

The Invention of India in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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South Asia

With his representation of India in the 1950s, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) has appropriated the nineteenth-century realist tradition in novel writing to his own ends. The Nehruvian idea of India as a 'unity within diversity' and a secular approach to religion features prominently in this novel. Its vast descriptive horizon is contained within a deceptively styleless language, naturalizing what is in fact a carefully constructed 'imagined community'.

By Neelam Srivastava

A *Suitable Boy* provides a synchronic look at post-Independence Indian life of the 1950s, in many ways a *tranche de vie*. It aspires to provide an idea of India through a realistic approach that has an almost photographic quality. Seth's narrative technique has invited comparisons with novelists such as R.K. Narayan, George Eliot, and Leo Tolstoy, because his novel displays a rare belief in the possibility of representational 'authenticity', which it seeks to achieve through an impressively detailed and documented reconstruction of Indian society around the time of the first general elections. Amidst the anti-realist tendencies of postmodern fiction, Seth's novel is striking for its reappropriation of the realist mode, which is characterized by an omniscient narrator, linear chronology, and psychologically coherent characters, all immersed in a 'universe of ordered significance'.

My reading examines the novel as a secular narrative of the Indian nation, which draws much on Jawaharlal Nehru's nationalist text, *The Discovery of India*. In emphasizing India's multiculturalism and traditions of tolerance towards other religions, Nehru identified secularism as the only approach which would guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation. This did not mean 'absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India' (Gopal 1980: 331).

The fifties were a very important moment in the consolidation of modern Indian identity, when 'disobedience, resistance and revolt were carefully dismantled and oppositional energies were consciously diffused as the nationalist struggle was closed off and the nation-state began to establish its dominance' (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 44). Many of the myths and conceptions of the nation that still survive today were established and circulated in Nehru's India. In *A Suitable Boy* a cultural interpretation of 1950s nationhood, i.e. the idea of a 'strong' India, based in part on liberal progressivism, is strongly endorsed.

This is even more so because Seth's secularism is articulated within the boundaries of the nation-state. Compared to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which questions the viability of the very concept of nation, Seth is already working within an accepted idea of the nation, and is concerned with more specific issues of making it work, such as communal harmony and economic improvement. In the 1950s, as a concomitant effect of the Nehru administration's economic development policies, the body of the state absorbed the nation. The Indian

state assumed full responsibility for the marginalized groups that had not been prime beneficiaries of the transition from colonialism to independence. Certain cultural products, such as Indian nationalist novels, 'endorsed and extended these transformations as they set up a nation-space' (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 60).

Seth has a similarly statist and secularist approach to the idea of nationhood. He writes about nation-building from the point of view of India's rising middle class, informed by a secularizing Nehruvian ideology. Focusing on four upper-class Indian families, three Hindu, one Muslim, the author makes no attempt to hide the essentially bourgeois viewpoint of the narrative, which is contained in part within a progressive teleology of the nation. Many events in the book can be seen as symbolic moments in the nation-forming process, characterized by gradual, rather than violent, social change. The land reform acts implemented by the Congress Party during the 1950s are evoked in the novel by the fictional Zamindari Abolition Act, which aims to abolish feudal land-holdings in the invented state of Purva Pradesh. It is portrayed as the cause of one of the most important social and economic transformations of post-Independence India. In the narrative it symbolizes the passage from feudalism to the rise of the middle class, traditionally seen as a crucial moment of transition in the development of a modern industrialized state.

A Suitable Boy as a national narrative

'The more leisurely stretches in realistic fiction also convey the immersion of meaning in time. The well-trained reader of novels knows when to look and listen with special care; certain meanings which inform the entire narrative are dramatized more starkly, or expressed more explicitly in the privileged moments of traditional fiction' (Bersani 1978: 52). In *A Suitable Boy*, this 'immersion of meaning in time' also results from, or contributes to, the construction of the Indian nation as an undisputed framework. This provides a solid ideological and ethical basis for



A Hindu priest about to light the wedding pyre

the development of the novel: the main narrative events, the dialogues, the thoughts of the characters, and the direct authorial interventions. There are some privileged moments where Seth's construction of his discourse emerges more explicitly, as in his direct comments on Nehru's political achievements.

Seth's naturalized representation of the nation goes hand in hand with his endorsement of Nehruvian ideology. In *A Suitable Boy*, the nation is an all-inclusive concept that moves from the individual, to the locality, to the regional state, and arrives to embrace the entire nation. Seth invents a state, Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian dimension is stretched to make it representative of India in its totality. At the beginning of the novel, Lata Mehra, one of the central characters of the novel, is daydreaming during her sister's wedding, musing on the small pyre in the middle of the ceremony:

...this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India... and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge (Seth 1993: 16).

The author constructs an organic idea of India through the microcosm of Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh, in the tradition of R.K. Narayan's invented South Indian town, Malgudi. Seth claims to have based Brahmpur on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya. The move to create typical, rather than specific, North Indian localities recalls the process of nation-forming itself, where it is seen as an idealization and selection of historical events and religious and linguistic traditions, made in order to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness.

A Suitable Boy appears to encompass a staggering variety of experience: it

seems to be 'saying everything about India', while in fact its vast descriptive horizon is not infinite, and is shaped by the discourse of the narrator. Realist description is characterized by the interweaving of the aesthetic and referential purposes. The aesthetic purpose has a containing function, in that it directs the description towards the production of a meaning. On the other hand, the assumed reality of the referent prevents the description to turn into fantasizing. This fact becomes very apparent in the crowd scenes in *A Suitable Boy*. As in many Indian-English novels, these scenes communicate a sense of India's multiple realities contained by a unifying national consciousness, which is represented by the omniscient narrator and often filtered through the consciousness of individual characters. As Maan Kapoor takes a *flâneur*-like stroll through the old part of the city of Brahmpur, this is what he sees:

'Crows cawed, small boys in rags rushed around on errands (one balancing six small dirty glasses of tea on a cheap tin tray as he weaved through the crowd), monkeys chattered in and bounded about a great shivering-leaved pipal tree and tried to raid unwary customers as they left the well-guarded fruit stand, women shuffled along in anonymous burqas or bright saris, with or without their menfolk, a few students from the university lounging around a chaat-stand shouted at each other from a foot away either out of habit or in order to be heard, mangy dogs snapped and were kicked, skeletal cats mewed and were stoned, and flies settled everywhere...' (Seth 1993: 97).

The naturalness of Seth's portrayal of India in descriptions such as this one is a great achievement. It's almost as if the purpose of the walk were to familiarize the reader with the town, which is the main setting of the plot. Such familiarization is a recurrent authorial strategy and is characterized by an informative yet affective tone, calculated to make the reader 'feel at home' in every setting. The description of the crowd carries an immediacy that makes us 'enter' the scene in some way, as if we were present at it, thus imbuing it with an impressionistic quality. This technique resembles that of nineteenth-century realist fiction such as Balzac's, where the stylistic unity of the description is not established rationally but 'presented as a striking and immediately apprehended state of things, purely suggestively, without any proof' (Auerbach 1953: 471).

Nehru employs a similar naturalizing technique when describing the diversity of the Indian crowds. There is the sense, in both Seth's and Nehru's texts, that the nation is waiting to get out, 'come into its own'. India is assumed to be an undivided subject whose apparent 'diversity' stops at the surface. It is the narrator/protagonist of the text who effects a 'discovery' of an undivided India through his description.

The novel's Nehruvian perspective



Guests and relatives at an Indian wedding

must be seen in context. Published in 1993, when the Hindu right wing steadily appropriated Indian national identity, *A Suitable Boy* can be read as a response to the aggressive communalization of politics in the 1990s, by recuperating a Nehruvian vision of the relationship between religion and society. The novel was immensely successful in India, and its translations in Hindi and Bengali met with great critical acclaim, showing that it could be 'translated back' into the vernacular languages which are represented in the novel. *A Suitable Boy* thus remains an influential secular and realist narrative of India, whose linguistic creativity and intense engagement with recent history has effectively contributed to its canonical status in the post-colonial literary context. <

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