

PREFERENCE FOR ARRANGED MARRIAGE OVER LOVE MARRIAGE IN THE NOVELS OF VIKRAM SETH

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Abstract

The objective of the present paper is to analyze the significance of arranged marriage in human life though it may be American, Indian, or European society. For this purpose Vikram Seth's all the three novels — *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music* have been taken into consideration. All the three novels are set in three different countries — America, India, and Europe respectively but Vikram Seth has depicted one common aspect of people's preference for arranged marriage over love marriage in all these novels. All the marriages in these novels are arranged marriages, except the marriage of Claire and Phil in *The Golden Gate* and Arun and Meenakshi in *A Suitable Boy* and they have to face disastrous effects of love marriages. This brief research paper will analyze Vikram Seth's preference for arranged marriage over love marriage which has been propagated through distinct memorable characters.

Marriage is a “legal relationship between a husband and wife” (Hornby 941). Marriage is a social relationship that provides sexual, emotional, and mental satisfaction. It is a social union or legal contract between people that creates kinship. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged in a variety of ways, depending on the culture or subculture in which it is found. Arranged marriage is a kind of mutual contract between two unknown persons who swear wedding vows, during their marriage ceremony, to live together and to provide help and support throughout their lives. In Indian society, marriage is considered a pious binding of two souls. It is not only a social agreement but a religious rite and ever-lasting binding which is not liable to be broken at any cost and it is pre-destined by the Almighty God. It is believed in Indian mythology that couples are made in heaven. Marriage is not only a means of sexual satisfaction and a legal licence for child production but it provides spiritual and mental satisfaction to people also. Marriage is the beginning of a life full of restrictions, maturity, and restrictions. It is a kind of fiery ordeal to test human's virtues of tolerance, sacrifice, understanding, maturity, ability of decision-making, and feeling of co-operation.

Arranged marriage is considered the most common type of marriage in every society. In this type of marriage though would be bride or bridegroom is suggested by their relatives or

friends, yet their marriage is decided by the parents of both sides. The couple is the responsibility of their parents and if there is any dispute, clash, misunderstanding, problem in their married life; the couple can ask their respective parents to solve their problem and support them in the days of their misfortunes. On the other hand, love marriage is the best marriage from the couple's point of view but it is acceptable neither to parents nor society. In love marriage if there is any dispute between husband and wife they cannot blame their parents for it. It is the sole responsibility of the couple to retain their love throughout their lives and to bear their responsibilities as they may or may not have the helping hands of their parents and other family members. Though love is the basis of love marriage but it does not mean that there is no love between the couple who get married according to arranged marriage system. In this type of marriage love develops after their marriage and it proves to be a stable love relationship as it is not the product of infatuation or physical attraction but here love develops because of mutual understanding and interests.

In *The Golden Gate* the marriage of Phil and Claire is the result of their physical attraction and passionate desires for each other. They fall in love being attracted by their charm and beauty. Though Claire's parents and other family members do not approve their marriage, yet Claire and Phil do not care to have their parents' approval, consent, and blessings and get married very soon after falling passionately in love. Their love marriage proves totally failure as they could not drag their marital relationship up to six years. Claire and Phil fall apart within six years of their marriage as Claire goes to another man to seek love there, leaving Phil and their five years old son Paul. "A good wife ought to be interested in all her husband's activities" (Narayan 107) but Claire has no interest in Phil and his activities, so their love marriage collapses without any hope. Phil gets nothing out of his love marriage but unrest, sorrows, desertion, divorce, and aloofness. Phil repents over his marriage with Claire and wishes, "O God, I wish I'd never seen /Your face—I wish I'd never been married— Claire" (GG 3.15). Through the relationship of Phil and Claire Seth has proved that marriage is not such a relationship that could be decided in haste or being trapped in physical attraction but it must be decided after a lot of careful and deliberate considerations.

The marital bond of Mr. and Mrs. Dorati is the result of their arranged marriage as it is not the outcome of their passionate love but it has been arranged by their parents and love develops between the couple after the pious ceremony of marriage. Though Mr. and Mrs. Dorati get married by following the traditional way of marriage that is arranged marriage system but they get success to be one soul and one body. They lead their life happily and satisfactorily, enjoying each other's company and Mrs. Dorati wishes the same kind of bliss of married life for her children. She remains worried to get her children married in their proper age and to enjoy their lives.

It is difficult to categorize the marriage of Phil and Liz into love marriage or arranged marriage. It cannot be termed either as love marriage or arranged marriage. It is a kind of revenge upon John for his desertion of Liz without any fault of her own. Liz and John fall in passionate love very soon of their first meeting. Their relationship grows to the heights of glorious peak of passionate and physical love and they want to enjoy the bliss of love by getting married. But Vikram Seth does not make them to enjoy the happiness and bliss of married life that they might have after their love marriage. Seth very deftly makes distrust to creep in their love relationship and it is this distrust of John in Liz that acts as oil into the burning fire and scatters their passionate love into pieces. Being deserted by John, Liz takes a sudden decision, astonishing all the family members, to get married with Phil who is already a divorcee and father of Paul. Though Phil liked Liz and her ideas but they did not have any passionate feelings of love

for each other. The passionate and emotional feelings of love develop between them after their marriage. Their marriage is arranged by their parents though in the beginning Phil's mother does not give her consent for this marriage and she does not look happy at it. Later in the novel we see Phil and Liz enjoying their married life. Liz gets married with divorcee and pragmatic Phil rejecting romantic, passionate and volatile John because she understood that "in the game of life what will last is steady affection rather than a passionate and romantic relationship" (Mohanty 238). By the triangular relationship of Phil, Liz, and John Seth has advocated the arranged and traditional marriage over love marriage. Seth has introduced the love marriage of Phil and Claire, arranged marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Dorati, Phil and Claire in *The Golden Gate* to make his readers to have a lesson from the consequences of their marriage and to propagate his theory of preference of arranged marriage over love marriage.

A Suitable Boy is centred on the theme of marriage in new emerging India governed by norms and taboos, where violation always results to bad results. This novel is set against the background of traditional Indian society of 1952 and mainly deals with the issue of marriage in this conservative society. This novel starts with the marriage of Savita and Pran and comes to an end with the marriage of Lata and Haresh. Like *The Golden Gate*, in the novel *A Suitable Boy* Seth advocates arranged marriage over love marriage. There are a lot of married couples in *A Suitable Boy* and almost all the marriages are arranged marriages but Seth has introduced the marriage of Arun and Meenakshi as love marriage to show the disastrous effects or aftermaths of love marriage.

Jayabharthi says, "...arranged marriage brings with it inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance. These three prime characteristics are required for lifelong commitment. Being passionate about anything or over anything is worthy of momentary bliss" (153). In Seth's theory romance, passion, and love marriage is always synonymous with disaster. Though the protagonist of the novel Lata falls passionately in love with a Muslim boy Kabir and gets ready to elope with him but Seth does not allow this type of elopement and marriage in this novel because of conservative background and outlook of Indian society and culture. Seth has made Lata's mother Rupa Mehra to take the initiative who warns Lata against Muslim ritual of *talaq* as, "Muslim men can unilaterally divorce a legally wedded wife by simply pronouncing *talaq* thrice" (Shukla 24 Sep. 2015). In *A Suitable Boy* Mrs. Rupa Mehra warns Lata against Kabir and the inevitable custom of *talaq* in Muslim community saying, "He'll marry you—and next year he'll say "Talaq talaq talaq" and you'll be out on the streets" (SB 182). Mrs. Rupa Mehra finds and selects Haresh as a suitable boy for her daughter Lata and gets them married according to Indian tradition and customs. Seth has made Mrs. Rupa Mehra to understand the disastrous aftermaths of love marriage as well as inter-community marriage of Lata and Kabir. In this regard Ganjoo also says, "Despite the fact that Lata and Kabir loved each other passionately but their wedlock would have resulted in disharmony" (5).

Though Haresh has been married to Lata but he had love affair with a Sikh girl named Simran during his adolescence. Despite of his passionate love for Simran, Haresh has realized for the best that Simran is out of his reach because her parents were against their marriage. Seth has not allowed Haresh to marry Simran forcefully against her parents' wish and consent because Indian society of 1952 might have not permitted this marriage of Hindu boy and Sikh girl. "Had Haresh entered in wedlock with Simran he would have meted the same fate which Lata Mehra would have experienced with Kabir Durrani" (Ganjoo 6). Seth has made both Haresh and Simran to settle their lives with their life partners, selected or decided by their respective parents.

Three boys Kabir, Amit, and Haresh seek Lata's hand for marriage but Seth has made Lata to reject Kabir and Amit for one or another reason. Lata rejects Kabir despite of her great love for him because she finds him over dominating. She tells Malati that "when I'm with Kabir, or even away from him but thinking about him, I become utterly useless for anything. I feel I'm out of control—like a boat heading for the rocks—and I don't want to become a wreck" (SB 1298). Lata rejects Amit because she finds him moody like herself and besides it she is not certain if Amit will have any time for her because he remains busy in his writings and Lata feels that marrying Amit would be madness. Lata gives her consent to get married with Haresh as she has felt that "Haresh's feet touch the ground, and he has dust and sweat and shadow. The other two are a bit God-like and ethereal to be any good for me" (SB 1299). Seth has made Lata to understand that Kabir and Amit would be unable to carry her off into the sunset of life. She prefers "the flickering but steady light of the star over the blinding but temporary brilliance of the lighting" (Mohanty 179).

A Suitable Boy is a novel that centres around the theme of marriage and Seth has preferred arranged marriage over love marriage in this novel like his two other novels. The marriage of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Mrs. Kappor, Mrs. Chatterji, Veena and Kedarnath, Priya and Ram Vilas Goyal, Savita and Pran, Lata and Haresh all are arranged marriages. All the couples who get married according to arranged marriage system of society are presented leading their lives happily and satisfactorily despite of some of inconveniences. It is a fact that life is not bed of roses we have to face some troubles and problems in our lives but these couples solve their problems with mutual understanding and co-operation. Jayabharthi aptly says that "arranged marriage brings with it an inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance" (153).

Arranged marriage is not only prevalent in Hindu society but it also exists in Muslim community. The marriage of Nawab Sahib and his younger brother has been decided by their parents. Nawab Sahib marries off his educated daughter Zainab to the boy of his choice. Even Saeeda a famous and charming prostitute wants her daughter Tasneem to be married with the boy selected by her. She rejects Tasneem's three suitors Ishaq Khan, Rasheed, and Firoz for one or another reason and asserts to Maan that "it is not for the admirers to choose her, but to be chosen by me" (SB 806). Abida Khan was married according to arranged marriage system but she represents the valour on the part of Muslim woman who shows enough courage to disobey the rules of *purdah* in Muslim community and even she becomes a member of legislative assembly and is known as "the firebrand of the legislature" (SB 321).

To prove the superiority of arranged marriage over love marriage Seth has introduced the love marriage of Arun and Meenakshi and the ruinous effects of it for the couple and for the society. Marriage has been described as a pious relationship since time immemorial. The building of marriage is based on the foundation of belief and sacrifice but both Arun and Meenakshi do not fulfil this requirement and they present "a dark side of marriage where both husband and wife involve themselves in extramarital relations" (Ganjoo 6). In *A Suitable Boy* Seth has shown much courage to introduce inter-caste marriage of Arun and Meenakshi in the traditional Indian society of 1952 where this type marriage was out of imagination. But his purpose is not to glorify love marriage or his valour to introduce love marriage in superstitious society, Seth only wants to present love marriage as a contrast to arranged marriage.

Arun and Meenakshi do not respect the sanctity, limits and restrictions of this pious relationship of marriage. She nurtures a secret lust for Billy Irani who is Arun's friend. She even goes much beyond it and establishes sexual relationship with Billy and as a result gets pregnant though she gets the foetus aborted as she feels that the baby might not be of Arun and besides it,

it will damage her figure and social status. Meenakshi does not feel it illegal or amoral to establish physical relationship with Billy despite of being married with Arun. She asks Billy, “What does marriage have to do with it ... I’m married, aren’t I? You enjoy it, I enjoy it; that’s all there is to it” (SB 1131). Meenakshi blots the pious relationship of marital bond as she has no respect or regard for this relationship. Meenakshi’s coquetry and adultery with Billy Irani reveals “the superficiality of a love-marriage based on passion alone” (Sinha 54). Only Meenakshi does not deserve to be blamed for her extra-marital relationship because her counterpart Arun is no better than her. Arun also establishes physical relationship with Shireen, Billy’s girl-friend. Through the marriage of Arun and Meenakshi, Seth has highlighted the drawbacks of love marriage that is totally based on passion and physical attraction. Seth has proved that love marriage gets exhausted very soon in the long run of life and transient love between the couple disappears as soon as it starts. The loving couple finds it impossible to keep the flower of their pre-marriage love away from withering. On the other hand, love blossoms after marriage in the couple who come together because of arranged marriage system of society and the flower of their eternal love remains ever fresh throughout their lives. Their love proves permanent and static as compared to the transient and flickering love of the couple who get married according to love marriage system of society.

Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, a political leader is in favour of arranged marriage as he gets his children Pran and Veena married according to traditional arranged marriage system of society. Mahesh Kapoor even asks his younger son Maan to leave his passion for the prostitute Saeeda Bai and to get married to the girl whom they have engaged for him from Banaras. Mrs. Rupa Mehra also favours arranged marriage and she gets her daughters Savita and Lata married with the boys selected by her after a lot of search and deliberate considerations. She wants her younger son Varun to be married with the girl chosen by her. Mrs. Rupa Mehra does not approve the marriage of Arun and Meenakshi because Meenakshi is not the girl of her choice as she could not become the apple of her mother-in-law’s eyes.

Seth has made the parents of Meenakshi to represent the modern and generous attitude of awakened India as they do not object the inter-caste marriage of Arun and Meenakshi as Arun belongs to *khatri* caste and Meenakshi is a Brahmin girl. Mr. Chatterji goes much further in his generosity when he does not show any objection about the marriage of his daughter Kakoli to a German, Hans. But such type of generous person seems to be exceptional and rare in Indian society of 1952. In short, in *A Suitable Boy* Seth has presented India of “arranged marriages, self-made men, rationality and sanity, and tolerance and understanding” (Mohanty 179). Seth has glorified arranged marriage over love marriage and proved that love marriage is governed by passion that can last for a few years but arranged marriage is governed by affection and it can last for lifetime. All the couples who get together through arranged marriage are described having divine virtues as: sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, adjustment, trust, mutual understanding and they try their best to adjust in this lasting marital bond and they do not waver from it like Meenakshi and Arun.

An Equal Music is set against the background of enchanted and romantic world of Vienna and Venice. On the one hand, this novel is “an unforgettable tale of love, lost and nearly regained” (Mohanty 153) but on the other, it also describes the minute description of music, musical notes and terms. Seth has woven the story of the novel in a realistic web of musicians, agents, critics, concert halls, rehearsals, details about music and musical instruments, different records of Western music, disparities between the musicians and their mutual understanding and co-operation but it also deals with the theme of marriage in the European society. Seth has

glorified arranged marriage in *An Equal Music* also. The marriage of Michael's parents has been arranged by their parents and they try their best to lead their life with mutual co-operation, understanding, and personal sacrifices that are considered the essential virtues of any type of marriage to make it successful.

Regarding the benefits of arranged marriages Sorrell said, "Arranged marriages are meant to avoid the risks associated with the freedom of choice, as they are designed around entirely practical grounds such as alliance formation or rank, which in certain societies may be beneficial to the couple or the associated kin group" (20). The marriage of Julia and James falls into the category of arranged marriage as their marriage has been arranged by their parents and it is not the product of their passionate love. Love develops between James and Julia after their marriage and they enjoy the bliss of married life and have a son, Luke.

Though Julia had romantic relationship with her fellow musician Michael, yet Seth has very cleverly made Michael to disappear from Julia's life when there had been a chance for them to get married as they were totally in love with each other and wanted to convert their love into marital bond. But it might not be acceptable to Seth so he made Michael to have a row with his teacher Carl Kall and to flee to London leaving Julia to pine alone. Seth has made the loving couple to meet again in London after ten years of unbearable separation but in the meanwhile, though Michael is still a bachelor but Julia has been married with another person James and they have no way to marry again but they get infatuated and establish physical relationship with each other. It is also a part of Seth's plan to propagate his preference for arranged marriage over love marriage because having sexual relationship with Michael, Julia comes to realise the futility of this amoral and illegal relationship. Besides it, she understands the value of marriage, husband, and her family to have peace of mind and satisfaction in life. Her guilt pricks her conscious; she loses peace of mind, and decides to return back to her caring and loving husband deserting passionate, volatile, and over-dominating Michael.

Seth has presented Julia and James as "a delightful couple ... made for each other" (EM 211). It is James who helps Julia in her deafness, it is James who encourages Julia to continue playing piano, it is James who makes Julia to get name and fame in the world of music, it is James who sends Julia to Vienna and Venice even with Michael for musical concerts, and it is James who provides each type of comforts for Julia and does not blame her for having physical relationships with Michael. Karanvir Gupta has rightly said that among all the relationships, marriage is especially a relationship "where accepting each other with their imperfections is the key" (17 Feb. 2013). James accepts Julia despite of her amoral physical relationship with Michael and her deafness.

Seth has not made Julia and Michael to be tied up in the marital bond because he is not in favour of love marriage. Besides it, Seth knew very well that if he would have made Michael and Julia to get married then there would have every possibility of Michael's being unsuccessful in bearing the responsibility of married life because he is romantic, unrealistic, dreamy, and passionate lover and only these qualities are not essential to be good life-partner but a person should be realistic, practical, mature, and caring to lead a successful married life. All these qualities abound in James who does not reside in the world of dreams like Michael but keeps his feet firm on the ground of reality.

Seth's theory of preference of arranged marriage over love marriage has been highlighted in all the three novels. All the arranged marriages are presented as being successful in his novels. The people of these three distinct countries in which these novels are set, are described in favour of arranged marriage and the drawbacks of love marriage are brought into consideration time and

again. Though Seth has depicted love marriage and romantic relationships in his three novels but it is only to draw a comparison between the consequences of love marriage and to glorify traditional method of arranged marriage.

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