

# Theme of Endogamy and Traditional Marriage in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the theme of Endogamy which is, as a social problem, prevalent in the society in arranged marriages with reference to the Vikram Seth's novel, 'A Suitable Boy'. The present research paper aims at an in-depth inquiry of the role of Endogamy in perspective of traditional marriages in the society and examines the role of endogamy while making choices for arranged marriage in a traditional family. It explores the facts through critical textual analysis of Vikram Seth's masterpiece novel, *A Suitable Boy*. It critically examines the mind-set of Indian mothers while making marital choices for their daughters. Marriage institution is based on traditional norms rather than individual choice. Suitability of an individual for marriage, in most cases, depends on his class or caste. Class, Caste and Custom are chief concerns of traditional marriages rather than individual love. The effective factors of Class or Caste play a dominant role in the mindset of Lata and finally She comes to the reality that making a matrimonial choice is different than loving someone.

**Key Words:** Endogamy, Traditional Marriage System, Ethnicity, Class and Caste

## Introduction

Vikram Seth is a celebrated Indian novelist, poet, and travel writer, best known for novels and poems. He has been an Indian English writer for more than three decades and is considered as one of the most popular writers who emerged after 1980. He initiated his writing career with composition of poems. He published the first collection of poetry in 1980, named *Mappings*. After poetry and travel writing, he made his presence in the realm of fiction writing in 1986 with his first novel, *The Golden Gate*. Seth was honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1988 for this novel. However, it was Vikram Seth's second novel, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) that brought him international fame and recognition as a writer. The novel consists of 1349 pages (1488 pages in paperback) as one of the longest novels ever written and published in the English language. "A very large novel by a very small Indian" as Seth puts it.<sup>1</sup>

The first section of the novel begins with the wedding scene of the older sister of Lata, whose search for a suitable husband is the central theme of the novel. The novel explores the relations between four Indian families against the backdrop of love and marriage in early post-independence years of India. The novel demonstrates social reality of match making for arranged marriages in the India of 1960s, which ranges from ill-fated inter religion love affair of Lata and Kabir to ethnic or class endogamous pre-

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<sup>1</sup>A Suitable Boy' Books Guardian. 26 March 1999. Retrieved 7 April 2020

marriage affairs. *A Suitable Boy* secured the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1994 with WH Smith Literary Award in the same year.

### The Concept of Endogamy and Traditional marriage System

The term endogamy is commonly used to refer to the marital choice of couples within the same religious group and specific social, ethnic or caste group rejecting those from other religion or outside their group as unsuitable for marriage. Endogamy is defined as the customary marriage choice of people within their own cultural or ethnic group. Barnard (1997:475) defines endogamy as a "system of marriage in which individuals can only marry those from within the same kinship group."<sup>2</sup> It is also known as in-marriage system, endogamy is a custom of marrying within someone's own ethnic, class, tribe or caste group over the many generations. According to Schaefer and Lamm (1998) the word, Endogamy, is derived from a Greek word 'endon' which means within<sup>3</sup>. It refers to marital choice within the same religious, social class or caste groups within which a marriage must be arranged.

Thus, there are many forms of endogamy such as caste endogamy, class endogamy, sub-caste endogamy, race endogamy, tribal endogamy and such other forms. Although it is rare today to see these rules in developed countries but it is still present in many countries including India.

### Types of Endogamy

Schwimmer (1995) in his book about Endogamy classified Endogamy in four divisions which are village, lineage, caste and class endogamy.<sup>4</sup> There may be several other types of Endogamy but chiefly these four have been widely seen. Now we will discuss the following types of Endogamy one by one.

**Village endogamy:** This type of endogamy aims to arrange marriage within a specific village or territory units. It occurs when people residing in the same village or town, prefer to marry each other. It is most often arranged to maintain geographical boundaries or convenience since in the highly rural and hilly areas it is quite difficult to afford long journey in order to frequent face-to-face contact.

**Lineage Endogamy:** This type of endogamy arranges marriage between people of the same lineage or blood relation. They are generally organised through the custom of parallel cousin marriage, between the children of two brothers, who belong to their father's patrilineage. This practice aims to maintain property within the family lineage and saves from misuse of assets through marriage exchanges or female inheritance.

**Caste Endogamy:** This type of endogamy aims to maintain the purity of caste and keeping in view the peaceful unity and resource exchanges within the same group of caste or sub caste. Marriages under caste endogamy have certain social customs that are to be followed by those who belong to a particular caste society.

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<sup>2</sup>Barnard, A and Burgess, T (1997) *Sociology Explained*. United Kingdom, Cambridge.

<sup>3</sup>Schaefer, R T and Lamm, R P (1998) *Sociology*. United States of America, McGraw-Hill.

<sup>4</sup>Schwimmer, B (1995) *Endogamy* University of Manitoba <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/..Endogamy>

**Class Endogamy:** Class, like Caste Endogamy aims to maintain social status of the society according to wealth, and related criteria. It discriminates a person in favour of his wealth, social status, or other social aspects such as occupation. Class endogamy also gives preference to the ethnicity, race, and religion.

### **A Suitable Boy : a quest for endogamous match making**

A Suitable Boy is set between the years 1950 and 1952 which were the early years of post-independence India that witnessed the rise of the Indian middle class and changes in society. The novel has a third person narrative. The novel begins with the wedding ceremony of Lata's elder sister, Savita, to Pran Kapoor where her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra says to Lata, "You too will marry a boy I choose." When Lata replies her indifferently she emphasizes her statement "I know what your hms mean, young lady, and I can tell you I will not stand for hms 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?"<sup>5</sup>

Lata, a 19 years old lady, falls in love with a dashing young student at her university where she was a student of literature. His name is Kabir. Lata is Hindu, and Kabir is a Muslim by religion. Lata's mother did not like any friendship between them, because she cannot bear her daughter's marriage with a boy who belongs to other religion or community. She sends off Lata to Calcutta and start a search for a suitable boy who comes in the novel as Haresh Khanna, who is a Hindu and belongs to same caste (Khatri) as her.

The plot of the story keeps on the mystery as to whom Lata will marry. Will her mother's prejudice about Kabir be changed and Kabir be accepted as suitable for marriage with Lata by her mother in the end or will Lata go against set rules of traditional marriage. Alternatively, readers also think that she may accept one of her other suitors. Lata's mother likes Haresh Khanna because in terms of caste and class he stands first for her choice. She is a woman who prefers to be traditional rather than being modern. Women is morally trained to maintain purity of caste order and family honor while making relationship with someone. A woman as a victim of traditional endogamy has to compromise in marriage with an individual chosen from same class and caste group by her parents, sacrificing her individual love or choice of life partner. Affected by these factors and under familial obligations, Lata's mind-set changes towards Haresh and finally she starts loving and prepares to be married with a man found by her mother. It is simply believed that she follows her mother's prejudice. She follows what her mother permits for her. Meenakshi Mukherjee has commented that the conflict between an individual's desire and duty to family has been a pan-Indian concern. According to her "Sometimes the conflict resolves itself neatly into two issues: duty to the family, and personal fulfilment. The fulfilment of oneself, however, desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family."<sup>6</sup>

The main themes of the novel is exploration of suitable boys for Lata. It is not difficult to interpret the dilemma of Mrs. Rupa Mehra regarding Kabir as an unsuitable boy. "Lata has to choose between the first

<sup>5</sup>Seth, Vikram, A Suitable Boy, Penguin Books, 1993.

<sup>6</sup>Meenakshi Mukherjee, 1979, (29)

love of her life (Kabir) and her mother's happiness. The novel presents passion gone awry, and Seth emphasizes that the search should be not for love but for lifemate.”<sup>7</sup>

Seth does not believe that passion always goes wrong but according to him there are other things (besides true love), that do affect upon lives of people. Consequently, A Suitable Boy deals with social factors that affect an individual's life while choosing a suitable husband or wife. Lata Mehra influenced by these social factors decides to get married with Haresh Khanna. Ultimately, the novel ends with endogamous traditional marriage of Haresh and Lata. Thus quest for a suitable match for Lata ends in the novel with the conception that class and caste play major role while making choices for marriage.

### Conclusion

Endogamy plays a major role in the novel giving preference to the ethnic and social status for choosing a bridegroom having in view hierarchical concept of caste and religion. This traditional match making is primarily preserved through the institution of marriage and especially in arranged marriages. The very word 'Suitable' stands for suitability of an individual to the arranged marriage in terms of his religion, caste, ethnicity, class structure. If someone does not fulfil the said criteria for a particular Caste or Class structure that is sustained by traditional endogamy, It will be his or her unsuitability for marriage concerning that particular ethnic Caste or Class. Mrs. Rupa Mehra refuses her daughter's request of marriage with Kabir because he does not belong to her caste and religion. Ultimately, Lata influenced by her mother's suggestion and makes a choice for life partner keeping in focus her own class and caste. Thus Lata Mehra's quest for a suitable husband ends with her endogamous marriage with Haresh Khanna who belongs to the same ethnic origin and clan as her.

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