

## **REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND THEIR VOICE IN VIKRAM SETH'S MAJOR WORKS**

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### **Abstract**

Literature has witnessed a drastic change in the projection of women since long. These women have been striving hard to gain recognition in the so called patriarchal and racist societies. As they are forced to follow the standard and Norms of their societies, these women tend to break the stereotypical and submissive images that degrade their position in the societies. Vikram Seth, an eminent Indian writer represents female characters in his works with subjection and competence simultaneously. His major works depict the pre and post-independence India. The dark comedy, sexual assault, subversive slavery and taboo are the main frame of his works. Born to Leila Seth, the first female justice of the Delhi High Court, Seth is aware about the position of women and their status in the society. The major themes that are well projected in Seth's works are love, marriage, family and ethics which are also discussed at length. He also talks about the patriarchal and orthodox society which tries to subjugate women's sexuality from liberation. The discrimination and degradation of a woman's identity help her to constantly raise her voice in socio-economic and political spheres to gain self-esteem, self-confidence and self-control. The present paper's aim is to study the gender and sexual indeterminacies that form a major characteristic in the works of Seth.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Identity, Discrimination, Society, Liberation.

### **Introduction**

The depictions of women by Vikram Seth in his novels are very symbolic and prototypical of liberation. The women in his works can be categorized mainly into two phases, one which consists of his puerile representation and the other is of earnest approach towards the issues of women. In both phase, women being subjected to male domicile, has to follow their commands. A woman in almost every scenario is somehow compressed or unseen by the patriarchal society. The female has always been seen through a male perspective in the society. Seth in his works mainly projected women as leading figures and exhibited them as self-sufficient and are better off when they are 'free' from 'male' as a f(re)male. The women in Seth's works are independent, self-sufficient and are liberated.

In this paper, I analyzed two major styles of Seth's works to establish the relationship between the self-identity of women and their status in the contemporary society. Both "The Frog and The Nightingale" and "A Suitable Boy" are examined in this context. Both the works belong to different genres and encompass different facets of Seth's writing and the representation of women in them. In the poem, "The Frog and The Nightingale" from the collection of poems in *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, published in the year 1994, projects how Seth trivializes the act and showcases the insanity in a playful manner, so that it could be understood even by a layman. Seth's interpretation of the beautiful and

soulful nightingale is a symbolic representation of women who is full of life and prosperity. The poem consists of two major characters the Frog and the Nightingale around which Seth deploys his fascination and narrative. Seth also includes a bunch of spectators who watches everything and enjoys the merriment while silently speculating the dreadful end of the soulful nightingale. The employment of the public is at chief for Seth because to him the public is the society who is least bothered about its surroundings and blind to women's suffering and pain.

In the poem, the 'boastful' and the 'cacophonous menace' of the frog - is a symbolic representation of the patriarchal society by Seth that accurately fulfills the parameters of conventions and women condition of the social order. Here the nightingale is so melodious that the melancholy 'Bingle Bog' comes to life with her presence. But the divinity of her is not appreciated of the frog who was very much adamant to showcase his determination by his 'crass cacophony'. When the nightingale was praised for her 'divine' voice and was glorified by the bog.

Toads and teals and tiddlers, captured  
By her voice, cheered on, enraptured:  
"Bravo!" "Too divine!" "Encore!"  
So the nightingale once more,  
Quite unused to such applause,  
Sang till dawn without a pause. (65)

But she was startled by the 'croak' of frog who undermines her and constantly remarks with negative criticisms leading her to lose her self-confidence. The lack in her confidence led the frog to guileful offer for nightingale where he convinces her to be savior who can properly train her under him as she lags. The nightingale, unaware of the frog's cunningness considers him as her Mozart.

'That's not much to boast about,'  
Said the heartless frog. 'Without  
Proper training such as I  
-And few others -can supply,  
You'll remain a mere beginner.

But with me you'll be a winner.'  
'Dearest frog' the nightingale  
Breathed: 'This is a fairy tale-  
And you're Mozart in disguise  
Come to earth before my eyes'.  
'Well, I charge a modest fee.'  
'Oh!' 'But it won't hurt, you'll see.' (67)

The fee that cost the nightingale was her life because from the very beginning frog was very much adamant and was not in a position to succumb his position, so he lured her into a trap and preyed on her. He strained her so much that her vein popped up and she died. He was benefitted by her performances and even exploited her without her knowledge 'Every day the frog who'd sold her/ Songs for silver tried to scold her'. (68) When she with all integrity devoted herself and died in the process to prove her in front of her master.

The frog was also not pleased by the ladies present in the audience, the representation is important by Seth to show how women are being viewed in the patriarchal society. The society only employs women as a figure of enjoyment and they are just required as a means of source for profits or outlays.

Ladies with tiaras glittering

In the interval sat twittering-

And the frog observed them glitter

With a joy both sweet and bitter. (68)

The 'glittering tiaras' shows women's freedom and appreciation to a form of art which is not liked by the frog as he observes them with 'both sweet and bitter' because to him women is not subjected to appreciation rather they are the object of appreciation that shows how the society objectifies female.

Said the frog. "I tried to teach he,

But she was a stupid creature-

Far too nervous, far too tense.

Far too prone to influence.

Well, poor bird- she should have known

That your song must be your own.

That's why I sing with panache:

"koo-oh-ah! ko-ash! ko-ash!" (69)

Thus, the nightingale lives a pitiful life even though she was the source of income and the voice of divinity. The male figure overpowered her integrity and created an ambush where she lost her confidence and was inclined to the cunningness of the frog. Seth therefore tries to tell the women that power and confidence is lost by the social structure of patriarchy. He also tries to show how the veracity and uprightness of women who are projected to social injustice and prejudices.

In contrast to the poem, if the example of "A Suitable Boy" is considered Seth has portrayed as series of women figures that are very different from one other. "A Suitable Boy" was published in 1993 which deals with the idea of post-independence and post-partition India which is also the longest novel that is produced in single volume. To which Jeremy Gavron also remarked, "It is a love story with little love and no sex. At two feet high in type script, and 1349 pages when published in hard back, it was the longest novel, written in English language." (Jeremy. *The Age A Suitable life*) It deals with the search for a suitable boy-suitors for Mrs. Rupa Mehra's younger daughter Lata. So, the search of 'suitable boy' also rummages around to find the self.

Seth's representation of women in *A Suitable Boy* carries a panoramic viewpoint where a series of women celebrate their lives and the social conjectures. The first and the most talked character are of Mrs. Rupa Mehra wife of late Raghbir Mehra whom she confines herself as a widowed and the soul responsible member of the Mehra's family. The search of Mrs. Mehra of a suitable boy for her youngest daughter Lata comprises the whole frame of the novel. Lata being bold and audacious, believes in an ideal relationship rather than a social imposition. Hence, from the very beginning of the novel examples of the bickering between the mother daughter is clearly prominent. "You too will marry a boy I choose," said Mrs. Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter. Lata avoided the maternal imperative by looking around the great lamp-lit garden of Prem Niwas. The wedding guests were gathered on the lawn. 'Hmm,' she said. This annoyed her mother further. 'I know what your hmms mean, young lady, and I

can tell you I will not stand for hmms in this matter. I do know what is best. I am doing it all for you. Do you think it is easy for me, trying to arrange things for all four of my children without His help'. Seth with his wordplay describes their relationship as an ideal communion which beholds each other through their differences to establish themselves. The two prime figures of Seth's novel Mrs. Mehra and Lata are vibrant and rebellious. Seth described Mrs. Mehra as a vibrant figure who also plays an important role in Seth's personal life as he named the character after his grandmother also named as Rupa Mehra and Seth calls her as "the muse of the project." (Joshi, 4)

Mrs. Mehra belongs to the throes of decaying as social values were crumbling very fast and Lata being the new age holds the power for the future. While in the process Mrs. Mehra fails to withhold and perish the old theologies as Lata tries to transform it, so sometimes Mrs. Mehra cries as "I have to do everything in this house, and no one cares for me. Everything goes wrong and I have to make peace. I have slaved for you all my life, and you don't care if I live or die. Only when I'm burned on the pyre will you realize my worth" (375).

Seth shows power and freedom through his female figures where his feminine characters are the sole ruler and tries to manage the house and the social life. The characterization by Seth in *A Suitable Boy* exemplifies that the women are at supreme. The characters such as Mrs. Mehra, Lata, Meenakshi, Savita, Saheeda Bai, Veena, etc. plays distinctive roles and aims at a better future for their selves. According to Seth, women are an epitome of freedom and liberation, so his vivid representation depicts the picture of modern woman through his characters.

Mrs. Mehra is also a symbolic representation of freedom and liability because she soon after took the responsibility of her family after the demise of her husband and was the sole caretaker of her four children Amit, Savita, Varun and Lata. Her travelling alone and search for a suitable match for her daughter singlehandedly indicates the independent and self-determination of women in post independent India. On the other hand, Seth also shows that the character of Savita, eldest daughter of Mrs. Rupa Mehra is very different from her younger daughter Lata. Savita marries Pran Kapoor who was her mother's choice without any objection and also prefers that Pran is the suitable match for her even if Pran is not handsome as he was dusky 'Pran is a little thin,' Mrs. Mehra immediately bursts out: Thin? What is Thin? Everyone is trying to become thin these days". Whereas Lata was adamant towards her mother's choice for her as Harish was a shoemaker and Lata was rebellious but finally, she accepts her mother's finding and the 'suitable boy' her mother found for her. She finally accepts Harish as her better half as she finds him equal in her status and intellectually wiser in his judgments. She thinks about her future with him rather merely indulging in romance and started their life with a bit of sensibility.

"The morning after the wedding, Haresh suddenly decided over breakfast that since he happened to be in Brahmipur, he should look in on the local Praha factory . . . Haresh kissed her and went off. Lata walked over to the window and after a while looked out at the bougainvillea, a little puzzled. This was a strange way to begin her married life. But then she thought about it and decided that it was just as well that Haresh had not spent the day with her wandering around Brahmipur - going to the university, the Ghats, the Barsaat Mahal. Since they were going to begin a new life, it was best to begin it elsewhere." (1348)

Seth also discusses two beautiful women Meenakshi and Kakoli, the daughters of Chatterjees. Meenakshi was married to Amit Kapoor, eldest son of Mrs. Rupa Kapoor. Both the ladies of Chatterjees represent passion and confidence. Where on one hand Meenakshi who married Amit possessed the same zeal as she had in her unmarried days, on the other Kakoli represents the youth and the rebelliousness who dislikes the idea of arrange marriage. She is an epitome of the modern Indian society who brings the cosmopolitanisms into the culture as she was attracted to a German guy named Hans. Meenakshi was marrying into a non-Bengali family, which showcases her independent thoughts and her acceptance and inclination towards the western culture as Arun was “a Brahmo, nor of Brahmin stock, nor even a Bengali . . . They [the Chatterjees] were only concerned that their daughter might not be able to afford the comforts of life that she had grown up with. But again, they had not swamped their married daughter with gifts.” (385) Before marrying Arun, she was an enthusiastic and fun-loving person so after marriage she made sure that she must lead a sophisticated life with a high social status without any commitments. That latter shows her loss in self-control and having an affair with Billy Irani a friend of her husband Arun. She also goes to the extent of aborting her child as she was not aware who impregnated her “Meenakshi Mehra had been a Chatterjee, before she and Arun had met at a cocktail party, fallen in torrid, rapturous and elegant love, and got married within a month, to the shock of both families.” (11) She was also projected as the face for the commercialization through her choices of shopping and food as she “bought her fortnightly stores — her white flour, her jam and Chivers Marmalade and Lyle’s Golden Syrup . . . from Baboralley, a couple of loaves of bread from a shop in Middleton Row (‘The bread one gets from the market is so awful, Luts’), some salami from a cold store in Free School Street (‘The salami from Keventers is dreadfully bland, I’ve decided never to go there again’), and half dozen bottles of Beck’s beer from Shaw brothers.” (372)

Seth has also incorporated many women characters in his novel to show the difference between the women in a society and in a way, he tries to accomplish and cherish each characteristic in a great detail. The character of Saeeda Bai is one of chief persona when Seth considered women as a free figurine in his novel as she represents the marginalized section of the society who are not considered to be elite. She was invited by the Kapoors for their Holi function but when Mann was romantically inclined to her, she was considered to be a mistress who has dire company. She was accompanied by her maid Bibbo who regards all her demands and Begum was secretive of her sister Tasneem as she wants her to be in the mainstream rather ending up like her. Mann after his time in jail comes to term that visiting Saeeda Bai is worthless and he understands the convention of society where his association with a mistress like her will led to social discrimination “He had been eager to visit Saeeda Bai when he was in jail, but now that he was out of jail, he found that he had inexplicably lost his eagerness to do so.” (Boy 1479) This shows Seth’s exact replication of the social injustices and dentures towards women with lewd associations.

Seth also presents a series of supporting characters of women who helps the prime protagonist to be at focus. The character of Parvati, the second wife of Dr. Kishen Chandra Seth father of Mrs. Rupa Mehra shows her dislike towards her stepmother. The role of Parvati is influential when analyzing the character of Mrs. Rupa Mehra as she thinks herself to be better than her stepmother. Soon after Savita’s marriage Mrs. Mehra’s father advised Lata by giving his second wife’s example “Yes. She must be nearly twenty. Far too late. Parvati got married when she was in her thirties and see what she got. A suitable boy must be found for Lata.” (36) Which show how women are treated after a certain age and the society constantly taunts the choices that one makes.

Similarly, the character of Malati, Lata's friend, is provided by Seth to mark the difference between Lata and her. Malati was rebellious and bold but she was loose towards married men, so this makes a vast difference in their character as Lata was more governed by social values while Malati was drawn by passion and lust. She was Lata's best friend because she was the one with whom Lata shares herself and she also provides her confidence. The relationship that both the friends share strengthens the social self. Since they have lost their paternal bond, they connected more together. She was also brought up, just like Lata, by her mother who is also a contrast figure to that of Mrs. Mehra, "Malati's mother was remarkable in that she wished her daughters to be independent. She wanted them, apart from their schooling at a Hindi medium school, to learn music and dancing and languages (and especially to be good at English); and if this meant that they had to go to someone's house to learn what was needed, they would go – regardless of what people said. If a tutor had to be called to the house of the six women, he would be called. Young men would look up in fascination at the first floor of the house, as they heard five girls singing along undemurely together. If the girls wanted ice-cream as a special treat, they would be allowed to go to the shop by themselves and eat it. When neighbors objected to the shamelessness of letting young girls go around by themselves in Agra, they were allowed occasionally to go to the shop after dark instead – which, presumably, was worse, though less detectable. Malati's mother made it clear to the girls that she would give them the best education possible, but they would have to find their own husbands. (29)

This resulted in Malati being bold, outspoken, strong and smart and Lata was very much influenced by her which is also liked by Mrs. Rupa Mehra as she symbolizes freedom and strength herself. While talking to Malati, Lata confides that, "Oh, love, what a boring subject. I'll never fall in love." (30) The socio-psychological attributed is noted by Seth to reflect that how new age women considered loving and marrying to be a social sin while Mrs. Mehra tries hard to establish a suitable match for her daughter so that the social institution can function well.

The different ideologies like marriage, self-reliance, independence is very necessary to understand on the part of a woman because they are sensitive towards the issues regarding the social culture and traditions which are preloaded by the patriarchy. Meanwhile, Seth also admits that he knew it better as he has come with close contact to women issues as legacy from his mother Leila Seth, who was studied law in London and subsequently became the first female chief judge in the Himachal Pradesh High Court and then she was the first female judge in Delhi High Court, India.

Some characters like Kalpana, Mr. Gaur's daughter who was a close friend of Mrs. Mehra's late husband. Kalpana is always ill and does not have the zeal to welcome people, but she gets well when it comes to matchmaking. She also helps Mrs. Mehra to find a suitable match for Lata "Now the time has come to get Lata well settled, and I must look all out for a suitable boy." (43)

Similarly, the character of Mrs. Kapoor who happens to be Savita's mother-in-law and was concern about Lata when she gently informs Mrs. Mehra about the Lata's affair, "Please look after your daughter, someone saw her walking with a boy on the bank of the Ganga near the dhobi-ghat yesterday morning. . . But they were walking hands in hand." (179) Another example that Seth gives is of Veena and her friend Priya, who helped her when Veena, daughter of Mr. Kapoor faces financial distress due to commercialization.

In the novel, each woman compliments other in a way or the other and the women also find themselves through the contrast projection from the other. That shows how each women character is independent and responsible on their own ways. Seth's representation of each character justifies itself and the varied characteristics of women showcases the digression and prejudices propelled on them by the society. To this David Myers' commented that "Lata is not marrying Hareesh: she is marrying a symbol of what Vikram Seth would like to proclaim as his hope for a new India - an ambitious, pragmatic, antisnobish, working-class, self-made Indian man." (Myers, 84)

So, Seth very well defines his women in "The Frog and The Nightingale" and "A suitable Boy". According to his observations, women hold the power and freedom of their own. A woman is a free entity and is not bound by the conditions of male governed society. He well figures that concept of f(re)e- male. Punam Pandey's observes of Seth's A Suitable boy in her work "A Discourse on Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy from Socio-Political and Historic Perspectives":

The main character Lata seems reluctant to follow to social customs and rituals at the beginning of the novel. But truly speaking she has never been away from her own history and social norms. She is well aware of the fact that any deed taken by passion may be harmful not only for herself but her family also. By her deed and decision she nourishes social tradition. (Pandey, 117)

So, Seth showcases how society plays a dominant role in women's liberation and identity. Thus, the paper hopefully tries to justify the notion of female as- free from male which gives women the power and freedom to explore the world. Seth also admits during an interview with Ameena Meer that the main responsibility of a writer is "to make sure your work is interesting and substantial. Variety is my way of doing it."(<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1377/vikram-seth>)The examples from Seth's artifacts helps to show the difference in the attitude of woman itself as they both contradicts the basics of women-hood and tries to establish themselves according to social conventions.

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