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PORTRAYAL OF INDIA OF THE 1950s IN MIRA NAIR'S MINISERIES A SUITABLE BOY

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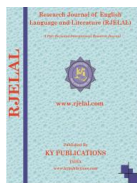
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Abstract



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Vikram Seth's 1474 page novel *A Suitable Boy* written in 1993 was adapted by Andrew Davies into a six episode serial and was directed by Mira Nair. This BBC television drama released on 23 Oct 2020 on Netflix depicts the social, economic, political and cultural upheaval of newly independent India of 1950s. The serial covers the events, the issues and challenges encountered in the time span of one year from 1950 to 1951 in the post independent era. Though on the surface the story appears to be of a mother's aspiration to find a suitable match for her daughter and the daughter torn between her duty towards her mother and her instinct to follow her heart's desire, the serial actually holds a mirror to society. The diversity of characters in the serial represents the various facets of being an Indian in the early 1950s. This paper is an attempt to portray a newly independent India of the 1950s in Mira Nair's miniseries *A Suitable Boy*.

Keywords: Suitable, India, marriage, partition, boy

Mira Nair was born in 1957 in Odisha (formerly called Orissa), India and then moved to New York where she has been residing for about four decades. In 1988, she directed *Salaam Bombay*, a significantly commended account of life in the slums of Mumbai followed by an early Denzel Washington drama, *Mississippi Masala* which is about an Indian from Uganda in the American South. Since then, Nair has made many feature films, including *Monsoon Wedding* in 2001, and has become recognized as one of the finest interpreters of the Indian-immigrant experience. Nair has also adapted classic novels, including *Vanity Fair*, and several pieces of modern literature, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In a Profile of Nair in 2002, John Lahr wrote, 'Nair's

films negotiate disparate ethnic geographies with the same kind of sly civility she practices in life. Her approach is sometimes oblique: she doesn't make political films, but she does make her films politically. Her gift, to which 'Monsoon Wedding' attests, is to make diversity irresistible.'

Mira Nair took upon herself to make the story about Lata finding herself through the sea of suitors, literature, her family and the propriety of nineteen-fifties Indian life, and to knit those strands of essentially a personal humanist look at family life, into a look at a country that was striving to ascertain its freedom. That was her concern. She also draws our attention towards the fact that the seeds of much of the terrible politics of today were also sowed at independence and Partition.

The story *A Suitable Boy* revolves around the inner mechanism of four families related to each other by marriage and friendship. We have the middle class educated Mehras, politically connected Kapoors and the surfeit, sophisticated Chaterjis, who are all Hindus and connected to each other by marriage. The elder daughter of Rupa Mehra, Savita is married to Pran Kapoor, son of Mahesh Kapoor, the Revenue Minister. Then there is glamorous but promiscuous Meenakshi Chaterji married to Rupa Mehra's eldest son Arun Mehra, an anglicized Indian living in Calcutta. Meenakshi's brother Amit, a poet, is a suitor of Lata Mehra. The fourth family is the Khan family. Nawab Sahib of Baitar's friendship with Mahesh Kapoor transcends all religious barriers. His son Feroz Ali Khan too is a close friend of Kapoor's lost, unmoored son Maan. Their friendship is tested when in a fit of rage, jealousy and misunderstanding Maan stabs Feroz. Ultimately the friendship prevails when Maan gets acquitted in the end due to the testimony of Feroz.

The Mehras live in Brahmpur which is a typical Indian town with temples and mosques, but the trauma of partition seems to hang over the town leaving resentment and mistrust in its wake creating long living division between the two communities. Tension breaks out when the Hindus and Muslims take out processions on the occasion of Dusherra and Muharram, which coincide in the lunar calendar. A minor altercation turns into a blood bath leaving everyone blood thirsty. In another incident a conflict brews and Hindu Muslim riots break out due to a Hindu temple being built near a Muslim mosque. Thus the racial tension in the area makes it a tinder box ready to ignite at slightest provocation. Right from the first episode, the rise of Hindu nationalism following the formation of Pakistan is underscored. The building of a temple next to a mosque by the local authorities, backed by the national ruling party, was burningly pertinent at that time, in 1993 when the book released, and is so in the present day. Maan and his best friend Firoz's (Shubham Saraf) relationship is made use of as a layered symbol to the growing Hindu-Muslim dynamics in the country, as the two friends go from enigmatically queer to blinded by wrath and prejudice.

Mira Nair in a conversation with Isaac Chotiner on December 7, 2020 for *The New Yorker* discussed her career as a filmmaker, the challenges of adapting an epic novel, and how rising bigotry in India, led by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, affected her work on *A Suitable Boy*. After the interview, it was reported that members of the B.J.P. called for an inquiry of Netflix, the series' Indian distributor, alleging that the portrayal of a kiss between a Muslim man and Hindu woman deliberately infuriates religious sentiments, which in India is a felony. Netflix has given no public statement, and Nair declined to address the complaint.

Nair's most gratifying elucidation comes in her micro-to-macro juxtaposition of how the politics of Indian matchmaking and lovemaking play out against that of a nation struggling to get to its feet. Through Maan and Lata's analogous journeys and common learnings, she professes the idea that love and ambition need to go hand in hand for a country recently divided on communal lines and given the freedom to choose its path ahead.

Nair said that she was drawn to the political backdrop of a post-independence India as it prepared for its first national election as a democracy, and how Lata's character especially personified the modernity and optimism of the time. 'That idealism and socialism is a huge inspiration for me. My parents came out of that,' she said. Her father, Amrit Nair, was a civil servant in the Indian state of Orissa during the same time and shared the same dream of building a new country. 'It's important to remember where we came from because we could so easily be made to forget,' she said, appending that while the series holds up a mirror to the current society, it also pushes back against disruptive expectations. For example, it demonstrates the strength of Hindu and Muslim relationships even with the political complexities. (Nair herself comes from a Hindu family, while her husband is Muslim.) This includes the friendship between Maan and Firoz, his relationship with Saaeda as well as the interfaith romance between Lata and one of her suitors, a Muslim man named Kabir Durrani.

Mira stated she paid great attention to find a balance in the historical details and cultural nuances, from elite families doing the Foxtrot and dancing impeccably in a Kolkata club to the Hindu and Urdu classical music in the performances by Saeeda, a courtesan and Maan's lover. Nair said she strove to capture the essence of India in the 50s through the locations, scouting for real-life places in the city of Lucknow to find bungalows like the ones she herself grew up in, complete with red oxide floors, arches and sprawling gardens. The textile too seen in the serial reflects the era. Mira Nair in an interview for *Vanity Fair* dated 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020 tells Sonia Saraiya, 'everything was hand loomed. None of the brands and the Adidas- this is vegetable dyed universe, essentially a khadi universe.' She was confident that the series had to highlight the things she considered were significant. 'It was meant to hold a mirror to where we have come from, to enlighten younger folks — and to jog the memory of the older folks — that this is what our history is: Partition had just happened, with all its trauma, but still, we had such an incredibly syncretic way of life, in our language, our music, our poetry.' For Nair, the show was meant to showcase India's history of cultural heterogeneity, and Saeeda's songs 'are so much a part of a non-majoritarian culture, so I was determined to highlight that.'

For her, this is an ode to an India that was, and it is meant to be enjoyed as India was — everything at once. The serial portrays anglicized Indian elite on one side and the vulnerability of the untouchables and the lower class, in Rudhia, on the other. We have Lata, the protagonist, a student of English Literature, Pran, her brother-in-law, a professor of English Literature, Arun, Lata's brother who is a hybrid post-colonial product, mimics English and admires English style and Amit, a celebrated writer and poet. These newly liberated Indians who have been educated reading Shakespeare and Keats remain deeply immersed in the English ways and culture.

The series addresses the political landscape of the time and deals with the first election that the independent nation faces. Mahesh Kapoor an eminent freedom fighter from the Congress party is the minister of Revenue in the state of Purva

Pradesh. A misunderstood visionary he intends to get Zamindari abolition bill passed and the opposition he faces is well reflected. Nawab Sahib of Baitar who represents the decaying feudal world of India is likely to be most hit with the passing of the bill, but this does not affect his personal relationship with Mahesh Kapoor. Just as the politicians of the present whip up communal passion for narrow political ends, we see Waris using the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims to his advantage to win elections and defeat Mahesh Kapoor on his own turf. The peasantry and landlord relations emanate when we watch the campaign of Mahesh Kapoor in the villages of Rudhia and Salimpur standing for Congress party and assisted by his close associate Nawab of Baitar.

As far as the political relevance of the serial goes, we are still where we were in the 1950's. We are still struggling with corruption in politics, self-centered, selfish, unscrupulous politicians, the exploitation of the sentiments of the masses for political gain, the Hindu-Muslim intolerance and strife, the persistence of age old traditions, caste system, untouchability and the horrendous living condition of the slum dwellers.

In the history of Indian societies 'marriage' as an institution has acquired a unique place and has been ever-present in all sections and classes of the society. Within this, finding a groom or a bride is a very seasoned activity. The series primarily mulls over how inter-faith or mixed marriages were deemed unthinkable in those times and which is not acceptable to Lata's family as well. Lata has to choose amongst three suitors: her first love Kabir Durrani who is Lata's college mate and a Muslim by religion, Haresh Khanna who is a self-made man, an England returned shoe manufacturer and Amit Chatterji who is again an England returned poet. In Indian families, society and duty ends up taking a much bigger role in one's decision than personal choice, as we see in the choice that Lata ultimately makes. Though headstrong and independent, she ultimately conforms to the expectations of parents and society by choosing the ambitious, hardworking, successful Harish as her life partner. Lata's coming-of-age mirrors the country's endeavor to step into its own identity, making *A Suitable Boy* not just the

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story of one woman's choice but an entire country's future.

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