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ALL HEROINES DON'T WEAR CAPES: THE UNNAMED PROTAGONIST OF A SUITABLE BOY

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Abstract

Through a close textual reading of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* employing the interpretative framework of cosmopolitanism, I will critically analyse key events in the novel to situate Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, a minor character, as pivotal to the plot as well as to the author's cosmopolitan vision of post-independence India. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a leading contemporary philosopher in the field of cosmopolitanism, has defined cosmopolitanism as "the idea that every human being is responsible for the whole human community. In this sense, your obligations aren't limited by the particular society that you're in... there's an element of universality" (Yates). In *A Suitable Boy*, Seth interrogates, dismantles, and articulates the fissures, fractures, and multiple voices that animate Independent India. The novel tells the story of four families: the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Chatterjees, and the Khans. For Seth, the personal and the public intersect and shape each other. Using strategies of seemingly minor interventions by individuals, he suggests modes of cosmopolitanising the Nation at the political, social, and personal levels. Thus, this paper focuses on Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, an unnamed minor character known only as the wife of Mahesh Kapoor, the Revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh and the mother of her three children, Veena, Pran, and Maan.

Keywords

Minor Characters, Convergence of the Private and the Public, Idea of India, Cosmopolitanism, etc.

Full Article

Uth, jaag, musafir

Rise, traveller, the sky is light.
Why do you sleep? It is not night.
The sleeping lose, and sleep in vain.
The waking rise, and rise to gain.
—Vikram Seth *A Suitable Boy*

Vikram Seth, in his novel *A Suitable Boy*, employs the conventions of romantic novels and focuses on the private lives of intersecting families, telling the story of post-independent India. The narrative shows that public and private actions are not distinct domains but are forces that intersect, influence and reshape one another. By using this narrative style, Seth constructs and articulates his idea of India. In this paper, I argue that not only the central protagonists but the minor characters and their actions (both private and public) are integral to the articulation of his authorial vision. As minor characters of *A Suitable Boy* haven't received much scholarly attention, this paper will attempt to situate Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, a minor character, as pivotal to the novel. Seth's ideal India is cosmopolitan, one that critiques and attempts to dismantle patriarchy, caste, religious, and class hierarchies. Kwame Anthony Appiah, the world's leading contemporary



philosopher, defines cosmopolitanism as “the idea that every human being is responsible for the whole human community. In this sense, your obligations aren’t limited by the particular society that you’re in” (Yates). As Seth’s ethical aesthetics align with Appiah’s formulation, I shall employ this theoretical framework in this paper.

Who is a cosmopolitan? The image that the term “Cosmopolitans” invokes is that of urban elite jet-setting around the world (Appiah xi). This, says Appiah, is an erroneous definition because the fundamental prerequisite of a cosmopolitan is one who can extend their imagination beyond the limits of their prescribed social, cultural, and national identity and does not refer to those who have the resources for transnational travel. Cosmopolitans are those with empathy to think and feel beyond their own rigid identities of nation, religion, caste, class, race, and gender. Nico Slate attempts a similar redefinition in *Coloured Cosmopolitanism*, a study that removes “whiteness” as an essential qualifier from a cosmopolitan identity. Slate’s study of cosmopolitan solidarity brings diverse characters like Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Cedric Drove, Gandhi, Nehru, Vivekananda, and Martin Luther King, whom Slate calls “Colored cosmopolitans (who)opposed racism without fully abandoning the claims of race” (Slate, 162). In “Actually Existing Cosmopolitans”, Bruce Robbins remarks that, at present, cosmopolitanism has new characters and calls for a redefinition of the term cosmopolitans and cosmopolitanism, keeping with the change in “personnel” (Cheah, 1). From a category which earlier denoted either the privileged (aristocrats and merchants) or the deviant (Jews and homosexuals), cosmopolitans today consist of a broad category of disparate individuals bound together by a feeling of shared humanity above all other concerns. This democratisation and humanisation of cosmopolitans is a helpful tool in formulating the concept of a cosmopolitan protagonist. If power, privilege, and geographical location are no longer deemed essential to make one a cosmopolitan, then what is the key prerequisite of a cosmopolitan?

Uth jaagmusafirbhor bhai/ Ab rain kahan jo sovathai/ Jo sovathai so khovathai / Jo jagathai so pavathai. This bhajan, which calls for one to rise from ignorance into true knowledge, provides an apt point of departure for a discussion on cosmopolitanism in the private sphere. Seth’s disparate cosmopolitan characters have three qualities in common: imagination, compassion, and action. Imagination (the ability to transcend narrow boundaries of caste/religion/race) leads to compassion (*anrishamshya*), and compassion leads to action (*karma*). The fact that these three qualities are fundamental to both spiritual traditions and the idea of citizenship in contemporary India attests to the significance of these three virtues. This ethical basis of being a good human becomes consequential only when it moves from the ideational level to the level of execution. Empathy and compassion arise from the ability to expand one’s imagination and consciousness beyond one’s ego, and in its innate creativity, it is also an aesthetic experience. Importantly, it does not imply losing one’s identity. Instead, it is an expansion of one’s selfhood. Seen from this perspective, cosmopolitan empathy and compassion are akin to the idea of locally-situated global citizens, who see their “circle of concern” as well as “circle of influence” (as theorised by the American author Stephen Covey) as encompassing the broader humanity, while continuing to be firmly located within a spatio-temporal framework.

Should there be a dichotomy between private and public ethics and behaviour? As Martin Heidegger claimed, can we only be “authentic” in the private sphere? As *dasein*, an ontological being, the being-there, in the various tasks we carry out, should we be controlled by our facticity and fallenness, or should we also explore our existentiality, our possibilities and the immense potential it holds? The answer being obvious, this realisation of our authenticity can also help us transcend the facticity of our local, parochial, and national identities and see the larger humanity as advocated by cosmopolitanism. The *oikos/polis* divide should be transcended. Imagination,



which has a subservient position in Kantian ontology, must be reclaimed as an essential tool for creating a convivial world order.

The most poignant scene in *A Suitable Boy* is Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's *chautha*, mainly when her daughter Veena sings her mother's favourite bhajan, "*Uth jag musaafirbhorbhaee, abraiinkahan jo sowaathhai*." Reading the novel as a cosmopolitan text, this moment can be considered its denouement, as it brings the many impulses of the narrative together. It is also a fitting tribute to a woman who remains unnamed throughout the story and whose contribution to the immediate family and society remains unacknowledged while she is alive. The presence of the Sikh *raag is* on this occasion also holds immense significance. Her "secular" husband, Shri Mahesh Kapoor, a freedom fighter and the Revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh, had barred any display of religiosity, and only the *raag is* were allowed to perform once a year at Prem Niwas (the Kapoor home). In his attempt to appear tolerant and nonreligious, he had come to ignore and frequently mock his wife's spiritual and religious practices, regarding them as a sign of her inferior intelligence. A man who considers himself the vanguard entrusted to create a modern India, his Hindu wife appears ignorant and superstitious. In his "secular" zeal, he does not realise that this appearance of tolerance has turned him into a dogmatic and extremely intolerant man. However, this afternoon of her *chautha*, several people whose lives she has touched in myriad ways have gathered to pay their respects. Despite her husband's impatience with religious activities, the pandits carry on with the prayers and readings from the *Isha Upanishad*. For a woman who was not allowed to hold any *bhajans*, ironically, because of her death, the Hindu pandits chant *mantras* and expatiate from religious texts, and the Sikh *raagis* sing Kabir's *dohas* and Nanak's *banis*. The presence of *raagis*, pandits, and one of Gandhi's favourite *bhajans*, *Uth jag musafir*, sung by her daughter Veena, becomes symbolic of her syncretic and tolerant nature.

Uth jag musafir, one of Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's favourite *bhajans* too, is a prayer that calls for spiritual wakening and seeking true knowledge. This *bhajan* moves the recalcitrant, secular, and apathetic husband to tears. When Heidegger said, "spend more time in the graveyards", this is the sort of realisation he was referring to. It is at this moment of his wife's death that Mahesh Kapoor realises that he has indeed lost many things: Maan, his son, is in jail after having grievously injured Firoz, Firoz is still battling for life in the hospital, and ties between Mahesh Kapoor and his only friend the Nawab of Baitar seems irrevocably broken, he has left the Congress party with which he was associated from pre-Independence days, and now, his wife who was his invisible bulwark is dead. Things are falling apart at the national and personal level. For a freedom fighter, this *bhajan* also reminds him of the death of another more famous personality, Mahatma Gandhi, and what it implies for a new nation: "Gandhi was dead, and with him his ideals" (Seth, 1336). He realises that both his life and Gandhi's India, which he fought for, seem to be quickly vanishing, and for the first time in his married life, he "began to fully realise what he had lost—and how suddenly" (Seth, 1337). For one who has always been concerned with his public image, it is telling that he realises his loss only when he sees the large number of mourners who have gathered on this occasion:

Mahesh Kapoor was amazed by how many people had come to attend the *chautha* of his wife, whom he had always thought was a silly superstitious woman. Refugees she had helped during the days of Partition in the relief camps, their families, all those whom she had given kindness or shelter from day to day, not merely the Rudhia relatives, but a large group of ordinary farmers from Rudhia, many politicians who might well have paid only perfunctory or hypocritical homage if he himself had passed away, and scores of people whom neither he nor Pran



recognised, all felt that they had to attend this service in her memory (Seth, 1332).

But who is this woman, whom we only know as Mrs Mahesh Kapoor? And what makes her the novel's unlikely cosmopolitan heroine? To respond to this question, one needs to delve deeper into her life from the skeletal information we can gather about her. In this panoramic tale of India in the 1950s, Seth frequently employs the interesting strategy of having characters reflect one another, thereby giving us multiple perspectives. This relational method of characterisation helps create a more comprehensive portrayal of the protagonists, especially when we want to understand their impact on the lives of those around them. In Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, Seth presents us with a completely "domesticated" woman, replete with all the standard templates of an Indian wife and mother. Santosh Desai, in his witty and incisive article titled "Mere Paas Ma Hai" in *Mother Pious Lady: Making Sense of Everyday India*, discusses this stereotypical role/representation of Indian mothers as a "giant ball of affection" (Desai, 25). Vikram Seth, in his characterisation of Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, strictly adheres to the recognisable trope of the "Maa" in the Indian psyche. She is the much-shouted-at mother of Pran, Maan and Veena.

We first hear of her rather than see or hear her at her son Pran's wedding to Savita Mehra. This wedding is unusual because it takes place at the groom's house. The bride's grandfather, the unpredictable and hot-headed man Dr Kishen Seth, has taken sudden umbrage, locked his house, and left town. Savita's father died when they were young, so her father-in-law stepped in to host the event. Mr Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue of Purva Pradesh, is a man who has little patience with traditions and gossip. As one who suffered great economic hardships when the British government jailed him, he has refused to accept any financial contribution from Savita's widowed mother, Mrs Rupa Mehra. While he comes across as a remarkably forward-thinking man, his brusque and condescending attitude towards his wife is the most jarring aspect of his character. The dynamic Minister and ex-Freedom Fighter refers to his wife disparagingly as the "weak-willed woman" and "your superstitious mother" (Seth, 7) to his younger son, Maan, since he cannot voice his annoyance about the delay in wedding rituals to anyone else. The Minister does not seem to have any compunction about insulting her publicly. As the wedding rituals proceed, he snaps at her, "Speak up! Speak up! If your mother had mumbled like you, we would never have got married" (Desai, 6), at which Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, "his dumpy little wife, (who) became even more tongue-tied as a result" (Desai, 16).

Here, it is necessary to interrogate the idea and criticism of the role of a "mother". A quick perusal of Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's portrayal as the cosmopolitan heroine will inevitably draw umbrage from those who may decry such forms of representation. This may lead one to critique Seth's portrayal of a woman by taking issue with how her agency has been negated and what seems like an exaltation of her subservient character. However, to his credit, Seth gives a nuanced portrayal of the mother figure. He is not condoning her behaviour vis-à-vis her husband but rather critiquing her husband's behaviour towards her. For Seth, her character's function is to highlight the capacity of an individual to lead a dharmic life even under what may seem to contemporary readers the subjugation of a woman under patriarchy. In fact, in the novel, Seth presents a wide array of female characters spanning all ages, who enjoy different types of freedom that independent India has made possible. But among all these women, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's character has been given the greatest heft by the writer. In a story about the ordinary lives of ordinary men and women caught in extraordinary times, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, Pran, Maan, and Veena's mother, is unwittingly also the novel's moral compass. Her compassion, the depth and breadth of her imagination, which embraces everyone and everything around her, and the



unobtrusive way she yields her influence elevate her character from a mother-wife figure to a personality who positively impacts the lives of all those whom she has met.

Unfettered by the threshold, she seems to have made the world a better place and earned the gratitude of a broad spectrum of people, including refugees, relatives, politicians, peasants, and strangers. Suppose a good life is judged based on the ability to positively influence the lives of those around us. In that case, it is her character, who, even within the limitations of her gender, has nurtured the energy that animates the universe, whether in human beings or nature. Seth deconstructs the traditional significance of fe/male role and influence, especially by juxtaposing her power from within the limitations of her private sphere to that of her husband in the larger public sphere. Despite being the man in charge of the Zamindari Abolition Act, her husband is shown as being largely unsuccessful in his endeavour. In contrast, his wife, in her way, has brought about significant changes in the lives of others. Returning to the episode of Pran and Savita's wedding, after their wedding rituals are complete, the newly-weds are escorted to the "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" (Seth, 18). Seth uses the beautiful harsingar tree motif to illustrate the profoundly spiritual aspect of the woman who nurtures it. Characteristically, Mrs Kapoor does not take any credit for what she sees, but merely attributes it to God's grace. She looks around her and sees that the garden looked beautiful on the wedding day: the gardenias, chrysanthemums, and roses were already in bloom, and the harsingar tree was in full bloom (Seth, 19). In Indian mythology, the harsingar tree, also called the parijat, is considered a tree from heaven. With the fragrance it spreads at night and the ephemeral quality of shedding its flowers at dawn to adorn the earth, this tree is an apt metaphor for Mrs Mahesh Kapoor. The Prem Niwas garden, which occupies her when she is not occupied with her family's interests, serves as the perfect metaphor for her personality. A woman from her generation and social background would be housebound, spending time among her loosely knit circle of extended family. Given the rapid political and social developments occurring outside, her only direct connection to the outside world—aside from her family—is this garden. Later in the story, her daughter-in-law Savita, who is genuinely fond of her, compares her to the pond herons that frequent the garden (Seth, 190). Seth pays excellent attention to creating the fundamental unity that exists between her character and the natural world around her. She also achieves self-expression through this lovingly tended garden of Prem Niwas, which becomes a natural extension of her being. She later continues to provide succour even after her death. Her vision of life is akin to her vision of her garden. Her sense of harmony is guided by the awareness of the *Brahman* that animates the universe. Rather than envisioning her garden with a sense of ownership, she sees it as something to be shared, organic, and natural. Despite being the wife of the powerful Minister of Revenue, and with all the resources that can be at her disposal, she never aspires to win the First Prize at the Annual Flower Show. Her gardener Gajraj, suggests that, like Justice Bailey's wife, who consistently wins the first prize, she too should increase the expenditure and, like the Baileys', plant every bush, shrub, or flower with a particular date in mid-February in mind, the date of the Flower Show. However, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor sees things differently, and her garden is designed to allow different flowers to bloom through the (Seth, 929). She has an organic view of the natural order of things and the imaginative capacity to conceive and recognise the unifying spirit that animates it. Even when the jamun pickers trample upon her beloved lawn and flower beds, she neither frets nor reprimands the trespassers but enjoys the presence of the cheerful jamun-pickers (Seth, 927). As an avid gardener, she also doesn't seem to care for the well-manicured and artificial landscape, so she lets the unevenness of the lawn remain so that in the



muddy puddles formed in the monsoon and winter rains, she can offer hospitality to the visiting (Seth, 190).

Far from being the ignorant and illiterate woman, as Mahesh Kapoor is wont to be little at every opportunity loudly, he is entirely dependent on her to read the Proceedings of the Purva Pradesh Legislative Council, which is transcribed in Hindi. The Minister was taught the Arabic script in school, while she was taught the Devanagari script by the Arya Samaj. The image-conscious minister likes to maintain discretion about his own “illiteracy” and “ignorance”, hence does not seek assistance from his staff. Unfortunately, when she was alive, he neither appreciated the comforts of domesticity that she went to great lengths to provide for him nor her help in his public life. Finally, when he does realise his loss, it is:

Too late, and perhaps because of the love that everyone else around him so clearly bore her, he began to realise fully what he had lost, indeed, whom he had lost – and how suddenly. There was so much to do, and no one to help him, to advise him quietly, to check his impatience...She would not be there, as she always had been, to help. The birds had robbed the standing grain, and here he was wringing his empty hands. What could she have said to him? Nothing direct, but possibly a few words of circuitous comfort, something that might, a few days or a few weeks later, have taken the edge of his despair.... (Seth,1337)

Even after her death, the garden she lovingly nurtured is the succour that sustains Mahesh Kapoor through his post-electoral defeat and familial tragedies. The secular-intelligent-modern man, even though he “did not know either the Hindi or the English names of the birds and the flowers that surrounded him, but perhaps in his present state of mind, he enjoyed the garden more truly for that. It was his only refuge, and a nameless, wordless one, with birdsong its only sound- and it was dominated, when he closed his eyes, by the least intellectualize sense- that of scent” (Seth, 1405). In his zeal to transform the social inequities of a newly independent nation, he seems to have forgotten that charity begins at home. The intelligent and articulate politician, who constantly taunted his wife as a superstitious fool, finds refuge in this realm of sights and smells which lay beyond his world of speech. And if the soul continues to live even after death, she would believe that the first prize that her garden wins that year is the proverbial icing on the cake. The way the different daughters-in-law view their respective mothers-in-law is another mildly amusing yet character-revealing feature of the book. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor is the only mother-in-law in the novel who is not considered a domestic and emotional depot by her daughter-in-law. Savita is treated very kindly by her, and she has no expectations of her in return. She is genuinely pleased for Savita when she delivers a baby girl. She is the most level-headed and kind-hearted among the mother-in-law figures who dominate the story: Mrs Rupa Mehra, Mrs Tandon, and Priya’s (Veena’s friend) mother-in-law, whom we only know of as “the witch”. In 1950s India, this attitude is quite remarkable. In telling her story, the writer creates a multi-layered character with great depth and portrays a woman whose life embodied *dharma* through karma. Nowhere does he view her with the ironical detachment or witty humour with which other characters are often described in the novel.

Lata’s reflections on Mrs Kapoor’s life on the day of the *chautha*, are also critical to the progress of the narrative. Lata too will be married soon, and even with her education and the independence that women of her generation enjoy, she realises that fundamental issues like leading a fulfilling life, family, children, and social roles will always remain pertinent irrespective of social changes (Seth, 1335). Mrs Kapoor’s life is shown as an embodiment of the principle of



‘service to all’, and her *chautha* is a solemn occasion for self-reflection and self-realisation for the main characters in the novel. Yuval Noah Harari, in *Sapiens*, discusses this elusive concept of happiness. He observes that family and community have more impact on our happiness than money. Marriage, too, is critical to happiness (Harari, 382). Harari also refers to Daniel Kahneman’s (the winner of the Nobel Prize for economics) study, which revealed a paradox in human behaviour. For instance, though child-rearing is challenging and taxing work, most parents declare that their children are their primary source of happiness. Thus, happiness is not necessarily associated with self-centeredness; instead, it is based on how one perceives the world and their role in it. Harari further elaborates that happiness does not imply a surfeit of pleasantness. It arises from a sense of leading a meaningful life. He quotes Nietzsche, who proclaimed that if one has a ‘why’ to living, then one can be the ‘how’ (Harari, 391). Therefore, this conception of a satisfying life is very subjective, and when we look at Mrs Mahesh Kapoor’s life, we may believe that she was happy and that she led a success fullife. Continuing with the solemn atmosphere of self-reflection among the characters, the passages immediately following her cremation are some of the most philosophical quotes in the novel, and a reminder of what the world has lost:

Ash and bones, that was all Mrs Mahesh Kapoor was now, ash and bones, warm still, but soon to cool, and be collected, and sunk in the Ganga at Brahmpur...She was the garden at Prem Nivas (soon to be entered into the annual Flower Show), she was Veena’s love of music, Pran’s asthma, Maan’s generosity, the survival of some pond-heron, a smallunrung brass bell, the memory of decency in an indecent time, the temperament of Bhaskar’s great-grandchildren (Seth, 1332).

She continues to live through the men and women whose lives she has touched; through her descendants yet to be born on earth; through the garden and the herons that she cared for; and most importantly, through the Ganga, her ashes will flow into the sea, and then she too will be a part of the entire world.

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