning of the novel to help readers keep up with the complicated interwoven family networks. The other characters of the novel which are not included above are - Nehru, Haresh Khanna, Shoe businessman, Kabir Durrani, Hashim Durrasni, Dr. Durrani, S.S.Sharma, Agarwal, home minister, Priya, Simran, Kalpana Gour, Billy Irani, Shireen, Bishwanath Bhaduri, Kedamath Tandan, Mrs. Tandan, Abdus Salam, Saeeda Bai, Raja of Marh, Rajkumar of Marh, Dr. Bilgrami, Prof. Mishra, Dr. Ha Chattopadhyaya, Hans, Tasneem, Bibbo, Rasheed, Ishaq, Begam, Abida Khan, Bhashkar Tandon, Arpana, The Guppi, Netaji, Sahgal, Makhijani, Sandeep Lahiri, Waris, Jagal Ram, Tandan, The Munshi, Uma Kapoor, Badrinath, Nowrojee, Sunil Patwardhan, Parvati and Malati.

Reviewing *A Suitable Boy*, Firdaus Kanga says, Too many characters share the same sensibility gentle and fuzzy and slightly over emotional, so that the old Nawab sounds much like the old minister, one window much like another and



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all good wives are just as good.' In this novel Seth has given preference for the clear and simple language and technique with a view to impart compassionate realism as Pico Iyer has classified Seth's narrative mode.

One of the characters of this novel, Amith Chatterjee, is said to be the alter-ego of the author himself; he is a writer and hence shares his predilections while discussing classical music. In the novel itself, he says to Lata and Dr. Ilia that he had always felt that the performance of a raag resembles a novel, at least the kind of novel he was attempting to write. You know....just as you take one note and explore it for a while, then another to discover its possibilities, then perhaps you get to the dominant and pause for a bit, and it's only gradually that the phrases begin to form and the tabla joins in with the beat...and then the more brilliant improvisations and diversions begin....:

This not only speaks of Seth's musical predilections and understanding of music, but also his creative art that made *A Suitable Boy*. The analogy of 'raag' implies a linear pattern from beginning through middle to end as suggested by the Ganges image; and one note in raag explored for a while, then another to discover its possibilities, getting dominant and pause for a bit. gradually phrases begin to form and tabla joins in with the beat: and then the more brilliant improvisations and diversions begin: the excitement increases to a climax: the slow growth of a big text as indicated by the banyan tree image. Through raag, the musical allusion is achieved a sense of sustained harmony. Through a prolonged and highly elaborate process of narration, the same harmony is achieved by Seth in *A Suitable Boy*. The uniqueness of the performance of an Indian classical raag, the maestro is allowed a remarkable degree of freedom, provided he maintains a minimum frame of notations. Every singer is free at every single performance of a raag, which could even take hours for complete exposition. So he is an original creator. Dr Ilia, who is a metaphysical poet, dismisses Amit's words on the Raag-Novel Relationship by saying He's just a writer, he knows nothing about literature.³

Seth's knowledge of Indian classical music and his ways of using its creative fecundity and harmonious diversity is undeniably relevant in understanding the novel. In this novel one can find the rise-fall intonation which clearly admits the classical music. Amit explains to Dr. Ilia how the raag is slowly performed step by step through elaboration, diversification, rich ecstasy, climax and conclusion while the main tune continues to be at the core, which throws light on the way his novel is made. It is true with Seth's novel also as it serves the exposition of an Indian classical raag. This performance is repeatedly described in the novel. Ustad Majeed fits this context. He is seen again and again at performing some particular raag. Listening to 'raag' makes the listeners to forget troubles and personal involvements. In the novel Lata, Kabir, Malati and others listen to raag of Majeed, and Ishaq Khan used to listen his morning raag over the AIR. At the time of singing, Majeed is a mystic visionary, though as a person he is rude, mean, uninteresting, in whose mind different religions get merged. Music was a prayer to him, a livelihood, his joy and religion too.

Music too was prayer to him, and some mornings he would be up long before dawn to sing Lalit' or some other early raag. Then the first words of the azaan ringing about God's greatness would vibrate across the roof tops in the cool air. When he heard the words calling people from their sleep he would smile. It was one of the pleasures of his day.'When his mind was disturbed, when he is worried about the disharmony among people, he begins meditatively to hum the words of the composition - 'Jaago Mohan Pyaare'. For him all disharmonies get dissolved into one with music and its melody. This melody or the music in its turn gets merged into the Ganges - the other image - the eternal flow, all embracing and all dissolving. The raag or the melody of music or the flow of music is compared to the flow of the Ganges which waits for none but flows and flows covering, dissolving and embracing everything.

In the novel there are many other references to other forms of music. Reference may be made of Saeeda Bai. Who sings Ghazals. Which are based on raag of classical music. In Ghazals, it is found that a miniature form of what happens in the total book - something like an elaborate exposition of some Indian classical raag which, again is like the narrative process in which some main themes recur through a wide range of diversifications, like Ghazals it will fall back again some particular refrain of a melody.



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There are references to Rabindra-Sangeeth (Tagore's songs Amith's mother is fascinated by Tagore's songs while to her children he is bore. These songs are often based on classical raag. Meenaksr- a* Kuku, who represent the post-independence period, in spite of their pane thumping and limerick improvisations, are not interested in Indian ciass*u music. At the Lata's marriage, Saeeda Bai is replaced by the Sanplayers. Once again it is a return to full-fledged exposition of a c z s i raag, from Ghazal, which is like the banyan in its elaboration and r: diversity and like the Ganges in its linear progress.

There are references to various trees - some big, some smale which spring blossoms towards the sky while the lovers separate, pec: -:pass away under them; some strike roots into the earth seem t assurance of something solid, sustaining and mysterious, ever-grc. -: and ever-encompassing. Death of Lata's father is also associa mind with the tall gulmohurs in bloom. It was in April that he died Gulmohurs were then in bloom too.⁵

Even her own love, its early joy and later pain are eased with gulmohurs. Some Orange flowers get into the context as well. Lata and Kabir in their early friendship days, used to meet by some big tree which gives the message that there is still something which had been pnor to and will remain beyond it and which relates to a person of rare intuitive goodness could have a mystic communion with this transcendental life

Trees big and small respond to Mrs.Mahesh Kapoor who rated as wife and mother, outwardly unimpressive woman and command anextraordinary goodness, has an instinctive affinity with trees. Thus (ne gulmohur in her garden has petals almost scarlet, rather than the usua^ read orange." The tree which gives away all its flowers at dawn only to be luxuriously refilled every night thus repeats the continuous cycle of birth-death- rebirth, a concept central to the Hindu belief.

Thus, the story of an individual becomes the part of an elaborate process which is repeated by trees. Old trunks die while new branches sprout up to become supporting trunks, the unending cycle of blossom-fall-blossom rotates on and on throughout the novel. The same process is also associated with the flow of the Ganges with uneven waves. The Ganges is there throughout as a continuing presence at the back of every human scene representing joys and fears. Ganga is an archetypal image rather than just a river.

Two main branches of banyan tree are to be identified with two themes of the novel centering round the issues of love and marriage, and friendship. The first related to Lata and the second to Maan and Firoz. Lata, in spite of her painful love for Kabir slowly realizes that she could not give up her family. When Pran and Savita are hospitalized she realizes it more clearly, with life and death so near each other here in the hospital, it seems to Lata that all that had provided continuity in the world or protection from it was the family.' This experience of coming to terms with life gets artistic expression through the image of back water. The back water, however, is not entirely unaffected by the mainstream, but repeats, although in a very subdued way, the rising tide and falling ebb of the river out there just as the tune in a lower key could repeat the main tune played on a higher key, or a smaller branch of a big tree could repeat the same pattern as displayed by a bigger branch. It is a series of such rhythmic repetitions that Seth introduces to place his tale of individual lives in a broad social context. And this tale has been placed in perspective again and again by being continually referred to the image of the Ganges.

Thus to conclude, the three images together, as they operate rhythmically, impart a very special favour to the novel, which can be defined as Indianness.

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