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Patriarchy Portrayed In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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The objective of this paper is to present patriarchy portrayed in the novel “A Suitable Boy” written by Vikram Seth. For this purpose Vikram Seth’s “A Suitable Boy” has been taken into consideration. As observed in literature, the word “patriarchy” was around before the current resurgence of the women’s movement and women’s studies courses, the concept has been recreated in the past two decades to analyze the origins and conditions of men’s oppression of women. In “A Suitable Boy”, Vikram Seth portrays the world of post-independence women’s condition in detail. His women characters are associated with family clusters. He portrays patriarchy. Male heads of the family such as Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab Sahib of Baitar celebrate the ideal domestic space as that where men and women live within the specific roles delegated to them. The condition of the Muslim women and the lower caste women like Kachheru’s wife and how patriarchy forced on their life also portrayed in this novel.

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 Akademi 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”.

“The Golden Gate” heralded a new era in Indian English fiction. John Hollander calls it “A brilliantly fashioned tale of life among a number of Bayaree “Yuppies” and that it is never anything less than quaintly and most unqualifiedly marvelous”. This novel reminds us of Byron’s “Don Juan” or Puskin’s “Eugene Onegin”. Susan Sontag compares The Golden Gate to Eugene Onegin in its “particular mix of wit, sagacity and rue, and praises the golden gate as a thrilling subtle literary achievement.” H.H. Anniah Gowda was full of praise for Vikram Seth, when he says “Vikram Seth has earned a place in the realms of gold.”

On reading The Golden Gate one tends to endorse the author’s exclamation, “How marvelously quaint.” The novel was written in mellifluous sonnets and is devoid of oriental characters. It contains 594 stanzas each for acknowledgements, dedication, table of contents and a note about the author. It deals with the longing for love, affection and sense of belonging on the part of John, the Silicon Valley executive. Most of the characters experience loneliness in life and hence they search for meaning and emotional fulfillment. The happy ending of the novel, therefore, seems to be contrived.

A Suitable Boy (1993) deals with a simple theme, the quest for a suitable boy for Lata, the younger daughter of Rupha Mehra. Lata is a nineteen year attractive girl, who has passed just her graduation. She has three suitors- Kabir Durani, Amit Chatterjee and Haresh Khanna from among whom she has to choose her life partner. Seth meticulously writes about these three suitors and Lata’s affairs with each one of them, so that they can be judged objectively and the final choice can be made.

“An Equal Music” was published in 1999. In the authorial note included in the novel, Seth states: “Music to me is dearer even than speech. When I realized that I would be writing about it, I was gripped by anxiety. Only slowly did I reconcile myself to the thought of it (1999). It may be mentioned here that music is also the theme of two other contemporary Indian English novels.” That is, Rushdie’s “Ground beneath Her Feet” (1999) and Sashi Deshpande’s “Small Remedies” (2000).

The title, “An Equal Music” is taken from John Donne’s sermon describing life after death. In heaven there will be “No sun nor darkness nor dazzling but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music”. Regarding the epigraph John Carey writes; But an epigraph might have been taken from another great English poet, Tennyson: “Deep as first love and wild with all regret.” Seth’s story of love and loss can hold its own vicinity of that marvelous line.

The story of the novel opens in London with an upcoming musician, Michael Holme, a 35-year old violinist from Rochdale playing with Maggiore quartet and giving music lessons to a group of not-so-enthusiastic pupils with one of whom he is carrying on a desultory affair. The novel has a turbulent love story full of passion and pathos. Seth has successfully integrated this love

story with the story of music and music lessons. The novelist seems to say that music can alleviate the sufferings in life caused by the unfulfilled love. Hence, ending of the novel kindles a hope in human heart:

Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music- not too much, or the soul could not sustain it- from time to time.

PATRIARCHY:-

Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. In the domain of the family, fathers or father-figures hold authority over women and children. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage. Historically, patriarchy has manifested itself in the social, legal, political, and economic organization of a range of different cultures. Even if not explicitly defined to be by their own constitutions and laws, virtually all societies today are, in practice, patriarchal.

PATRIARCHY PORTRAYED IN VIKRAM SETH'S "A SUITABLE BOY":

As observed in the literature, the word "Patriarchy" was around before the current resurgence of the women's movement and women's studies courses, the concept has been recreated in the past two decades to analyze the origins and conditions of men's oppression of women. Originally used to describe the power of the father as head of household, the term "Patriarchy" has been used within post 1960's feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination. The term has been defined as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. Feminists have argued that in any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. It is observed in the literature that the establishment and practice of male dominance over women and children, is a historic process formed by men and women, with the patriarchal family serving as a basic unit of organization. A patriarchy is considered the head of the household and within the family he controls productive resources, labor force and reproductive capacities based on the notions of superiority and inferiority and legitimized by differences in gender and generation.

In "A Suitable Boy" Vikram Seth portrays the patriarchy. In this novel the conversation between Mrs. Rupha Mehra and Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor in the third part expressed the term patriarchy. It is given below;

Can't we do something about Ramnavami? Won't minister sahib change his mind? Asked old Mrs. Tandon,

‘uff! What can I say, he’s so stubborn’, said Mrs.MaheshKapoor. ‘And nowadays he is under so much pressure that he gets impatient at every little thing I say. I get pains these days, but I hardly worry about him so much.’

She smiled ‘I’ll tell you frankly’; she continued in her quiet voice, ‘I’m afraid to say anything to him.’

“Should I speak to minister Shahib (husband of Mrs.MaheshKapoor) asked Mrs.RuphaMehra.”

‘No,No,No... .’ – SaidMrs.MaheshKapoor, worried at the thought of these two powerful wills colliding. ‘He will only say this and that. Once when I touched upon the subject he even said “if you must have it, go to your great friend the home minister – he will certainly support this kind of mischief.” I was too frightened to say anything after that.’

These above conversation told about the condition of Mrs.MaheshKapoor is not satisfactory in the society. Mahesh Kapoor wanted his wife to be in private sphere and gives her no room in public. He delights in hurting his wife and scolds her. This is also considered as patriarchy.

Then an another paragraph from this novel in the part 5.4 also portrays patriarchy;

“PriyaGoyal would picture herself as a panther in a cage. She would look longingly towards the small house just a few minutes’ walk away – and just visible through the jungle of intervening roofs- in which her childhood friend Veena tendon lived. Veena, she knew, was not well off any longer, but she was free to do as she pleased: to go to market, to walk around by herself, to go for music lessons. In Priya’s own household there was no question of that, for a daughter-in-law from the house of the Rai-Bahadur to be seen in the market would have been disgraceful. That she was thirty-two years old with a girl of ten and a boy of eight was irrelevant. Ram Vilas, ever placid, would have none of it. It was simply not his way; more importantly, it would cause pain to his father and stepmother and grandfather and elder brother – and Ram Vilas sincerely believed in maintaining the decencies of a joint family.”

From this above paragraph, Vikram Seth portrays the condition of Veena andPriya is also not satisfactory in family life.

And in one more conversation in the part 9.16 of this novel between Lataand Mr.Sahgal portrays us the patriarchy in post-independence Indian society;

“I know you are a lipstick girl. Do you want some lipstick?” said Mr.Sahgal, moving forward along the bed.

‘No- ‘criedLata. ‘I don’t – Mausaji – please stop this – ‘

‘It is so hot – I must take off this dressing gown’.

‘No!’ Lata wanted to shout, but found she couldn’t. ‘Don’t, please, Mausaji. I – I’ll shout- my mother is a light sleeper – go away – go away- ma – ma – ‘

The clock chimed one

Mr.Sahgal’s mouth opened. He said nothing for a moment. Then he sighed.”

In this novel, the condition of women in Islamic society is also expressed. They have no interests of their own but they have to do what their husbands demand them to perform. The women in Islamic society spend their lives in the darkness of ignorance, illiteracy and have nothing to do with the outer world which seems them out of their reach. These are also the patriarchy referred from this novel.

The lower caste women's condition is also not better. Kachheru was a lower caste man who maintained the lands of Rasheed's grandfather. Kachheru's wife who belongs to a lower caste Chamar had not gone outside the villages – "the village into which she had been born and village into which she had married". Her daily duty is to bring chapattis, salt chilies, and some butter milk for her husband who is working in the fields, watch her husband eat in silence and go back to her cage. The married life of this woman seems dull, without any charm and attraction. It may be their tradition, destiny, lack of education and awareness that has kept the lower caste women away from the light of charming, self-respectful and honorable life.

CONCLUSION:-

Vikram Seth has portrayed the condition of women in post-independence India in this novel. His women characters are associated with the family clusters. Male heads of family such as Mr. Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Baitar celebrate the ideal domestic space as that where men and women live within the specific roles delegated to them. Thus we considered patriarchy portrayed in the novel "A Suitable Boy" written by Vikram Seth.

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