Chapter IV

Mirror up to Nature:
Study of A Suitable Boy
and
The Razor’s Edge
Vikram Seth was born on June 20, 1952 at Kolkata. His father, Prem, was an employee of the Bata India Limited shoe company who migrated to post-partition India from West Punjab in Pakistan. Vikram Seth's childhood was spent in the town of Batanagar near Calcutta, Patna, and London. His mother Leila Seth was the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court as well as the first woman to become Chief Justice of a state High Court. She was the Chief Justice of Shimla High Court. Leila gave her law exams when she was pregnant with Vikram Seth's younger brother and gave birth to child just a few weeks after her exams. Although born in India, Vikram Seth spent some of his early years in London. However, he returned to India in 1957 and completed his primary education from The Doon School in Dehradun. For his higher studies, he returned to UK and joined the Tonbridge School. He later went to Corpus Christ College, Oxford where he studied philosophy, economics and politics. The beautiful years spent in this college not only earned him a degree, but also helped him to explore his interest in poetry and writing. From then he worked towards poetry and other forms of writing. He even enrolled for Ph.D. in Stanford University but could never complete it because of his inclination towards writing. Having lived in London for many years, he loved the people and culture of the country. That was why he bought a residence near Salisbury, UK. He took his undergraduate degree in philosophy, politics and economics from Oxford University. He was enrolled in postgraduate economics courses at Stanford University and was also attached to Nanjing University for his intended doctoral dissertation on Chinese population planning. He has travelled widely and lived in Britain, California, India and China. Vikram Seth is well known for some of his noted works. Vikram Seth possesses the art of creating a living and breathing world that keeps the readers
focused and engaged. He has published six books of poetry and three novels. In 1986, he wrote *The Golden Gate*, his first novel. It is a novel in verse about the lives of a number of young professionals in San Francisco. Seth had encountered Charles Johnston's 1977 translation of it in a Stanford second-hand bookstore and it changed the direction of his career, shifting his focus from academic to literary work. The likelihood of commercial success seemed highly doubtful — and the skepticism of friends as to the novel's viability is facetiously quoted within the novel; but the verse novel received wide acclaim and achieved healthy sales. After the success of *The Golden Gate*, Seth took up residence in his parents' house back in Delhi to work on his second novel, *A Suitable Boy* (1993). Though initially conceived as a short piece detailing the domestic drama of an Indian mother's search for an appropriate husband for her marriageable Indian daughter against the background of the formative years of India after independence, the novel grew and Seth was to labour over it for almost a decade. The 1474-page novel is a four-family saga set in post-independence, post-Partition India, and alternately satirically and earnestly examines issues of national politics in the period leading up to the first post-independence national election of 1952, inter-sectarian animosity, the status of lower caste people such as the jatav, land reform and the eclipse of the feudal princes and landlords, academic affairs, inter- and intra-family relations and a range of further issues of importance to the characters. The novel was, despite its formidable length, a bestseller, and propelled Seth into the public spotlight. 'A Suitable Boy' won the W.H.Smith prize in 1993. It also won the prestigious Booker’s award for 1994. Seth's third novel, *An Equal Music* (1999), set in contemporary Europe, focuses on the lives of classical musicians and their music. Some readers and critics complained that Michael, the protagonist, was simply not a likeable (or unlikeable) enough character to sustain interest throughout a substantial novel and that the focus on the music for its own
sake can be trying for the uninitiated. However, Paolo Isotta, one of Italy's most significant music critics, wrote in the influential newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* of the Italian translation that no European writer had ever shown such a knowledge of European classical music, nor had any European novel before managed to convey the psychology, the technical abilities, even the human potentialities of those who practice music for a living.'

The Rivered Earth, released in late 2011, consists of four libretti taking inspiration from the Salisbury house where English poet George Herbert lived and died which also serves the illustration for the book cover. The libretti are written to accompany music by Alec Roth, and quite a few of the pieces were adjusted and rewritten to suit Roth's style. The venue for the libretti is churches, including Salisbury church. The four parts are entitled 'Songs in Time of War', 'Shared Ground', 'The Traveller' and 'Seven Elements'. They are inspired from Chinese and Indian poetry and even George Herbert's house which Seth later bought. *Two Lives*, is a non-fiction family memoir written at the suggestion of his mother, and published in October 2005. It is a memoir of the marriage of his great uncle and aunt. It focuses on the lives of his great-uncle (Shanti Behari Seth) and German-Jewish great aunt (Henny Caro) who met in Berlin in the early 1930s while Shanti was a student there and with whom Seth stayed extensively on going to England at age 17 for school. The award of the commander of the order 3 of the British Empire was given to Seth on February 2001. Vikram Seth is also the author of a travel book, *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983), an account of a journey through Tibet, China and Nepal that won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, and a libretto, *Arion and the Dolphin: A Libretto* (1994), which was performed at the English National Opera in June 1994, with music by Alec Roth. His poetry includes *Mappings* (1980), *The Humble Administrator’s Garden* (1985), winner of the
Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia), and All You Who Sleep Tonight: Poems (1990). His children's book, Beastly Tales from Here and There (1992), consists of ten stories about animals told in verse. Vikram Seth was also commissioned by the English National Opera to write a libretto based on the Greek legend of Arion and the Dolphin. The opera was performed for the first time in June 1994. At home in Delhi where he stays with his parents and maintains an extensive library and his vast paper work.

Vikram Seth’s magnum opus fictional system, A Suitable Boy is set in Brahmpur, a fictionalized Northern Indian city on the banks of the Ganges River. The action takes place sometime around in 1950 to 1952, four to five years after India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947.

After winning The Connect Award in 1993 for A Suitable Boy, Seth came into limelight with a slew of interviews, talk shows, and book signings on his book tour etc. But many readers and critics alike were utterly disappointed and dismayed when A Suitable Boy was left out of the race for the Booker Prize in 1993. Seth’s work was not among the six novels nominated for the prize, which was ultimately awarded to Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha on October 26, 1993.

However it won the 1994 commonwealth Writers Prize. A Suitable Boy is a fictional system which very realistically depicts the social and political life of post independence India. The story revolves around four families—the Kapoors, Mehras, Chatterjis and Khans.
Fig 1. Families which Form the Central narrative of the Fictional System *A Suitable Boy*

**Families which form the Central Narrative of the Fictional System *A Suitable Boy***

R- form central narrative of Fictional System *A Suitable Boy*

- Kapoors
- Mehras
- Chatterjis
- Khans

Fig. 2 Mehras

**MEHRA'S FAMILY TREE**

- DR KISHEN CHAND SETH (Have 3 Children)
  - R (married) FIRST WIFE (Dead)
  - R (re-married) PARVATI
  - CHILDREN including...
    - RUPA
      - R (Had Husband) RAGHUBIR MEHRA (DEAD)
      - R -son
      - R -daughter
    - MEENAKSHI (R HAS Wife) ARUN MEHRA
    - SAVITA (R HAS Husband) PRAN KAPOOR
    - APARNA (R HAS Daughter)
    - R (Has Daughter) LATA MEHRA
      - VARUN MEHRA (UNMARRIED)
      - PRAN KAPOOR (UNMARRIED)

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Fig. 3 Kapoors

KAPOOR'S FAMILY TREE

Fig. 4 Chatterjis

CHATTERJI'S FAMILY TREE
A Suitable Boy is complex historical fictional system which embodies multiple narratives and comprises nineteen subsystems. The backdrop of the narrative is the political upheaval in the post-independent and post-partitioned India of the 1950s. The author weaves a compelling narration revolving around the four families and their love, hatred, sadness, daily chores, lives, etc. and deals with the common man in times of crisis and a society that is a blending of different cultures, communities, and castes undergoing a change. These ordinary people are busy and trapped in the web of their own complex social and personal relationships, having their own prejudices and ambitions.

Though not an 'epic novel' in its traditional sense, A Suitable Boy is certainly epical in scale and range, over 1,400 pages in length, deeply rooted in Indian culture. A great deal of effort
is put forth on the part of a family to find a "suitable boy" for their unmarried daughters. It narrates the story of everyday life during 1951-52 in India.

The background of the novel is the underlying Hindu-Muslim conflict which flooded the period immediately after independence of India and Pakistan, and which is even today a threat to the South Asian subcontinent. The fictional system shows the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the fictional city of BrahmPUR.

Fig. 6 The Backdrop of the Fictional System A Suitable Boy

R – forms a backdrop of

Particularly, the narrative deals with the life of Mrs. Rupa Mehra (a widow) and her youngest daughter Lata for whom Mrs. Mehra is looking for a suitable boy. Lata is of
marriageable age but quite an independent and rebellious kind of a girl who is already in love with a Muslim boy. Mrs. Mehra’s sole aim in life is to look after and take care of her family, especially finding a suitable match for her youngest daughter.

Fig. 7 Main Theme of the Fictional System A Suitable Boy

Main Theme of the Fictional System A Suitable Boy

Mrs. Mehra

Trying to find a Suitable Boy for her daughter Lata

Lata

Contextual Note:

‘You too will marry a boy I choose’ said Mrs. Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter.

Lata avoided the maternal imperative by looking around the great lamp lit garden of Prem Nivas. The wedding guests were gathered on the lawn. Humm, she said this annoyed her mother further.

“I know what your hmms mean young lady, I can tell you I will not stand for hmms in this matter.
The narrative begins with Savita (Lata’s elder sister and Rupa’s elder daughter) and Pran Kapoor’s wedding. It is here that Lata decides and makes it clear that she will not go in for an arranged marriage like her sister. As time passes, three suitors come in Lata’s life, all from diverse backgrounds.

Lata likes a Muslim boy who was her classmate and is a writer, but her mother has chosen a self-made business man for her. Life moves on and Savita and Pran start their family life after marriage. Pran’s brother Maan falls in love with a girl from unsuitable family and his whole life gets transformed. On the other hand, Lata’s brother has a fight in Calcutta. The fictional system is basically a love story and efforts of Lata’s mother to find a suitable boy for her daughter.

Fig. 8 Attributes of Lata’s Personality

![Diagram of Lata's Personality Attributes]

- Freely went to university and shopping accompanied by friends
- Typical attitude of an youngster in Post Independent India
- Naive about life and relationships
- Well read
- Quick minded
- Self willed
- Feminist
Lata, the youngest progeny of Mrs. Mehra, is arguably the central character in the fictional system. She is first seen at the wedding of her sister Savita to Pran Kapoor. Lata is a student at the university. She has a quick mind and is quite well read, though somewhat naive about life and relationships. Lata questions the idea of an arranged marriage like that of her sister where the couple know nothing at all about each other. Her attitude is typical of the young Indian population after the separation of India and the British. Although Lata is free to go to the university and shopping with friends unaccompanied, but she is aware of the restrictions imposed upon girls. Lata and her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, are both trying to find, through love or through exacting maternal appraisal, a suitable boy for Lata to marry.

In a few chance encounters she happens to meet Kabir a fellow student from a similar class constituency at Brahmpur University who turns out to be Muslim but since he has an ambiguous first name she does not know until later that he is a Muslim. When his identity is revealed she is at once aware that the relationship with him is impossible, knowing the clear taboos against Hindu-Muslim miscegenation in the specific cultural and religious practices of the Indian subcontinent. Her friend Malati’s initial response to Kabir’s Muslimness exemplifies such an awareness when she advises Lata to “better drop him” (Seth,p.167) as well as Lata’s own reiteration at various points in the novel that this relationship is pointless and futile. “Don’t you know she asks Kabir, “What it (the notion of marriage to a Muslim) means in my family????”1. Significantly Kabir’s reaction to the seemingly impossible social taboo against Hindu Muslim marriage is a secular surprise that this should be no issue at all. “You love me. And I love you. That’s all that matters. He says this in a classic affirmation of love transcending all differences of culture, class, religion, race or caste. However Lata’s mother Mrs. Ropa Mehra’s hysterical outburst shows that her

upper caste Hindu family will never accept her relationship with Kabir. "Is he a Parsi" Roopa Mehra asks Lata hopefully because even though "the thought was audios" it was not so "calamitously horrifying". Moreover when Mrs. Mehra discovers that Kabir’s mother is suffering from mental illness, it only confirms her ‘othering of Muslims’.

Seth shows Mrs. Mehra as a woman representative of her class, caste and generation. Consequently she takes Lata to Calcutta to remove her from the polluting and threatening presence of Kabir. As the novel meanders along, we come across other suitors of Lata.

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Fig. 9 The Three Suitors for Lata in Her Marital Quest

Three Suitors for Lata in Her Marital Quest

R- Suitor for

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Amit the witty cosmopolitan Bengali English poet and Haresh the upwardly mobile shoe executive who is Roopa Mehra’s personal choice for Lata who is also from appropriate Khatri Lineage. Finally Lata decides on marrying the stable solid and trustworthy Haresh in keeping with her mother’s desires even though she loves Kabir “the most unsuitable boy of them all”\(^3\). If Kabir makes her feel passionate and unsettled, her love for Haresh is a “calmer less frantic love”\(^4\) and she chooses the latter emotion. Thus Lata prefers pragmatism over passions.

*A Suitable Boy* transports the readers into the rich imaginary world of four large extended families and spins a compulsively readable tale of their lives and loves. It presents a panoramic portrait of a complex, multiethnic society in flux. It remains the story of ordinary people caught up in a web of love and ambition, humor and sadness, prejudice and reconciliation, the most delicate social etiquette and the most appalling violence. Like an old-fashioned soap opera (or a Bombay talkie), the multi-charactered plot pits mothers against daughters, fathers against sons, Hindus against Muslims and small farmers against greedy landowners facing government-ordered dispossession. The fictional system presents India with all its enormity.

The search for Lata’s husband expands into a richly detailed and exotically vivid narrative that crisscrosses the fabric of India. Seth’s panoramic scenes take the reader into law courts, religious processions, bloody riots, festivals of India, marriage ceremonies, academia—even the shoe trade.


\(^4\) Ibid., 1420.
Just outside the door on the verandah of the house was a large bathtub filled with pink colour and several foot-long copper syringes. Pran’s Kurta and Pyjama were soaked and his face and hair smeared with yellow and pink powder.

‘Where is my Bhabhi?’ shouted Maan.

‘I’m not coming out’ said Savita from inside.

‘That’s fine’ shouted Maan, ‘we’ll come in.’

‘Oh no you won’t’ said Savita. ‘Not unless you’ve brought me a sari’.

‘You’ll get your sari, what I want now is my pound of flesh’, Maan said.

‘Very funny’, said Savita. ‘You can play Holi as much as you like with my husband, but promise me you’ll only put a bit of colour on me.’

Yes, yes, I promise! Just a smidgeon, no more, of powder—and then a bit on your pretty little sister’s face—and I’ll be satisfied—until next year’.
Opening and closing with a wedding, the fictional system is ostensibly the story of a Hindu family trying to find a suitable husband for their younger daughter, Lata. Who will the suitable boy turn out to be? The dashing Kabir, with whom Lata falls in love? The ambitious businessman whom Lata's mother favors? Or the sophisticated poet her relatives choose? The interwoven stories of four families linked by marriage form the background for this marital quest. It proves slow-moving at first, but the patient reader will inevitably be caught up in the compelling rhythms of a richly complex tale. The setting 'the India in the 1950s' is vividly realized: the enormity of the subcontinent, its overpowering heat, lush gardens, colorful festivals, and exotic foods.

*Fig.11 A Glimpse of Wedding Ceremony in the Fictional System*
Now that the exchange of garlands was over, the crowd paid no great attention to the actual wedding rites. These would go on for the better part of an hour while the guests milled and chattered round the lawns of Prem Nivas. They laughed; they shook hands or folded them to their foreheads; they coalesced into little knots, the knots, the men here, the women there; they warmed themselves at the charcoal-filled clay stoves placed strategically around the garden while their frosted, gossip-laden breath rose into the air; they admired the muticoloured lights; they smiled for the photographer as he murmured ‘Steady, please!’ in English; they breathed deeply the scent of flowers and perfume and cooked spices; they exchanged births and deaths and politics and scandal under the brightly-coloured cloth canopy at the back of the garden beneath which long tables of food had been laid out; they sat down exhaustedly on chairs with their plates full and tucked in inexhaustibly. Servants, some in white livery, some in khaki, brought around fruit juice and tea and coffee and snacks to those who were standing in the garden: samosas, kachauris, laddus, gulab-jamuns, barfis and gajak and ice-cream were consumed and replenished

Along with puris and six kinds of vegetables.
Contextual Note

Arun certainly valued the Chatterji connection greatly. The Chatterjis had wealth and position and grand Calcutta House where they threw enormous (but tasteful) parties. And even in the big happy family especially Meenakshi’s brothers and sisters sometimes bothered him with their endless unchokable wit and improvised rhyming couplets, he accepted it precisely because it appeared to him to be undeniably urbane. It was a far cry from this provincial capital, this Kapoor crowd and these garish light-in-the-hedge celebrations- with pomegranate juice in lieu of alcohol!
The fictional system also throws light on the historical and political details of the post independence India through various characters. It also brings out the power struggle between the various political leaders and its impact on the everyday lives of the families around them. *A Suitable Boy* is the story of several Indian families whose paths intersect continually over a period of about a year. India has only recently gained its independence from the British, and in his lengthy tour Seth takes us through all the ramifications of that momentous change, from the modern city to the backward country, and from the political to the intensely personal. But, as the title suggests, *A Suitable Boy* never strays far from the subject of love and marriage.

In the background rests the underlying Hindu/Muslim conflict which saturated the period following the independence of both India and Pakistan, and which continues to batter the South Asian subcontinent today. In the novel, conflict occurs between Hindus and Muslims in the fictional city of Brahmpur, where the story is primarily set. Seth sees *A Suitable Boy* as a plea for religious tolerance, among other things.

‘The Suitable Boy’ is the central theme of the fictional system *A Suitable Boy*. The idea comes from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls with several points that comprise the ideal match. First, the boy must be of the same religion as the girl. This becomes the main hindrance between Lata, a Hindu, and Kabir, a Muslim. The only way they could have married was to elope and marry without their parents' permission. Another consideration is the caste or social standing of the boy and his family. Much of that is based on appearances. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is able to arrange a marriage for her daughter Savita into the Kapoor family without a large dowry by the fact that Pran Kapoor is dark complexioned. His skin coloring precluded his marriage to a girl from a wealthier family.
Some Underlying Thematic Tonalities: Emergent Properties

Historical Sub-Text in the Fictional System *A Suitable Boy*

And thus his [Nehru’s] meetings ended, and on he went to the next one, always late, always late, always impatient, a man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country not merely in those early and dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime, safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious intolerance.\(^5\)

History is the natural and socio-cultural environment of man. History enters into literature and imprints both the content and style and assumes the form of ‘literary history’ the history of ideas, which is more than a record of past events. Rene Wellek explains, “history does not simply individualize general values (nor is it of course a meaningless flux) but the historical process will produce ever new forms of values hitherto unknown and unpredictable.”\(^6\). Literature is concerned with vividly presenting the human experience and “there is no act or fact of human experience which does not have history.”\(^7\).

In the fictional system *A Suitable Boy* history forms a very significant mode of interpretation. The contemporary South Asian literature in English endeavours to grapple with rising religious intolerance and fundamentalist politics in the Indian subcontinent. Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* are some illustrative examples of an increasing examples of an increasingly


widespread South Asian Literary concern with present day communal conflict. The destruction of the Babri Masjid, and the horrific anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat brought to the fore anxiety among left and liberal circles in India about the death of secularism. Seth deploys the genre of the historical novel in order to make an oblique address to the contemporary intensification of religious intolerance in India. Seth writes in accordance with the wide canvas, the fictional system represents India in all its colours and forms. It abounds in a variety of people, several scenes of group violence or collective anarchy, a student protest turned violent, a Hindu mela gone wrong and two scenes of communal violence.

The range is Tolstoyan. Huge epic scenes of riots, stampedes, public processions, parliamentary debates and political shenanigans among real historical characters are balanced with intimate descriptions of family meals, the ruminations of the fictional characters as they work through their moral dilemmas and relationships, the passing of the seasons; the system is full of portraits of birds, children and the eternal poor of both city and countryside; detailed descriptions of Indian music, movies, food, festivals, religious mania, poetry, appear as part of the narrative, embedded very much in its structure, not flashed around as authorial digressions.

Lata’s and Kabir’s ill-fated romance is set against a backdrop of communal conflict in post-partition/post-independence Brahmpur. The two riots are set apart by approximately nine hundred pages – the first appearing at the beginning of Part Five, and the second materializing close to the end in Part Fifteen – and thus can be seen as framing the Lata-Kabir romance, even though they are not shown to impinge directly on the trajectory of the romance.
Contextual Notes

R1- Believed that a historic mosque was purported to stand on the site of an ancient Shiva temple

R2- Becomes the representative of a Hindu nationalist Movement, decides to build a Shiva temple adjacent to the grand mosque, and lays the foundation stone of the temple

R3- Gives an inflammatory speech to his congregation on Friday

R4- Riot breaks out between them

R5- Is interrupted by the sound of conch

R6- Caste conflict breaks between the traders and the shoe makers

R7- By reasons 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

R8- 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.

Significantly, Seth chooses to set these riots against the backdrop of a Hindu revivalist movement spearheaded by figures like the Raja of Marh, and one which is aided in no small measure by state functionaries like L. N. Aggarwal, the Congress Home Minister of Purva
Pradesh. In a thinly veiled fictional reconstruction of the Babri masjid conflict, Seth constructs a scenario of dispute over a historic mosque that is purported to stand on the site of an ancient Shiva temple. The Raja of Marh becomes the representative of a nascent Hindu nationalist movement in the early fifties. The decadent Raja who is quite happy to consort with Muslim courtesans like Saeeda Bai has decided to build a Shiva temple “to stand cheek by jowl with the grand mosque constructed by Emperor Aurangzeb two-and-a-half centuries ago on the ruins of an earlier temple to Shiva”\textsuperscript{8}. If he had his way, the omniscient narrator tells us, “the foundation of his temple would have stood on the rubble of the mosque itself”\textsuperscript{9}. “For him it’s a great joke to think that the Muslims will be bowing down in the direction of his Shiva-linga five times a day”\textsuperscript{10}.

The first riot takes place against this setting of an emergent Hindu nationalist movement in the early fifties. The Raja lays the foundation stone of the temple- as a consequence, the Imam of the Alamgiri mosque gives an inflammatory speech to his congregation on Friday and in a typical instance of cyclical violence, a riot breaks out between the Hindus and Muslims of the city over clashing religious symbols. The call for prayer from the mosque is interrupted by the sound of a conch. “Normally,” the narrator states, “such a thing might have been angrily shrugged off but not today”\textsuperscript{11}. Seth clearly demonstrates how fundamentalist discourses play a huge role in the transformation and crystallization of religious identities over and above all other identities in moments of conflict. However significantly he also indicts the State for its complicity in allowing the violence to take place in the first instance when it could so easily have been controlled or averted. About the same

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 251.
time, Brahmpur also becomes the scene for a caste conflict between the traders of Misri Mandi and the shoemakers who are largely of the Jatav caste. L. N. Aggarwal, the Home Minister—by reason of his own caste affiliations—despite the sound advice of the District Magistrate, decides to deploy a vast majority of policemen for controlling the uprising of the low caste Jatavs; as a result there are only a handful of policemen left near the site of the mosque and temple when the riot breaks out. The police are forced to fire at the Muslim mob due to the lack of an adequate deterrent police force and several people lose their lives. In Seth’s representation of this first riot, then, the state is undoubtedly held culpable for its passivity and mismanagement of the situation. Thus the narrators pithy statement is worth quoting that “some riots are caused, some bring themselves into being”12. Through this recreation of the scene of communal violence and in the effort to outline its causes, Seth clearly indicts Hindu nationalists as well as the State for rising religious intolerance in his present.

While the author unmistakably attributes the culpability for the first riot to a failure of the state and the communalization of its functionaries, the second moment of communal violence ensues much later in the text and is depicted as a more “spontaneous” uprising, a consequence of a clash between Moharram mourners with Ramlila celebrators. Indeed, the chief minister anticipates this violence since Moharram and Dussehra almost overlap that year along with Gandhi Jayanti. “Rama, Muhammad, and Gandhiji may all have been apostles of peace,” he prophesies, “but in combination there could be nothing more explosive”13. Sure enough, the Chief Minister’s predictions of doom come to pass. As both groups, Hindu and Muslims engage in rituals of celebration and mourning respectively, their

13 Ibid., 1062.
processions intersect momentarily and yet another riot takes place. In Seth’s depiction, this second riot is an unorchestrated and impulsive demonstration of mob violence that is explainable within the terms of group psychology and cultural prejudice rather than attributable to the clear mismanagement of the State, though undoubtedly latent cultural biases are shown to have been brought to the fore.

*A Suitable Boy* addresses India’s past as a way of responding to contemporaneous historic-political configurations. *A Suitable Boy* is a ‘historical fictional system’ as its version of the national past implicitly projects an ideal present and future for the nation.

**Heteroglossic Indian Linguistic System and Indian Culture**

Heteroglossia, which is defined as the “dialogic interrelation of different registers and dialects that gravitate within the orbit of a national language, is in constant tension with the tendency towards linguistic centralization and unification”\(^\text{14}\).

Bakhtin stressed the multi-layered nature of language, which he called heteroglossia. Not only are there social dialects, jargons, turns of phrase characteristic of the various professions, industries, commerce, of passing fashions, etc., but also socio-ideological contradictions carried forward from various periods and levels in the past. Language is not a neutral medium that can be simply appropriated by a speaker, but something that comes to us populated with the intentions of others. Every word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially-charged life.

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The Indian national linguistic system is composed of a variety of different language systems. The phenomenon of multi-lingualism has always attracted the attention of linguists from time to time. A highly commendable research has been carried out, and is still being carried out by socio-linguists analyzing the effects of this interesting phenomenon. But Seth, instead of dealing with linguistic technicalities, resolves the tension between the centrifugal and centripetal linguistic forces and represents the various linguistic systems of the nation within a unitary, though extremely flexible style. He 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 whose specifically North Indian dimension is stretched to make it representative of all India in its totality:

... 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.¹⁵

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Seth constructs Indian macrocosm through the microcosm of Brahmpur. His naturalistic representation and narration with seamless blending of fact and fiction can be described as 'mimetic-symbolic' mode. Paul de Man, looks upon symbol as a uniting factor between representation and the semantic function between the representative and the semantic function of language. In a symbol the distinction between the sign and a referent effaces. In a similar way in the mimetic–symbolic mode of representation in this fictional system the fact and fiction coincide. *A Suitable Boy* is an illustration of a successful mimesis of the nation. The term mimesis was first used by Plato in his famous treatise *Republic*, but of course his usage had more negative connotations. His disciple Aristotle redefined the term by calling it imaginative re-creation of the reality. However it is a well established fact that art is a mimetic representation rather than a photographic representation. Seth creates a state, Purva Pradesh, which embodies several historical features of the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Seth claims that Brahmpur is based on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya.

**India and Secularism: Nehruvian Matrix in the Fictional System**

The characters depicted are typical of 1950s India, a period influenced by Nehru’s secular vision of state and society. The secularism of the novel is in line with Nehru. Nehru adopted a resolutely non-sectarian stance in the matter of religion in the public sphere, identified secularism as the only way to develop a truly integrated nation. Nehru’s secular approach promoted a strongly inclusive attitude towards minorities, and this pluralist attitude formed a base for the constitution at a time when terms like ‘multiculturalism were not the key words as they are today. Seth’s depiction of Nehru
subscribes to this improvisational view of politics in terms of citizenship and religion. At one point, in a rare authorial aside, Seth gives an assessment of Nehru:

A man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country, not merely in those early and most dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime, safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious fanaticism.\(^{16}\)

Nehruvian ideology was premised on a rationalistic and scientific approach to religion, but it also deployed elements previously considered religious, and as signs of national culture. In *A Suitable Boy*, then, the constant affirmation of tolerance must be understood not just as pertaining to state policies, but also an ethical vision of a peaceful society. Early in the text, Mahesh Kapoor, the Revenue Minister of the state of Purva Pradesh, is established as Nehru’s fictional counterpart, specifically with reference to his views on religion and secularism. He functions as the local Nehruvian figure who is “well known for his tolerance towards other religions” and is “liked and respected among knowledgeable Muslims”\(^{17}\). However, what emerges as the central focal point in the historical fictional system is Seth’s upholding of the commitment of Nehruvian secularism to ‘protection of minorities’. This not only emerges from the likes of Nehru and Mahesh Kapoor, but is also articulated by Muslim characters like Ustaad Majeed Khan, the Nawab of Batair and Begum Abida Khan. Ustaad Majeed Khan, who is upset at the idea of the Raja of Marh’s plans to build the Shiva temple tells Mahesh Kapoor’s daughter Veena, “if your father, the minister, is bent upon destroying our livelihood, at least he can protect our religion”\(^{18}\). Similarly, the Nawab begs


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 672.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 317.
Mahesh Kapoor to contest the election from Salimpur –cum Baltar "who can protect us and our culture? Only people like you, who know us, as we are, who have friends among us, who do not prejudge us because you can judge us from experience."19. In a similar instance, Begum Abida Khan, employs a similar trope to express her concern over the marginalization of Urdu.

In one of the fictional legislative assembly debates, she asks, "Why is Urdu receiving this step motherly treatment? Why can the two brother languages not be adopted together? The elder brother has a duty to protect the younger brother, not to torment him?20. Here in these and several other passages and instances. The novelist is articulating his view of secular nationalism, spearheaded by Nehru.

The novelist also attempts to reconstruct the religious conflicts of the Nehruvian era as analogous to the India of the 90's. One also needs to pay attention to the fact that the fictional system was published in 1993, shortly after the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, spearheaded by the VHP, culminated in the demolition of Babri Masjid. From this perspective the novel can be read as a response to the aggressive communalization of politics in the India of the 1990's, by reviving Nehruvian vision based on the relationship between religion and society.

Seth presents the actions that Nehru undertook in this period to ensure that Muslims would not be treated as second-class citizens an improvised attempt to maintain unity in a country that, in the early 50s and so soon after Partition, was at real risk of a civil war. Retaliation against Muslims for the horrors of Partition was very much in the air. Seth's form performs

20 Ibid., 1104.
21 Ibid., 1105.
the ideological function of projecting a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian state that has a clear Nehruvian matrix. The objective of the author behind the recuperation of Nehruvian vision of state and society is to speculate and engage with the present needs of the Indian context.

**A Suitable Boy: A Voice of Minority Positions**

Some interpreters of Vikram Seth have found parallels between Nehruvian secularism as it is represented in *A Suitable Boy* and in Nehru’s book *The Discovery of India*, a nationalist version of Indian history and of the independence movement published in 1946, a year before independence. They conclude that there is no real space for Muslim Secularism. However Seth voices his concern over the transformation of Muslims into minority. For instance in *A suitable boy*, the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, head of the Khan family, represents a glorious, yet retrograde culture, destined to disappear with the end of the zamindari system. The Muslims, who are a vital representatives of North Indian culture, have been reduced to the status of a minority, as is exemplified by the transformation of Baitar house, the Khan’s ancestral home, before and after partition. Before partition Seth writes,”...

owing to the constant bustle, the visiting, the festivals, the celebrations, in both the men’s and the women’s quarters it had had a grand atmosphere of energy and life.” But after partition things had changed. The house was no longer the great community it had been. It had become in several ways lonely. Uncles and cousins had dispersed to Karachi or Lahore. Of the three brothers, one had died, one had gone away, and only that gentle widower, the Nawab sahib, remained.  

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At another place in the fictional system, the speech of Abida khan is a very strong and clear cut expression to prevent Muslim culture from becoming a minority culture in the state. In the Legislative Assembly of the state of Purva Pradesh, the politician Abida Khan strenuously defends zamindari system against the land reforms being pushed by the ruling Congress party.

... the fact is that it is we zamindars who have made the province what it is – who made it strong, who gave it its special flavor. In every field of life we have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, the very culture of this place were established by us.\(^{23}\)

The concern of the author is evident that Muslims, in order to become Indian citizens ‘fully’ had to forgo a vital part of what constituted their past, their culture and in short their identity. Seth considers it essential that in spite of Muslims being transformed into a minority body, their previous religious and cultural identity must be subsumed into that of the secular India.

**Syncretism and  *A Suitable Boy***

In recent times the concept of ‘syncretism’ and composite cultures is being taken as an antidote to the present day sectarian violence, but it is also being cautioned by scholars like Gauri Vishwanathan, who observes in her article “Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge” that if it is not being properly historicized then it can become a code

word for the incorporation and assimilation of minority cultures into the dominant group. However here I use the term ‘syncretism’ not with reference to any theoretical reservations but to suggest that Seth is aware of the shared world of fifties which his Brahmpur with its affluent space presents. No doubt that the fictional system conveys the sense of a beleaguered Muslim minoritarian identity immediately after the partition. But the hallmark of the fictional system is the construction of an intermingled upper class Hindu-Muslim milieu, reminding the readers what is still possible. It is made quite evident by the author that despite the constant straining under the forces of division and fundamentalism, a fragile thread of unity is still binding together all the Indians. For instance the second occurrence of communal violence also brings out the tolerant and composite culture of Brahmpur. Unlike the first riot, two central characters Mann and Firoz are caught in the midst of this second carriage. Since, they happen to be trapped in a Hindu mob in a predominantly Hindu neighbourhood; the Hindu Maan saves his Muslim friend Firoz from the bloodthirsty mob. This man is my brother, more than my brother,” he warns one of the leaders. “If you harm more than one hair of my brother’s head... Lord Rama will seize your filthy soul and send it flaming into hell”24. Thus the fictional system demonstrates that if people are capable of terrible violence, they are also the site of an everyday ethics of tolerance and peaceful existence. The friendships between Mann and Firoz and their fathers Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Bihar, the romantic world of Urdu poetry and Hindustani classical music all endorse the composite culture of Hindus and Muslims in Brahmpur and Purva Pradesh. The novelist attempts to create a thickly textured interwoven and coexistent world, despite of the scar of the partition and the emergence of the right wing Hindu elements.

Decoding Narrative Structures: Emergent Properties

Metaphoric Narrative Structure

M.H. Abrams defines a narrative as “a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters and what the character say and do.”\(^{25}\) John Holloway describes narrative as “a set of items whether characters, initial facts about them or their setting or events that happen to them.”\(^{26}\) Ronald Barthes in his essay *Introduction to the structural Analysis of Narrative* says, “The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken and written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substance; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in any age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes all human groups have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”\(^{27}\)

Narrative involves two things – the matter and the manner’ – i.e.," the ‘what’ of the story told and the ‘how’ of its presentation”. In theoretical terms, the fundamental of all narrative

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is the ‘telling’. Narrative necessarily involves a story being told by someone for someone since all stories are told to be received by some addressee, even though the teller is talking to himself. Telling is thus a two-sided affair where the teller tells what happened so that the audience can also tell what happened.

*A Suitable Boy* has a metaphoric narrative structure and the metaphors are drawn from the Indian context and culture; for instance, Amit Chatterje says: ‘I’ve always felt that the performance of a *raag* resembles a novel-or at least the kind of novel I’m attempting to write. You know, . . . first you take one note and explore it for awhile, then another to discover its possibilities then perhaps you get to the dominant and pause for a bit and it’s only gradually that the phrase begin to form and the *tabla* joins in with the beat . . . and then the more brilliant improvisations and diversions begin, with the main theme returning from time to time and finally it all speeds up and the excitement increases to a climax’".28

In the narrative structure of *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth has used the lapdog Cuddles as a metaphor for the Chatterjis, their way of life, their manners moods and modes of living, “Cuddles was not a hospitable dog. He had been with the Chatterji family for more than ten years, during which time he had bitten Biswas Babu, several school children (friends who had come to play) a number of lawyers (who had visited Mr. Justice Chatterji’s chambers for conferences during his years as a barrister, a middle-level executive, a doctor on a house call, and the standard mixture of postmen and electricians”29.

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29 Ibid., 387.
Syntagmatic Narrative Structure

The narrative structure in *A Suitable Boy* is syntagmatic. **Syntagmatic** structure (structure of syntax) is “the mode of time-awareness which listeners are placed in” A Syntagma is one syntactic or syntagmatic element. Narrative structures feature a realistic temporal flow guided by tension and relaxation, In other words, there is a linear temporal sequence of the story. Syntagmatic narration also refers to a threading narrative that flows continuously or has recurring themes.

Syntagmatic narrative is based on **sequential** (and causal) relationships (e.g. in film and television narrative sequences), there are also other syntagmatic forms which are based on **spatial** relationships such as montage in posters and photographs, which works through juxtaposition. Some Syntagmatic narratives also contain **conceptual** relationships such as in exposition or argument.

In an interview to Seema Paul, Vikram Seth says: “This novel is linear party because it’s multilinear. There are several plots in it.”

In the fictional system *A Suitable Boy* Syntagmatic narrative structure operates at three levels- sequential, spatial, and conceptual. There are some digressions in the linear narrative structure of the novel which are evident in the long history of the political feud and the debates of the Purva Pradesh Legislative Assembly.

‘Point of View ’in the Fictional System *A Suitable Boy*

The perspective from which the narrative is told in *A Suitable Boy* is that of a third person omniscient narrator. The narrator knows everything that needs to be known about the characters, actions and events that take place in the narrative. He has privileged access to
the characters thoughts, feelings and motives. The omniscient narrator can see through the thoughts of Mrs Mehra when her daughter Lata said that she was not interested in marrying anyone: "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."

The omniscient narrator tells the story from the peripheral point of view. He is never at the centre of the narrative but at the same time he is also authorial and restores the authors view. So the omniscient narrator's positive depiction of Savita Mehra’s arranged marriage with Pran Kapoor is an example of Vikram Seth’s views. The third person omniscient narrator is also an intrusive narrator who reports, evaluates and comments on the actions and motives of the characters. ‘Diegesis’ is a style of representation in fiction which penetrates into the internal world and presents an interior view of a world. Vikram Seth also functions as an extra-diegetic narrator since he produces the linear narrative at the primary level and he is also a heterodiegetic narrator since he is not one of the characters in the fictional system. He just narrates the incidents, happenings and events in the life of the characters in a detached, distanced and aloof manner. This makes the omniscient narrator a reliable narrator who makes the reader accept his points of view.

Multiple Focalization in A Suitable Boy

There is ‘multiple focalization’ in the fictional system, that is the narrative can be viewed from various perspectives or points of view. The omniscient narrator is the external focalizer and the various characters whose points of view are narrated in the novel are internal focalizers. The novel has the perspectives of Mrs Mehra, Maan, Lata, Haresh Khanna and many other characters. Both the internal focalizers and the external focalizers are non-

perceptible. In other words the characters like Mrs Mehta, Maan, Lata and Haresh who are the internal focalizers give an objective account of the events in *A Suitable Boy*.

Seth's greatest achievement is the narrative voice, which is always self effacing and utterly transparent. Themes and issues are presented with a steady consistency of imaginative objectivity. We see these concerns as the characters see them: there are no distancing devices, no poking through the veil of ideologies, no historical hindsight, no modern gap between what the narrative presents, and how it is presented. Throughout the book, whether in the Hindu or Muslim sections, issues and institutions are presented entirely without judgment from a (modern) (Western) external perspective, but from inside the story itself, just as the characters see them. We are completely brought in and made part of the story; we inhabit the same mental (and physical- Seth's writing is highly pictorial and intensely evocative) space as the characters. In willingly suspending our disbelief as we become absorbed in the novel, our own ideology and even our own values slowly dissolve as we come to understand the characters and their world as they see it.

Thus, undoubtedly the fictional system *A Suitable Boy* is a composite whole, representing the linguistic, cultural and political diversity of India and also performs the ideological function of projecting a pluralist and secular idea of India. It particularly displays the middle cognitive level of consciousness, above the material / physical plane, as it were, but below the top level of spiritual consciousness.
William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris, France on January 25, 1874. His father, Robert Ormond Maugham, was a lawyer and English ambassador to France, while his mother, Edith Mary Snell Maugham, was a captivatingly beautiful cosmopolitan woman. Maugham had begun to form a close relationship with his mother, but this was cut short after she died in complications of childbirth in 1882. Utterly distraught and deeply in debt, Robert Maugham died two and a half years later of stomach cancer, leaving ten year old Willie (which was what Maugham preferred to be called at the time) and his three brothers orphaned. He then went to live with his paternal uncle, Henry Maugham, and his wife. While with his uncle, Maugham was educated at King's School, Canterbury, Kent. His uncle wanted Maugham to enter the ministry, but the death of Maugham's parents had turned him toward atheism. He instead attended the University of Heidelberg, Germany for a year, where he received his first true taste of literary works. However, in a year his German sojourn came to an end and Maugham went back to England to study at St. Thomas' medical school, London. He qualified as a doctor in 1897.

Maugham had no desire to practice medicine (he actually had only studied it as a fallback career), and he began his literary career. From 1897-1914, a period which Maugham called the combined apprenticeship and transition period, Maugham wrote eight novels, fifteen plays, one collection of short stories, and a volume of non-fictional prose. His first success came in his novels, when *Liza of Lambeth* was published in 1897. The first of his true novels, *Liza of*
Lambeth displayed the formula that the rest of his novels would consist of, a mixture of personal experience, tradition, and instinct. His main published works up to 1908 were all either novels or short stories. However, in 1908, Maugham had his first successful attempt with drama, and three of his plays, A Man of Honor, Schiffbrüchig, and Mademoiselle Zampa, received acclaim. Maugham then abandoned fiction for the next few years and continued to work with his drama. He wrote a handful of new plays, but they were not as well received as his first few. Maugham was financially stable from his early success, and his failure in drama only drove him back to fiction.

Maugham entered his finest period as an artist with the release of Of Human Bondage in 1915. This semi-autobiographical cathartic tale of Maugham's childhood and school years gained great critical acclaim and pushed Maugham into the forefront of fiction writers. The next years of his life were a flurry of personal and creative happenings. He released The Moon and Sixpence (1919) and Cakes and Ale (1930). He also published a large amount of short stories throughout the twenties that gave him authority as a short fiction writer. Meanwhile, in Maugham's personal life, he began to have an affair with Gwendolyn Maud Syrie Barnardo Wellcome, and although still married to her husband, she bore Maugham a child in 1915. The two eventually married in 1917, but ultimately divorced in 1929.

Maugham began writing plays again in the mid-twenties, culminating with Sheppey in 1933. However, it was proven again that Maugham the playwright was not as effective as Maugham the fiction genius, and he once again turned to fiction. World Wars had a great effect on Maugham, and from his enforced domicile came the novel The Razor's Edge (1944). Once again
Maugham put great amounts of his own personal experience with his disenfranchisement with life and the way society lived it. The novel became the fourth of Maugham's classics, and his last great work.

In the later years of his life, Maugham attempted essay writing and an autobiography entitled *Looking Back*. Before his death, Maugham burned all the unpublished manuscripts that he had and he begged friends to destroy his letters. He died in Nice, France on December 15, 1965.

*The Razor’s Edge* is a fictional system by W. Somerset Maugham published in 1944. The following lines from *Katha-Upanishad* form the epigraph and set the tone of the fictional system:

> The sharp edge of razor is difficult to pass over, thus the wise say the path to salvation is hard.

*The Razor’s Edge* is a philosophical fictional system which represents an artist’s outlook towards life and his faith in spiritual values. It spans a period of twenty-four years, from 1919 to 1943. The main characters are upper-middle-class Americans. The structure of the novel is quite complex as it covers a period of twenty-four years and is set in a number of different locations, mainly Chicago, Paris and the French Riviera, but with some action set in Alsace and Toulon, France; London, England; Seville, Spain; India, and Germany. The thread that holds the structure together is the meetings that Maugham the narrator has with the characters over the years, in which they tell him their stories. Thus the action does not always unfold in a linear or
calendar like sequence as it usually happens in fictional /dramatic systems with simple plot structures.

The fictional system narrates the story of Larry Darrell, an American pilot who is traumatized by his experiences in World War I. The narration sets off through the eyes of Larry's friends and acquaintances as they witness transformation in his personality after the war. His quest for purposeful and meaningful life allows him to thrive while the more materialistic characters suffer reversals of fortune. What Aristotle terms 'Peripetia'. The novel was twice adapted into film, first in 1946 starring Tyron Power and Gene Tierney, and Herbert Marshall as Maugham, and then again in 1984.

The fictional system opens with the author's misgivings about writing the story he is about to narrate. The reason for writing the story is to provide some useful information to his friend's biographers. At the outset he states he has not invented or embellished anything, he has changed names and written the conversations in his own words to the best of his recollection. The conversations he was not around to listen to, he wrote, based on how he thought the conversation would have gone. He writes:

I have never begun a novel with more misgiving. If I call it a novel it is only because I don't know what else to call it. I have little story to tell and I end neither with a death nor a marriage. Death ends all things and so is the comprehensive conclusion of a story, but marriage finishes it very
properly too and the sophisticated are ill-advised to sneer at what is by convention a happy ending¹.

Maugham, instead says, he “leaves his reader in the air.” The fictional system, *The Razor’s Edge* portrays the spiritual voyage of Larry Darrell, a sensitive, intelligent young man who refuses to conform to the prevailing social norms of post–World War I America. During the course of his journey he stops in Germany, Spain and India and finally finds answers to some of his questions in the teachings of oriental *Vedanta* philosophy.

W. Somerset Maugham is not only the creator, but also a character in this fictional system, inspiring the conversations that drive the system’s narrative. Maugham’s elitist friend Elliott, opportunistic French artist Suzanne Rouvier and tragic addict Sophie drop in and out of the narrative, each playing an important role in the process.

Before situating the fictional system within an analytical theoretical framework, I would examine the twists and turns of the plot structure. Maugham, who is a part of the narrative structure, meets Isabel and her fiancé, Larry, at the house of Louisa Bradley, a rich widow who is having her house redecorated which everyone agrees is needed, except for Larry, who tells the group, including Maugham’s friend and Mrs. Bradely’s brother, Elliott, an elitist snob with a generous heart, that the only thing that matters is Mrs. Bradley’s happiness and satisfaction. Soon after, he and Isabel decide on a separation of two years, as Larry wants to understand the world, life, its meaning and other existential and metaphysical issues. The critical factor in

Larry's transformation was the tragic death of his friend in World War I, which left him traumatized.

In Paris, Larry declines Elliott's invitations to join the social elite, instead spends his time reading books. After two years, Isabel and her mother come to Paris to confront Larry about his plans. Once again, he declines to join their world and asks Isabel to travel around Europe with him, despite their limited financial means. She declines, essentially choosing money over love.

After the breakup, Larry spends the next ten years traveling through Europe starting with a mining community in northern France, before working at a farm in Germany, visiting Spain and studying under a Yogi in India. In India, Larry finally finds answers to some of his questions about life. They are also answers that he failed to find at a monastery and in the Christian church. Also in India, he experiences a spiritual awakening while observing the sunrise over a mountain lake and as a contented person he returns to Paris.

In Paris, Larry meets Isabel, Maugham and Elliott, and discovers that Isabel has married Gray Maturin, Larry's former best friend and the son of a wealthy Chicago broker. She admits that she married him out of her desire to live a comfortable life more than true love.

After some years, the couple loses nearly everything after the stock market crash of 1929 and moves into Elliott's Parisian apartment. After a chance meeting with Maugham, Larry rejoins his old friends, who are taken aback by his changed personality. He tells them he has found peace and no longer needs money or other material things. Apparently, Larry has also picked up the power to heal, curing Gray's migraine headaches after teaching him meditational practices.
Though Isabel has feelings for Larry, it is evident that the general harmony is broken by the reappearance of Sophie MacDonald, an old friend from Chicago. She lost her husband and baby in car accident and ended up in Paris as a drug addict, and leading a promiscuous life. Shockingly, Larry asks her to marry him, a proposal driven by his need to help her. The proposal enrages Isabel, who purposely sabotages the marriage by tempting Sophie, who has been trying to give up her habits, with a bottle of vodka. She disappears and is later found murdered in Toulouse.

In between Sophie's relapse and her death, Elliott dies of old age in his house on the Riviera. It is a sad death. Having surrounded himself with rich people and expensive things, Elliott passes away alone, buried in a ridiculous old aristocratic costume. Maugham calls it a wasted life.

On the way back to London after Maugham's friend's death, he pays a visit to Isabel to confront her about Sophie. After first denying it, she admits to planting the vodka and tells Maugham she would do it again. Apparently, Isabel never got over her love of Larry, a love that caused her to commit a ruthless act of sabotage.

Following Sophie's burial, Maugham says goodbye to Larry for the final time. Larry tells him that he plans on giving up his monthly veteran's check and preaching his new found spirituality in America. Afterward, Maugham admits losing touch with Isabel and Larry, but he imagines, in their own way, they each got what they wanted. Isabel, who moved to Dallas after Gray got a job in the oil business, probably lived the life of an upper-class socialite, hosting parties and living in a large, expensive house. Larry, whose only desire was knowledge and peace, is probably living a simple life back in the U.S., poor but happy.
Fig. 1 Graph depicting the relationship among the characters / elements in the Fictional System *The Razor’s Edge*

Contextual Relationships (with short clarification)

R1: friend of
R2: lover of
R4: friend of
R5: Niece of
R6: Brother of
R7: Daughter of
R8: wife of (married Gray for the sake of wealthy, comfortable and secure life even though she continued to love Larry)
R9: former friend of
R10: learnt meditation and Eastern Hindu Philosophy and found answers to his questions on God, life and soul from
R11: worked in mines with
R12: friend of (who lost her husband and child in a random accident)
R13: Proposed marriage to (with an intention to help her)
R14: friend of (who also loved Larry)
R15: hated (out of jealousy)
The narration progresses in seven parts, constituting the seven sub-systems of the fictional system. In the very first sub-system the readers get a glimpse of the unique style adopted by the novelist which enables him talk directly to the reader and narrate the story as a long recollection. The voice shifts from first person to second person to third person.
The first subsystem brings out the theme of snobbery and money, along with the theme of the dual forces ‘good and evil’ functional in the world simultaneously through various characters and episodes. Elliott is a snob who makes friends and is nice to people for his own social gain. Maugham writes:

When I first met Elliott I was just a young author like another and he took no notice of me. He never forgot a face and when I ran across him here or there he shook hands with me cordially, but showed no desire to further our acquaintance; and if I saw him at the opera, say, he being with a person of high rank, he was apt not to catch sight of me. But then I happened to make a somewhat startling success as a playwright, and presently I became aware that Elliott regarded me with a warmer feeling.2

However, as Maugham comments, he is also a kind-hearted person. Along with Elliott’s snobbery, Maugham makes his first criticism of the Catholic Church, claiming that Elliott changed religions because of the better social contacts he would make. Maugham’s dexterous use of character contrast is quite evident in the very first subsystem. When everyone criticizes Mrs. Bradley’s furniture, Larry’s reaction is different as he gives more importance to her contentment rather than the furniture.

The second subsystem throws light on Isabel's complex relationship with Larry. She loves him; yet, it is Isabel who suggests that he should go to Paris. Despite his desire to leave her for two years, she wants to stay engaged to him, which seems odd to her mother, uncle and Maugham.

The second sub-system brings out clearly the theme of Larry's spirituality. It is clear that his friend's death has had a deep impact on him. His comment “the dead look so terribly dead when they are dead” startles Isabel. He further observes:

I don’t think I shall ever find peace till I make up my mind about things.

You say to yourself: “Who am I that I should bother my head about this, that and the other? Perhaps it’s only because I’m a conceited prig.

Wouldn’t it be better to follow the beaten track and let what’s coming to
you come?" And then you think of a fellow who an hour before was full of life and fun, and he's lying dead; it's all so cruel and so meaningless. It's hard not to ask yourself what life is all about and whether there's any sense to it or whether it's all a tragic blunder of blind fate 3 .

Larry also says the quest to answer those questions might take five or ten years, foreshadowing a long spell in Europe for him.

The second system is remarkable for Maugham's art of characterization. Though Isable loves Larry, gives him two years to sort out his questions, when it comes to choosing Larry and a life of adventure with meager means, she chooses the safe and stable life of an aristocrat. "I'm just a normal girl," she tells him. Later, at the tea party filled with rich people, Isabel cannot help but feel that this is the best way to live. She has made her choice: money over love.

The following conversation between Larry and Isabel forms the nucleus of the sub-system and also expresses clearly the questions that disturb Larry:

I want to make up my mind whether God is or God is not. I want to find out why evil exists. I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die it's the end.

But Larry, she smiled. People have been asking those questions for thousands of years. If they could be answered, surely they'd have been answered by now.

Don’t laugh as if I said something idiotic,’ she said sharply.

On the contrary I think you’ve said something shrewd. But on the other hand you might say that if men have been asking them for thousands of years it proves that they can’t help asking them and have to go on asking them. Besides, it’s not true that no one has found the answers. There are more answers than questions, and lots of people have found answers that were perfectly satisfactory for them.4

The ‘structurality’ of the plot structure gradually effaces by the time the third sub-system begins and the reader unknowingly with pleasure starts following along with Maugham the unorthodox structure. Talking directly to the reader, he narrates a conversation he has with Larry nearly ten years after his breakup with Isabel. This foreshadows several things. Firstly, Larry does not just disappear. Somewhere down the line, Larry and Maugham meet and talk again.

Through the character of Kosti the novelist exemplifies the theme of complex human relationships and the complex nature of man himself. Kosti is a large brute, who cheats at cards and immediately plans on seducing Becker’s wife. At the same time, he is also a student of philosophy. Whenever Larry brings up Kosti’s take on philosophy, Kosti changes the subject and refuses to talk about it. Also, Kosti’s true background is not clear. There are two irreconcilable sides of his personality, Larry feels that he cheats people for mere amusement.

But that was only one side of him and it was the other side that made him so interesting to me. I couldn’t reconcile the two. Though he boasted he never read anything but the paper and detective stories, he was a cultivated man. He was a good talker, caustic, harsh, cynical, but it was exhilarating to listen to him. He was a devout Catholic and had a crucifix hanging over his bed, and he went to Mass every Sunday regularly. On Saturday nights he used to get drink.⁵

Fig.4. The Sub-sub-systems of the Third Sub-System of Fictional System Razor’s Edge

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The third sub system abounds in irony. The irony is that Isabel does not stay with Larry because she is afraid of poverty. She marries Gray Maturin but unfortunately the stock market crashes resulting in the tragic end of Henry Maturin.

Gray was left to deal with the situation alone. He had been speculating extensively on the side, without the knowledge of his father and was personally in the greatest difficulty. His efforts to extricate himself failed. The banks would not lend him money, older men on the exchange told him that the only thing was to throw up the sponge. He was unable to meet his obligations and was, I understand, declared bankrupt; he had already mortgaged his own house...⁶

Isabel, the girl who always wanted nice things and a rich life, is now forced to move to a plantation in South Carolina. Of course, she's still better off than most people, but her immediate plans of becoming a member of the rich high life are on hold.

The fourth sub-system brings to fore the concept of beauty and how different people become more or less attractive based on their circumstances. As an example, when Maugham sees Larry shaven and well-dressed, he remarks that he looks twenty-five.

Unconcerned with money and having spent his time searching for spiritual fulfillment, Larry's good looks are symbolic of his kind and peaceful soul. Gray on the other hand, who has based his life on working and making money, has grown heavier and less attractive. Larry's spirituality takes a turn for the supernatural with his healing powers. In a theme that Maugham will explore later in the novel, Maugham makes some kind of connection between Larry and Jesus, although it's more through Larry's Eastern teachings than Christianity. Larry heals Gray, somehow making his arms move. Later, when Isabel and Gray are talking about Larry's peculiar behaviour, Maugham says it's because of Larry's goodness. Larry's healing powers are also evident in subtler ways with Suzanne. She's sick after her bout with Typhoid, and Larry's
kindness in taking her to the country aids her recovery. In addition, there's no expectation of anything in return for his kindness, another example of his inherent kindness.

Isabel, during her conversation with Maugham, admits that she is not really in love with Gray, and she still harbors feelings for Larry. Ironically, while Larry does not seem to need a passionate love life, is one of the reasons why Isabel goes to stay with Gray. She seems unwilling to accept the fact that if Larry is unable to have that kind of relationship with her, he could have a physical relationship with anyone else. Perhaps she is unable to accept that he might care for anyone else, as well.

Fig.6 The Sub-sub-systems of the Fifth Sub-System of Fictional System Razor's Edge

Razor's Edge
Fictional System
Sub-system 5

The passion and attraction of Isabel for Larry

The theme of duality and the good and bad in all people continued through Sophie

The theme of physical beauty as a result of being true to oneself

The theme of Elliott's death as a loner and with feelings of dejection as a symbol of wasted life

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In the fifth subsystem Isabel's true feelings for Larry surface. The feelings she has for Larry go beyond fondness; there is passion and attraction. It is Gray, however, who will be the beneficiary of these feelings.

Like Elliott's snobbery and kindness, through Sophie Maugham continues the theme of duality and the good and bad in all people. Sophie is a relatively normal person until the accident that kills her husband and child, when she becomes a drunk, drug addict and sexually promiscuous. Isabel contends that she was a bad person all along. Larry wonders what happened to the sensitive girl that used to like poetry. He does not come to any conclusion regarding Sophie; instead he wants to understand her. Maugham finds Sophie attractive despite her bad makeup and inappropriate dress. She is attractive now because she's being true to herself, just like Larry is attractive after his travels and Gray is unattractive without a job. Earlier, Isabel who denied Larry is a little annoyed when he speaks fondly of Sophie. After knowing Larry's intention to marry Sophie, she erupts in anger. It is evident that Isabel simply cannot stand the idea of Larry being with somebody else, especially someone like Sophie who Isabel considers clumsy and evil. She screams:

How can you suppose that common sense or prudence will have any effect on Larry when he's in the grip of a passion like that? You don't know what he's been seeking all these years. I don’t know either, I only suspect. All these years of labour, all these experiences he garnered weigh nothing in the balance now they're set against his desire-oh, it's
more than a desire, his urgent, clamorous need to save the soul of a wanton woman he’d known as an innocent child.\(^7\)

She cries:

‘I love him’, said Isabel. ‘God knows, I ask nothing of him. I expect nothing. No one could love anymore unselfishly than I love him. He’s going to be so unhappy.’\(^8\)

Maugham observes that though she left Larry for money, now her anger is more with herself. Maugham then touches on themes of Larry’s spirituality and beauty. In terms of beauty, Sophie looks attractive when she is drunk in the bar, but now that she has cleaned herself up, Maugham notices how plain and unattractive she looks at lunch. The irony is that if being true to oneself makes one attractive, then perhaps Sophie really is a bad person, as Isabel suggests.

Foreshadowing upcoming events, Maugham notices a strange look in Isabel's eyes. Although she denies that she is concocting some scheme, Isabel appears overly enthusiastic about the Polish vodka. Continuing the theme of true beauty being a result of being true to oneself, Maugham observes that despite being back on drugs, Sophie looks attractive. What is not known is what is behind the Polish vodka suddenly appearing in Isabel’s apartment. Maugham notices a strange look in Isabel’s eyes when planning the lunch with Sophie, and Isabel seems overly taken with the Polish vodka. Taking Isabel’s earlier remarks about how much she is against Larry and Sophie’s wedding, it is easy to guess that she has something to do with


\(^8\) Ibid.
Sophie's temptation. Earlier, Maugham states how Elliott might have been a snob, but he was a good person. In this section, there is little sympathy showed for him. One of Elliott's final conversations with Maugham details his deep-seeded belief in elitism.

He actually believes that there are different heavens for the rich and the poor. Even near death, despite all the evidence that his life has amounted to little, he holds on to his snobbish beliefs.

Maugham calls Elliott's way of living a wasted life and says that he looks ridiculous in his burial suit, the Count De Lauria costume, symbolic of Elliott's vanity and his insistence on expensive, materialistic things.

In addition, Elliott dies alone and shunted from the elite society that he so hungered to be a part of. Elliott cries and expresses his deep anguish and pain on being left alone:

Oh, it’s so unkind, ‘he said. ‘I hate them, I hate them all. They were glad enough to make a fuss of me when I could entertain them, but now I’m old and sick they have no use for me. Not ten people have called to enquire since I’ve been laid up, and all this week only one miserable bunch of flowers. I’ve done everything for them. They have eaten my food and drunk my wine. I’ve run their errands for them. I’ve made their parties for them. I’ve turned myself inside out to do them favours. And what have I got out of it ? Nothing, nothing, nothing. There’s not one of them who cares if I live or die. Oh! it’s so cruel. He began to cry.\footnote{Maugham, William Somerset. The Razor's Edge. London : Vintage, 2000.246-247.Print.}
Ironically, Edna Novemali calls him a bore, snob and scandal monger. Elliott has been that way all his life, but in the end, he dies a lonely man.

Fig 7. The Sub-sub-systems of the Sixth Sub-System of Fictional System *Razor's Edge*

In the beginning of the sixth sub system Maugham tells the readers that they can skip it but the fact is this subsystem is most crucial to the entire system. In his usual witty style, Maugham writes:

I feel it right to warn the reader that he can very well skip this chapter without losing the thread of such story as I have to tell, since for the most part it is nothing more than the account of a conversation that I had with
Larry. I should add, however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worthwhile to write this book.10

Larry fully explains what led him to his quest for spirituality and his philosophical questions which are present throughout.

If an all good and all powerful God created the world, why did he create evil? The monks said, so that man by conquering the wickedness in him, so that man by conquering the wickedness in him, by resisting temptation, by accepting pain and sorrow and misfortune as the trials sent by God to purify him, might as long last he made worthy to receive His grace. It seemed to me like sending a fellow with a message to some place and just to make it harder for him you constructed a maze that he had to get through, then dug a moat that he had to swim and finally built a wall that he had to scale.11

Larry asks why God needs to be worshipped and why he punishes them for the evil they commit in a world that he created and that has led them to evil. Larry is questioning some of the basic tenets of Christianity, and he does not find any answers. He says, “those good fathers had no answers that satisfied either my head or my heart to the questions that perplexed me”.12

11 Ibid.276.
12 Ibid. 277
Finally he is told "you should stop off in India, the East has more to teach the West than the West conceives." He visits Ramkrishna mission and meets the Swami. Together they come to Benaras and Larry gives a detailed description of his experiences:

I saw something I could never have believed possible, I saw thousands upon thousands of people come down to take their lustral bath and pray. I saw one tall gaunt fellow, with a mass of tangled hair and a great ragged beard, with nothing but a jock-strap to cover his nakedness, stand with his long arms out-stretched, his head up, and in a loud voice pray to the rising sun. I can't tell you what an impression it made on me. I spent six months in Benaras and I went over and over again on the Ganges at dawn to see that strange sight.

Two years later Larry went to Madura, a place in South. Though Maugham says that his purpose is not to describe *Vedanta* philosophy in detail, he gives an elaborate account of his discussion with Larry regarding liberation, Absolute, atman etc. For instance he describes:

According to Vedantists, the self, which they call the atman and we call the soul, is distinct from the body and its senses, distinct from the mind and its intelligence; it is not part of the Absolute, for the Absolute, being infinite, can have no parts, but the Absolute itself.

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14 Ibid., 285.

15 Ibid., 290.
Larry's role as a spiritual holy man is also touched upon again. Maugham's arms are mysteriously raised by some kind of unseen power that comes from Larry. This power comes from the things he learned in India and the things he learned from Hinduism. Larry is capable of curing people because he was able to cleanse his mind and soul to a great extent of selfish thoughts and ambitions, unlike Gray and Isabel Maturin and Elliott.

Unable to find the answers to his questions about man and the soul in Christianity, Larry seems to find them in Hinduism. He can't find the answer as to why there is evil in the world in his time with the monks, but he, to a great extent, understands through Hinduism.

It does not seem to be a coincidence that as Larry is talking about the evil and the things that people must suffer through in life, Maugham sees a series of sad and/or low-character people wander in and out of the restaurant. The underlying question is - are these people paying for sins committed in past lives?

The long conversation ends with Larry seemingly getting a hold of some of the basic questions he has been asking since ten years. However it is interesting to note that ironically, after years trying to find answers to complex questions, Larry's theory is the simple idea of trying to make the best of things.
Larry's glimpse into the Absolute is symbolic of his genuinely good nature. Elliott sees beauty and happiness in money and material things. Isabel seems to be the same way, choosing a safe, wealthy life over love. Sophie finds happiness in drugs and sex. Larry is able to see the beauty in simple things such as the natural beauty of the lake. It is this ability that enables him to be the only truly happy person in the novel.
In the seventh sub system Sophie's life ends exhibiting man's struggle between two opposing forces. As mentioned by Maugham in the beginning that he would leave everything on the readers. In the end several questions haunt us- Was Sophie a truly bad person? How much of the blame can be laid on Isabel, who contrives the environment for Sophie's downfall? How much of the blame can be laid on Sophie? If Isabel is responsible, is she also driven by her environment or circumstances, laying the blame yet elsewhere? Whether Isabel is or is not responsible for Sophie's death, she is responsible for her own action, leaving the vodka out in hopes that Sophie will drink it. Maugham writes in the end:

But as I was finishing this book, uneasily conscious that I must leave my reader in the air and seeing no way to avoid it, I looked back with my
mind's eye on my long narrative to see if there was any way in which I could devise a more satisfactory ending; and to my intense surprise it dawned upon me that without in the least intending to I had written nothing more or less than a success story. For all the persons with whom I have been concerned got what they wanted.  

Maugham's final passage seems to wrap everything up nicely. He says that everyone has got what he or she wanted in the end. But the reaction of any perceptive reader would be: 'have they?' Isabel might be rich and living a good life in Dallas, but she never got her true love, Larry.

Emergent Themes

Psycho-Historical Paradigm

In The Razor's Edge the world war I and Stock market crash of 1929 serve as metaphors to delineate the interconnectedness between historical and psychological forces. The following observation of Edmund Wilson, the renowned American critic and thinker, is quite relevant in this context:

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The attitudes, the compulsions, the emotional patterns are embedded in the community and the historical moment and they may indicate its ideals and its diseases as the cell shows the condition of the tissue.17

The world war I had devastating effects on Europe. The great war demolished the Austria, Hungary empire and also the Russian empire. New states were established out of these former empires. Communism arose in Eastern Europe, France and Britain formed many new territories from the defeated nations as Germany, Austria, Turkey had lost most of their land and resources. However the effects of the war were also felt across the Atlantic Ocean in America, though in a different manner. Due to war, industry in the USA grew, the women's movement progressed and the government adopted the new diplomatic policies as the result of the USA joining the war, industry production in America boomed, manufacturers had to keep production up to the pace needed to support the war. In order to produce more material in short amount of time new technologies were developed to help manufacturers to meet the needs of the government and people, more employment opportunities were opened for women and Afro-Americans, thus even economy boomed with the Industry.

While the period after World War-I came to be known as the roaring twenties and was known for its grandness of life, the period between World Wars was also of the great cultural uncertainty. The unpopular war that destroyed much of Europe left many with a feeling of

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disillusionment and a little sense of where to turn to next. These sentiments were reflected in various ways in much of the literature of the time.

A preoccupation on the part of ordinary Americans with materialistic values and lifestyles has been noted and discussed by scholars and intellectuals for many years. Oswald Spengler’s (1880-1936) *Decline of the West* (1922) reflected this directly with his main argument that the ideals and extravagances of Western culture would ultimately lead to its collapse.

*Fig. 10 State of USA from Prosperity to Adversity: Roaring 1920s to the Great Depression*
Another very significant event which is touched by Maugham in the *Razor's Edge* is the Stock market crash of 1929 which ultimately led to the shattering of the American dream, leaving people traumatized. In the 1920s, America was increasingly prosperous. The Gross National Product increased by 59 percent spurred by the massive growth in the automobile industry. Personal income rose by an average of 38 percent. Consumer goods such as washing machines, refrigerators and radios became commonplace. The rapid development of industrialization and technology, and the rise in wages, made many people like Henry and Gray Maturin in the *Razor's Edge*, believe there was no limit to the production of wealth.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 (October 1929), also known as the Great Crash, and the Stock Market Crash of 1929, was the most devastating stock market crash in the history of the United States. The crash signaled the beginning of the 10-year Great Depression that affected all Western industrialized countries and did not end in the United States until 1947.

The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. The timing of the Great Depression varied across nations, but in most countries it started in about 1929 and lasted until the late 1930s or early 1940s. It was the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the twentieth century. The Great Depression has been the subject of much writing, as authors have sought to evaluate an era that caused financial as well as emotional trauma. The impact of this is projected through the characters of Gray Maturin and Henry Maturin.
Contextual Note:

After the crash Gray had tried to get a job, even as a clerk in an office such of the brokers as had withered the storm, but there was no business. He applied to his old friends to give him something to do, however humble or however badly paid. But he applied in vain. His frenzied efforts to stave off the disaster that finally overwhelmed him, the burden of anxiety, humiliation resulted in a nervous
breakdown and he began to have headaches so severe that he was incapacitated for twenty four hours and as limp as a wet rag when they ceased\textsuperscript{18}.

\textbf{Materialism versus Spiritualism}

The principal governing theme of the philosophical fictional system \textit{The Razor's Edge} is spirituality versus materialism with Larry representing the former and Elliott Templeton representing the latter. His exploration of eastern philosophy and its exposition in the artifact was quite startling for Western audiences of the 1940s. He even clarifies at the outset that the characters were inspired by actual people. It has been speculated that he modeled Larry on Guy Hague, an American who took up Eastern religion in the '30s. Shri Ganesha, the yogi, who is Larry's Guru in India, is said to be modeled after Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, a guru Maugham met during his 1938 visit to an ashram in India.

The conflict between materialism and spiritualism is reinforced in the system with reference to the themes of 'temporal and eternal', 'mortal and immortal'. The fictional system proves that one who believes in the permanence of the world, gives himself to the pleasures of the world, ultimately suffers as it happens in the case of Elliott. His statement 'nothing, nothing, nothing' reflects the sense of futility with which he died. Youth is fleeting, customs change, objects wither, physical beauty fades away with time, happiness is not everlasting, physical body decays, power, wealth and glory are not everlasting, meaning hereby everything is subject to
dissolution. Amidst all this uncertainty, what gives strength to man is his faith in God, pursuing the path of spirituality. In the fictional system Larry seeks permanence and transcendence.

Fig.13 Razor's Edge- A Success Story?

Razor's Edge- A Success Story?

R-got

Larry
Darrel

Isabel

Gray

Elliott

Sophie

Happiness
Assured position backed by substantial fortune
Steady and lucrative job
Social eminence
deadth

Contextual Notes:

There is an undercurrent of irony in the following concluding passage of the fictional system:

For all the persons with whom I was concerned got what they wanted: Elliot social eminence, Isabel an assured position backed by a substantial fortune in an active and cultured community; Gray a steady and lucrative job, with an office to...
go from nine till six every day; Suzzane Rouvier security; Sophie death; and Larry happiness.\textsuperscript{19}

Did the above mentioned characters excepting Larry really get what they want?

In the World War I, his friend Patsy fends off German fighter pilots endangering Larry. In the melee, Patsy’s plane is shot down. Hence, he sacrifices his life for his friend. At one place one of the characters in the fictional system makes the statement:

The East has more to teach the West than the West conceives\textsuperscript{20}

The above concept can be more concisely and concretely illustrated and authenticated with reference to Oriental Religion of Saints (Radhasoami Faith). His Holiness Huzur Sahabji Maharaj writes:

The Eastern civilization leads to the investigation of the ultimate reality of man’s “I” or “ego” i.e. the spirit or soul of man, while the western civilization on the contrary makes man curious to enquire about the place of man’s stay. And so, with a view to know the secret about the spirit, the seers of the East, particularly those of India adopted a particular way of life so that their attention could be withdrawn from all sides and on piercing the veil of their “Ego” or their “I” they may be able to obtain knowledge of their spiritual essence or spirit... As the western civilization directs its efforts towards gaining knowledge about the place


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 222.
of stay of man instead of the secret of man’s “ego” or “self”, the wise men of the west have made wonderful discoveries about the forces of nature and different conditions of matter. As these wise men did not get any knowledge of their own “self”, they naturally remained ignorant both of the Supreme Being and of the presence of the spirit within all ordinary forms of life.\(^2\)

**How to Attain Spiritual Consciousness?**

The epigram of *Razor’s Edge* is taken from the “The Method of Yoga” in *Katha Upanishad* which explicates this aspect. Verse fourteen from which Maugham has taken the line is as follows:

> Arise, awake, having attained thy boons, understand (them). Sharp as the edge of a razor and hard to cross, difficult to tread is that path (so) sages declare.\(^2\)

Explaining the meaning of the above verse, Radhakrishnan says that the path of religion is never easy. It is steep and hard. There can be no progress in religious life without self control. Only the pure in heart can realize God. Self-discipline is the first step in spiritual progress. In the same section verse 13 says:


The wise man should restrain speech in mind; the latter he should restrain in the understanding self. The understanding he should restrain in the great self. That he should restrain in the tranquil self.23

It explains how the wise disciple should discriminate the unchanging light atman, from the changing objects of sense and mind which it illumines. To acquire spiritual consciousness the purity of the soul is required.

Maugham himself visited Ramana ashram where he had a direct interaction with Ramana Maharshi in Tamil Nadu, India in 1938. But, it is said that Maugham received his inspiration and direct translation for this epigraph from Christopher Isherwood, with whom he had become acquainted through The Vedanta Society’s Hollywood Hills center.

Katha Upanisad, also called Kathakopanisad, belongs to the Taitttriya school of Yajur Veda, which uses the setting of a story found in ancient Sanskrit literature. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan describes:

A poor and pious Brahmana, Vajasravasa, performs a sacrifice and gives as presents to the priests a few old and feeble cows. His son Naciketas, feeling disturbed by the unreality of his father’s observance of the sacrifice, proposes that he himself may be offered as offering to a priest. When he persisted in his request, his father in rage said, ‘Unto Yama, I give thee.’ Naciketas goes to the abode of Yama and finding him absent, waits there for three days and nights

unfed. Yama, on his return, offers three gifts in recompense for the delay and discomfort. For the first, Naciketas asked "let me return alive to my father." For the second "tell me how my good works may not be exhausted", and for the third "tell me the way to conquer re-death". In the Upanisad the third request is one for enlightenment on the great transition, which is called death.24

*The Katha Upanishad* (commonly assigned to the fourth or fifth century B.C.E.) is the first instance when we see a recognizable tradition of Yoga emerge. Within this poetic text there lies the first descriptions of the fundamentals of a yoga practice; the preparation of the body and the cultivation of the stability in the mind that steer a person towards higher consciousness. There are similarities between Bhagvadgita and Katha Upanisad.

Going beyond the Upanisad philosophy, and adopting a generic and broader perspective, we realize that in the Oriental Religion of Saints (Radhasoami Faith) there is a very clear and authoritative explanation of this aspect. It is not easy to tread on the path of spirituality. His Holiness Sahabji Maharaj writes:

Everyone knows that it is a very difficult task to restrain outward *vrittis* (the outward flow or movement of attention) of the mind. On account of habit formed in innumerable past lives and year after year during the present life, the flow of the outward *vrittis* has gathered a powerful momentum. It is therefore only through a patient effort for a considerable time and by awakening a true

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desire in the heart for the beatific vision of the True Supreme Being and
developing an attitude of contempt and detachment for the objects of the world
that outward vrittis can possibly be controlled. But the difficulty is that the task
of the devotee does not end with this. There still remains for him the necessity
of turning his vrittis inwards for, until this is done; no internal experience
whatsoever is possible and a state of mental and spiritual inanition is established.\textsuperscript{25}

He further illustrates this with reference to one of the poems of Saint Kabir Das which explain
how difficult it is for a \textit{Sadh} to play his part well, than a sati or a warrior. The warrior no doubt
has an extremely difficult task to perform as he has to risk his life, similarly sati has to burn
herself alive but in both cases their task is restricted to a short time. \textit{Sadh}, on the other hand
has to put up a stubborn fight against his mind day and night and the light has to be carried on
till his death.

The main character, Larry, is an embodiment of the spiritual approach to life as it is found in the
Hindu religion. He is contrasted with the characters who embody American materialism. From
the beginning, Larry is more interested in pursuing intellectual and spiritual knowledge for its
own sake than in becoming part of the great American industrial money making machine. He
turns down a job with Henry Maturin's company, choosing instead to go to Paris, where he
spends most of his time reading and studying. He wants to become enlightened.

With this book Maugham skillfully dramatizes a philosophical treatise on the clash of Eastern spirituality and Western culture into one man's relentless journey towards enlightenment and the repercussions of such an action on the loves and lives of others. Hidden beneath the exquisite prose, a lesson in self-determination and self-development slowly unravels and reveals itself amidst a beautifully balanced cast of players and the customs, prejudices, and decadence of the day. Although by no means the first to anticipate the growing influence of Eastern Culture on Europe and America, Maugham—who drifts through the story as a unassuming narrator—produces a work that proved perceptive to the point of prophetic and predated the Beats who were to popularize the phenomenon by over a decade.
The key to everlasting peace and happiness lies in pursuit of spirituality for raising consciousness to higher and higher levels leading finally to truth, ultimate reality and God which turn out to be one and the same supreme essence.