



Research Paper

## Ethnic Awareness in Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy'

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### ABSTRACT:

There has been quite a lot of work in the studies of Language in relation to the Society explaining how speakers are gentle in behaviour to one another in what they say and do, and how they try to mitigate impolite behaviour linguistically in order to uphold social aspect. As literature, in many ways, reflects societies, the investigation of principles of politeness in literary discourse can tell us a lot about language, society, culture and thought and thereby can uncover new meanings, implications, and insights into the nature of literary communication that are generally not explained through a strictly traditional analysis. Based on the premise of who speaks; to whom; when; where; how; and why in a variety of contexts, including social contexts, the present paper examines some supra-sentential stretches of dialogic discourse in diverse inter-personal relationships from Vikram Seth's magnum opus **A Suitable Boy** in the light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face Saving view of Politeness. Various issues concerning face management related to personal motives, solidarity principle, power principle, etc. that are opened up through the analysis of the conversational behaviours of characters and the governing force for their choices of one strategy over others within the framework of face-saving politeness can help us better account for the aspects concerning the construction and performance of various personalities and identities— particularly through the inferences generating about the changes in one's character in different inter-personal and socio-cultural contexts. **Ethnic Awareness** refers to one's sense of belonging to an **ethnic** group and the part of one's thinking perceptions, feelings, and behaviour that is due to **ethnic** group membership. **Ethnicity** refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. Furthermore, the application of pragmatic interpretative strategies in the literary studies would also produce multi-level discussions and interpretations of literary texts which may help heighten literary appreciation.

**KEY WORDS:** Ethnic, Ethnicity, inquisitive, Ukrainian, post-partition, anglicized, and entertainment.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Vikram Seth is a prolific post-independence novelist of global status. He has written several novels and poetry. He was born on 20th June 1952 in Kolkata, west Bengal. His father was Premnath Seth and his mother Leila Seth, a barrister by training. Seth has written From Heaven's Lake, a travel book about China, and two collections of poems – The Humble Administrator's Garden and All You Who Sleep Tonight and the two fables. The Golden Gate (1986) is a novel in verse consisting of 596 sonnets. Then, he wrote A Suitable Boy (1994) is his magnum opus. He stunned the literary world with his novel An Equal Music (1999). Vikram Seth created history in more than one way. He is the first Indian English novelist to write a novel entitled The Golden Gate in verse, for which he won the Sahitya Academy Award for the year 1988. Again he is the first Indian English novelist to get a fabulous amount of rupees two crores as advance for this epoch-making novel **A Suitable Boy**.

Generally, the readers' judgment is based on anecdotal references in the story and hence it tends to become tentative. It is against this backdrop that the present paper attempts to show as to how the face-saving model of politeness, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), could be used to uncover real meanings of character utterances through the marked culture-specific discourse features in conversational exchanges regulated by the characters' personal motives and their respective milieus. This may help the readers to form better judgments related to the development of different aspects of personalities of characters through the novel.

The fundamental assumptions of this face-saving view of Brown and Levinson are combined with Goffman's (1967; 1972) concept of 'face' i.e. an individual's publically manifest self-esteem. Face is

something that is emotionally invested by every competent member of a society and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in an interaction. Such cooperation is based on mutual vulnerability of face. Put another way, normally, everyone's face depends on everyone else's is being maintained. Since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own faces, also to threaten others' face. The notion of face reflects two related aspects:

- a) **Negative Face:** It refers to the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction, i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
- b) **Positive Face:** It is related to the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by interactants which certainly includes the desire that this self-image be appreciated, understood, ratified, approved of, liked or admired

The two aspects can be treated as basic wants which every member knows and every member desires and it is in the interest of every member to partially satisfy them. Negative face wants are related to the politeness of non-imposition whereas positive face wants are concerned with the reduction of person's self-image or personality directed towards the other person. Although the content of face will differ in different cultures, the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image or face and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction are universal. Normally, the respect for face is treated as norms or values but not as an unquestionable one. Face can be, and routinely is, ignored in cases of social breakdown or effrontery and also in situations of urgent cooperation and emergency. In any particular society one may expect the notion of face to be culturally highly elaborative. This core concept of 'face' is subject to cultural specifications of many sorts, e.g. what kinds of acts threaten face; what sorts of person have special rights to face protection; what kinds of personal style are specially appreciated. On the other hand, notions of face naturally link up to some of the most fundamental cultural ideas about the nature of social persona, honour and virtue, shame and redemption and thus to religious concepts. But, despite all rich elaborations, the core ideas in the notion of face have a striking familiarity.

#### **What is Ethnic Awareness?**

**Ethnic Awareness** is relating to or characteristic of a human group having racial, religious, linguistic, and certain other traits in common. It is also relating to the classification of mankind into groups, esp. on the basis of racial characteristics. Further it is denoting or deriving from the cultural traditions of a group of people.

#### **Sense of Ethnic Awareness:**

Ethnic awareness is proposed to be the foundation for ethnic identity that typically emerges in early adolescence. Ethnic awareness includes three distinct dimensions: sense of belonging, sense of community, and sense of place within the context of their ethnic group. There has been little investigation of children's emerging sense of ethnic awareness during the preschool year when children's social-cognitive abilities to recognize differences and similarities among ethnic groups emerge. Entry into preschool provides children with the opportunities to interact and develop relationships with peers. These relationships may help children to learn more about and internalize their sense of ethnic awareness. Reciprocally, children's sense of ethnic awareness may contribute to the frequency of their peer interactions. How children's emerging sense of ethnic awareness is associated with the frequency of their peer interactions is understudied in early childhood.

Using a sample of 231 low-income, ethnically diverse families in Western Canada, the current study tested three theoretically guided models to examine how children's emerging sense of ethnic awareness and peer interactions (positive peer interactions and peer conflict) are associated across a preschool year. The awareness-driven model tested whether children's sense of ethnic awareness contributes to prospective frequency of peer interactions. The peer-driven model tested whether peer interactions contribute to prospective proficiency of sense of ethnic awareness. The transactional model tested whether sense of ethnic awareness and peer interactions were reciprocally related. Ethnicity and immigration status were tested as moderators of the associations between children's sense of ethnic awareness and peer interactions.

The awareness-driven model fit the data best for positive peer interactions whereas the peer-driven model fit the data best for peer conflict. The transactional model did not provide a better fit to the data. Ethnicity and immigration status did not moderate these associations. Children who had a more proficient sense of ethnic awareness had more frequent positive peer interactions at the end of the school year. Alternatively, children who had more frequent peer conflict had a less proficient sense of ethnic awareness at the end of the school year.

One of the biggest traps when adapting a literary novel to screen is the director's temptation to include just about everything in the text. Mira Nair's "A Suitable Boy," based on Vikram Seth's 1993 1300-page magnum opus, falls precisely into this trap.

Set in the fictional university town of Brahmpur in 1951, four years after the British left the partitioned subcontinent, the series tries exploring the sense of freedom emerging at the political, social and personal levels. Even as new equations are forming among parties professing different ideologies, and the youth are

experimenting with newer notions of romantic love, writer Andrew Davies' core plot to place the life of 19-year-old Lata (Tanya Maniktala) in the context of a bewildering choice of suitors loses its way in the melange of men and women.

Her sweetly domineering mother insists that she and she alone, must have the right to choose a suitable groom, but Lata falls in and out of love with three men, each affair accentuating her confusion. There is Kabir Durrani (Danesh Razvi), a handsome history undergrad and budding cricketer who Lata is passionately fond of. Poet and British-educated Amit Chatterji (Mikhail Sen) and disciplined, self-made shoemaker Haresh Khanna (Namit Das) also compete for her affections in a story which conveys the dilemma of a girl fighting to free herself from societal shackles. But Nair goes overboard here. Scenes of Lata kissing Kabir in a public place in the extremely conservative 1950s India appear like the director's desperate attempt to prove a point. I am sure she could have taken the liberty to digress from the novel.

"**A Suitable Boy**" has other tracks, too. A respected politician's son, Maan Kapoor (Ishaan Khatter), who is infatuated with an older courtesan, Saeeda Bai Firozabadi (Tabu), plays a role in the series. Lata's arrogant brother and sister Savita (Rasika Dugal) are part of the motley group. It is her marriage that kicks off the series mirroring the political-religious animosities of a new nation and the personal battles of the youth.

The street scenes in what was then called Calcutta appear wonderfully authentic, replete with its quaint trams and hand-pulled rickshaws. Refreshing performances — particularly Maniktala's — pep up the visual appeal. Yet, "A Suitable Boy" is certainly not in the same league as Nair's 2001 Venice Golden Lion winner "Monsoon Wedding."

**A Suitable Boy** is about an inquisitive young lady flirting with a future planned by her mother. Lata Mehra (Tanya Maniktala) falls in love with Kabir Durrani, a Muslim classmate; her mother Rupa (Mahira Kakkar) reacts by setting Lata up with handpicked Hindu suitors — "suitable boys" — in other towns. *A Suitable Boy* is also about a mercurial young man resisting a future conceived by his father. Maan Kapoor (Ishaan Khatter), a drifter, falls in love with Saeeda Bai (Tabu), an older Muslim courtesan; his father Mahesh (Ram Kapoor), the Revenue Minister, reacts by banishing him till Maan finds maturity. Most of all, *A Suitable Boy* is about a democratic young nation confronting a future hastily mapped out by its former colonial rulers. It is 1951 in Brahmputr, four years since the Partition, and an increasingly communal India is on the verge of its first General elections. India is half-Lata, confident but compromising, and half-Maan, passionate but pained. Lata, Maan, their fates and their families become both metaphor and mirror for a country torn between inherited identity and inherent individualism.

These broader analogies are made apparent in Mira Nair's six-episode mini-series: a curious adaptation of Vikram Seth's mammoth 1488-page novel. Lata and Maan are introduced at a wedding, as protagonists whose free spirits demand course correction. We then see the teething contrasts of the India-Pakistan relationship: Innocent homoerotic undertones between Maan and his best friend Feroz ("purer than love but less problematic") represent the past; the doomed sexual tension between Lata and Kabir — who, being an Indian Muslim, is shown as an aspiring batsman rather than a fast bowler — indicates the dissolution of history. Saeeda Bai's mansion bristles with forlorn blues and faded greens. Lata's family bristles with transitional tension: a nosy mother, a "black sheep" younger brother, a snooty elder brother, a diplomatic sister, a sultry sister-in-law. Each of them stands for the ambivalence of tradition: How does one distinguish between being and becoming? Lata's suitors too — a cricketer, a poet and a shoemaker — represent a move from British legacy to Indian craftsmanship. Communal riots culminate in terrace viewpoints, where horrified characters watch the sky burn. Even the opening credits are set against a blood-drenched Radcliffe Line; the red borders morph into corpses and trains, while the musical score features pensive sitar strings and tabla beats.

The narrative description is epic, but I want to say the same about its storytelling. Nair's rendition feels cold and distant, as if it were introducing a race instead of navigating it. Most of the show's flaws are rooted in the use of language. First, there's the brisk cinematic language. Condensing the vastness of a literary universe into visual snapshots is one of the toughest aspects of filmmaking. Every book combines the rhythm of its own world with that of the reader imagining it — a paragraph of a lover in longing relies on its own prose just as much as the physical circumstances of a reader who, through smells and sounds and memories, chooses to internalize it. The screen holds the disadvantage of containing, rather than invoking, these sentences. Suddenly the viewer *sees* the definition of a moment. What Mira Nair does is edit the time — the banter, stillness, and reflections, regrets — of a people on the verge of creating a new time.

As a result there is no space for subtext to breathe; every scene exists to take the text forward instead of inward. Maan experiences love at first sight because it's written, just like that, not because *he* experiences it. Fine actors appear in bit roles that play out like highlight packages of full-bodied lives. Without a voiceover and intertitles, one can sense the obligation of the characters to convey narrative motion. For instance, when we first see Mahesh Kapoor with the Nawab of Baitar, Mahesh is speaking *at* him. He seems to be conveying the history of his Muslim friend to familiarize viewers with the era: "When your father and brother moved to Pakistan four years ago...". When Maan attempts to meet Saeeda Bai during Muharram, Feroz intercepts him and heatedly

explains the significance of Muharram to him. The exposition sounds amateur and stilted. This is also related to a more literal problem in the show's language.

I'm not entirely sold on "creative license" – especially cultural appropriation – for art to be globally accessible. But context matters. I didn't mind, for example, *Chernobyl* being filmed with English-speaking actors in an Ukrainian setting. The essence of the show was systemic tragedy, the sensory horrors of which are universal and bereft of language. More importantly, English was a mother-tongue for most of the lead cast; there were no local actors pretending to converse in a secondary language. Yet, the same license for something like *A Suitable Boy* infects the very DNA of the premise. The concept of a voice is central to the evolution of a young country. For better or worse, the sound of this voice is inseparable from our reading of its stories.

Acting is a linguistic medium – the use, or misuse, of language defines the anatomy of a performance. A character can learn any language, but it's futile if he or she doesn't appear to think and behave in that language. In that sense, *A Suitable Boy* is a distinctly brown series, and I don't mean that in a South Asian way. Homegrown Indian actors here are made to sound like brown-faced Western actors. The term "brown" automatically implies the existence of White as a default setting – a default skin-colour, a default storytelling style, a default audience. A case can be made that the Kapoors and the Mehras are colonially hung-over; only a few years after independence, their soul is still white.

But it's clear that the Indian characters, despite their milieu, are speaking in both a literary language and a commercial one. It's the kind of anglicized English they use – written by an Indian author, yes, but also adapted by a British screenwriter – that makes the most casual exchanges look stagey and performative. Irrespective of whether English is the tongue of the actors involved, the aristocratic grammar is not. The lines are recited, not delivered. For a better idea, imagine if I narrated this review, verbatim, on video. The formal sentence construction is written to be read, not spoken or heard. One can of course choose the Hindi-dubbed version on Netflix, but that's even more jarring – the gait and faces are fashioned to the sounds of English. Consequently, the performances feel laboured. Extended cameos by Manoj Pahwa, Ranvir Shorey, Vijay Varma and Vinay Pathak are derailed by the "Slumdog Syndrome": son-of-the-soil Indians giving oral exams. Ishaan Khatter and Tanya Maniktala try their damndest to undo their dialogue with expressive eyes and exuberance. But they remain prisoners of their words. Maniktala in particular displays a bewildered, cosmopolitan air, as if Lata were constantly reacting to Instagram statuses rather than real people. In a crucial scene, Lata responds, "Well, I should certainly hope so!" – While running, breathless, alongside a moving train, on a railway platform. Maan's standout moment features him in a riot, fending off a rabid Hindu mob in a language *they* understand rather than the one viewer is supposed to. The better parts feature Tabu's Saeeda Bai speaking in Urdu – the chasm in language and culture, after all, defines her relationship with Maan. Hers is the only character whose emotions seem to dictate the language she speaks – upset in Urdu, intimate in English, distant in Hindustani. Namit Das, as one of Lata's suitors, is remarkable too, because he speaks in a vernacular that aids his character's unpretentious personality.

At one point, a group of Indian college students perform William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. This is when the ethnic disconnect of *A Suitable Boy* truly comes to the fore. I couldn't tell the difference between play rehearsals, the bard's lines and the series itself. They speak with the same studied intonations and theatricality. When the drama teacher gets distracted, a couple of them in the background break into Hindi. The respite is ironic. The masks within the masks are off – a fleeting glimpse of the most suitable version of *A Suitable Boy*.

The six-part TV series is based on the seminal novel by **Vikram Seth** which follows Lata's experience. Although the story of Lata is fictional, the novel's context is based in reality. *A Suitable Boy* is set in 1951, in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition of India.

The six-part drama has been hailed as the first all-Indian period drama on western TV. Written by Andrew Davies, who is considered the Spielberg of the genre thanks to his adaptation of books such as *Pride and Prejudice*, it was shot entirely on location in India. The drama features an all-star cast that includes Indian film legend Tabu, who says it was high time that the story of partition was brought to the screen.

"We have seen glimpses and flashes of Indian culture, but *A Suitable Boy* is part-fiction, part-inspired by real life and what was happening at the time of partition," she says, "and that's what makes it interesting. It is not just a historical documentary but a story of people's lives and how they were being changed by historical events."

Set in early Fifties, post-partition India as it prepares for its first free election, the series centres on Lata Mehra, a vivacious 19-year-old student from a traditional Hindu family, whose widowed mother Rupa goes in search for "a suitable boy". Her mother's efforts would give Auntie Sima from Netflix's *Indian Matchmaker* a run for her money. The visual sumptuousness of the series – which combines the colour and musicality of Indian culture and the darker side of society and political turmoil with the seamless intricacy of a bridal sari – shows a picture of Indian society we rarely see in the west.

As Saeeda Bai – a beautiful courtesan who scandalises polite society through her relationship with a handsome young politician's son half her age – Tabu gives one of the stand-out performances of the series.



Although director Mira Nair said they resisted the temptation to “sex up” the series for western audiences, the subtle sensuality of Tabu’s performance – she seems to convey more sexiness in one flutter of her eyelashes than the whole *Fifty Shades* trilogy managed – has meant the series has been dubbed not so much a bodice ripper as a sari blouse buster.

“The journey of this character is sexy because there is romance, there’s love and passion and she’s a courtesan entertaining royalty and the aristocrats of that time,” says Tabu, whose real name is Tabassum Hashmi. “Courtesans are part of India’s history. Saeeda represents a part of the culture that was prevalent at the time.” She continues: “The women utilised their beauty, glamour and musical abilities to entertain men and it was something that was not looked down upon at that time. Saeeda is an outsider but she is intertwined with the story, which shows the fine line between respectable society and her world and what can happen when those lines are crossed.”

She wants more awareness for Indian cinema beyond the *Goodness Gracious Me* parody of Bollywood couples dancing around snow-capped mountains: “I don’t like the term Bollywood,” she says. “It isn’t the only type of film making in India. Western audiences associate Indian cinema with Bollywood film stars dancing around trees. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s only one facet of Indian cinema.”

One relatable theme explored in *A Suitable Boy* is the dilemma between following your heart and following your duty, when Lata falls in love with a Muslim boy. Their relationship – and the tensions it causes – offers a microcosm of the growing friction between India’s Hindu and Muslim communities, which are exploited by politicians around elections.

The sectarian tensions that form the darker subtext of the series are timely, and there are unmistakable parallels with current events in India; the recent protests in India, for example, against the Citizens Amendment Bill – which offers amnesty to undocumented non-Muslims from three neighbouring countries and was dubbed the “anti-Muslim bill”.

But as soon as I mention the political themes of the story, Tabu’s eyes widen in horror and she lets out a gasp, frantically making scissor gestures and running her finger across her neck in a cutting motion. “Let’s skip this question,” she says, adamantly. Though her reaction is surprising given the plot of the novel, it is also understandable. The pressures on actors of Muslim origin – which Tabu is – to prove their loyalties to the nation are enormous. An ill-timed remark can result in protests, even death threats.

Politics aside, *A Suitable Boy* is ultimately a universal story about finding love. Lata’s journey towards finding herself, at a time when the country is also finding its feet, is something to which almost all can relate.

According to Tabu, *A Suitable Boy* is a coming-of-age story not just for Lata, but for ethnic, female representation on TV. “The representation of women is changing, not just in Bollywood, but in every industry,” she says, “and going in different directions where female representation is concerned. We have come a long way in giving multi-layered roles to women. This is just the start.”

The first episode of the new BBC television series “*A Suitable Boy*”, which features a primarily Indian cast and is set in a newly independent, post-partition India starts off with wedding, talks of arranged marriages and ends with violent religious clashes.

Directed by the award-winning Indian American filmmaker Mira Nair, the six-part miniseries, which was adapted from Vikram Seth’s 1993 book of the same name, tells the coming-of-age stories of two young protagonists set against the backdrop of a country adapting to its newfound freedom after almost two centuries under British rule.

Through parallels between personal stories and politics, “*A Suitable Boy*” exhibits and subverts several cultural stereotypes that deal with traditional family dynamics, religious intolerance, class differences and interfaith relationships. “All of my work has always been about showing who we really are and not pandering to the Western ideas of our culture,” Nair told NBC Asian America. Nair, 67, is known for exploring South Asian families and society in her films, which include “The Namesake,” “Mississippi Masala,” “Monsoon Wedding,” and “Salaam Bombay!” which was nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign language film.

“*A Suitable Boy*” was adapted for screenplay by Andrew Davies. The drama is set primarily in the fictional Indian town of Brahmpur in 1951. Lata Mehra, played by Tanya Maniktala, is a 19-year-old English literature student at a university whose mother is obsessively trying to arrange her marriage.

Meanwhile, the rebellious Maan Kapoor, played by Ishaan Khatter, begins an affair with an older Muslim woman. 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 embodied 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, adding that while the series holds up a mirror to the current society, it also pushes back against divisive expectations. For instance, it shows the strength of Hindu and Muslim relationships despite 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 Saeeda as well as the interfaith romance between Lata and one of her suitors, a Muslim man named Kabir Durrani.

However, the kissing scenes between Lata and Kabir set outside a temple have caused a stir in India. A case has been filed against two executives at Netflix India, where the series is streaming, after some leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party objected to the scenes on the notion that it hurts religious sentiments.

## II. CONCLUSION:

“A Suitable Boy” also received flak from a few critics for being almost entirely in English, questioning the authenticity of the narrative and for whom the period drama is made. But Nair said these criticisms feel misplaced. She said the world of the book is also anglicized, the influence of 200 years of British rule.

She said she paid great attention to find a balance in the historical details and cultural nuances, from elite families doing the Foxtrot and dancing flawlessly in a Kolkata club to the Hindu and Urdu classical music in the performances by Saeeda, a courtesan and Maan’s lover. “It’s also a big period piece in its own way,” Nair said. “We had to do months of vital preparation to get everything right: the sets, the costumes, the colors.” Nair said she tried 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.

“A Suitable Boy” features an ensemble cast mostly from the Indian entertainment industry, led by newcomer Maniktala, rising Bollywood star Khatter, acclaimed actress Tabu, as well as prominent performers such as Ram Kapoor, Rasika Dugal, Ranvir Shorey, Vijay Raaz and Aamir Bashir. Nair, who was involved in the casting process, said she is most excited for U.S. audiences to discover this talent. The miniseries previously aired in the U.K. and has been streaming on Netflix in other parts of the world.

“I also hope that everyone can see aspects of themselves in the story. It’s not a magical journey or something — it’s a human saga,” Nair said. “The characters are myriad, human, and unpredictable, which makes it relatable even if American audiences aren’t aware of the country’s history or the details of the India-Pakistan partition.”

In a word, ethnic awareness is highlighted in every sphere of the creative art of Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*.

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