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## REVISITING THE PAST IN HOPE FOR A BETTER INDIA: HISTORY COMES ALIVE IN VIKRAM SETH'S *A SUITABLE BOY*

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“Let no one say that past is dead  
The past is all about us and within”

- Oodgeroo Noonuccal

### **Abstract:**

*History as inheritance and as significant past is an inexorable ubiquity in our society. A sound understanding of the past is necessary in order to condition ourselves in terms of where we are heading to. Likewise literature gives us an insight about ourselves that we didn't have before. Both history and literature are indispensable for the discernment of oneself and the world around us as they mirror the life, culture and civilisation of people. Being the studies of humanity, history and literature intertwine and respond to the hopes, concerns and problems of real human beings, their emotions and hardships in a concrete life situation. In representing the humanity literature and history have always had a close kinship.*

**Key Words:** *History, inexorable ubiquity, discernment, humanity.*

Comprehending human nature and learning from the experiences of others is an important part of the study of history and historical fiction also shares the same objective. Fiction enables history to come alive, be it the past epoch or the present, history is mainly taught through literary works and it reaches its full potential as a study of human nature through the means of literature. Bearing this in mind we can say that a historical fiction helps perceive history through the eyes of the people who were there. It presents us a narrative that lays prominence on a particular period in history and elucidates some of the real events that happened at that time, blending actual historical facts with fiction.

Vikram Seth, the world acclaimed Indian poet and novelist of today has made immense contribution to the genre of historical fiction and has enriched Indian English novel with reference to themes as well as techniques. Many of his works have great historical values and they interestingly expose the crude facts of time and mystify the truths of the past. His historical novels revive the glory of the national past and enact like a prism and by divulging and dispersing, show the colourful social, religious and familial customs of India. His novel *A Suitable Boy* is one of his monumental works which is set in between 1950 and 1952, crucial years in the history of India as it saw the emergence of Indian middle class and secularism under the governance of our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

After the withdrawal of the British from the Indian subcontinent, the Congress party and Muslim League concurred in June 1947 to a partition of India along religious lines. Under the contingency of the Indian Independence Act, India and Pakistan were entrenched as Independent dominions. The Concurrent Independence and partition of India evinced a great victory and sorrow for our nation. The severance of the subcontinent caused massive disaster like dislocation of huge number of people which brought surging bitterness that persisted in our so called “free India”. The greatest repercussion was the inter communal violence and disputes among the Indians for religious reasons. The partitioned India saw the great human turmoil's of history. Millions of people moved and exchanged their houses between India and Pakistan -

Muslims to Pakistan and the Hindus to India.

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. (284-285)

Seth in his novel *A Suitable Boy* captures this unrest which was prevalent in India during the 1950's. After a raging sermon by the local Imam in opposition to the construction of the Shiva temple next to the mosque, a riot takes place. The narrator reports the poignant 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. (251)

This scene culminates and comes to an end with the arrival of the police shooting at the mob. A similar incident occurs later in the novel, a Stampede at the Pul Mela on the banks of the Ganges. The narrator says:

Within fifteen minutes more than a thousand people were dead. . . . It was still not clear what had happened. Dipankar had been among the spectators on the other side of the main route. He watched with horror the carnage that was taking place less than fifty feet away but with the nagas between him and the ramp there was nothing he could do. Anyway, there was nothing he could have done except get killed or injured. He did not recognize anyone on the ramp, so tightly packed was the crowd. It was a hellish scene, like humanity gone mad, each element indistinguishable from the other, all bent on a kind of collective suicide (796-797).

Though these events took place in the 50's it recalls certain similar situations that happened in the recent past of our contemporary India. A train was burned in Godhra a city in Gujarat, due to inter communal violence on 27 February 2002 and caused the death of 59 people and this incident led to the outbreak of violence in Ahmadabad for many days. Kumbha Mela is a Hindu religious festival which takes place once in every three years and thousands of people come to Allahabad to bathe at the conflux of the rivers of Ganga and Yamuna. On 10 February 2013 during this festival a stampede broke out at the railway station killing and injuring more than 36 people. Thus, the great classic master Aristotle said that "history is an account of the unchanging past", in the sense that human nature does not alter and all the activities arise only with same purpose and motives only differ in the extent of details and not in their basic nature. Hence, war, conquest, conflict, expansion and exploitation are constant elements in history.

Since communal riot was one of the central political events that happened in India during 1950's Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to obtain a solution through democratic socialism which championed political liberty, equality and tolerance. He wanted to maintain individual freedom, consent and compromise but not conflict. Nehru in his *The Discovery of India* built a secular India to imbue that religious and cultural tolerance was at the basis of our Indian civilization and fostered India as "a secular unity, 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 pleads the same clarion call of Nehruvian secularism which is the only approach that can bind India which is being fragmented on communal grounds. In his novel he tries to build a strong friendship between people who were not supposed to be friends. Maan Kapoor and Firoz Khan's friendship is one such example. By doing so Seth reiterates Nehru's ideologies and advocates Nehruvian secularism which is still the need of contemporary India where only peaceful method can initiate constructive changes be it politically, socially or economically.

Another episode that Seth depicts in his novel is the abolition of Zamindari system. He talks about the consequence problems that occurred during that time due to the feudal system. Until Independence a large part of agricultural land was controlled by the Zamindars, which as a result burdened the farmers with unproductive cultivation, heavy taxation and other forms of ill treatments. In the novel the politician Abida Shahib defended the Zamindari system, in the legislative assembly of the invented state of Purva Pradesh. He voices against the land reforms being thrust by the ruling Congress party.

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. (307)

But Nehru wanted to eradicate the internal colonial attitude which took place in the name of land lordism. In his first five year plan he stated that the land reform was the radical issue of national importance. The aims of land reforms measures in India were to enhance the productivity of land by improving the economic condition of farmers and to ensure an egalitarian society by eliminating any forms of exploitation. Seth represents this idea in his novel and conveys how even though there was opposition regarding the land reforms, eventually the people began to accept the change for integrating the nation as a whole and started a journey towards a realistic life. This shift made India march towards the industrial arena which in turn modified the social structure of India. He also portrays how Lata Mehra realistically chooses a suitable boy. Her choice is neither the wealthy Amit nor the dashing and attractive Kabir, it is instead the apparently mediocre Hareesh, a semi-professional in the shoe industry who epitomizes the reality principle.

Seth traces this gradual development of India into a modern industrial nation. The abolition of feudalism was the sign of real Independence. However the repudiation did not prevent the ascent of farm suicides in India, which have occurred since the middle of the 1990's. Things happen the same way both in the past and in the present, but only when we go back to our history we will get to know the reasons and answers for the problems we face now.

The novel also exhibits how Indian women during the 50's were beginning to be liberated and through the characters of Lata Mehra and Malathi, Seth reveals how women were becoming strong as men in demanding their choices. We also learn that the institution of marriage was also reforming. Even though Lata Mehra and Kabir did not end up together in the novel, Seth indicates how in the 50's people started to contemplate about inter-faith/inter-class/inter-caste marriages manifesting the fact that history paves way for the future.

Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* allows us to witness firsthand the growth and development of India towards modernity in the real sense. He gives a graphic picture of the gradual transition and nation-building in India which was considered as the most important social and economical transformation of India after Independence. Seth's intention of revisiting the past is to hope for a better India. Through his novel he exemplifies that India today is the building blocks of the past.

No culture is said to be complete without referring to the marvelous movements of the past as it offers us the quintessence of human experience. The contemporary world gains a lot of benefits and upgrades them by drawing numerous lessons from the past and our history is definitely a bountiful resource we can draw upon to grab the present and the future.

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