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## Women and Marriage: Study of *Pride and Prejudice* and *A Suitable Boy*

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### **Abstract:**

The objective of the present paper is to analyze the significance of marriage in relation to women particularly Regency women and their counterparts in Post-independent India. For this purpose Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* has been taken into consideration. Both the novels have been written under different social milieu but one common aspect lies in concern of mother towards her unmarried daughter and this is what leads to the cultural understanding of West and East. The social scenario prevalent in Regency England and Post-independent India too is an important focus. In brief paper attempts to analyze a comparative study where different issues in relation to women particularly her choice for life partner has been taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** Women, Marriage, Regency England, Post-independent India.

The concept of gender (man and woman) as claimed by Feminists is socially constructed so is marriage. The very fact is that human beings are products of society and as such are governed by norms. This yardstick is equally applicable to both men and women. In simple words: "A marriage is legally a union between two people generally a man and a woman in whom they are united sexually, cooperate economically and may give birth to, adopt or rear children. The union is assumed to be permanent (although it may be dissolved by separation or divorce)" (Strong et al. 7).

But women whatsoever the society, culture or nationality have always been a subject of discussion in relation with their desires and aspirations. The question which remains to be addressed is with reference to the status of women. This is where gender bias too plays its role, and this can be well applied in the context of marriage. However, one common belief is that "the changing status and position of women in different periods and different civilizations have very greatly influenced her upbringing and education. If during one period of time or in one civilization she was brought up as a prized possession of parents in some others, she was completely neglected and accepted only as a provider of sexual pleasure to man and as a producer of his off spring" (Majumdar 7). This fact cannot be denied that in olden times society was patrilineal and the status of woman was defined by man. "The western countries being mostly followers of Christianity dominated the status and position of the woman as indicated by their religion. Hence in most of them till quite recently women were given very low status in comparison to men. The Christians considered the woman as temptations of the world of flesh and of the devil. The fathers of church believed in myth that Eve led Adam into sin" (Majumdar 22).

### **Women in Regency England**

Accordingly it is important to analyze the status of women in Regency England and

what were the conditions which compelled them to enter in wedlock as early as possible. Regency era as such comprised of landowners and lower gentry, where men had access to everything and women confined themselves to domestic work only. It was only in household work that woman attained the status of ruler. She "... is the housewife and mother and where housekeeping and upbringing are not done in person, she has the full responsibility, nevertheless and becomes with the large household an administrator. Generally speaking the house and what goes on inside it is the woman's concern while the estate and what goes on outside are the man's" (Craik 56-57). Outside home woman had no role to play. An unmarried woman without fortune was generally a ridiculous object in the eyes of society. She was nick named as old maid. "Single blessedness' was just a polite term for the more derogatory 'old maid' a term commonly used at the time by men and women alike. There were worse epithets. 'Ape Leader' was one of them listed in a popular slang dictionary and defined as: 'An Old maid their punishment after death for neglecting to increase and multiply will be it is said leading apes in hell'" (Jones 193-94). She in all probabilities was dependent on the generosity of her acquaintances. Right from her youth she had to pass through various trials and tribulations. "... it is probable that after having passed the sprightly years of youth in the comfortable mansion of an opulent father, she is reduced to the shelter of some contracted lodging in a country town attended by a single female relevant, and with difficulty living on the interest of two or three thousand pounds reluctantly and perhaps irregularly paid to her by an avaricious or extravagant brother who considers such payment as a heavy encumbrance on his paternal estate. Such is the condition in which the unmarried daughters of English gentlemen were frequently found" (Jones 174-75). Therefore matrimony was the only option available to regency woman through which she could secure her true self.

### **Women in Pre and Post-Independent India**

"In Indian culture since very early periods, women as a group has been dominated by men and their status has been low in the family and society" (Anuja 7). That was because of illiteracy, financial dependence and patriarchy. The customs like polygamy, Purdah system (seen among Muslims) were the prominent ones. It was only when India achieved independence that things began to change slowly and steadily. "Only in Post colonial India, education of girls started being considered important and necessary but somehow its importance is linked with the better chances in matrimonial market. Education can provide not only good jobs, but also good marriages" (Nubile 13-14). This is the strategy which works with Indian mind even in present times.

However for a woman in Regency England marriage was the need of hour. The same situation was prevalent in India at the time of independence. But one important aspect which deserves to be mentioned is the trend of arranged marriages in India for the simple reason that it fits the framework of social structure. The Indian system of arranged marriages is a broad concept. "Marriage in India has been closely related to caste hierarchy and caste endogamy has remained a critical point in arranged marriages" (Chauhan 153). While arranging marriage the role of family cannot be denied. Even in present times the practice seen in most of the Indian families is to put the matrimonial advertisement in some leading newspapers where lot of emphasis is given on specific attributes of a prospective alliance. Financial status is an integral part of arranged marriages in India. Courtship (even in present times also) too plays a crucial role where men and women are given an opportunity to understand each other.

Regency England is exactly a duplicate picture of what was seen in Post-independent India, (where alliances were arranged) spas, picnic sports, and assembly rooms prepared the platform for courtship. "Sons and daughters were allowed to exercise a degree of choice of whom they married, needed advice on how to assess character, how to behave in the assembly room, springing up in every town in England, how to attract the opposite sex, how to make or refuse a proposal and finally how to fulfill their role as husbands and more especially wives" (Jones 2).

Marriage in Regency era was a financial business and in doing settlements, parental veto was taken into consideration. If anything untoward happened woman was the first sufferer. English novels written during Regency period particularly of Jane Austen can be regarded as an outstanding example where courtship becomes central subject, "... because it involved both the social perpetuation of a family line, through inherited property and the intermixture of social classes" (Bhattacharya 74). Jane Austen never married but she too was aware of the problems confronted by an unmarried women. For men no worry at all, but for women husband hunting was simply an order of the day.

But what if a woman tries to go for inter religious marriage. This is where Vikram Seth moves a little further from Jane Austen and puts question mark on the consequences. Austen's heroines marry men of their choice despite the fact that obstacles come to their way.

Vikram Seth as such falls in Post-independent India. To put it specifically it was the new emerging India governed by norms and taboos, where violation always led to bad results. The question which remains to be addressed is with reference to inter religious marriage. Such type of marriage is solemnized only when there is approval from both the parties. The other part of the story is that it is followed by fear to lose one's reputation and several other uncertainties which at times can result in conflict. Strictly speaking such marriages in case of opposition are followed by elopement.

Whether it is Regency England or Post-independent India elopement had its own repercussions. Elopement was the order of the day in Regency England and found its way into the press, "... the press seized on every example of impropriety it could find...". Jane Austen herself was quite interested to spread news about "... forthcoming, arrangements or make observations on happy and unhappy alliance comments successfully on adulteries, elopements and divorces and described balls at which young women fall woefully short of making desired impressions" (Jones 101-04). Jane Austen through her fictional world speaks about the best kind of union (between husband and wife) based on compatibility. To put it specifically it is the union of minds and not only physical self. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* repeats the same story but Seth doesn't allow elopement to reach its climax, because of conservative background of Indian culture. His heroine Lata Mehra falls in love with a Muslim boy Kabir Durrani but ultimately she is left with no option except to marry the boy of her mother's choice. "At the heart of it says Seth about the novel 'it's really a love story.' It presents multiple shades of love, such as romance, friendship, lust, love and marriage" (Singh 13). In simple terms *A Suitable Boy* is about four families, Mehras, Kapoors, Chaterjees, and Khans and this has lot of similarity when Jane Austen speaks about, "... three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work upon" (Bhattacharya 138). Familial atmosphere is prevalent with both, Jane Austen and Vikram Seth. *A Suitable Boy* on the whole deals with several issues like independence of India and its aftermath.

The tannery work of Haresh Khanna plays a crucial role in the plot making, since it is Haresh Khanna who ultimately becomes suitable boy for Lata. “The ultimate and familiar portrait of an over sized India that we find in *A Suitable Boy* is then a product of a realistic, authentic, which like Austen’s is given to anthro-morphizing. In other words the novel is about the world of men and women and about the world of history. But it is history as inscribed not in the larger events of war and revolutions, but in the ordinary quotidian events of eating and drinking and growing up and marrying and dying” (Mohapatra and Nayak 36). Everyone in the novel is in search of something. Mrs. Roopa Mehra is looking for a suitable alliance for her daughter Lata. Mrs. Chatterjee feels worried about her daughter Kakoli, Dipankar (the eldest son of Chatterjee’s) searches for spirituality.

Apart from all this there are several components which can be well linked with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. That is the emergence of middle class where both Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Roopa Mehra find themselves on one common platform, looking for a suitable alliance for their daughter. The struggle of these two women deserves to be mentioned. “Like pilgrims they religiously and dutifully devote their entire time to reach one goal – the marriage of their daughters. This passionate search for Mrs. Mehra is unparalleled in history of Indian writers in English and thus Austen and Seth is a class by themselves” (Aggarwalla 11). In addition to this there are several references to the works of Jane Austen as well. At one place Lata Mehra reads *Emma* when she is on her way from Calcutta to Kanpur so as to see Haresh. There is reference to Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* which Lata buys from bookshop and meets Kabir but this happens only towards the end. Moreover it is business of marriage which unites both the novels. The core issue in *Pride and Prejudice* is connected with Bennet sisters and their relationship with several men, whom they encounter *Pride and Prejudice* presents a beautiful world of eighteenth century life style. Mrs. Bennet is very pushy. She wants everything to go according to her own way. In the words of narrator: “The business of her life was to get her daughters married its solace was visiting and news” (Austen 53). At one point of time she persuades Elizabeth to marry Collins. In *A Suitable Boy* Mrs. Roopa Mehra speaks about all those issues connected with religion, caste, and social standing so as to get a suitable alliance for her daughter Lata. Her first sentence: “You will have to marry the boy I chose” (Seth 5). This speaks of her domineering attitude towards Lata. Apart from domineering attitude there is glimpse of maternal concern as well that she wants to see Lata settle down. In order to get Lata married Mrs. Roopa Mehra consults her relatives, writes letter, travels from place to place in search of a suitable boy. This is quite similar to what Mrs. Bennet does in *Pride and Prejudice* she proves her supermacy by giving substantial dinners which pleases even pampered Darcy.

Another striking similarity between two novels is female bonding. To put it more specifically women appear in groups in both the novels. “Historically women have worked together in groups to feed, nurse, house and petition for the release of men and children endeavours otherwise known as ‘humanitarian’” (Chesler 390-91). What all these women mostly talked about is marriage. Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas reveal secrets to each other despite the fact that both of them have different opinions about marriage and man-woman relationships. Charlotte Lucas prefers marriage of convenience and nothing else. But Elizabeth Bennet speaks about compatibility. In *A Suitable Boy* Lata Mehra and Malati Trivedi are close friends. Malati Trivedi acts as a prime source of gossip, giving essential details about Kabir Durrani the first suitor of

Lata Mehra. Likewise women in *Pride and Prejudice* gossip about Darcy and Charles Bingley when they make their way to Longbourn. *Pride and Prejudice* presents a world of friendship and relationships. Mrs. Bennet has good chemistry with her neighbour Lady Lucas and both women are seen together so as to give latest update to each other about who will marry whom. Looking back to *A Suitable Boy* Mrs. Roopa Mehra has cordial relations with Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, Mrs. Tandon, Mrs. Sahgal and Kalpana Gaur, one of the family friend acts as an intermediary between Lata and Haresh Khanna. Malati Trivedi, Lata's friend too has an instrumental role to play. "Bold and out spoken Malati Trivedi functions as a foil for Lata's personality and is highly critical of Lata's rational justification of her choice of husband" (Pandurang 128). What dominates the novel is the domestic world of women. Except Abida Khan, (Nawab's acquaintance) Malati Trivedi, and Illa Chattopadhyaya, rest of the women absorb themselves in family issues. This is quite relevant to what is seen in *Pride and Prejudice* where women remain fixed and their movement is restricted to certain specific places. Thus Bingley sisters move only in the company of their brother. In a similar manner Elizabeth and Jane Bennet follow the men they marry.

The question which remains to be addressed with both novels lies in the selection of suitors. Taking *Pride and Prejudice* into consideration three men (Darcy, George Wickham, and Mr. Collins) come into life of Elizabeth Bennet. But with Jane Austen it is only compatibility which leads to the foundation of relationship. The same yard stick can be applied to Darcy and Elizabeth. Initially both of them are not comfortable with each other. The feelings between the two develop gradually and steadily as they come to know about each other. It is mutual understanding which leads to their relationship. Elizabeth Bennet's relationship with other men particularly with George Wickham does not go for a prolonged period because he is deceitful and inconstant person. With Collins, it is the repetition of the same story because marriage for him is not a matter of heart but financial business.

Jane Austen gives her heroines a little respite when it comes to the question of selecting a partner. Vikram Seth has moved a little further from this very step and puts emphasis on repercussions involved in interreligious marriage. Three suitors Kabir Durrani, Amit Chatterjee, and Haresh Khanna come into the life of Lata Mehra. Kabir Durrani being a fellow student falls in love with Lata and she with him. But Kabir Durrani has other plans when he says: "Two years I think, first I have to finish my degree. After that I'm going to apply to get into Cambridge or maybe I take exam for the Indian Forest Service" (Seth 186). With Kabir Durrani it is the romantic self which plays a key role where decisions are taken abruptly. This fact cannot be denied that novel as such deals with Post-independent India. Accordingly, "In the aftermath of the horrible Indian Partition and the resultant communal, frenzy in 1951-52 it was unthinkable on the part of Seth to show an interreligious marriage between Kabir Durrani and Lata. Even in 1995, the showing of the marriage of a Muslim girl, with a Hindu Boy in *Bombay* directed by Mani Ratnam has raised dust of controversy among Hindus and Muslims" (Agarwalla 28). Despite the fact that Lata and Kabir loved each other passionately but their wedlock would have resulted in disharmony. Amit Chatterjee being a distant relative of Mehra's is simply a poet and his financial status is not upto the mark. This is one of the reasons why Lata rejects him. Finally it is only Haresh Khanna who claims the trophy of a suitable boy. "As for a dowry (continued Kalpana in her curvaceously looked script) he isn't the kind of man to ask for it and there is no one to ask for it on his

behalf.” This proves to be an added advantage. The caravan of matrimony between Haresh and Lata proceeds slowly. In the very beginning Lata is not comfortable with Haresh. “Her first impression of him was that he was short then she had expected. The next when he opened his mouth to speak was that he had been chewing paan...” (Seth 562,569). Before meeting Lata Mehra Haresh Khanna had a relationship with a Sikh girl named Simran about whom he speaks boldly about Simran to Lata. But there also the marriage between two remained out of question because of interreligious faith. Had Haresh entered in wedlock with Simran he would have meted the same fate which Lata Mehra would have experienced with Kabir Durrani. Why Haresh becomes suitable boy for Lata simply because both of them have similar story to share with each other. Haresh too makes a sacrifice and gives up paan chewing. Because “... relationships especially marriage is one such relation where accepting each other with their imperfections is the key” (Gupta 2). What is so impressive about Haresh is his enthusiasm to participate in every activity and this is what impresses Mrs. Roopa Mehra. Her dealings with Haresh Khanna remind us of Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Philips in *Pride and Prejudice*. *A Suitable Boy* begins with the wedding of Pran Kapoor (elder son of Mrs. Mehesh Kapoor) and Savita Mehra (elder daughter of Mrs. Roopa Mehra) and ends with the wedding of Haresh Khanna and Lata Mehra. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* presents different types of marriages excluding Gardiners’ and Lucases’ the remaining five marriages are typical contrast to each other. With Bennets Austen presents a failed marriage. The counterpart of Bennets we see in Kapoors. With Kapoors there is no failed marriage as such but their approach to view the world is different. Mahesh Kapoor wanted his wife to be in private sphere and gives her no room in public.

Looking back to *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Bennet’s union with Charles Bingley is an arranged one, but it is based on compatibility and passionate tenderness. This yardstick is equally applicable to Pran and Savita because “... they recognized the limits and possibilities their yearnings did not sketch beyond their reach. They loved each other or rather had come to do so” (Seth 952). The other couples Meenakshi (Daughter in-law of Mrs. Roopa Mehra) and Arun (Son of Mrs. Roopa Mehra) present a dark side of marriage where both husband and wife involve themselves in extramarital relations. The counterpart of Meenakshi and Arun we see in Lydia Bennet and George Wickham. The message is clear that the feelings are transient. Particularly Lydia has an epicurean taste for life, so has Meenakshi. While Elizabeth’s marriage with Darcy, is the most companionate of all marriages in *Pride and Prejudice*. Lata Mehra on the other hand has to go according to the conventions of society. She renounces her romantic self (Kabir) and accepts the responsibility of familial relationship. Towards the end she is only Haresh’s wife the “Bride of Goodyear Welted” (Seth 1333). Her marriage is solemnized in the interest of all.

“Marriage is a crucial metonymic concern in Seth as in Austen. The question of who will turn out to be the ‘suitable boy’ from amongst the host of suitors and contenders for the hand of the girl seems to translate in the last analysis into the question of who will best embody the values and aspirations of the emergent class, and will by so doing guide the nation towards its rightful destiny...” The difficulty in making choices is even seen in Jane Austen’s fiction as well, but her women do emerge victorious towards the end. Elizabeth Bennet is blessed with the extraordinary liveliness of mind. No doubt she at times gets involved in prejudices commits mistakes but makes assessments as

well. Even when she rejects Collins she does not succumb and towards the end when she realizes Darcy's real worth she gladly accepts his proposal to the surprise of everyone. Lata Mehra on the other hand faces the dilemma. It is only when she is persuaded by her mother her decision to enter in wedlock with Haresh Khanna is executed in time. "The point of course is that if *A Suitable Boy* is Austenian in one respect, it is fundamentally unAustenian in another respect which is to do, with its being an Indian story. This, duality is of course a feature of an Indian English story" (Mohapatra and Nayak 27, 28).

With Vikram Seth it is the communal bias which leads to break up of relationships. While Jane Austen at her own level, speaks about the flaws of human relationship. To conclude we can say that rules and norms are specifically recommended to middleclass. Middleclass is always at the helm of affairs when things go topsy-turvy and this is the common aspect seen with Jane Austen and Vikram Seth.

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