Chapter Three

Social-self in *A Suitable Boy*

What was good enough for her mother and her mother’s mother and her mother’s mother’s mother should be good enough for her. (ASB 22)

Seth’s first prose novel *A Suitable Boy* is analysed in this chapter with the notion of collective social self, traced in its prime characters Lata Mehra, Mrs. Rupa Mehra and the suitors, Kabir Durrani, Amit Chatterji and Haresh Khanna. Primarily the study is engaged in redefining how Lata’s self is socially shaped by almost all the characters in the novel. Lata’s self is a witness of the transition happened in herself and in society. As critics suggest the novel is locally a social satire and globally a social history.

The main theme is about search for ‘a suitable boy’, a really suitable Hindu boy for a young upper caste Hindu woman from a good background. It is a search by a mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra, for her younger daughter Lata Mehra. She has four children, two sons - Arun Mehra and Varun Mehra and two daughters - Savita Mehra and Lata Mehra. Mrs. Rupa Mehra had lost her husband. Arun is married to Meenakshi Chatterji against the will of his mother and has a daughter, Aparna and is staying in Calcutta. Arun is very arrogant and short tempered person. Savita is her elder daughter, “kind-hearted and accommodating” (ASB 14). Varun is staying with his brother in Calcutta and is studying Mathematics. He is rather a timid character.

Lata the youngest of the Mehra family is good in studies and is studying English in Brahmpur University. She is very much controlled by her mother for ‘her own erratic swings of mood’ (14). There is no single character to be considered as the protagonist.
as each character has its own role to play. It is primarily about the social, religious and familial customs of India and her people with the numerous characters serving as tools to illustrate the veracity of these customs:

The plot, as in Jane Austen, revolves around Lata and her suitors, but the richness of the book comes from the hundreds of interactions between families and friends, brought together as passing strangers or made enemies by legal, religious, musical, literary, economic, and social institutions. *A Suitable Boy* bears out a truism of Indian society: that at a certain level everyone seems to know everyone else. (Richard B. Woodward)

The novel is set in the post-independence period in the imaginary state of Purva Pradesh with its capital Brahmpur. References are also made to Delhi, Calcutta, Kanpur, Lucknow etc. It follows the developments in four linked families in the province of Purva Pradesh and its capital Brahmpur. At the level of social satire the story involves around four deeply intertwined families of three Hindus and one Muslim, by marriage and friendship respectively:

The Kapoors represent the Hindi-speaking elite, gaining their ascendancy as part of a new political elite, while the Anglicized Mehras firmly believe in the superiority of convent schools, English Literature and proper manners. The Chatterjis, eccentric and rather scandalous members of the Bengali intelligentsia, indulge in rhyming couplets and coddle a manic dog Cuddles, as the Muslim, landowning Khans face legislation that threatens to dissolve their culture and Urdu language along with all feudal landholdings. (Ron Moorby)
The over-anxiety of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, one of the chief characters in the novel, about the marriage of her daughter, Lata, to “a suitable boy” is the unifying story line of the novel. Based on this quest, the novel progresses and the story of four interconnected families such as Mehras, Kapoors, Khans, and Chatterjis are woven intelligently for its development. Along with the story of these four families, it deals with a wide variety of topics such as Indian history, politics, law, familial customs, communal riots, urban and rural tradition, food, dress, cricket, love, marriage, extramarital relationship, friendship, and even shoe manufacture. It also provides an overview of the society and the customs and taboos prevalent during the period. Various circumstances in the novel firmly point out the folly of finding out a suitable boy and thus make the novel a typical example both for its structural irony and, through it, a deviation from the established social norms of matrimony.

Seth projects the idea of “unity within diversity” in India. The different social languages employed in the fictional system are composed into a ‘structured stylistic system’. To achieve the objective, the novelist constructs an organic social imagery which possesses the feature of national representativeness. One of the main settings of the novel is the invented city of Brahmpur, which plays an important role in the representation of India in the fictional system. Brahmpur symbolically represents a geographical area, specifically North Indian dimension, is stretched to make it representative of all India in its totality. The main strength of the novel lies not in the business of matchmaking, but in the depiction of the social panorama of the decade after independence. Seth interweaves all the larger themes of political, social and religious conflicts, with the day-to-day ordinary human emotions of his true-to-life characters. Seth’s imagination comes through Lata’s individual self:
Perhaps 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 pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, 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. (ASB 15)

Seth offers a huge, thick, and multi-layered slice of Indian life through the cities of Brahmpur and Calcutta with excursions to New Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow and also to remote village Debaria of Rudhia District.

The novel opens with the wedding of Savita Mehra and Pran Kapoor. Pran Kapoor is the son of Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue of the state of Purva Pradesh. He is a lecturer at Brahmpur University teaching English where Lata is studying. He is described as a thin, weak man with repeated attacks of asthma. Everyone in the family except Savita is against choosing him, but for Mrs. Rupa Mehra, “Pran is a good, decent, cultured khatri boy” (4). She is a lovable mother as well as she is very firm in her decision. She reveals her responsibility when she talks to her younger daughter Lata during the wedding ceremony of her elder daughter Savita that, “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 [her husband] help?” (3). She misses her husband’s presence during this occasion. But Lata is of the opinion that marrying a man without knowing him will not work out. Thinking of Savita she says, “How could she have agreed to get married without knowing this man?” (14). Thus the interrogative voice is raised against the social custom constructed by social self. Male has been considered power centre not giving any
privilege to women even in married life, though the wife has been called better half. Pran’s character is idealized by Mrs. Rupa Mehra as a male, very considerate, caring and loving. But these characteristic features may never be enjoyed by women for a long time. *A Suitable Boy* is none but who is anticipated by the mother’s like Mrs. Rupa Mehra.

The novel is written in the realist fashion. It reveals its discontent with the established social norms, particularly in the case of marriage, in a very subtle manner. Each and every incident in the novel is related to other incidents. The interrelationship of these incidents lead the novel and they become the integral part of the novel’s structure.

Lata’s mind is depicted as an oscillating unstable one. When Mrs. Rupa Mehra tells her that she also has to marry a boy chosen by her, she avoids her maternal imperative. The way she behaves shows that she is against arranged marriage. She thinks that the place “Prem Nivas”, name of the house of Kapoors where the marriage of Savita is takes place is not the right one for arranged marriage: “‘Prem Nivas’ for a start: the abode of love. An idiotic name, thought Lata crossly, for this house of arranged marriages” (15). And at one point she emphatically says to her mother, “I don’t think I ever want to get married” (22).

Malati Trivedi is Lata’s best friend to whom she shares her feelings as Malati is the only one who has given her more confidence. She belongs to socialist party; for, her lover is a socialist interested in music. The portrayal of Malati’s self is a counter to that of Lata. The inter-personal relationship between Lata and Malati strengthens the social self of Lata. The bond of paternal loss also tied Lata and Malati together.
She too has been brought up by her mother who is almost different from Lata’s mother:

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 neighbours 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)

As a result Malati is very bold, smart and outspoken. While talking to her, Lata says, “Oh, love, what a boring subject. I’ll never fall in love” (30). This is a sociopsychologically attributed note reflecting on marriage as social institution which always considers loving and marrying as a social sin.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra is much satisfied with herself for having arranged the marriage of her elder daughter, Savita, to Pran. No sooner than the marriage is about to be over she begins her next mission of finding out a suitable boy for Lata, her
younger daughter. She tells her, “You too will marry a boy I choose” (3). She keeps repeating the need of a suitable boy at every important stage of the narrative. She also stresses, “What is good enough for your sister is good enough for you” but Lata ironically replies, “We can’t both marry Pran” (5). Mrs. Rupa Mehra is highly conscious and keeps advising Lata at regular intervals. She is a woman who is always concerned about her children and is eager to getting them settled well in life. She is determined to take care of them at any cost even if they are against her wish. She does not have any difficulties with Savita, but her problems with Lata are too greater to be solved. She with much annoyance decides, “Her younger daughter was going to prove more difficult than her elder” (4).

At the same time like Lata, Maan Kapoor, Pran’s younger brother, doing business in Banaras and is soon to be married, is also under a similar pressure from his family for accepting a suitable girl of his father’s choice. His father, Mahesh Kapoor, is a well educated man. Nevertheless, he wants to maintain the family custom of choosing suitable spouses for his children and thus have compatible marriages in his family. He speaks to Maan Kapoor: “What is good enough for your brother is good enough for you” (6). When Maan tries to resist his father’s choice for him, he exerts his pressure saying: “We chose well for Veena, we have chosen well for Pran, and you are not to complain about our choice of a bride for you” (7). On his father’s decision, Maan is, greatly disappointed. He has no affection for his fiancee. Yet he has to conform to his father’s decision:

Maan began to think about his fiancee and her family and became depressed about his engagement, as he usually did when he gave it any thought. His father had arranged it, as he had threatened to do; Maan, taking the path of
least resistance, had gone along with it; and now it was an ominous fact of life. He would sooner or later have to get married to her. Maan felt no affection for her – they had hardly met each other except in the company of their families – and he did not really want to think about her. (98-99)

Through the very title itself, Seth makes fun of the frantic effort of Indian parents for finding out suitable boys and girls for their daughters and sons. After the wedding of Savita, Dr. Kishen Chand Seth, father of Mrs. Rupa Mehra advises regarding the need for a suitable boy for Lata. “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). Based on this piece of advice she starts her quest. She approaches all her relatives and friends to help her in this task. Thus Mrs. Rupa Mehra plays a pivotal role in the action of the narrative from the very beginning till the end. And for Mrs. Rupa Mehra ‘a suitable boy’ for Lata works as a mantra. Her sole aim in life is to look after and take care of her family, especially finding a suitable match for her youngest daughter. In a letter to Savita and Pran, she writes as, “If only I could find a husband like Pran for my Lata, I would die contented. If Daddy had seen you Pran, he would have known that Savita was in good hands” (311).

Seth presents three suitors: Kabir Durrani, a cricketer, dashing and handsome, but a Muslim whom she meets on her own without having been introduced by her mother as her inner mind suggests; Amit Chatterji, Bengali poet and novelist, sophisticated, rich and a Brahmin who is known to the family as a relative; and Haresh Khanna, an energetic and bright young man determined to make a career for himself in the shoe manufacturing industry, supposed to be ‘the suitable boy’ is recommended by her mother. They are totally different from each other in their
appearance and behaviour. The knot is well made through them to have a social interaction, arguing that who would be the best choice for Lata. This is another kind of social construct where the individual ‘self’ and the social ‘self’ get into conflict.

Lata is a 19-year-old college girl, vulnerable, but determined to have her own way and not to be influenced by her strong mother and opinionated brother, Arun. She ventures into an alien territory. She develops a fondness for Kabir Durrani, son of Dr. Durrani, Mathematics Lecturer. He is a cricket and literature enthusiast, and is the student of history in Brahmpur University wherein she is the student of literature. She meets him while browsing through a book in a book shop:

The words were assured, and therefore reassuring: things were what they were even in this uncertain world, and she could proceed from there. She smiled to herself now, not aware of her surroundings. Still holding the book, she looked up. And this was how a young man, who had been standing not far from her pleasantly startled, and smiled back at her. Lata frowned at him and looked down at the page again. But she could not concentrate on it, and after a few moments, replaced it on the shelf before making her way to Poetry . . . . The tall young man, who had (Lata noticed) slightly wavy black hair and very good, rather aquiline, looks, seemed to be as interested in poetry as in mathematics, because a few minutes later Lata was aware that he had shifted his attention to the poetry shelves, and was glancing through the anthologies. Lata felt that his eyes were on her from time to time. (46)

At first Lata hesitates and in due course she gets attracted to him. She has a strong fondness which in turn quickly develops into deep and penetrating love. Without knowing that he is a Muslim, the love in them grows stronger and they even go to the
extent of getting married. She admires him a lot. She is enchanted by his playing cricket and thinks, “I’m behaving like a fascinated gopi. Soon, instead of feeling jealous of Krishna’s flute, I’ll start envying Kabir’s bat!” (147). Even love instinct in Lata is realised through the mythical representation of Gopi and Krishna cult, which can be treated as a social continuity promoted through ages. It seems Lata believes in ‘love at first sight’.

Kabir wants to show her the ‘Barsaat Mahal reflected in the water’, and share its beauty with her. He takes her in a boat. He wants to share its history as he has some knowledge about this delicate white structure. The boatman at one point stops the boat and says them to sit and watch for five minutes:

“Now sit and watch for five minutes”, said the boatman. “This is a sight you will never forget in your lives”. Indeed it was, and neither of them was to forget it. The Barsaat Mahal, site of statesmanship and intrigue, love and dissolute enjoyment, glory and slow decay, was transfigured into something of abstract and final beauty. Above its sheer river-wall it rose, its reflection in the water almost perfect, almost unrippled. (167)

Seth thinks the Barsaat Mahal to be the right choice for the lovers as it is a monument of love. ‘The Barsaat Mahal, miracle of marble filligral work, for their love and pleasures’ was built by Nawab Khushwaqt in memory of his is third wife Fatima Jaan. For their impassionate love made them inseparable companions. By taking her to this place Kabir wants to show the intensity of his love for Lata.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra reacts in a frantic manner, when Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor tells her about the affair gently, “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). On her way home Mrs. Rupa Mehra keeps crying in the tonga. She speaks about Lata as “shameless Lata” and expresses her anxiety about not getting a suitable boy for her, saying “who will marry her now” (180). Her violent reaction includes even resorting to calling her thus: “The wretched girl asks me who told me. No one told me. It’s the talk of the town, everyone knows about it. Everyone thought you were a good girl with a good reputation – and now it is too late. Too late” (181). The moment Lata, and eventually her worrying mother find out Kabir is a Muslim conflict zone is created between Lata and her mother. There rises the conflict between the self and the society. For both, this becomes clouded by upset and emotional confictions. On hearing that Lata’s lover is a Muslim, Mrs. Rupa Mehra takes it as the worst offence in her life. “A Muslim!” . . . “What did I do in my past life that I have brought this upon my beloved daughter?” (182). The strong orthodox belief about the purity of caste is nowhere better expressed than in this context of Lata’s love affair with Kabir. She firmly thinks that it is degradation for the family. She is much agitated and thinks: “Even marrying a non-khatri Hindu was bad enough. But this was unspeakable. It was one thing to mix socially with Muslims, entirely another to dream of polluting one’s blood and sacrificing one’s daughter” (183). Here Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s social consciousness does not allow her to think of marrying her daughter to someone outside her caste against the social norms which has a strong hold on every individual self in the country. But, Lata is not willing to lose her ‘self’ for the sake of society. The love affair between Kabir and Lata reflects the religious disharmony prevailing in the society.
Even after her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, has made a hue and cry about her love-affair with Kabir, the love for him never loses its intensity. She is strong in her decision. Seth describes her decision as, “No matter what happened, she would meet him as planned, tomorrow. She told herself again and again that the path of true love never did run smooth” (183). This shows her courage and powerful mind-set on her passion and her gratification over herself against the social restrictions against love marriage.

The non-compatibility of Kabir’s caste with Lata’s sends shock waves through Lata. On hearing Kabir’s surname from him, she responds with pain: “I know. Hearing him say it so casually brought all the cares of the world back on her head” (171). After having known his surname, she realizes that Kabir is a Muslim and so she is not ready to stand towards her wish of love marriage, because to her love marriage should be done within a caste system that she has been taught through her social brought up. So here falling in love is no longer an individual affair, but a social contract. Thus she loses her courage and becomes a prey to the society’s norms on marriage. “It’s all important. Don’t you know what it means in my family?” (171). She goes with the society here. By saying this she registers herself as a member of the society who wants to strictly adhere to the family traditions. Seth makes Lata lose her courage to court the man whom she loves. He also hints at the rigidity of the society that criticizes true love. Kabir speaks to her on this aspect of love and marriage. Kabir holds her hand and says, “You love me. And I love you. That’s all that matters” (171). Lata seems to be convinced of his comforting words at that time. But the society does not allow her to be on her own ‘self’. So many changes take place in her
life. The society is represented chiefly through Mrs. Rupa Mehra and the conflict between individual ‘self’ and social ‘self’ through Lata.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra frantically tries to choose a boy for her, especially when she learns that Lata is in love with Kabir, a Muslim. She writes to Mr. Gaur’s (her husband’s friend) daughter Kalpana Gaur whom she treats as her own daughter at Delhi, who knows everyone, and may help her 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).

To avoid Kabir Mrs. Rupa Mehra takes Lata to Arun’s place, Calcutta. Lata gets the chance of moving with different people of the cosmopolitan city through various parties she attends with Meenakshi and Arun. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is not at all happy with her daughter-in-law and she is much worried when she takes Lata with her to tango - a dance party. She keeps waking till they arrive home. As a watchful mother she wants Lata to tell her every incident that happened in the party. “You must tell me everything you did. What you ate, what you saw, whom you met, what you did” (435). She never wants her daughter to move freely. Lata also has the chance of moving with the Chatterjis especially Amit who is shown as her another suitor. Amit is Meenakshi’s elder brother. He enters Lata’s life more as a relative and a friend than a suitor. When Lata’s heart is almost broken and she needed some diversion, she meets Amit. She starts liking his company. He takes her around Calcutta. Amit is basically a poet and Lata too is interested in poetry. So he wants to take her to Park Street Cemetery, the place of poetic interest. Though it was with ‘just Amit’ Lata is going, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, unreasonably insisted on someone accompanying them. “But well, he was a young man, and for form’s sake it was important that someone be
with them, so that they would not be seen alone altogether” (448). This shows that she gives much importance to the society. She does not want the society to talk ill of her family. As the families move with each other there is a chance for Amit and Lata to become good friends. They both enjoy each other’s company in discussing about poetry, novels and altogether literature which is the favourite subject of these two. Gradually Amit gets attracted by her charm, innocence and simplicity. Although he is very far from being a passionate person he sends a modest proposal for Lata in the form of a poem:

As you’ve asked for black and white,

May I send these lines to you

In the tacit hope you might

Take my type at least as true.

Let this distance disappear

And our hearts approach from far

Till we come to be as near

As acrostically we are. (1288)

To Lata he is her friend, a travel guide at Calcutta and he is the brother of Meenakshi and Kakoli. She cannot even imagine him as her husband. “He was just Amit – to convert him into a husband was absurd – the thought of it made her smile” (1289). Amit’s wit and passion does not move Lata. When asked by Malati ‘how he has put himself out of the running’ she explains:
Well, he wouldn’t be my undoing, as you put it, but I don’t see myself as his at all. We’re too alike. His moods veer and oscillate as wildly as mine. Can you imagine the life of our poor children? And if his mind’s on a book I don’t know if he’ll have any time for me. Sensitive people are usually very sensitive – I should know. (1296)

She can reject his proposal without losing his friendship. But he is also Arun’s brother-in-law; to marry him is to be near her brother Arun, whom she cannot tolerate as she puts it: “To live five minutes away from him would be the ultimate lunacy” (1297). Arun, with his British accent and his prestigious position with Bentsen & Pryce, is a vain and empty man, an anglicized Indian basking in the reflected glory of a setting empire – the typical brown sahib under the colonial hangover.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra is not happy with the move of Lata with Amit. She immediately moves to Delhi with the hope that Kalpana would help her in getting Lata settled at the earliest. She says, “I decided to come suddenly. It’s Lata. I want you to find her a boy at once. A suitable boy. She is getting involved with unsuitable boys, and I cannot have that” (548). She shows her some seven boys. All the seven are rejected by Mrs. Rupa Mehra. She gets dejected on her possibility in Delhi and decides of trying from Kanpur, Lucknow and Banaras, with the help of her husband’s relatives. As Kalpana is sick she thinks of staying there for a week to look after her. Thus she happens to meet Haresh Khanna, ‘the suitable boy’ who comes to meet his friend Kalpana. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is very much impressed with him. As there is a saying that first impression is the best impression, she persuades Kalpana to pursue the case:
Mrs. Rupa Mehra had indeed liked Haresh. She had liked the fact that he was energetic, that he was independent of his family (though affectionate towards them), and that he clearly took great care with his appearance. Now a days, many boys looked so scruffy. And one crucial point in Haresh’s favour was his name. Being a Khanna, he was bound to be a khatri. (556)

Her rigid conventional mind-set is best revealed here. This also means that she is comfortable with no other community except herself. This conventional psyche of Mrs. Rupa Mehra is the reflection of the society’s own rigidity where parents’ comfort very much depends upon the marriage of their child to someone of their own caste and the compatibility of horoscopes. This thought pattern cares little for the comfort or matching of the minds of the boy and girl who enter into matrimony. To upset the thought pattern of the parents is to upset the smooth functioning of the society. The conflict mind set of Lata, one of the chief characters, is presented almost until the end of the novel. But the last moment twisting of the novel’s normal course of direction is apparently intended to give it a conclusion demanded by Mrs. Rupa Mehra and the society.

On the contrary she hates Amit as he is not independent. When Kalpana tells that he is a famous poet and a nice man, Mrs. Rupa Mehra replies, “Famous! All he does is sit in his father’s house and stare out of the upstairs window. A young man should do a job and earn his living” (557). Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s social self again suggests that ‘a suitable boy’ is a practical man with worldly knowledge to strengthen the social status of one’s family through earning money, not through earning popularity as a poet.
The dowry system is also viewed as a social construct here. The most suitable boy for Lata, according to Mrs. Rupa Mehra, is Haresh Khanna, a Khatri. One of the most important reasons for her to choose Haresh is that he would not ask for a dowry, the other being the fact that his caste matches with Mehras. She sets her eye on him the very moment Kalpana Gaur mentions his name to her. And the thought that there would not be any dowry gives her great relief:

As for a dowry [continued Kalpana in her curvaceously looped script], he isn’t the kind of man to ask for it, and there is no one to ask for it on his behalf. He is very attached to his father – his foster-father, actually, though he calls him Baoji – but (unlike his foster-brothers) he has established his independence early enough. (562)

This is a valuable piece of information for Mrs. Rupa Mehra and she is elated as it gives her double joy that the problem of dowry is ruled out and the boy is independent enough to look after his own family. Mrs. Rupa Mehra represents a lower middle class mother and she must be aware of the consequences if she could not raise as much dowry as the bridegroom’s family demands. So by making all the effort, Mrs. Rupa Mehra avoids the dowry for her daughter. Thus she functions as the novelist’s spokesperson to bring forth his social non-conformity to a much-rooted social system in India. Mrs. Rupa Mehra acts vigorously to avoid the mobilization of a huge dowry for Lata. She does this without ever sacrificing her idea about her social status in a caste-ridden society.

Haresh wins the heart of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. It is evident from the letter, Kalpana Gaur writes him:
The point is that Mrs Mehra has a young daughter Lata – and she was so impressed by you that she wanted to know if there was any possibility of anything being arranged between Lata and you by way of matrimony . . . . But she saw you that evening and was extremely impressed. She thinks it would be a boy of your type who would have made Lata’s late father happy. (566)

Mrs. Rupa Mehra almost decides Haresh to be the suitable boy for her daughter. In fact, Haresh too wants to be liked by them:

Haresh found Mrs. Rupa Mehra affectionate as well as good-looking. He has tried to maintain a respectful distance by calling her Mrs Mehra throughout, but she had eventually insisted on him calling her Ma. ‘Everyone else does so after five minutes, so you must as well,’ she told Haresh. She waxed voluble about her late husband and her coming grandson. She had already forgotten her afternoon’s trauma and had appended her future son-in-law to the family. (579)

He judges Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s nature as “exacting and pragmatic in her criteria for a suitable boy for her daughter” (908). On seeing the photograph of a smiling, long-haired young woman that stood in a silver frame on Haresh’s writing table Mrs. Rupa Mehra questions him, “Haresh. Is there someone else in your life still?” Being a frank, open-hearted fellow and who does not want to hide anything from them, Haresh replies:

‘Mrs Mehra,’ said Haresh, I told Kalpana and I am sure she has told you that Simran was and still is very dear to me. But I know that that door is closed to me. I cannot tear her away from her family, and for her family the fact that I
am not a Sikh is all that matters. I am now looking for someone with whom I can live a happy married life. You need have no fears on that score. I am very glad that Lata and I have had the chance to get to know each other a little. (574)

Seth presents a clear picture on Haresh who obliges to the social norms. No matter his love for Simran, the Sikh girl is a whole-hearted and true one, he does not want to go against the wish of her parents for whom the only hindrance for not accepting him is the caste. They also like him and still he is in touch with Simran’s sister. He is much oriented to his social ‘self’ than his own ‘self’. Further he wants to prove that he also needs some social status and he is well aware that the social status is gained only through marriage. Thus foregoing his own desires he wants to get settled in life by marrying a girl who would give him this status in his life. He thinks here Lata would be the right choice. He gives up his ill-fated love and promises to devote himself whole-heartedly in making the marriage with Lata successful.

At first she dislikes Haresh for his habit of paan, manner of dressing with correspondent shoes and his awkward English – of pronouncing ‘Kanpur’ as ‘Cawnpore’ etc. Slowly Lata gets attracted with Haresh and starts loving him. His unaffected ways and sincere concern for everybody and systematic way of functioning take her towards him. “If Haresh had any god, it was Quality” (607). Because of which he has some conflict with the authorities at CLFC where he works. He does not want to lose his self-respect and wants to quit. He decides to search for a job at James Hawley. Haresh is highly confident of his self and hopes that they will treat his abilities with more respect. He says, “Quite frankly, Sir David, I am looking for a job. I believe I am qualified for it, and I hope you will give me one” (611).
Haresh respects labourers and never imposes superiority over them. His way of motivating the labourers is totally different from other superior officers. He goes down to the level of labourers and starts finding out their problems and joins hands and even works with them for increasing the production. He personally visits the mechanics and they are very happy as normally the foremen only sent slips asking them to repair their machines. He also assures them job security. His motivational speech to the gang of labourers of Praha reveals his personality:

On Monday morning I will don my overalls and show you what can be done. But let us talk for the moment of a mere 400. I am prepared to stand and tell you here and that if our production rises to that level, not a single man will be fired. And the week that you regularly make 400 pairs a day I will fight for all of you to be promoted by one grade. And if this does not happen I am prepared to resign. (1117)

During their visit he takes Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Lata to the tannery though it is not his work place. Mrs. Rupa Mehra wants to know whether he works in the tannery. He says that he works in the main factory but visits it about once a week. Seth through Haresh shows his frankness and the dignity of labour:

I am proud of the shoes I make. I don’t like sitting in an office giving orders and expecting miracles. If this means that I have to stand in a pit and soak a buffalo’s hide myself, I’ll do it. People who work in managing agencies, for instance, are perfectly happy to deal in commodities but don’t like smudging their fingers with anything except ink. If that. And they care less for quality than for profits . . . . If you have to do something, you should do it without making a fuss. An uncle of mine in Delhi thinks that I have become polluted,
that I have lost caste by working with leather. Caste! I think he is a fool, and he thinks that I’m one. (577)

The shoemakers are mainly the members of the ‘untouchable’ jatav caste or a few lower-caste Muslims, a large number of whom have remained in Brahm pur after the partition. They are gaunt and poorly clad, and many of them look desperate. They are called basket-wallahs. They run hastily from shop to shop with baskets on their heads, offering the shoes that they and their families make during the day to the wholesalers. They will have to sell them in order to buy food as well as leather and other materials for their next day’s work.

In fact, Haresh maintains a cordial relationship with Jagat Ram, one of the shoemakers from jatav community of Ravidaspur. Kedarnath Tandon introduces him. They both meet him for getting shoes for his company. Haresh gets impressed by the work of Jagat Ram who is also very sincere in his work and is skilled. Haresh always has the quality of appreciating talents. Their relationship grows like this and Haresh gets the shoes made from him for his company. Haresh also invites Jagat Ram to his wedding:

Jagat Ram reacted to Haresh’s wedding with visible shock, no so much because Haresh was getting married, and in Brahmput at that, but because he should have thought of inviting him. Moved as he was, he had to refuse. The two worlds did not mix. He knew it; it was a fact of life. That a jatav from Ravidaspur should be present as a guest at a wedding at the house of Dr. Kishen Chand Seth would cause social distress that he did not wish to be the centre of. It would injure his dignity. Apart from the practical problems of
what to wear and what to give, he knew that he would feel no joy and only intense awkwardness at being present on the occasion. (1334)

Haresh insists him to come. He tells, “You are not to bring a gift. I’ve never been a believer in gifts at weddings. But you must come. We are colleagues. I won’t hear of your not coming. And the invitation is also for your wife if you want her to come” (1334-1335).

Through Haresh, Seth wants to break such modalities of the society and such social constraints. For Haresh all are equal especially the ones who are devoted to their work. He has high regard for Jagat Ram for his involvement and devotion to duty. He treats Jagat Ram as his colleague and not as a slave just because he is from the ‘untouchable’ low-caste Jatav community. With great reluctance Jagat Ram agrees to come for the wedding.

Lata’s thoughts about Haresh go thus: “generous, robust, optimistic, impatient and responsible There he stood in Prahapore, as solid as a pair of Goodyear Welted shoes, twinkling his eyes affectionately at her from the pages of his letter and telling her as well as he could that he was lonely without her” (1291). Lata feels a sense of adventure and mystery in losing herself in his world, a world populated by various people and finds only Haresh as reality. Thus Lata gradually starts liking Haresh:

But there was something adventurous in losing herself entirely in a world that she did not know with a man whom she trusted and had begun to admire – and who cared for her so deeply and steadily. She thought of a paan-less Haresh, smiling his open smile; she sat him down at a table so that she could not see his co-respondent shoes; she ruffled his hair a bit, and – well, he was quite
attractive! She liked him. Perhaps given time and luck, she could even learn to love him. (1292)

Arun writes to her giving reasons that Haresh ‘would not make a suitable addition’ to their family. First he says, that Haresh is not of the same wave-length as Lata or any of the family members as his English is not good. Secondly, Haresh does not and can never aspire to move in the same social circles as Mehras. He says a foreman is not a covenanted assistant, and Praha is simply not Bentsen & Pryce. He also says with that his way of dressing, his liking for snuff and paan, he lacks the small social graces. Finally, he says that her future family income will in all likelihood not permit her to send her children to the kind of school like St. George’s or St. Sophia’s or Jheel or Mayo or Loreto or Doon. Arun disagrees with his mother’s choice and warns Lata to think it over and decide accordingly.

In spite of her brother’s warning she decides to marry Haresh. She thinks that he only can provide her affection with security. She tells Malati, “It’s more like Nala and Damyanti than Portia and Bassanio. Haresh’s feet touch the ground, and he has dust and sweat and a shadow. The other two are a bit too God-like and ethereal to be any good for me” (1299). Nala-Damyanti myth suggests that love is a holy bond socially constructed, which cannot be destined to be broken. The love affair between Portia and Bassanio is determined by choice. Even though, it is a positive note of getting married to each other.

She also says, “It’ll be interesting, I think. Haresh is practical, he is forceful, he isn’t cynical. He gets things done and he helps people without making a fuss about it. He’s helped Kedarnath and Veena a great deal” (1297). When asked whether he will allow her to teach she replies, “But I am sure of it. I think I know him well
enough by now. He hates to see anyone’s talent wasted. He encourages them. And he’s really concerned about people – about me, about Maan, about Savita and her studies, about Bhaskar – ” (1297)

Lata rejects Kabir after a lot of thinking and analyzing. She feels that she loses her ‘self’ when she is in his company. “When I’m with Kabir, or even away from him but thinking about him, I become utterly useless for anything. I feel I’m out of control – like a boat heading for the rocks – and I don’t want to become a wreck” (1298). She knows that she cannot have any future with Kabir. The love for Kabir only gives excitement and is not the requirement for leading a bright future. Quoting what she has read the previous day she says to Malati:

There are two different kinds, I believe, of human attraction. One that merely excites, unsettles, and makes you uneasy; The other that – Well, I can’t remember exactly, but he talks about a calmer, less frantic love, which helps you to grow where you were already growing, “to live where as yet I had languished” – I just read it yesterday, it isn’t in my head yet, but it said everything that I couldn’t express on my own. (1299)

Malati tells Lata that her feeling towards Kabir shows her passionate love for him. “Oh, Lata – don’t be blind – exclaimed Malati. It shows how passionately you love him – ” (1296). But she explains to Malati thus:

I don’t want to, I don’t want to. If that’s what passion means, I don’t want it. Look at what passion has done to the family. Maan’s broken, his mother’s dead, his father’s in despair. When I thought that Kabir was seeing someone
else, what I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion.

Passionately and forever. (1296)

So the ethereal nature of Kabir and the practical wisdom of Haresh are compared and the practical wisdom wins in the end. Intimidated by the society, Lata comes in terms with its norms. She starts hating the passion of love passionately.

Though she has taken the decision to marry Haresh, she can not even imagine of deserting Kabir. Her lips start trembling:

“I am not at ease – I’m not –” she cries. “It’s not easy – Malu, how can you think it is? I hardly know who I am or what I’m doing – I can’t study or even think these days – everything is pressing in on me. I can’t bear it when I’m with him, and can’t bear not to see him. How do I know what I may or may not do? I only hope I have the courage to stick to my decision. (1299)

Lata is in deep love with Kabir. At the same time she cannot marry him. She does not want to go against her family. She says that she can never hurt her family especially her mother. Thus she tries to avoid him and when asked for the reason she says, “It’s not possible – it never was – but not because of time and careers and studies and other practical things . . . . Because of my family . . . . However much they irritate me and constrain me, I can’t give them up. I know that now. So much has happened. I can’t give up my mother . . . . I just see how much she cares about everything and how she would be affected by this” (906). Lata thus loses her individual ‘self’ and the social ‘self’ in her wins.

She adopts a rational perspective of the young man’s virtues and weaknesses. In the letter to Kabir, she writes in a controlled rational tone: “I have got your note . . .
I got your letter too when I was in Calcutta. It made me think over and remember everything. I am not annoyed with you in any way; please do not think so. But I feel that there is no purpose at all in our writing or meeting. There would be a lot of pain and very little point” (776).

Seth’s men and women are in search of perfect adjustments and harmony in domestic as well as in social life. They believe that a harmonious relationship within the family is but a prelude to a stable society. It is not that they have no hardships and difficulties but there is no hint of a mutual betrayal leading to an inevitable clash. Seth sees the institution of marriage as a stable one and hence his faith is in stability and solidarity of society.

Kabir is very sweet and highly intelligent. He loves Lata too much and this deep-rooted love for her is seen burning in his soul, like a raging forest fire. It keeps growing and becomes more intense. His use of poetic lines lifted from the pages of Keats and Byron show the intensity of his love. Thus he is a lyrical and sensitive individual, who through societal and personal circumstances is forced to experience a heart ache, never felt before. Kabir by her rejection becomes much dejected. He is not able to tolerate that his love is lost. On the day of Lata’s marriage, the shattered, desolate Kabir is seen aimlessly walking on the banks of Ganga:

KABIR had not been able to bring himself to the wedding. But though it was Thursday night, he had not gone to visit his mother either. Instead he took a walk by the Ganga: up-river past the banyan tree, along the dhobi-ghat, past the Pul Mela sands underneath the Fort, along the waterfront of the old town, following the black water for miles until he came to the Barsaat Mahal. In the shadow of a wall, he sat down on the sand for an hour, his head in his hands.
Then he got up to walk again, up the tall stairs, across the parapet and to the other side. After a short while he came to a factory, the walls of which came down to the Ganga and prevented him from going further. But he was too tired anyway. He pressed his head against the wall. The ceremonies will be over by now, he thought. He hailed a boatman, and took a boat down-river back to the university and his father’s house. (1348)

It is this ‘Barsaat Mahal’ he visits with Lata when their love was in full bloom and now it is to the same he comes when his love has withered.

Lata, Seth’s heroine, is wooed passionately by the cricketer Kabir, pleasantly by the poet-novelist Amit and sensibly by the shoe maker Haresh. In finally marrying Haresh, Lata seems to be avoiding the ‘self’ in her and goes with the society.

There is a symbolic representation of the places she visits with these three suitors. Seth rightly chooses the places. He selects the Barsaat Mahal in Brahmpur for Kabir. The Barsaat Mahal is very famous for its beauty. It is also the monument built out of passion for love and it is the symbol of Muslims. She died at the age of 33. For the Anglicised Amit he selects the Park Street cemetery. It is a tomb of Walter Savage Landor’s love Rose Aylmer who died at a young age of twenty. His poem stands inscribed on a plaque beneath her name and age. Amit says that ‘a surfeit of pineapples’ made Landor lose Rose. Too much of anything is good for nothing. Thus both of them take her to a place where the love never lasted long. But Seth chooses the tannery as the place for the practical man Haresh. This is the place of his work. It is the work he worships. Thus Seth shows the practicality in Haresh and the reality in life. That practicality is the need for a bright future.
The very fact that Lata’s story is placed in the wide canvas of the socio-political history of the fifties suggests her status as primarily an individual haunted by many social selves. She is almost always defined in relation to other people, like her mother or friends. Even her personal attitudes have a strong cultural echo. They are not mere personal idiosyncrasies but authentic social attitudes. Viewed thus, her marriage does not dwindle into an anti-romantic marriage of convenience, but rather it becomes the fully responsible gesture of a socially aware individual. David Myers’ says that “Lata is not marrying Haresh: she is marrying a symbol of what Vikram Seth would like to proclaim as his hope for a new India - an ambitious, pragmatic, anti-snobbish, working-class, self-made Indian man” (84).

Thus, two types of marriages appear: marrying for love, and marrying for tradition (family/security). By Lata’s attitude it appears that she will marry for love but she decides of marrying for family. Indirectly she represents Indian culture displaying social responsibility.

Lata takes her final exams. She ‘sometimes gets the impression that she was someone other than herself’(1332). She remembers each and every moment of what happened when she met Kabir a year ago and searches for him. Seth writes about her feelings: “Kabir was nowhere to be seen. Amit had written her a brief note of congratulations, but – after their few moments in the bookshop and the coffee house – Kabir has as good as disappeared. Whose life am I living? Was my acceptance just a reaction?” (ASB 1332). Despite Haresh’s encouraging letters and her own cheerful replies, Lata begins to feel both uncertain and very lonely. The thought of Kabir occupies her mind. She thinks how she would have reacted if she is in his place for rejecting him. In a highly dejected mood she thinks:
Two weeks more, and I will be the Bride of Goodyear Welte. Oh, Kabir, Kabir – she wept. I should run away, she thought. I should run away, far from Haresh, far from Kabir, far from Arun and Varun and Ma and the whole Chatterji clan, far from Pran and Maan and Hindus and Muslims and passionate love and passionate hatred and all loud noises – just me and Malati and Savita and the baby. We’ll sit on the sand on the other side of the Ganga and go to sleep for a year or two. (1333)

There is more escapism involved here than denunciation. She is on the threshold of physical maturity that makes her think emotionally. Lata wants to escape from the society, from all its social customs, traditions, from the familial bond, from its communal conflicts and from the passion that ruins. But she wants to have Malati, Savita and the baby with her because they are the ones who understand her well without any expectations. She wants to go to sleep for a year or two hoping that there will definitely be a change in the society. She does not know that it may take years to have the society of her choice.

At a social history level it describes life in post-colonial India, a subcontinent trying to find its bearings, and to reconcile differing religions and languages in one national identity, as it stands on the brink of its first general election the epic touches upon the partition. The issues dealt with include national Indian politics in the period leading up to the first post-Independence national election of 1952, Hindu-Muslim animosity, the status of lower caste people, land reform and the eclipse of the feudal princes and landlords, empowerment of Muslim women, academic affairs etc.
The sub plot, the story of Maan and Saeeda Bai is a counter one to the main plot of searching for ‘a suitable boy’ for Lata. This episode represents historiography, meta-fictional setting of the socio-realist life which continues in India through many ages. This also explains how an individual ‘self’ has been molded by social, religious, political, fictional world of a country of its past and present.

During the festival of colours, Holi the character Saeeda Bai Firozabadi the courtesan, comes into light. She lives in Pasand Bagh close to Prem Nivas. She is bold and vulnerable and has a wide range of fans following. She is invited to Mahesh Kapoor’s house for singing. Seth introduces Saaeda Bai’s character by making her sing at a Holi function at Mahesh Kapoor’s house. He describes her as follows:

She moved the pallu of her silk sari further forward over her head: it tended to slip down, and one of her most charming gestures – to be repeated throughout the evening – was to adjust her sari to ensure that her head was not left uncovered. The musicians – a tabla player, a sarangi player, and a man who strummed the tanpura – sat down and started tuning their instruments as she pressed down a black key with a heavily ringed right hand, gently forcing air through the bellows with an equally bejewelled left. The tabla player used a small silver hammer to tauten the leather straps on his right-hand drum, the sarangi player adjusted his tuning-peg and bowed a few phrases on the strings. The audience adjusted itself and found places for new arrivals. Several boys, some as young as six, sat down near their fathers or uncles. There was an air of pleasant expectancy. Shallow bowls filled with rose and jasmine petals were passed around: those who, like Imtiaz, were still somewhat high on bhang, lingered delightedly over their enhanced fragrance. (79)
This description expertly conjures up the glamour of the courtesan and the expectant atmosphere at the start of the ghazal concert.

Maan gets much affected by her recitation. Her ghazal makes him sink and soon he becomes an admirer of Saeeda Bai: “Maan himself, who had been in love often enough in the past and was therefore prone to a sort of cheerful nostalgia, was overwhelmed by Saeeda Bai’s last ghazal, and popped a thoughtful cashew nut into his mouth. What could he do? – he felt he was falling irresistibly in love with her” (85). He is much obsessed with her and not able to ‘get her out of his mind’. Thereupon, Maan’s life takes new turns. He visits the ‘Barsaat Mahal’. That too reminds him of Saeeda Bai. The chapters describing the life and ways of Saeeda Bai, present a picture of the luxurious life led by the Maharajas and the rich class of the society during that period. The novelist unravels the world of Epicureanism and the power of monarch.

Though Saeeda Bai is introduced as a prostitute and a very good singer she is an independent and trustworthy person. She loves her position in the society and makes everyone happy including the Raja of Marh. He claims priority over others as a Raja and Saeeda Bai is bound to oblige. She is dependent on people like him for her livelihood. Sr. K. Vijaya views her character thus:

Saeeda Bai is very content with what she is and comfortable with all men who come to her life. She is also very sensitive and positive in her dealings with everyone. She meets many men in her life, but falls in love with Maan, the son of a politician. She knows very well that Maan loves her because she is very attractive and a very good singer above all she belongs to the Muslim community” (43).
He meets her often and uses her for his own purpose. She understands that he cannot marry her though she loves him and is concerned about him. With a generous heart she advises him to accept his parents’ proposal for his marriage. Saeeda Bai’s good heart reveals about her nature through this dialogue between Maan and Saeeda Bai.

“And why should I marry? . . . . In fact I sometimes wonder what you see in an old woman like me . . . . But you must get married. You cannot cause your parents so much pain” (ASB 303-304). She is also an independent person and is not afraid of the society. She enjoys her freedom being a singer.

His passion for her is uncontrollable and is driven mad. His madness for her grows to such an extent that he stabs his dearest friend Firoz. The obsession leads to his fall:

HE took the bottle of whisky out of his pocket and began to drink. He felt as if his heart had been crushed. Every night for a fortnight he had thought of her. Every morning when he woke up, whether at the Fort or in Salimpur, he had lingered for a few minutes in bed, imagining that she was with him. No doubt is dreams too had been of her. And now, after these fifteen days away, she had granted him fifteen minutes of her time, and as good as given him to understand that someone else mattered far more to her than he ever could.

(1188)

Maan with much eager visits Saeeda Bai after fifteen days but she expects someone else and spares only fifteen minutes. He is vexed with the fact that someone else is given importance. He has drunk too much and he does not know what he is doing. He wants to find out who that person is. He stands there for half an hour. He recognizes from the gait it must be Firoz entering the house. He is well aware of the fact that
Firoz is fascinated by Tasneem, Saeeda Bai’s younger sister. He also knows that Saeeda Bai will not allow anyone to meet Tasneem. He was sure that the person who entered is going to see only Saeeda Bai. As he has drunk more than half bottle of whisky, he is not aware of his behaviour. He forcefully enters her house and goes into her bedroom and finds no one there. He looks at Firoz’s walking stick. But Saeeda Bai says that Firoz has gone. Maan asks Saeeda Bai, “Why did he come? To meet your sister? Is it your sister he is in love with?” (1190). Saeeda Bai laughs as if he has said ‘was both bizarre and hilarious’ (1190). She says that it is not with her sister he is in love with. “He was red with rage. The woman he loved had betrayed him with his friend, and now she was taking delight in mocking his love and his misery” (1190). He starts strangulating her and she tries to reach for the fruit knife. He grabs it from her and stabs Firoz as he tries to disarm Maan. His obsession for the courtesan sends him to jail for attempted murder. It is an example of passion destroying people. The shock of his arrest causes his mother to die from a stroke. Maan himself is only acquitted when Firoz changes his testimony to say that he was not stabbed, but fell on the knife while trying to disarm his friend.

Seth’s theme is family, and marriage; specifically arranged marriages. Each sphere of social activity, each layer of society has a story and characters to present it and this is done entirely unselfconsciously: what stands always in the forefront is the characters and their situations and how they interact. The whole of India in one year is presented through its people. Themes and issues are presented with a steady consistency of imaginative objectivity.

In contrast to the Lata-Kabir and Maan-Saeeda Bai relationships, the most fulfilling relationship in the novel is that of Lata’s elder sister, Savita, and her
husband Pran – a relationship built by an arranged marriage in which both learned to love each other after their marriage. It is a relationship based on companionship and stability rather than grand romantic passion. Seth wants to emphasise the fact that the marriages fixed by the elders remain forever. It leads to happiness in the long run. According to Seth the main emotion that runs through love marriages is ‘passion’ and for arranged marriages is ‘affection’. Passion may change but affection remains forever. By marrying Savita to Pran, Mrs. Rupa Mehra says with confidence, “And Pran and Savita will be happy, you will see. They will be happy” (4). This becomes true. Pran and Savita become an ideal couple. Their love and affection blossom after their marriage. Their mutual understanding and trust towards each other help them in overcoming all the hurdles they face in their life.

Savita, the elder daughter of Mrs.Rupa Mehra, is very calm and adjustable. She knows and understands her mother’s pain and sufferings. She accepts her mother’s decision and accepts wholeheartedly to marry Pran. She accepts the arranged marriage and does not pass any comments on her mother’s decision/selection. She is very beautiful, obedient, and a dutiful daughter of Mrs. Rupa Mehra. She does not even see her life partner. She sees him only during the marriage. She believes that whatever her mother does is good for her life. Seth has written that how the women like Savita accept the will and wish of the mothers: “Kind-hearted, and accommodating though she was, she did have views of her own. Lata loved her deeply and admired her generous, even temper; the evenness was certainly a contrast to her own erratic swings of mood. Savita was free from any vanity about her fresh and lovely looks” (14).
But Lata was unable to accept this marriage and was wondering about her sister Savita. Her husband looks very thin, block and sickly person but he is very good in nature. Savita accepts him as her life partner and leads a very happy married life. By nature she is very accommodative and receptive. She knows her mother’s burden and does not want to upset her in any way. She has enough confidence on her mother. Seth expresses the view that beauty is not being handsome but should be handsome in their actions. Their relationship leads to the transition of individual self of Lata to her social self finally. Savita plays a significant role in changing Lata’s self gradually.

Seth also gives another example in the form of Veena and Kedarnath Tandon, owner of the Brahmpur Shoe Mart. Their son is Bhaskar who is a genius in Mathematics. They have a smooth domestic life in spite of their painful memories, present financial constraints and future uncertainties. Through arranged marriages understanding, adjustment and tolerance develop and that leads to a life-long commitment.

These basic things lack in the life of Meenakshi and Arun. “Meenakshi Mehra had been a Chatterji 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). Thus they lead a sophisticated life. They have high social status. But there is no commitment in their life. Meenakshi has an affair with Billy Irani, friend of Arun. She even goes to the extent of aborting her child as she is not aware who her father is. Again Maan becomes a prey for this self-destructive passion:

Seth’s characters are set painful lessons in personal knowledge and moral self-discipline, as a result of which rationality triumphs over any sort of obsessive or passionate indulgence. His characters may suffer, but they also understand
and their understanding derives from a proper exercise of rational thoughts rather than from emotional or subconscious enlightenment. Seth, through his characters, proposes that we deny passion and remain as far as possible, in control of ourselves. (Seemita Mohanty 162-163)

Lata’s mother arranges a meeting with Haresh, so that she can have an understanding with him. When Haresh tries to show his affection during this meeting by getting hold of her hand, she warns him immediately against being “mean”. He walks away fallen hearted. She never hesitates when Kabir puts his arm around her shoulder and kisses her where the love is an emotionally involved one. But rationalization takes place in Lata and she gets rid of her passion and understands Haresh and accepts him in due course. Lata chooses companionate marriage and stability over romantic love. As Lata is in love with an “unsuitable” Muslim boy, Kabir, whom she cannot marry against the will of her family, her future husband Haresh too, is in love with an “unsuitable” Sikh girl, Simran, whose family will never allow her to marry a Hindu man. Lata gives up her romantic passion and decides to marry the man her mother chooses. Even Haresh, the man she decides to marry has given up his romantic passion and decides to marry her.

Another social scene is one of partition and its impacts. Kedarnath Tandon used to be a resident of Karachi and he often remembers with horror the last days spent in Pakistan. They had to face lot of brutalities before reaching India. He also remembers the difficulties faced in establishing a livelihood in India. The political scenario also gets a space in the novel with Mahesh Kapoor and his friends. Also the Kapoors have a good relationship with the family of the Khans, Nawab Sahib of
Baitar. In fact, Nawab’s son Firoz Khan is the close friend of Maan Kapoor. They enjoy each other’s company more than anything else.

Finally, towards the end of the novel Mrs. Rupa Mehra is successful in finding an ideal match for her daughter. Also there has been a change in the career graph of Varun Mehra, resulting in a great change in his character also. He becomes an I.A.S. officer. Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s mission continues with regard to finding out suitable spouses to her children. During the wedding of Lata with Haresh she tells Varun, her second son, “You too will marry a girl I choose . . . . A suitable girl, that is what I want for you” (ASB 1343).

Seth questions this taboo about the inter-caste marriage and the pseudo social status through his extended irony revealed very subtly. And that is the most important aspect of the social non-conformity that Seth brings forth in the book. On the occasion of the marriage of Savita to Pran, Arun, her own son, speaks about her incapacity for sane thinking. “But once Ma got it into her head that this Kapoor chap was suitable, it was impossible to dissuade her. It’s impossible to talk reason with Ma; she just turns on the water-works” (11). This incapacity for reason is the incapacity of the society as well, which Seth exposes in the novel. Thus Seth exposes the thoughtlessness in the Indian tradition.

In the first part of the novel itself, Seth hints at this nature of Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Lata’s strong resistance to it in a satirical description. This satirical and humorous description of Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Lata inaugurates Seth’s attack on the Indian tradition of matrimony. Mrs. Rupa Mehra thinks:
What on earth had got into the girl? What was good enough for her mother and her mother’s mother and her mother’s mother’s mother should be good enough for her. Lata, though, had always been a difficult one, with a strange will of her own, quite but unpredictable – like that time in St Sophia’s when she had wanted to become a nun! But Mrs. Rupa Mehra too had a will, and she was determined to have her own way, even if she was under no illusions as to Lata’s pliability. (22)

Lata always shows a will of her own. She has her independent views on several things. As for example, she defends the presence of two Muslim ministers in Nehru’s ministry against her mother’s objection to it based on caste. She says, “Ma, I don’t agree at all. He’s the Prime Minister of India, not just the Hindus. What’s the harm if he has two Muslim Ministers in his Cabinet?” (172). Throughout the novel Lata goes about with an independent spirit. She falls in love with a Muslim boy. She fights with her mother to marry him at first. But Seth makes her take a strange decision against passion at the end of the novel. As Mrs. Rupa Mehra points out Lata, “a difficult one” with “a strange will of her own”, decides to marry Haresh.

Seth presents the failure of Lata and Kabir’s combined efforts to swim against the society metaphorically:

When they courted each other in love “no doubt the boat had been rowing against the current of society, upstream towards the Barsaat Mahal” (982). But rowing upstream against the current of the society is abruptly stopped, and by letting Lata deem Haresh as the suitable boy, Seth gives the picture of the rowing downstream along with the society. This is included as part of his structural irony. (Shodhganga)
Seth mocks at the new affluent class of Indians, who have adopted all the manners and comforts of the former English ruling class. But it is highly pathetic to see them making fun of the habits and customs of the natives. Lata’s brother, Arun is one of the examples for this. He tries to behave like an English Lord and is more class conscious than his European employers.

The characterization of the Chatterji family depicts about colonial impact on Indians. Chatterjis are upper-class anglicized Brahmins from Calcutta. They are related to Lata through her brother Arun, who is married to the “glamorous Meenakshi”. Meenakshi’s older brother, Amit (based on Seth himself) becomes one of the contenders for Lata’s hand. The other siblings include the “spiritual” Dipankar, the flighty Kakoli, and the baby, Tapan. Each member of the family is deeply eccentric in his/her own unique way. Seth writes:

The Chatterji family at breakfast presented a scene of cordial conflict. It was an intelligent family where everyone thought of everyone else as an idiot. Some people thought the Chatterjis obnoxious because they appeared to enjoy each others’ company even more than the company of others. But if they had dropped by at the Chatterjis for breakfast and seen them bickering, they would probably have disliked them less. (ASB 441)

A particularly interesting aspect of the Chatterjis is their tremendous knowledge and spontaneous answers or comments with couplets. Kuku says thus:

It comes naturally to us, like singing in a raag, if you have heard it often enough. People are astonished we can do it, but we’re astonished Dipankar can’t. Or only once a month or so, when he has his poetic period . . . .
‘Rhyming, rhyming so precisely–
Couplets, they are coming nicely,’
gurgled Kakoli, who churned them out with such appalling frequency that they were now called Kakoli-couplets, though Amit had started the trend.

There are many factors that lead Arun to marry Meenakshi though she is a Chatterji and not a Khatri. These are the factors that led his love affair with Meenakshi: the position of Chatterjis, the wealth of Chatterjis, the Grand Calcutta house of Chatterjis, the company of urban elites – Brothers and sister of Meenakshi and the impressive academic profile of Chatterjis.

Conflict between Hindus and Muslims is not treated lightly, and the author is precise in the description of how a small incident can cause a riot resulting in death and brutality on both sides. Despite Seth’s emphasis on not being included in the narrative, on these occasions he displays something like authorial comment in the form of cold and bitter irony. During a riot in the city of Brahmpur, when a Muslim mob roams around old streets looking for its Hindu counterpart, the author reflects on the fate of three Muslim drummers, innocent victims of fear and hatred, who “lay murdered by the wall of the temple, their drums smashed in, their heads half hacked off, their bodies doused in kerosene and set alight – all, doubtless, to the greater glory of God” (1058).

Riots at Brahmpur take place between the Hindus and Muslims and between the traders and the shoemakers. The Hindus believed that a historic mosque was purported to stand on the site of an ancient Shiva temple. Raja of Marh, becomes the
representative of a Hindu Nationalistic Movement, decides to build a Shiva temple adjacent to the grand mosque, and lays the foundation of the temple. With this onset, the Imam of the Alamgiri mosque gives an inflammatory speech to his congregation on Friday. Prayer at mosque is interrupted by the sound of conch. Thus the riot breaks out between the Hindus and Muslims. In the mean time there is a conflict between the traders and shoemakers (Jatav caste) of Misri Mandi. L.N. Agarwal, the Home Minister of the state by reason of his own caste affiliations, despite the sound advice of District Magistrate uses his influence and gives orders to deploy a vast majority of the policemen for controlling the uprising of low-caste Jatavs as a result there are only a handful of policemen near the mosque. The Policemen are forced to fire at the Muslim mob due to lack of an adequate deterrent force and a lot of people lose their lives.

In a country as big and ethnically diverse as India, religion plays an important role. Religious beliefs and faith are powerful and influential factors for the Indians. Much importance is given for religious rituals. Thus Seth depicts the picture of religious festivals taking part in the novel, Ramlila and Moharram, both Hindu and Muslim Festivals:

Maan and Firoz were sauntering along through the dark lane of Katra Mast towards Misri Mandi when Maan stopped suddenly. The sounds he heard approaching them were not those he had expected. They were the sounds neither of a tazia procession – and surely it was too late for a tazia procession – nor the joyful sounds of Bharat Milaap. The sound of drums had stopped on either side – and neither ‘Hassan! Hussain!’ nor ‘Jai Siyaram’ could be heard. Instead he made out the ominous, inchoate sounds of a mob, broken by
screams of pain or passion – or shouts of ‘Har har Mahadeva’. This aggressive invocation of Shiva would not have sounded out of place yesterday – but today it chilled his blood. He let go of Firoz’s hand and turned him around by the shoulders. ‘Run!’ he said, his mouth dry with fear. ‘Run.’ His heart was pounding. Firoz stared at him but did not move. The crowd was rushing down the lane now. The sounds grew closer. Maan looked around him in desperation. The shops were all closed, their shutters down. There were no side-lanes within immediate reach. ‘Get back. Firoz – ’ said Maan, trembling. ‘Get back – run! There’s nowhere to hide here – ’ ‘What’s the matter – isn’t it the procession?’ Firoz’s mouth opened as he registered the terror in Maan’s eyes. ‘Just listen to me,’ Maan gasped – ‘Do as I say. Run back. Run back towards the Imambara. I’ll delay them for a minute or two. That’ll be enough. They’ll stop me first.’ ‘I’m not leaving you,’ said Firoz. ‘Firoz you fool, this is a Hindu mob. I’m not in danger. But I won’t be all right if I come with you. God knows what will be happening there by now. If there’s rioting going on, they’ll be killing Hindus there.’ ‘No –’ ‘Oh God – ’ By now the crowd had reached them, and it was too late to flee. (1058-1059)

Seth vividly describes the dreadful maniacal mob. The deep inter-religious friendship between Maan and Firoz is highlighted by the author. Seth highlights the institutionalisation of religion which forms a prime part of expanding a country.

At the same time Seth condemns the act of fanaticism in the episode concerning the Alamgiri mosque and the Shiva temple. The Raja of Marh decides to have a Shiva temple (third in the Hindu trinity) created next to the site of the Alamgiri mosque. The head priest or Imam of the mosque makes inflammatory
speeches against this move, stating the temple will be oriented in the direction of Mecca so that when the congregation genuflects they will be forced to bow to the idol of the infidels. The stone of an ancient Shiva temple lies near the river bed. The Raja of Marh has it rolled up the steps near the river to the top of the hill, but the rope breaks and the huge stone rolls down, crushing many. The attempt to erect the “Shiva-linga” from the bottom of the Ganga becomes a failure. The efforts go in vain as it rolls back to its original place ruining lives en-route:

Down the rollers rolled the great linga, past the next step, and the next, and the next, gathering speed as it rolled. The tree trunks cracked under the impact of its weight, it veered to left and right, but it kept rolling on, down, down, swifter and swifter towards the Ganga, crushing the pujari who now stood in its downward path with his arms upraised, smashing into the burning pyres of the cremation ghat, and sinking into the water of the Ganga at last, down its submerged stone steps, and onto its muddy bed. The Shiva-linga rested on the bed of the Ganga once more, the turbid waters passing over it, its bloodstains slowly washed away. (1319)

It is a satirical attack on the religious impact of the society and *A Suitable Boy* surveys the social self of India.

There are communal riots taking place as a result of either political manipulations or by evil minded people who are interested in benefiting at the cost of mass destruction. Lumberyard of a well known Hindu trader who lived in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood is caught in fire. The fury of reaction to this incident is shown thus: “Firoz closes his eyes, as if to shut out the terrible vision of the city in flames” (1063). Curfew is declared.
With respect to social aspects, Seth does not avoid mentioning the appalling living conditions of the inhabitants of the slums of Brahmpur, or the misfortune of the members of the lower castes, or the helplessness of the untouchables, although the general attitude is not that of denunciation. The plot no doubt revolves around searching ‘a suitable boy’. It also presents a portrait of 1950s India with all the social events. “A Suitable Boy includes plot lines devoted to issues of land reform and religious communalism. Seth also includes several other aspects of Indian culture in the novel, such as the tradition of courtesans, Urdu poetry, and Hindustani Classical Music” (Kabir Altaf).

Seth brings in a description of the life of a courtesan by creating a plot line involving a doomed romance between Mahesh Kapoor’s younger son, Maan, and Saeeda Bai Firozabadi. The issue of religious communalism is brought into the novel by focusing on a conflict over a mosque which was supposedly built over a temple (clearly inspired from the Babri Mosque issue in Ayodhya). There are also sections describing rioting between Hindus and Muslims that occur when a Muharram procession happens to cross a performance of the Ramlila. Several critics have argued that Seth uses these incidents to make a plea for secularism and against religious fanaticism. For example, Seth includes a scene set in the Alamgiri Mosque after a Friday Prayer. For the past few months, a Shiva Temple has begun to be constructed next to the mosque, much to the dismay of the local Muslim community. After a particularly fiery sermon by the local Imam, a riot takes place. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighborhood that lay on one side of Chowk became a mob. One
moment they were walking individually or in small groups through the alleys towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, excitedly discussing the ominous signals they had heard. After the midday sermon most were in no mood to listen to any voice of moderation. A couple of the more eager members of the Alamgiri Masjid Hifazaat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing-wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. There were cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ which could be heard all the way to the police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had sticks in their hands. One or two even had knives. Now it was not the mosque they were headed for but the partly constructed temple just next to it. It was from here that the blasphemy had originated, it was this that must be destroyed. \textit{(ASB 251)}

This scene ends with the police shooting at the mob, resulting in several deaths and injuries.

A similar incident occurs later in the novel, a stampede at the “Pul Mela” on the banks of the Ganges, based on the Kumbh Mela celebrated in Allahabad every six years. The narrator writes:

Within fifteen minutes more than a thousand people were dead . . . . It was still not clear what had happened . . . . Dipankar had been among the spectators on
the other side of the main route. He watched with horror the carnage that was taking place less than fifty feet away but—with the nagas between him and the ramp—there was nothing he could do. Anyway, there was nothing he could have done except get killed or injured. He did not recognize anyone on the ramp, so tightly packed was the crowd. It was a hellish scene, like humanity gone mad, each element indistinguishable from the other, all bent on a kind of collective suicide. (734)

Through such episodes of communal clashes, Seth makes a plea for secularism, and more generally against passion and for rationality.

The scene of the Pul Mela in which thousands of innocent people got crushed to death during their procession towards the holy Ganga to take a holy dip on the auspicious day of Purnima is presented thus:

But there was nowhere to go. Some people at the edges of the ramp tried to slip through the bamboo barricades and scramble down to the ditches on either side. But last night’s storm had made these steep slopes slippery, and the ditches themselves were filled with water. About a hundred beggars were sheltering by the side of one of the ditches. Many of them were cripples, some were blind. The injured pilgrims, gasping for breath and clawing for a foothold on the slope, now came tumbling down onto them. Some of the beggars were crushed to death, and some tried to flee into the water, which soon turned to a bloodied slush as more of those who were trapped on the ramp sought this, their only route of escape, and fell or slid onto the screaming people below. At the foot of the ramp, where Veena and her family were trapped, people were
maimed or dying . . . Veena saw one old woman, blood pouring out of her mouth, suddenly collapse near her. There was complete and dreadful chaos. ‘Bhaskar – Bhaskar – don’t let go of my hand,’ cried Veena, clutching him tightly. She had to gasp out every word. But they were thrust to and fro by the great terrified injured mass all around them, and she could feel the weight of someone’s body force itself between her hand and his. ‘No – no –’ she screamed, sobbing with dread. But she felt the small hand slip, palm first, and then digit by digit, out of her own. (733)

Bhaskar gets lost in the Pul Mela. Kabir saves Bhaskar as he is one of the volunteers at the rescue camp. He sees someone bringing Bhaskar. He recognizes him as Haresh has once taken Bhaskar to his father Dr. Durrani for solving a mathematical problem. Kabir finds out through Sunil Patwardhan, a colleague of his father that Bhaskar is Kedarnath’s son and Mahesh Kapoor’s grandson. He rings up Prem Nivas and informs the minister to come and pick up Bhaskar. Mahesh Kapoor asks for his name and he says ‘Kabir Durrani’. “Durrani?” Mahesh Kapoor’s voice expressed surprise before he told himself that disaster knows no religion” (743). Through this incident Seth wants to emphasise that ‘religion is only next to humanism’.

Seth mocks at the selfish nature of the Sadhus who in the name of God cheat people for their livelihood and fame. They think themselves as ‘Gurus’. Dipankar Chatterji is introduced to Sanaki Baba by Mr. Maitra, his family friend at Brahmpur. Dipankar is ‘searching for the Truth’. Sanaki Baba makes Dipankar stay with him in the camp for his own benefit but projects that it will be difficult to come from such a long distance every day:
'And coming such a long distance each day?' said Sanaki Baba. ‘No, no, you must stay here in this camp, and go for a bath in the Ganga three times every day. You just follow me!’ He laughed. ‘You see, I am wearing swimming clothes. It is because I am the swimming champion of the Mela. What a Mela this is. Each year it gets bigger. And every six years it explodes. There are thousands of babas. There is a Ramjap Baba, a Tota Baba, even an Engine-Driver Baba. Who knows the truth? Does anyone? I can see you are searching.’ He looked at Dipankar and continued kindly: ‘You will find it, but who knows when.’ To Mr Maitra he said: ‘You can leave him here. He will be good. What did you say your name is – Divyankar?’ ‘Dipankar, Babaji.’ ‘Dipankar.’ He said the word very lovingly, and Dipankar felt suddenly happy. ‘Dipankar, you must speak to me in English, because I must learn it. I speak only a little. Some foreign people have come to listen to my sermons, so I am learning how to preach and meditate in English too.’

The recent colonial past of the country is not regarded nostalgically, as many of the characters remember their long years spent in British prisons during the struggle for independence. According to the characters in the novel, the British were thrown out of the country thanks to the suffering of many and the actions of providential men like Nehru. The figure of Gandhi appears in the memory of all with an aura of respect. Seth, nevertheless, does not forget the corruption and ruthless fight for power that dominate the political circles of the government, and he gives voice to a character during the election campaign of the socialist party:

Think, my friends, think. Who among us does not know a mother’s love? And yet today, that mother who, with tears streaming down her face, looked at her
family jewels, her wedding bangles, her very mangal-sutra for the last time – those precious things that are dearer to her even than life – and who sold them to support the education of her son – and who saw her son through school, through college, with such high hopes that he would do something worthwhile in life – she now finds that he cannot even get a job as a government clerk without knowing someone or bribing someone. Is this what we threw the British out for? Is this what the people deserve? Such a government that cannot make sure of its people are fed, that cannot make sure that its students have jobs, such a government should die of shame, such a government should drown in a handful of water. (1171)

As Ron Moorby says:

The book covers the 1930s to 1950s is locally a social satire and globally a social history. The novel’s scope ranges from the politics of Nehru to the manoeuvring Mrs. Mehra, the matriarch of one of the four central families who has decided to enlist friends and relatives to help her find her unmarried daughter Lata “a suitable boy.” It provides an epic reminder of the torments or birth pangs from a nation in its infancy to the angst of a young girl in love.

Thus the narrative of A Suitable Boy comprises of many factors. Seth leaves no stone unturned. Through his narration he makes everyone feel as if they are also a part of the social events. He clearly presents the Indian festivals, its diverse cultures, communities and castes, the complex social and personal relationship, the Multiethnic society, the Hindu-Muslim riots, Indian tradition of arranged marriage, Indian culture, aftermath of partition, a fictional North Indian city on the bank of the holy river Ganges, Post Independent India and the everyday life during 1951-1952, Indian
politics and the Shoe trade. Lata’s self is undoubtedly, for instance, subjective of all such social events of her own time present and time past. As Punam Pandey rightly observes in “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. (117)

Thus Lata’s self is fixed as an embodiment of society and the continuity of both culture and tradition. The next chapter is an attempt to locate the political self of the protagonist in Two Lives.
Notes and References

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


pagewanted=all&src=pm>


Ironic as the Vehicle of Deviation in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*.


<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/7072/10/10_chapter%203.pdf>