The Invention of India in Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy

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A Suitable Boy provides a synchronic overview of the independence of India, a narrative that reaches out to the readers throughout the world. The representation 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’.

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 India as a novel of ‘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’.

Like many English Indian novels, these scenes communicate a sense of India’s multiple realities contained in a ‘universe of India’ (Gopal 1980: 311).

The fifties were a very important modal moment of the consolidation of modern Indian identity, when the terms of Indian ‘resistance and revolt’ were being 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 Lalla 1993: 44). Many of the myths and conceptions of the nation that still survive today were established and circulated in Nehru’s India.

A Suitable Boy contains a cultural interpretation of 1950s nationalism, 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 end, A Suitable Boy reflects Nehru’s 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 Lalla 1993: 60).

Seth has a similarly static and secularist approach to the nation of nationalism. The author constructs an organic image of India through the microcosm of Brahmaputra, the capital 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 industrial state.

A Suitable Boy as a national narrative

The more loosely structured 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 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 to the national state. Seth invents a Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian dimension is stressed 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, missing on a 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 pleasant locality of Brahmaputra, 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 image of India through the microcosm of Brahmaputra, the capital of Purva Pradesh, in the tradition of R.K. Narayan’s invented South Indian town, Malgudi. Seth claims to have based Malgudi on a thinly disguised Brahmaputra or a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya.

The move to create typical, rather homogenous situations in this invented South Indian town is partly suggested by the fact that the novel’s protagonist, Arun Seth, 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.

References


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