

Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy as Ecocritical Novel

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Article Received: 07/07/2023

Article Revised: 04/08/2023

Article Accepted: 05/08/2023

Published Online: 07/08/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.08.45

Abstract

Nature plays a vital role in many of the literary works, right from romantic age to modern age. In the late 18th – early 19th century the understanding of nature was changed. As romanticism is characterized by a sense of unity between man and nature, this is true with any genre of any literature whether it is the poetry of Romantic age of English Literature or Anton Chekov's play, The Cherry Orchard of Russian Literature or Voltaire's satire Candide of French Literature or Matsuo Basho's prose and verse travel diary From the Narrow Road to the Deep North of Japanese Literature. Vikram Seth's novel A Suitable Boy depicts the nature and nature related things in succinct manner.

Keywords: Vikram Seth, A Suitable Boy, Nature, the Ganges, Pul Mela.

Literature has been agent of change, be it personal or societal. Green literature, a contemporary genre that derives its roots from ecocriticism, a branch of literature that studies the relationship between man and nature. Nature plays a vital role in many of the literary works, right from romantic age to modern age. In the late 18th – early 19th century the understanding of nature was changed. As romanticism is characterized by a sense of unity between man and nature, this is true with any genre of any literature whether it is the poetry of Romantic age of English Literature or Anton Chekov's play, The Cherry Orchard of Russian Literature or Voltaire's satire Candide of French Literature or Matsuo Basho's prose and verse travel diary From the Narrow Road to the Deep North of Japanese Literature.

According to Alexander Pope, truth in literature begins with the author knowing what he is talking about and urges writers to first follow nature, for nature is the ultimate source, the purpose and the final test of art that is true. This view is corroborated by William Wordsworth in his preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1802). He says the primary and permanent aspects of nature influence the permanent and essential qualities of human nature. There is no work of arts without a setting. Setting refers to the time and place of a specific work and includes the physical environment of the story, a house, a street, a city,

a landscape, a region. Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) begins in a fictional town, Brahmpur, located along the Ganges. Patna, Calcutta, Delhi, Lucknow and other Indian cities form a colourful backdrop for the emerging stories.

Vikram Seth depicts nature which constitutes the trees, animals, birds, weather, rivers, etc. vividly and portrays clearly how the characters of the novel walk down the memory lane when they encounter nature related. The novel begins with the marriage of Savita in a garden, and it ends with the marriage of Lata in a garden. This is how a new life begins amidst nature. At the onset of the novel, guests are gathered in the 'great lamp-lit garden' (Seth,1) lawn on Savita's wedding. The garden is in Prem Nivas - the abode of love of Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue of the state of Purva Pradesh. It is situated in the quietest, greenest residential area of the ancient, and—for the most part—over-populated city of Brahmpur, the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh. This fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which is itself 'the heartland of India'. After a few concluding words by the priests, newly-weds are escorted to a flower-shrouded bench near a sweet-smelling, rough-leafed harsingar tree in white-and-orange bloom; and 'congratulations fell on them and their parents and all the Mehras and Kapoors present as copiously as those delicate flowers fall to the ground at dawn' (48).

The garden helps Lata control her irritation at Pran. For Mrs.Rupa Mehra, the scent from the garden brings back happy memories of her late husband. The beautiful looking garden is the pride of Mrs.Mahesh Kapoor, indeed. A couple of months after her wedding, Savita goes to visit her mother-in-law, Mrs.Mahesh Kapoor. She thinks, 'Everything ... appeared more intense in the garden at Prem Nivas. It was almost as if the plants understood ...their mistress' (221). In fact, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor carries away some of the best prizes in the Rose and Chrysanthemum Show in December as well as in the Annual Flower Show in February that amaze the more sophisticated inhabitants of Brahmpur. Judges' Committee may look at the garden for an hour but that it gives Mrs Mahesh Kapoor pleasure all the year round. The honey-scented harsingar in blossom, the roses are in their first full flush, the sweet alyssum and sweet william begin to bloom.

The world of fauna is depicted in the novel succinctly. The garden of Kapoor's is full of birds: pond herons, partridges, mynas, small puffed-up grey babblers in their chattering groups of seven, hoopoes and parakeets. When Varun, Malati, Lata, Bhaskar and Aparna visit Brahmpur zoo, they see 'the elephant, the camel, the emu, the common bat, the brown pelican, the red fox, and all the big cats'. They even see a smaller one, the blackspotted leopard-cat, as he paces frenziedly across the floor of his cage. But the best stop of all is the reptile house. Both children - Bhaskar and Aparna are eager to see the snake pit, which is full of 'fairly sluggish pythons, and the glass cases with their deadly vipers and kraits and cobras' (59). When Maan goes to the Barsaat Mahal, he sees a few antelope.

Seth describes vividly the weekly bird market near the Barsaat Mahal which is in full swing on the Sundays. 'Thousands of birds—mynas, partridges, pigeons, parakeets—fighting birds, eating birds, racing birds, talking birds—sat or fluttered in iron or cane cages in little

stalls' (150). A good Alexandrine parakeet is Ishaq's favourite kind of parrot. Tasneem gazes at the bird, then stretches out her hand and touches it. Despite its stubble it is very soft. Its colour is 'very slightly green, as its feathers had only just begun to emerge'. 'A parakeet?' 'Yes, but not a regular one. He's a hill parakeet. He'll talk as well as a myna' (153). When Mohsina Bai died, her highly talkative myna quickly followed her. Tasneem has been even lonelier without the bird, but she is glad that Ishaq has not got her another myna but something quite different.

Whenever Lata needs to be distracted, she goes for a walk by the river, and she feeds the monkeys. The monkeys are usually pleased to see her—she brings them fruits and nuts whenever she remembers to. One day she forgets, and they make clear their displeasure. A couple of the smaller ones pulls at her elbow in request, while one of the larger ones, a fierce male, bares his teeth in annoyance—but from a distance. She feels very gentle towards the animal world—which seems to her to be a simpler place than the world of humans. During the Pul Mela the monkeys have been royally feasted. Lata scatters some peanuts to the monkeys on the cliff and is the centre of their approving attention for a while. Having performed a generous action, Lata feels she can think more clearly.

When Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, Pran and Bhaskar sail on the Ganges, 'the broad, grey-black back of something much larger than a fish had appeared momentarily from beneath the surface of the Ganga' as if by magic, three large river dolphins with pointed snouts suddenly appear to the right of the boat and start playing in the water. Bhaskar laughs with delight. The boatman says, in his Brahmपुरi accent: 'There are dolphins here, in this stretch of the water. They don't come out often, but they are here all right.... You are lucky to see them' (1112). Mrs Kapoor believes the turtles and the dolphins, as good creatures, innocent and blessed. It is to protect the innocent, whether man or beast, to cure the recurring ills of the world.

Seth describes the picturesque morning, evening, and night of Rasheed's native village Debaria. It is cool, and there is a morning breeze. From the pigeon-house comes the 'sound of unfrantic, heavy cooing'. Then a few pigeons begin to fly around: some grey ones with black bands, some brownish ones, one or two white ones. In the evening everywhere 'birds chatter in the trees, the neem trees rustle in the warm evening breeze'. The sunset is 'pink, smoky, and still'. The fields stretched out to the dark horizon on either side. There was not a cloud in the sky. At night frogs croak in a pond somewhere at the edge of the village, cat yowl, buffalo snort in the cattle-shed, few crickets cry, and the grey-white flash of an owl settle on the branch of a neem tree. Seth, as well, depicts the impact of climate of Calcutta in a subtle manner when Lata and Amit get to the Park Street Cemetery, a melancholy place. Founded in 1767, the cemetery was filled up quickly with the European dead. 'Compared to Brahmपुर or Banaras, Allahabad or Agra, Lucknow or Delhi, Calcutta could hardly be considered to have a history, but the climate had bestowed on its comparative recency a desolate and unromantic sense of slow ruin.' (527)

Seth describes the Ganges and the great Pul Mela. When Pran travels downstream the Ganges to Delhi, his mind wanders back home, to the small whitewashed house, to Savita, her sister, her mother—the family that he has taken into his heart and that has taken him into

theirs; and then to the Ganges flowing close by the house. But for Dr. Ila Chattopadhyay ‘The Ganges is an absolutely filthy river’. Dipankar believes, ‘If I bathe, I’ll wash away not only my own sins but those of six generations above me.’ When Maan looks at the river he is struck by a remark he has heard from the mother of his fiancée. The great Pul Mela, ‘the grand bathing day of Ganga Dussehra’ (801) takes place every sixth year and it is the strong belief of Hindus that bathing in the Ganga is ‘especially auspicious’ (539). Kartik Purnima festival is observed much more devotedly here in Brahmipur than almost anywhere in India. The full moon of Kartik brings to an end one of the three especially sacred months for bathing; and since Brahmipur lies on the holiest river of all, many pious people observe their daily dip throughout the month, eat their single meal, worship the tulsi plant, and hang lamps suspended from the end of bamboo poles in small baskets to guide departed souls across the sky. As the Puranas say: ‘What fruit was obtained in the Perfect Age by doing austerities for one hundred years, all that is obtained by a bath in the Five Rivers during the month of Kartik’ (1219). Procreation and the Life of a Man of the World has not gone much better. ‘Today’s lesson was Religion and the Martial Spirit. Even here the Rajkumar had been a wash-out. While the Raja had bellowed ‘Har har Mahadeva!’ ..., the Rajkumar had lowered his head and mumbled the words even more unwillingly. Finally, there was Ritual and Education. The Raja was determined to fling his son into the Ganga. Since the Rajkumar had only a year to go before finishing his university studies, he should partake—even if a trifle prematurely—of the proper Hindu ritual of graduation—the bath or *snaan*—in order to become a proper graduate or *snaatak*. And what better place to become a *snaatak* than in the Holy Ganga during the sexennial Pul Mela, which was always grander than usual?’ (802)

To conclude, Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* is considered an Eco-critical novel as it deals with the environment in succinct manner. The author depicts nature and the constituents of nature vividly – whether it is the garden of Prem Nivas – *harsingar* tree, *jamun* tree, flowers of different varieties and various colours, birds; or the love for animals; or the different phases of a day in a village. Seth also portrays in a succinct manner when the characters of the novel – Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, Ishaq, Maan, Bhaskar, Veena, Pran and others relish the nature related things whenever they encounter with it. It is quite evident that all people have relationships with nature, since it is the medium in which we live it sustains us as human beings.

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