

**Food And Culture A Mark Of Cosmopolitanism: Study Of Seth's A Suitable Boy In The Light Of Diaspora****Bidya Singh<sup>1</sup>, Prasanta Kumar Padhi<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*Literature has witnessed a drastic change in the projection of food and culture since long. Since ages the society is known for its food and culture which has helped it gain recognition all over the world. Food when considered as an entity always has been depended upon the social and culture influence around it. An individual's identity is very much associated with the type of food it intakes or the culture or tradition it follows. As the individual is force to follow the standard norms of the society it often breaks the stereotypes and wants to creates its own identity and taste. The creating of something different or the evolution of fusion food is an attempt by the individual to its own identity midst the hasty society. Vikram Seth one of the mainstream writer of the modern era tries to shows the necessity of an individual's identity through their choice of food and the culture. Seth being an eminent Indian writer represents the 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. The major themes that are well projected in Seth's works are love, marriage, family, culture, food and ethics which are also discussed at a length. He also talks about the patriarchal and orthodox society which tries to subjugate individual's identity from liberation. The discrimination and degradation of individual's identity help it to constantly raise its voice in socio-economic and political spheres to gain self-esteem, self-confidence and self-control. The present paper aim is to study the cultural and sustenance indeterminacies that form a major characteristic in the works of Seth.*

**Keywords:** Food, Identity, Culture, Discrimination, Society, Liberation.

**Introduction**

Vikram Seth a prolific writer in Indian Writings in English marked his domain with A Suitable Boy in 1993, a journey of 1349 pages full of drama. The novel is one-mile stone in consideration of Seth's creating a post-independent India describing the families and their progenies. A Suitable Boy is the longest novel written in a single volume that deals with the idea of post-independence and post-partition situations of India. The central theme of the story revolves around the search of a 'suitable boy' a perfect suitor for Mrs. Rupa Mehra's daughter, Lata. The post-colonial approach to critically study of the novel of Vikram Seth will help us understand the concept of social and personal life of the characters in a different perspective. The artefacts vividly present a simple form of the chaotic life amidst the puddle social conventions after independence.

To begin with a close reading of the novel it is clearly portrayed how Seth has use culture and tradition as an important element throughout the story. With a very minute attention one can find the characters,

plot, themes and the settings of the novel dives deep into the understanding of Indian culture and its nuances portrayed by the author. In this paper, it is clearly examined that how societal norms, religious beliefs and political conditioning shapes and affects the cultural context of time may it be the past, present or the future. So it can be said that the post-coloniality easily seeps itself within the context that helps in understanding different aspects of literature. One of such aspect is of food and food ecologies.

While exploring the role of food and dining in the novel *A Suitable Boy*, it is clearly portrayed by Seth that how food is also a marker of identity and a medium of social connection and communication. Food is not only a means of communication but also it is a representation of culture and social significance in the Indian Society.

Seth is very observant with his characters. He slowly introduced each and every character so that the readers does not get confused or overwhelmed. The hero of the novel does not even appear till chapter four in the novel which not only an element of curiosity but also brilliant. If Seth's novel has to be read as a comparative study, then it would not be wrong to compare it with Jane Austen's world as lively and colourful. Seth world is full of love, food, parties, dances and the roller-coaster of relationships and emotions. Seth has a great hold of the era in which the novel is based on. He has shown a kaleidoscopic view of the lifestyle of British India represented by Kolkata and its inhabitants. The lifestyle of the 'elite' family very vividly showcased by describing the lives of the political family, service class family or rural life. The need of the representation of the lifestyle and food is necessary to understand the change of human identity by the visible dissimilarities but not jarring due to the change in the individual tries during the transition period.

Seth shows the transition very profoundly to the readers so that they will also understand the transitions and why there is a constant need to blend in 'classed' society.

When Hanif, the servant-cum-cook, came in with Arun's egg, he ordered his own. He first asked for an omelette, then decided on a scrambled egg. Meanwhile he took a piece of toast from the rack and buttered it.

'You might think of using the butter knife', growled Arun from the other head of the table.

Varun had extracted butter from the butter dish with his own knife to butter his toast. He accepted the rebuke in silence. (420)

This constant bickering and bantering of Arun about the antiques to Varun shows that there is a clear need to make thing westernized like buttering with a butter knife rather than own knife, choosing scrambled eggs over omelette. The persistent effort by Arun shows how much he is affected by the western culture and tries to blend in to fit into the class of the English.

In the very next instant when there was a topic over to choose between marmalade or honey, Varun decisively chooses marmalade over honey by he has to negotiate with the honey spoon due to his elder brother Arun. This was very rebellious of Varun to choose marmalade over honey because it made his brother mad which pleases him in a very cunningly.

He had been undecided as to whether to have marmalade or honey, but now decided on marmalade, since negotiating with the honey spoon, but bound to bring reproof down on his head. As he spread the marmalade, he looked across at Lata, and they exchanged smiles. Lata's was a half-smile. Very typical of her these days. Varun's was rather a twisted smile, as if he was not sure whether to be happy or despairing. It was the kind of smile that drove his elder brother mad and convinced him that Varun was a hopeless case. (420)

The character of Varun Mehra is a rebellious one, who tries to speak out of the indifferences but is being hushed down due to his social status. He is under the care of his elder brother Arun and his sister-in-law Meenakshi as he was studying Mathematics in Calcutta University. But the fact is that Varun leads a life of a caged and captive persona

Varun was studying – or trying to study- mathematics a Calcutta University, and he lived Arun and Meenakshi in their small ground-floor flat. He was thin, unsure of himself, sweet-natured and shift-eyed; and he was Lata's favorite. Though he was a year older than her, she felt protective of him. (11)

The constant protecting nature of Lata towards her beloved brother Varun is vividly described throughout the novel.

The fear of Varun is profoundly described by Seth in the novel as he was at a mercy of his brother as because Arun was the 'pleasant-looking bully who kept his siblings in place by pummeling their egos.' (11) So, Varun finds it difficult to express his ideas as knew Arun was the one who hold on to the family after their father's death by the constant rattling of Arun as because, "He was fond of reminding them that after their father's death, he was 'in a manner of speaking', in loco parentis to them." (11)

Varun's silence is described as a treatment of love and respect towards his elder brother who tries to find himself through thinning and retreating. The establishment of identity of Arun is only provided in front of brother as he breeds over the fear of Varun's and always considered him to be a failure,

Varun was terrified, in different ways, of both Arun and Meenakshi, and in some ways even of the precocious Arpana. His enjoyment of mathematics was mainly limited to the calculation of odds and handicaps on the racing form. In winter, as Varun's excitement rose with the racing season, so did his elder brother's ire. Arun was fond of calling him a bounder as well." (11)

Seth portrayal of Varun is very essential as it helps in discovering two forfeited identities one of Varun himself and the other is of Arun.

Later Seth unveiled the character of Varun as the symbolic interpretation of the undermined and the subsided flock of the society. The terror is empathized in character to bring out the subtle self in a persona. So there is a certain concern related to like Lata's concern towards Varun is very much justified for the development of hidden individuality, "Lata tried to visualize Varun's terror if Meenakshi had tried to prise him away from a table to the dance floor." (496) But the character gets its closure when Mrs Mehra admits that Varun is someone who should have made her husband late Mr. Mehra proud:

‘Studying is a good discipline,’ she said. ‘It needs application. Your father used to say that it does not matter what you study. As long as you study hard, it improves the mind.’

By the criterion, late Raghurbir Mehra should have been proud of his younger son. (496)

This showcases that Arun who took pride by deteriorating Varun personality he tries to cast his own on the social basics but when Varun gets to acknowledge himself in the company of Sajid and Jason who happens to be his Shamshu friends. Shamshu on the other hand is a symbolic representation of the native and past connections. Shamshu is a local drink which shows economic deprivations and social status of Varun’s. The use of a local drink projects the nativity and the consumption of is an escape from the modern society. So, while Varun is intoxicated with the consumption of Shamshu, he finds himself more vividly than being sane and captive. The sense of belonging back makes him realize his potential and helps in discovering his true self, Varun looked at him shiftily, ‘What’s embarrassing about Indian clothes?’ he asked. ‘Can’t I be what I want to? Ma and Lata and Bhabhiji wear saris, not dresses. Or do I have to keep imitating the whiteys even in my own house? I don’t think it’s a good idea.’ (431)

The representation of Seth’s Indianess is quite different from the other Indian writers, as Jayshree Hazarika tries to describe Seth’s idea of culture in her article that

He gets inside a culture and writes from the point of view of a person who belongs to that culture and hence he skillfully hides his Indianness...He gives an authentic representation of those settings which he achieves after rigorous research and this makes him an international writer. (Hazarika)

Seth generally tries to project the contrary findings to establish their values. Like Varun’s choice of Indian clothes over the western one depicts the individual freedom of adaptation may it be western culture or to value the traditional Indian culture. Seth’s representation of the cultural diversities and personality gives the character an eclectic reading in his works which is clearly described by Velamani in his essay Ethnicity in the Novels of Vikram Seth “World-wide travel has given Seth the tremendous advantage of a wider exposure of life and communication across cultural barriers and cultural background — Indian, English, Chinese and American.” (Velamani)

The superiority complex is constant in Meenakshi’s nature as she is an epitome of extravagance and considered everyone less around her.

(‘Oh, Arun is bound to like that, yes, I’ll take two,’ said Meenakshi whenever the shopkeeper suggested something that he thought madam would appreciate). All the purchases went into a large basket which a ragged little boy carried on his head and finally took to the care. Whenever she was accosted by beggars, Meenakshi looked straight through them. (422-423)

Seth tries to show how the Indian has westernized the Indian society and created a havoc about it by fitting into it. Not only she dislikes but also decides to never be a consumer of the western brands but she is bound to the sense of being elite only by being a faithful customer of the westernized society.

Meenakshi bought her fortnightly stores- her white flour, her jam and Chivers Marmalades and Lyle's Golden Syrup and Anchor Butter and tea and coffee and cheese and clean sugar ('Not this dirty ration stuff')- 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 a dozen bottles of Beck's beer from Shaw Brothers. (422)

Seth here shows the hypocrisy of the modern Indian society where a local drink is disliked and thought that they were not to be consumed by the gentry but same alcoholic drink 'beer' is being presented as an item nary when there will be guest.

Different problems are unobtrusively broached: the obsessive intra-Indian coloration cognizance, the extirpated caste system, the struggles of the energetic commercial classes (we research a lot about the shoe trade), the ramshackle and rambunctious new democracy, and the tenacious conflict of a vintage religion towards modern-day imputations of superstition. The point is that it's far all done through the lives of individuals who are knit into a network of blood and social and emotional relations. Seth's manage, his ability to yield to his characters the liberty to be, even as keeping them enmeshed each with all, is what seems to me his most important novelistic distinctive feature, over and above even his linguistic and observational virtuosity.

Thus the style is literary without being, as many evaluations factor out, experimental, put up-modernist, or obscure. The tone of the novel, even in moments of risk to the characters and their relationships, is contemplative, constructive, and forgiving, as opposed to gritty, dark, or crude. The occasions of the plot are dramatic without being sensationalized; Seth has very clearly described that the characters have been feeling their own (very plausible and herbal) feelings, not being made alternately to feel artificial extremes of struggling and exaltation for the motive of manipulating the feelings of the reader.

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