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## Negotiating Cultures: Hybridity and Social Harmony in *A Suitable Boy*

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### Abstract

The research paper explores Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* as a postcolonial narrative that negotiates cultural hybridity and the pursuit of social harmony in newly independent India. Set against the backdrop of Partition and the first general elections, the novel portrays the interplay of tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, as well as familial and societal expectations. Through its diverse characters and interwoven plots, the study highlights how hybridity shapes individual identities and collective coexistence in a society grappling with change. The novel portrays the cultural negotiations between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and family obligation and individual choice. By weaving together Hindu, Muslim, and Western influences, Seth presents hybridity as both a challenge and a resource for building a pluralist society. The narrative resists reductive binaries of self and other, instead emphasizing coexistence through relationships, rituals, and everyday encounters. In this way, *A Suitable Boy* testifies to India's ongoing search for unity in diversity, highlighting how cultural fusion can serve as a foundation for social resilience in the post-Partition context. The paper argues that Seth's novel transcends mere family saga to become a cultural testimony of India's attempts to reconcile diversity with unity.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial identity, cultural hybridity, social harmony, tradition and modernity, communal coexistence

### Introduction

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) <sup>[9]</sup> stands as one of the most significant postcolonial novels of India, portraying the complex cultural, social, and political landscape of the early years after Independence. Set in the early 1950s, the novel examines a nation negotiating its identity amidst the legacies of colonial rule, the trauma of Partition, and the challenges of democratic transition. Seth is a versatile individual. His works are situated in many nations, including *Golden Gate*, located in America, and *Suitable Boy*, set in India. He was born in India and schooled in the United States, making him proficient in both Indian and foreign cultures. References to Hinduism and Muslim culture are included in *Suitable Boy*, whereas Western civilisation is depicted in *Golden Gate*. Seth's writing is intricate and nuanced, emphasising multiple events and characters, thereby presenting interwoven plots that convey unique messages. Homi K. Bhabha argues that hybridity "is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (*The Location of Culture* 112). The Americans embraced love as a means to alleviate their stressful schedules. Seth portrays romantic love as a tool in the struggle against life's loneliness and monotony.

Through its wide cast of characters, Seth captures the interplay between tradition and modernity, communal tensions and secular ideals, as well as the pressures of family, love, and politics. The introduction situates the novel within postcolonial discourse, emphasizing how it explores cultural hybridity not only as a negotiation between East and West but also as a reconciliation of diverse Indian traditions. By foregrounding the theme of social harmony in a fragmented society, Seth's narrative becomes both a literary epic and a cultural testimony to India's search for unity in diversity. Seth's inaugural prose novel is *A Suitable Boy*. It examines the political dynamics that culminated in this period. Alok Rai notes that *A Suitable Boy* "projects the anxieties of a secular nation-state still fragile after Partition" (*EPW* 265). We also identified references to the lower class, feudal lords, landlords, academic matters, and intra-family relationships, among others. *A Suitable Boy* has been described as the longest single-volume novel ever published in English. He examines love

and passion, religion, culture, communal implications, infatuation, language, tradition, and orthodox culture.

In *A Suitable Boy*, Seth adheres to the conventional theme of young women. Rupa Mehara seeks an appropriate suitor for her nineteen-year-old daughter, Lata. She articulates her aspiration for her daughter's marriage with the statement: "You too will wed a boy of my selection" (*A Suitable Boy* 354). The multiculturalism evident when a Hindu girl, Lata, becomes enamoured with a Muslim boy, Kabir. The novel concurrently emphasised subjects such as Hindu-Muslim conflict, the eradication of the Zamindari system, land reform, and the empowerment of Muslim women. Seth says that marriage is merely a form of consideration anticipated from both the husband and wife to effectively unite and integrate. Indian marriage fundamentally entails specific customs and rituals. In India, marriage is a deeply entrenched and revered institution that entails numerous ideals, challenges, and complexities.

The novel portrays the tradition of arranged marriage as ongoing. Marriage beyond the mere union of two persons; it embodies the amalgamation of two families and necessitates the respect and comprehension of each other's customs, traditions, and family members. Aijaz Ahmad states, "Seth's novel articulates the contradictions of a society at the cusp of modernity and tradition" (*In Theory* 288). The daughter embodies her family's cultural beliefs, which she brings into her marital household. Consequently, it is unsurprising that numerous traditional families continue to favour the notion of marrying inside their caste and subcaste of a specific community. In *A Suitable Boy*, the protagonist Lata develops an affection for a Muslim youth, Kabir Durrani, but their courtship is abruptly curtailed when her prudent mother intervenes promptly. Lata was acutely aware that her mother would find it exceedingly challenging to accept Kabir, who belonged to a different caste and was unemployed. Upon Lata's declaration of her desire to wed Kabir, a Muslim, her mother becomes enraged and dismisses the proposal, stating:

Devastated when his last name turns out to be Durrani "A Muslim! said Mrs. Rupa Mehra more to herself now than to anyone else. What did I do in my past life that I have brought this upon my beloved daughter, year he'll say "Talaq, talaq and you'll be out on the streets. You obstinate, stupid girl! You should drown yourself in a handful of water for sheer shame. (*A Suitable Boy* 182)

Kabir's refusal of the matrimonial proposal highlights another crucial aspect of Indian civilisation. Kabir is a Muslim and Lata are a Hindu; a Hindu-Muslim marriage is highly improbable. Such ethnic division based on religion, and occasionally language, is a distinctive characteristic of Indian civilisation. Pankaj Mishra in *The New York Review of Books* calls the novel "a microcosm of India itself, with its bewildering variety of voices and desires" (19). India has maintained its secular status for approximately a millennium, characterised by religious tolerance and mutual respect among many faiths, a theme that Seth has adeptly illustrated through his characters, such as the prostitute Saeeda Bai, a Muslim who sings Holi songs. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "Seth's India is imagined as a pluralistic society where bonds of affection may resist political divisions" (*The Perishable Empire* 202). Veena, daughter of Mr. Kapoor, will tie 'Rakhi' to Imtiaz and Firoz Khan on Bhaiduj, as they are her Rakhi brothers and Rakhi sister. Let us examine an illustration of this from the novel:

Veena went in the morning to Prem Nivas to tie a Rakhi around Pran's wrist, she fed him a laddu and blessed Him and received in exchange his promise of protection Five rupees and a hug. Veena also went to Baitar house, as she went every year to tie a rakhi around Firoz's wrist And Imtiaz's both were in, since they were expecting her. (*A Suitable Boy* 980)

Seth's vision of cultural coexistence, where the ritual of Rakhi transcends religious and communal boundaries, symbolizing harmony, affection, and the enduring bonds of shared humanity in post-Partition India. Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, while centered on the lives and marriages of the Mehra family, expands beyond the personal to reflect India's collective struggle for balance after Partition. The narrative portrays India as a nation negotiating its identity through pluralism—embracing religious coexistence, cultural hybridity, and democratic ideals despite political turbulence. Elleke Boehmer's observation that "postcolonial texts testify not only to loss and trauma but also to the possibility of cultural renewal through hybridity" (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 214). Seth demonstrates how individual lives, marriages, and friendships can symbolize larger processes of reconciliation, resilience, and the forging of unity in diversity. Thus, the novel functions as both a domestic saga and a cultural testimony to India's capacity for renewal through hybridity and social harmony.

Seth emphasises the issue of social realism and the circumstances in India during the 1950s via the experiences of the Chatterjee children. The personalities convene at Chatterjee's residence for supper, serving as a form of entertainment for the elite. During the gathering, individuals engage in discussions regarding their professions, enterprises, relationships, literature, politics, society, and notably, the pursuit of an appropriate life partner for their offspring. Indian parents desire that one of their children manage the family business and advocate for arranged marriages. Amit, Chatterjee's son, is a lawyer who pursues poetry writing as his vocation. Justice Chatterjee states that the British authorities for his involvement in student politics a decade ago apprehended Amit. However, he currently possesses little knowledge of politics. Meenakshi has abandoned ethnic traditions, engages in canasta at the club, and dances at parties. Dipankar seeks the significance of existence through spiritual endeavours. Kakoli frequently engages in telephone conversations and disapproves of arranged marriage, similar to Lata; she is in love with a German man named Hans. Tapan is the youngest son of the Chatterjee family and a student, whose senior encourages him to embrace homosexuality.

Seth illustrates the mindset of Indian adolescents through the Chatterjee family. When Chatterjee summons his children to manage his business, a dispute ensues, as his children do not arrive; Amit is preoccupied with writing a novel, while Dipankar expresses disinterest in business and prefers to engage in Hindu spirituality. Justice Chatterjee lamentably states that his children lack occupations but are preoccupied with their endeavours. The actual condition in India was that individuals lacked employment, yet they pretended to be engrossed in their tasks. Seth embodies the realities of culture, religion, education, society, and marriage via this family. Justice Chatterjee says with sorrow about partition of India and Pakistan, which has divided the Indians into Hindus and Muslims. He just searches for the missed names of judges of British and Muslim

contemporaries in the previous year list of judges' names on the first page of All India Reporter of 1948 magazine. He regrets that:

In macrocosm, these two pages reflect the passage of an empire and the birth of two countries from the idea-tragic and ignorant—that people of different religious cannot live together in one. Who'd have thought, he asks himself that things would have changed as much and swiftly as they had? (*A Suitable Boy* 468)

Seth delineates the lifestyles and social behaviours of the Indian middle class, providing a reflection of social reality supported by political data. He chooses Chatterjee's family to exemplify the cosmopolitan culture and selects Calcutta as it serves as the cultural, social, and political capital of the British Empire. The Chatterjee family adheres to the anglicised Bengali culture and Brahmanism characteristic of an upper middle-class household. Raja Ram Mohan Roy is the progenitor of Brahmanism, which conveys the Upanishadic idea that God is singular yet referred to by various names. Shyam S. Agarwalla in his book *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: Search for an Indian Identity* states, "It is but natural that Seth, writing on the intellectual minority in India in 1951-52, should choose Calcutta, like Tolstoy, who chose St. Petersburg for war and peace" (53). It captivates with intellectual and sophisticated spirituality. Seth utilises the Chatterjee characters to articulate a spiritual and political ideology that champions India's historic virtues.

Seth documents social history and fashion that supersede conventional notions, reflecting societal and economic transformations into novel lifestyles thru Lata. He illustrates the Indian caste system through the shoe-trading industry and its labour force. The Praha shoe factory is likened to the Bata Shoe Company. The impoverished individuals employed at the shoe factory reside in unsanitary conditions, adversely affecting their physical and mental well-being due to the detrimental environment. Seth illustrates the disparity between the affluent upper-class communities and the lower-class Jatav group. In his fiction, he juxtaposes innovative and traditional elements, like to day and night. *A Suitable Boy* powerfully illustrates the societal transformations and has personalities that represent the authentic circumstances of newly independent India, notably in 1950. *A Suitable Boy* has conveyed two important social lives as marriage and family. The novel is built around love, marriage and family relationship. In his point of view, marriage is a symbol of peace, settled and stable life. In married life, men and women adjust each other, not only in domestic life as well as in social life also. Pran and Savitha's married life is a good example for it. They have pleasant bond within the family and in turn leads to a stable society.

Seth's *A Suitable Boy* presents postcolonial India as a cultural crossroads where tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and familial duty and personal freedom constantly negotiate with one another. Through its diverse characters and interwoven plots, the novel highlights hybridity as both a challenge and a means of fostering coexistence. Seth illustrates that India's strength lies in its pluralism—its ability to accommodate difference while seeking common ground. Through the depiction of ordinary conversations concerning love, politics, and identity, the novel asserts that societal concord is not the obliteration of

difference but the respectful coexistence of varied perspectives.

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