

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN VIKRAM SETH'S '*A SUITABLE BOY*'

Dr. Rajula Albert

Asstt. Professor (English)
Govt. Degree College Hatta,
Damoh (M. P.)

The concept of multiculturalism endorses the idea of difference and heterogeneity that is embodied in the concept of diversity. The concept of multiculturalism contributes to this agenda of democratization and non discrimination. First it locates cultural identity as a source of discrimination in society. While earlier theories focused on discrimination that occurs on account of one's religion, race and gender, multiculturalism points to discrimination of minority cultures within the nation state. Second it argues that equality for diverse cultures requires a system of special, group differentiated rights. Albeit, in its discussion of diverse communities, it distinguishes between the majority community and the minorities. That is the diverse cultural communities are categorized as majority and minorities.¹

Cultural diversity encompasses the cultural differences that exist between people such as language, dress and traditions, and the way societies organize themselves their conception of morality and religion, and the way they interact with the environment. Cultural diversity is tricky to quantify, but a good indication is thought to be a count of the number of languages spoken in region. The resulting confluence of peoples and cultures in an increasingly global, multicultural world brimming with tension, confusion and conflict is in the process of its adjustment to pluralism.

The study of Vikram Seth particularly *A Suitable Boy* brings to light the various reactions of the ideology of Multiculturalism. India has always been the most culturally, linguistically and genetically diverse geographical entity after the African continent. India's democratic republic is premised on a national belief in pluralism and not the standard nationalist invocation of a shared history, a single language and an assimilationist culture.

Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is all encompassing social commentary. Seth has tried to do justice to India, a country inhabiting 440 million people dispersed linguistically among 845 languages and dialects possessing varied customs and following several religions. The prohibitive size of Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*, to a great extent accounts for 'a larger than life' verisimilitude imparted to it. He presents India in all its variance, with heat, dust, light, extended families, its violence and lust together with the rigidities of castes and religions, along with religious processions, rigged elections and grand weddings. It wonderfully encompasses the complex labyrinth of the country in all the vicissitudes; social, political, moral and intellectual. All the features help in giving a complete cohesion to the novel. Seth has depicted India with all its ambiguities and contradictions. India is not one culture but several cultures rolled into one. Seth has successfully wielded a huge canvas of characters and incidents through multilinear plots.

The plot of *A Suitable Boy* is set in a volatile period of Indian history when old institutions were being dismantled and the new were still in the womb of time. The first parliamentary general election, which remain acid test for the newly born Indian democracy. The canvas of the plot touches almost all aspects of Indian life and Indian culture." *The novel is*

linear partly because it is multilinear. There are several plots in it".² In the words of Ruth Morse, "A **Suitable Boy** is a social satire and social history, from the politics of the great man to the manoeuvrings of a mother".³

The novel with its depiction of the tradition of arranged marriage is seen in continuation. Indian marriage essentially presupposes certain customs and rites. In India marriage is a well established and sacrosanct institution which presupposes various values, issues and obstacles. Marriage does not mean merely the meeting of two individuals in a relationship; rather it signifies mixing and mingling of two families and involves respecting and understanding the custom and tradition as well as the members of each other's families. The daughter epitomizes the cultural values of her family which she carries to the family she is wedded into. It is therefore no wonder that many traditional families still prefer the idea of marrying into their caste and sub-caste, of particular community.

In **A Suitable Boy**, the heroine Lata falls in love with a Muslim boy, Kabir Durrani, but the courtship stops sooner than it begins because the cautious mother takes charge of the situation immediately. Lata known quite well that it would be too difficult for her mother to accept Kabir who was neither of their caste nor was he employed. When Lata expresses her intentions of marrying Kabir, a Muslim to her mother, she gets infuriated and rejects the proposal saying:

"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, p 182)

Kabir's rejection in the matrimonial alliance brings out another extremely important dimension concerning Indian society. Kabir is a Muslim and Lata a Hindu and a Hindu-Muslim marriage is a severe impossibility such ethnic segregation on the basis of religion, sometimes on the basis of language also remains a unique feature of the Indian society. India has remained a secular country for about a millennium where religious tolerance and mutual respect for the others religion has been a unique feature of the country which Seth has wonderfully described through his characters like, courtesan, Saeeda Bai a Muslim singing Holi songs. Veena daughter of Mr. Kapoor going to tie 'Rakhi' at Bhaiduj to Imtiaz and Firoz Khan and are Rakhi-brother and Rakhi sister. Let us consider an example 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 p, 1980-81)

Yet there are certain areas where the segregation on the basis of religion or caste remains prominent and which, neither like to cross over. This segregation has perpetuated the multi ethnic character of the society of India and which even today remains as such. Even the most educated people like in the case of Lata maintain such segregation as they understand the deep

implications of such crossovers for the future of the individual in the societal frame work as well as the collective frame of the society.

Caste also plays an important role in maintaining the segregated structure of the society. Examples of the difference between upper castes and lower castes find mention in the novel. The difference of the rural and urban India is a new form of ethnic divide which we find in Seth's novels.

Multilingualism in the novel appears as one aspect of the diversity of India, and the novel's varied in range and scope implies a commitment of the author to make a full presentation of that diversity of India, as a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic society. The characters are represented as speaking understanding, reading and writing varying combinations of four main languages namely Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and English. At least three other feature in the background, they are Sanskrit, Arabic and German.

Religious fanaticism also finds mention in the book. In a country as big and ethnically diverse as India religion has always played a very important part in the life of an Indian. For majority of Indians no other factor is more powerful and influential than their religious beliefs and faith. Passion in religion is defined by Seth as fanaticism, bigotry and disgust towards other's religions.

In *A Suitable Boy* a cultural diverse society has been shown yet there remains peace and harmony inspite of all the diversities. Every minute detail of the cultural diversity has been shown by Seth. In a globalized world the co-existence of varied cultures has become a common phenomenon and the biggest question remains whether all these diverse cultures can remain within a single nation. Seth's India as presented in *A Suitable Boy* answers this question as all ethnic groups diverse in terms of religion, caste, sub-caste, gender, economy live under one umbrella i.e. a single nation.

References:

- 1 <http://www.india-seminar.com/1999/20/mahajan.htm>.p.3,15/1/07.
- 2 Gupta,Roopali.Vikram Seth's Art: An Appraisal.Atlantic Publishers and Distributors,New Delhi,2005,p.72
- 3 Ibid.,p.72
- 4 Seth, Vikram,A Suitable Boy,Viking Penguin India,New Delhi,1993