

## ‘A SUITABLE BOY’ MIRRORS POLITICAL, INDIVIDUAL QUANDARIES ON SCREEN.

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### ABSTRACT

"A Suitable Boy" is a television series based on Vikram Seth's Novel "A Suitable Boy" that beautifully reflects the political and individual dilemmas of India in the 1950s. Set against the backdrop of a newly independent India struggling to define its identity, the show portrays the challenges faced by both the country and its people in navigating their way through a complex social and political landscape. With a strong ensemble cast and stunning visuals, the series explores themes of love, duty, and tradition, while highlighting the clash between modernity and tradition. Overall, "A Suitable Boy" offers a compelling and thought-provoking reflection of India's past and present.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A social Milieu Refers to the immediate social, physical and environmental setting off a society where people live and something develops or happens. It includes the cultural dogmas and individual inherits and the people they interact with and their surroundings. Social realism is a replication of social reality as it is. Social realist films represent true to life characters and the environment. A suitable boy is soaked with the dogmas of family and connects perfectly with the conservative and realist portrait adroitly. Mira Nair has gone a long way showcasing the society of the time by adopting Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* to a mini series of six episodes. Mira Nair's adaptation of the novel *A Suitable Boy*, set in the 1950s, in every way assumes the form of a social realist film as it depicts the major conflicts of post-independence and post-partition India on screen. With the cultural tradition of making arranged marriages of higher class Indian children, she manages to insert the Hindu and Muslim friction in reference to political intrigues at the time. The constant involvement of the members of the four families keeps the political involvement from Being Dry historical facts. Lata and Maan serve as the main protagonists to the social situations in the series. This essay discusses a suitable boy as an adaptation of social milieus as it shows a clear mirror to the society of post-Independent India in various shades right from family values and the rituals of marriage, to the impact of courtesans On the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony to the politics of the Time, the first election and the trauma of partition, the tension between Hindu and Muslim.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To adapt a novel to the screen is not an easy task. It becomes even more difficult when the novel is one of the longest in English literature. Set in 1950, the era of the new India, director Mira Nair attempts to refine the sprawling universe that is *A Suitable Boy* into a mini-series of six-episodes for the BBC.

*A Suitable Boy* is set in an India that has just discovered freedom. It is a period of metamorphosis for the nation. The nation is still dealing with the hangover of the colonial past and the desire to practice newly discovered democratic rights. This turmoil has been recorded with the narrative arcs of Lata ( Tanya Maniktala), who is an English literature student and is being pressured by her mother to get married. On the other hand, there is Maan (Ishaan Khatter), the irresponsible son of a respected politician who falls in love with the courtesan Saeeda Bai (Tabu).

*A Suitable Boy* is an adaptation of social milieus as it is showing a clear mirror to the society of post-independent India in various shades right from family values across the spectrum containing rituals of marriage, the position of the fairer sex in the society, the impact of the courtesans in the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony, breakdown of which caused communal disturbance which is detrimental to the development of the society.

The social milieu refers to the immediate social, physical and environmental setting of a society where people live and something develops or happens. It includes the culture the individual inherits and the people or institutions they interact with. Social realism is a replication of social reality as it is. It is a form of writing that observes complete accuracy to the observed objective world. It documents the social customs, political circumstances, regional manifestation of lives and festivals as well as rituals. It recounts events exactly as they happen with rational causes and perceived effects. Social realist films represent true-to-life characters and environments.

*A Suitable Boy* is soaked with the dogmas of the family and this connects perfectly with the conservative and realist portrait adroitly. It is the family that assumes the center stage in Seth's narrative. As Anita Desai asserts,

“although, in their rash youth, they {Lata and Maan} might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance and the unknown, they learn their lesson and return, chastened, to the safety and security of the familiar and the traditional, represented here, in the Indian fashion, by the great God family.” [Desai 22-26]

Vikram Seth takes great pains to give optimal documentation to get the facts right in depicting India in its true sense of its fifties in his novel *A Suitable Boy*. Seth took nine long years to complete this novel. A long preparation went into making this magnum opus. No wonder the novel was an outright success. Mira Nair's adaptation of the novel *A Suitable Boy*, set in the 1950s, in every way assumes the form of a social realist film as it depicts the major conflicts of post-independence and post-partition India on screen. With the cultural tradition of making arranged marriages of higher class Indian children, she manages to insert the Hindu and Muslim friction in reference to political intrigues at the time. The constant involvement of the members of the four families keeps the political involvement from being dry historical facts.

Thus it is noticeable that *A Suitable Boy* is an adaptation of social milieu as it is showing a clear mirror to the society of post-independent India in various shades right from family values across the spectrum containing rituals of marriage, the position of the fairer sex in the society, the impact of the courtesans in the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony, breakdown of which caused communal disturbance which is detrimental to the development of the society. Mira Nair, winner of 45th Toronto International Film Festival's Jeff Skoll Award in Impact Media, has gone a long way successfully showcasing the newly Independent India discovering its sovereignty. “*A Suitable Boy*, the series surely stands out for its grandiloquence in terms of magnificent settings, locations and capturing the essence of post-independence Indian towns and cities, their magnificent havelis, mansions and offices. Villages, streets and alleys appear in life like similarity given an architectural resemblance is easy to create in a country that still has plenty of material heritage to boast of its past.” [“*A Suitable Boy*”]

Andrew Davies, The Welsh writer, who wrote this six-part mini series has earlier adapted Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* for film and television. Similarly, Mira Nair, the Indian-American director made her own various film adaptations of bestsellers like William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

To make an adaptation of a novel for the screen is not an easy task. Especially when the novel is one of the longest in English literature, of about 1500 pages. Mira Nair attempts to distill the sprawling universe of *A Suitable Boy* into a six-episode mini-series for the BBC. This is BBC's first series with no major white characters and also the most expensive one. *A Suitable Boy* delivers the fact that the representation behind the camera is equally as important as in front of it. The director Mira Nair, whose production company specializes in producing films about Indian society aimed all together at an international audience. With these expertise, Nair seems like the most appropriate director to take on the project. In contrast with other illustrations of South Asian men on television, *A Suitable Boy* features South Asian actors enacting love interests. The setting is also post-partition and post-independence India, at a time when the country was undergoing seismic cultural changes. In western television programmes South Asian actors tend to be put down for comic relief and are presented as romantically blundering. For example, the character of Raj in *The Big Bang Theory*, played by British Indian actor Kunal Nayyar, who ends up being single while all other white characters get married by the end and is being made fun of all the time for his accent.

“It is refreshing instead to see South Asian actors breaking this convention, and it should be the norm to see these sorts of characters on our screens. Within the wider context of the upheaval of racist tropes in British television, *A Suitable Boy* could not have come at a better time... *A Suitable Boy* seems like it could be a breath of fresh air for the British public that is calling for representation of people of color on our screens. Perhaps it will set a precedent for diversity on television in the programmes to come.” [“Significance of *A Suitable Boy*”]

Film adaptations, usually, do not offer the experience books provide, as films streamline the vision for the viewer. On the contrary, words in the book, even with detailed description, leave room for the reader's imagination. Books also offer it's reader moments of introspection which allow one to process and understand the emotional dynamics. Books work as a treat for our imagination. ‘*A Suitable Boy*’, however, feels to cut along with the narrative moving forward without embellishing emotional arcs. There's a moment between Lata and her mother, in the last episode, after Lata has chosen the man she wants to marry. The mother who has so far refused to accept her daughter's choices says, “for you Lata, it matters more than anything. You must choose for yourself.” [ASB ep-6] it is a dialogue that reminds you of all her earlier tantrums and feels unintentionally funny. One of the biggest traps that a director falls into while adapting a novel to the screen is the temptation to include everything that the text holds. Mira Nair falls into the same trap while making ‘*A Suitable Boy*’, as it rushes to tick off the plots points from the novel, the scenes come to us as fragments. There is a little flow. “As we are not privy to moments of deep reflection, some of the

‘twists’ seem to come out of nowhere, leaving us more bemused than shocked. In this adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*, the intent feels lost in translation.” [Aiyappan, “*A Suitable Boy* Movie Review: Lost in translation”]

*A Suitable Boy* is a series set against the background of social, political, economic and cultural turbulence of freshly independent India. The adaptation deals with the most eventful period of Indian history. There can be seen a stage of metamorphosis, a coming of age for the nation. The hangover of the colonial past, synchronizing with the desire to exercise newly discovered democratic rights. This commotion has been captured with the narrative arcs of Tanya Maniktala and Ishaan Khatter, who serve as the protagonists Lata Mehra and Maan Kapoor respectively, in the series. Lata, a student of English literature at the Bhrampur University is being pressured by her mother, Mrs Rupa Mehra (Mahira Kakkar), to get married. On the other side we have Maan Kapoor, the reckless son of the Revenue Minister, Mahesh Kapoor (Ram Kapoor), who falls in love with Saeeda Bai (Tabu), a courtesan who has the heart of gold. Mira Nair attempts to represent life in all its manifestations accurately and truthfully. She genuinely holds a mirror to society. Her work speaks volumes of the novels’ enduring quality and how it describes an India it once was and still remains so.

Marriage in India is a major responsibility taken up by the elders of the family where they choose between a boy and a girl who can make a couple and have to ponder upon a number of traits while selecting the suitable match and the elder’s preference has to be fulfilled by the pair. Mira Nair takes love and marriage as the central theme of the adaptation. Human nature unfolds itself through this most intimate of personal relationships. The main protagonist of the series, Lata (Tanya Maniktala) is the youngest daughter of the Mehra family. “She is a very colourful character....She’s open minded, which is something I can relate to, but she’s not afraid to make mistakes.” [Tanya] She is under strict inspection of Rupa Mehra (Mahira Kakkar), her mother, who is a widow. Mrs Mehra lost her husband when her children were very young, but she happens to drive her strength from this loss. Whenever there is a critical decision due, she takes advantage of this loss. In order to select a suitable boy for Lata, Mrs Rupa Mehra has her own perception of judgment and endures no compromise in this respect. She says to Lata, right in the beginning of the series, during her elder sister Savita’s wedding, “you too will marry a boy I choose”. [ASB ep-1] Lata falls in and out of love with three contenders, each affair highlighting her confusion. There is Kabir Durrani (Danesh Razvi), a handsome history student and cricketer whom Lata falls in love with at first sight. A hard working, self-made shoemaker Haresh Khanna (Namit Das) and a well known poet and British-educated Amit Chatterji (Mikhail Sen) also compete for her endearment in a series. *A Suitable Boy* conveys the dilemma of a girl fighting to free herself from societal shackles. Lata adopts a rational perspective of her suitor’s virtues and weaknesses. As Filkin says: Lata’s choice, then, is India’s choice. The options for each involve either a transcendence of religious factionalism [Kabir], a sophisticated internationalism [Amit, the poet celebrated in England], or a homespun and plodding pursuit of economic stability [Haresh]. However, [...] Seth is able to convey the subtlety and complexity of such choices without turning his characters into overt symbols. [Filkin]

The Chatterjis and the Kapoors are related by marriage to the Mehras. The Kapoors, an old established political family of Bhrampur led by the idealistic, dedicated politician Mahesh Kapoor, have been in friendship with the Nawab of Baitar’s family for a long time- one that has been sadly attenuated by the demands of partition. It is in 1951, while partition remains a dreary memory, there is much optimism and idealism, following independence. Old and new are juxtaposed via the twin strands of passion and pragmatism in Seth’s novel. It’s a portrayal evident in the television series too. Early in the first episode, Lata tells her friend Malati in a tone of self-mockery that she feels she is “going backward.” In the span of a year, things change for Lata.

*A Suitable Boy* has other strands too. One track in Mira Nair’s series occupies the center-stage along with the quest for a suitable boy- ‘the unsuitable boy’ Maan Kapoor (Ishaan Khatter) and his passionate, almost uncontrolled, love for the courtesan Saeeda Bai (tabu). Maan appears indolent and irrepressible-even irresponsible as his frustrated father, Mahesh Kapoor (Ram Kapoor), a respected politician, would call him- but there is more to him as becomes perceptible from the third episode. Maan is fiercely protective of his friend and bothered about the injustice he sees in the villages. The “passion” leads him to the crime he confesses to later and that sends him to jail, subdued and even sorrowful. A passion that makes Lata question the certainties she’s held so far.

Characters are limited, confined and unfortunately caricatured when a huge novel has to be squeezed into six hours of screen time. Often their existence is a token appearance, barely compensating for even his minor characters for the depth Seth managed. And some characters are left out entirely. As there would have been no time to do any justice to their arc, a lot of characters don’t make it to the series and the ones chosen gave it their best shot. Meenakshi played by Sahana Goswami, says Mira Nair, “is so delightfully herself” and uncomplicated morally. She is truly quite bold when it comes to embracing her sexuality. She does what she has to do to live life. She is greedy for life.

Kapoor is played by Ram Kapoor with practiced ease. His mobile face appropriately records sorrow, rage, and the occasional joy that the vicissitudes of life have given him. For this expression, Kapoor gets the screen space. Other performers, from statuesque Tabu to quick-silver Ishaan and dewdrop Tanya, are also uniformly fine. Vinay Pathak as horrid Home Minister, Ranvir Shorey as Waris who stands against Mahesh Kapoor in the election, Randeep Hooda as the suave Billy Irani and Vivaan Shah as Lata's youngest brother Varun, Rasika Duggal as Lata's elder sister Savita and Vivek Gomber as Lata's stuffy older brother are absolutely first-class.

Seth's novel is a big Indian novel telling the prototypical story of newly independent India. Nair's adaptation of this novel brings in a few more important tropes of the Indian Hindi cinema into it. There are two unforgettable typical Bollywood scenes in the last episode. One is the suspense-filled courtroom trial which had been echoing in countless Bollywood movies since ages and the other is the train sequence, almost towards the end of the last episode, with scenes of arms outstretched, feet running alongside the train on the platform that is slowly speeding up, climatic in the resolution that are made. Endings, however these might come about, should always be so suitably reminiscent.

A Suitable Boy can be considered as a microcosm to post Independence India where a fictional city in Purva Pradesh, Brahmpur depicts India in all its forms. The series and the Novell with its central story of whom Lata will choose, also reflects the time it is set in. It is 1951-52, the time when Independent India's first elections were to be held. Brahmpur boasts of an historical University, a diverse population and the resulting fault lines. A Suitable Boy does not only deal with the sexual "passion" but with the passion of politics, religion, public and domestic power and passion for careers. Apprehension also emanates from those who seek to take advantage of religious variance for communal rationale and political gains, an all-too-familiar account in present day India as well. The series sheds light on the social significance of the Zamindari system and on the thoughtful ramifications of the reform that by sweeping away the obsolete system, formulated the path to the contemporary agricultural structure in India. The nawab of Baitar (Aamir Bashir) finds common ground with the Revenue Minister Mahesh Kapoor, who pushes forward a radical land redistribution bill, the Zamindari Abolition Act. This infuriates and upsets the conservative traditionalist lot, Raja of Marh and L.N. Aggarwal for instance.

In addition to the central theme, the series deals with a passion for religion, politics, domestic and public influence, and a passion for professions. She has perhaps shaped A Suitable Boy with this manifesto against the passion of sexual love as well as politics and religion. In the series, Mira Nair sees religious zeal as fanaticism, intolerance and murderous hatred of other religions. This zealotry's stupidity and destructiveness are seen as equal to the crazy envy created by passion. Similarly, on the religious scene, at the mela festival, she displays her disdain for fanatical aesthetics and Swamiji's. A further reinforcement of its rejection of passion in religion is the horror of the crowd, stamping and crushing the elderly and the weak to death, and nearly killing Bhaskar, the boy who is a mathematics genius. When his grandfather asks L.N. Aggarwal the Home Minister to give an explanation, all he gets to hear is, "Many possible explanations have been put forward. It is possible that we may never know. May I remind you Mr Kapoor that with an election imminent this may not be the best moment to open up matters that might damage the reputation of our party." [L.N. Aggarwal, ep-4]

Religion for some people is like a soothing medicine when they are sad but if religion gets entangled in superstition it becomes poison and brings death and sadness to all. It is seen that in religious fairs deaths occur due to the poisonous concoction of religion and superstition. These tragedies are invited due to lack of safety arrangements and bad crowd management.

In the entire sequence, the theme of religious intolerance runs heavily. Religious distinction prevents Lata and Kabir from satisfying the wishes of their hearts for each other. With its uplifting temple of Shiva next to a mosque, the Raja of Marh becomes an arch emblem of religious militancy. As the pride and happiness of the temple, the phallic emblem of Shiva he plans to use is an arc of malice intended to taunt Muslims. "Here now for the temple, you know? Right by the mosque, you know? Now when they look west to pray to Mecca, they will be bowing to Shiva's lingam first." [Raja of Marh, ep-1] On all sides, in the name of religion, protests and attacks happen. The Hindu group disdains Saeeda Bai more for her faith as a Muslim than for her lifestyle. When all sects agree on the Holy Days, even death occurs when one side is not prepared to give way to the other. The theme of religious bigotry emerges as Maan travels to visit the family of Rasheed in Rudhiya village. Only after he shows not so much his tolerance of their customs as his indifference to religion in general does Rasheed's father accept him grudgingly. After Maan is accused of trying to kill the young Muslim man, Firoz Khan, the inference runs thin.

Hindu-Muslim riots followed the division of the nation, when the old and long revered human values suffered and lost all significance. In this failure, the generally accepted idea of tolerance and faith was utterly broken. As Andrew Davies puts it, "India was free, but the land and the people were divided forever." A modern rule of the jungle, where blood and death have no consideration, has taken over human instincts. The relocation of the population



from both sides accompanied this setback to principles. The migration was on an unparalleled scale and before and after reaching the borders, those who tried to seek refuge were tortured and humiliated. This was also a time in which people formed a complex of fear that persisted in the hearts of all those who remained or left, whether in the majority or minority. This sense of vulnerability is maintained and remains in the background of the series throughout. There is one particular scene in the series where during a particular Hindu-Muslim riot on the day of Muhharam, Maan saves his friend Firoz from the hands of a dangerously blood-thirsty mob, "He's my brother! Understand? Touch a single hair on his head, I swear by Lord Rama, I'll crush your bones!" [Maan, Ep-4] this scene truly deserves attention and is sure worthy of praise. Similarly, in the last episode the scene where Firoz speaks a lie in front of the judge in the court to save his friend from accusation of attempt to murder, and tells Maan that Firoz's father, the Nawab of Baitar, asked him to do so, is also a scene of great importance. It showcases beautifully that friendship and love still has more importance than the religious differences.

Whether in Muzaffarnagar or in Gujrat, communal riots happen every now and then in India. People are prodded to dislike and kill people of different religions. They are made to think that their faith is at risk. In order for peace to be widespread, by listening to their fiery speeches full of venom, we should remain calm and not fall under the sway of greedy people, whether Netas or ultra-orthodox people. In our hearts, we should have love, because if we give love, we receive love.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The conflicts such as the relationship between Hindu and the Muslims, the importance of love, marriage and Caste echo and develop in the lives of the four families around whom the storyline is framed. The Mehras, Kapoors and Chatterjis are related by marriage whereas the Khans are friends of the Kapoors. The ideologies of these families bring other concerns forward like the process of change, the values of work, and the course taken by freshly Independent and democratic India. The adaptation is not only a love story but a depiction of India. It renders only a specific piece of it, the upper and the middle class of the early 1950's. A Suitable Boy has a light tone and it can be considered a comedy as the series ends with a wedding, which is traditionally a happy ending.

In this research the Qualitative descriptive method has been used to conclude the aim of it; to deduce Mira Nair's adaptation of Vikram Seth's '**A Suitable Boy**' as a **Mirror to the Political, Individual Quandaries on screen**. The data has been collected from various sources. The research is confined to Mira Nair's A Suitable Boy and the novel it is based on.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Thus, it is evident that A Suitable Boy is a series on social milieus as it is showing a clear mirror to the society of post-independent India in various shades right from family values to across the spectrum containing rituals of marriage, the position of the fairer sex in the society, the impact of the courtesans on the family structures, the necessity of religious harmony, breakdown of which caused communal disturbance which is detrimental to the development and the psyche of the society. Anita Singh, the Entertainment Editor for the *Telegraph*, wrote, "Andrew Davies has stripped away all the fat from Vikram Seth's enormous novel and left us with a gorgeous TV drama," while according to *The Independent's* Ed Cumming, "In depicting the dangers of Hindu nationalism, the programme also nods towards modern Indian politics. It's refreshing to see Indian period drama grounded in at least a semblance of political reality." Mira Nair has gone a long way in successfully showcasing the society which was still emerging from the shadows of slavery and partition.

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