

Research Article

## Secularism in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*

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### Abstract

Secularism can be defined as treating every individual and every religion equally and providing all citizens equal opportunities and equal facilities. Secularism is a separation of religion and the state. This allows the citizens of the country to live as equals without one being the second-class or the first-class in the same country. Different writers and critics have written vastly on the subject and about the historical situation after India gained its independence, which was greatly centered on the issue of secularism. The period after partition was marked by Prime Minister Nehru trying to instill a secularist state in the country to quell turbulence that the young country was facing as a result of the religious divide between the Hindus and the Muslims that was at times violent and destabilizing. In his novel: *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth has raised a historical and contemporary narratives that dealt with the issue of secularism. By siding with the ideals of Nehruvian secularism, the author has told a story of individual love and nation- building, which, he implied, could flourish when the idea of secularism is upheld.

**Key words:** Secularism, Nehruvianism, Secular State, vigilante, partition, state, religion, tolerance

Secularism is a state in which an individual or a country separates between religion and politics in the way they govern themselves and others. The separation implies that the individual or the country as a whole is free to have whatever religion they want to have in their private affairs but they don't involve it in public affairs. Therefore both an individual and a state can be religious and secular at the same time. The only time they would be deemed non-secular is when the two are intertwined in their day-to-day policies and administrative affairs. Therefore there is a clear distinction between atheism and secularism as the former implies the lack thereof religion and the later doesn't require. However, an atheist individual or a state could also be said to be secular if they govern themselves by separating religion or its lack thereof from state affairs. It is not one's religiousness in public affairs that can cause one to be considered as a non-secular but one's imposition of non-religiousness on public affairs as well. Thus the definition of secularism doesn't have to do with non-religiousness. It is rather an abstention of policies that are based on religion or non-religion. There are a variety of definitions regarding secularism. The following definition given by Smith focuses on the state and its modus-operandi regarding the relationship of the individual and the state. He asserts that it is a situation in which the state allows the individual to have the right to practice religion without any repercussions from it. His definition is not only limited at the individual level, it also goes beyond that to include that individuals could make assemble and practice their religion freely. According to Smith's definition (Smith 1963: 4) the individual or the groups of individuals have a right as citizens of the state as one of their inherent rights the freedom to participate in the country's politics and socio-economic life regardless of what religion or sect they follow. Not only should the individual or corporates not be discriminated against the public affairs of the state but he also asserts that the ruling body in the state should be one that has not attained its power and legitimacy based on any sort of religion for there to be a completeness in secularism in the state. If the state is affiliated to any religion

or sect and it promotes the will of the religion that sponsored it, then that state would not fall under the category of Smith's definition of secularism. There are many situations in the world where the state and religion work hand-in-hand and people may not notice or feel their working unison in making public and governance decisions as long as they represent the will of the masses. But the ones who fell the pinch are the minorities which don't belong to the popular religion in the state. They not only find it hard to coexist in their countries but in many cases are subject to persecution, purely due to their religious background. The ensuing outcome is religious and political dissent that may lead to violence and conflict. At an individual level, decisions of marriage, especially are subject to religious discrimination as people want to stick to their heritages, in which religion constitutes a substantial part. In a non-secular society therefore a lover is frowned upon or prevented from marrying someone outside of their marriage by parents, relatives and communities. In the worst cases, they are subjected to violence. Therefore, just as a state doesn't fulfil the criteria for secularism if it discriminates based on religion, the individual is held in the same standard. In the novel, in any discussion about secularism therefore, it is not only the state but the individual characters that are scrutinized for their standards based on the way they treat others who may not fall into the category of their religious affiliation. Therefore secularism is mostly manifested in a multi-religious state and individual relationship where there is religious tolerance. Smith writes:

The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion. (Smith 1963: 4)

Secularism can be protected by constitution and it is a political decision which states choose to practice in order to maintain a peaceful coexistence of their diverse religious groups. Therefore it is a faith that dictates that there should not be interference of faith in the running of the country. It is a belief that negates belief in the public sector of the state affairs. However, human beings are not totally free from sectarian affiliations and that there needs some political apparatus that ensures that the course of secularism is being kept and that checks and balances should be in place to assess its progress in an impartial way. Even though it is not always a completely guaranteed in all political systems, secularism is recognized by many states across the globe and for a long time now that without it, the fabric of the society cannot hold together for long. Because one of the basic human instincts is to flock together and belong to one identifiable group of like-minded group people, there is always the danger that the outsider may find it hard to fit in without any awkwardness. In extreme cases the group or cult identity becomes so snobbish to the outsider and hence the minority will always suffer. Therefore, though it is always encouraging to hear that people, especially politicians would love to be viewed as though they uphold the principles of secularism in the way they deal with their communities as well as others, sometimes the cult identity may prove too strong that even the well-meaning politicians and individuals would succumb to the pressure from strong cult and organized religious groups. The fact that secularism is, at least, theoretically upheld by all political and social communities and recognized as the best deal that human beings could depend on in order to sustain a multi-religious state reiterates its contribution for a harmonious environment. But practicing a theory and a conviction takes a somewhat different commitment and constitutional strength on the side of leaders. At an individual level, secularism could be cultivated in families and schools. A child raised by educated family is able to develop a well-balanced attitude and tolerance toward other religious groups and sects than one from a less-educated family background. For this reason schools play a great role in shaping ideologies that uphold secularism both in the classroom and the family, which in turn result in generational change of attitude toward a tolerant society. Because drafting a constitution and having a society that guarantees its practice are two different things, educating the society to the higher level of tolerance about others' faith and belief system helps maintaining its functionality in a multi-religious community. Once secularism is attained to a satisfactory level, then, conflict resolution becomes easy and religious-based violence is reduced to the minimum. But it is as explained higher, easier said than done. Even in a mono-religious communities there will always be those who are ardent practitioners and those who are less strong in

their faith or unbelievers that would find themselves entangled in a religious or faith-based conflicts unless the state guarantees the separation of state and religion. According to Gayatri Spivak: Our world shows us that secularism is not an episteme. It is a faith in reason in itself and for itself, protected by abstract external structures – the flimsiest possible arrangement to reflect the human condition: under the circumstances, I invite you to think of secularism as an active and persistent practice, as an accountability of keeping the structures of agency clear of belief as faith. Secularism is too rarefied, too existentially impoverished to take on the thickness of a language. It is a mechanism to avoid violence that must be learned as mere reasonableness. It is thin as an ID card, not thick as 'identity'. (Spivak 2004: 106)

In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, the theme of secularism is viewed both at an individual level of the characters and the state level of the post-independence Indian politics. The novel is a story that deals with the early development of Indian democracy and the Indian state. There is a lot of historical reference about how the politics of the times looked like and what the future would look like, judging by the direction the country was moving. The interface between the history and the fiction in the novel provides a substitute platform for the readers regarding the history and the current situation of the country, which ultimately implies picturing the future as well. Vikram Seth has vividly painted the almost realistic fictional depiction of Indian socio-economic and political situation from its early stages, piece by piece. At the individual level *A Suitable boy* depicts the life of four Indian families with special interest being on their religious background. The intense relationship between Hindus and Muslims that was a delicately volatile during the origin of the Indian nation is seen from the prism of the lives of these four families in which three belonged to Hinduism and one to Islam. He presents the very hot political situations that arose as a result of the strong Hindu nationalism especially of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the great turbulence the nation was facing as these ultra-Hindu nationalistic supporters came to tense encounters with the rising Muslim movements in the new India. In order to quell the strong religious tension that was on the verge of leading the country toward a political and social upheaval, the novel seems greatly gearing in favor of the policies put forward by Nehru and his secularist political ideology. It was the only solution feasible if the state of India was to survive the volatile political time-bomb that was threatening to happen as the rift between the Hindus and the Muslims widened from time to time and the religious intolerance got intensified as a result. The novel shows that it was not easy for the secularist ideals of Nehru to flourish in the face of such an intense religious tension arising from either side of the religion affiliated populace. The novel shows that on the one hand the policies that Nehru was pushing geared toward secularism and that was viewed as the only solution to quell down the religious intolerance in the young democracy and set the nation on a more harmonious development path. On the other hand it shows how the Nehruvian secularism was facing stern criticism and opposition from religious fanatics. This further aggravated the chances for the nation to enforce a constitutional rule that allowed for the separation of religion and state in all public affairs. This meant that the minorities in the country found it very difficult to compete and participate in the socio-political and economic life of the country as their religious background and cast identity was used always a factor in them finding a space without any sort of discrimination in society. Let alone in the public affairs of the state the novel shows that even at the individual level young lovers dreaded of the consequences if they were from different religious background. According to Srivastava

The realism of Seth's style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state, which endorses Nehruvian secularism at a time when Nehru's idea of the Indian secular state was subject to severe erosion in the political sphere, with the rise of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party. Secularism was being displaced as a hegemonic political solution for conceiving and running the Indian state, especially in its relation to minorities. The rise of the Hindu right, and the spread of Hindutva ideology, was premised on a perceived need to break with the past. Srivastava, 2008 (11).

*A Suitable Boy* was a realistic and historical depiction through fictional characterization of the period in the early stages of Indian independence. Even though it was published in the 90s, the atmosphere it recreated was as vivid as the one in the 50s of India. But the situation in terms of religious and

sectarian relationship in the society and political affairs of the country was almost the same, underlining the reality that it takes long for any secular philosophy to take root and bring about change in a multicultural society as the one in India. Therefore the novel depicts a radical political revolution toward a more secular democracy without much of a change on the ground as regards to the culture and societal attitudes toward tolerance and acceptance across religious strata and for the political ideology to work successfully. The rise in strength of the Hindutva political philosophy was the main challenge to the Nehruvian secularist ideology and it was proving too difficult to change anytime soon. This meant that more and more Indians saw themselves as Hindus first and Indians next while at the same time any Muslim Indians were viewed as the other and an outsider regardless of their Indian nationality. While the Hindutvas saw themselves as protectors of the Aryan ancient culture in order to keep it as pure and as original as possible, the Muslims Indians were viewed as the destroyers of the pure Aryan culture. The novel shows the level of uncertainty in the future of the nation as it was not able to sail these two opposing religious entities harmoniously. Each side was pushing forward their own communal ideologies and philosophes rather than putting the nation first and writing a reconciliatory history which either recognized the right of all religions and faiths to function together in harmony in the state affairs and at individual level in the country. It is in such a tense atmosphere that the novel was published with a goal to not only paint what the past looked like or what the future would look but with a clever line of providing a road map for the present day India at the time the novel was written. The novel therefore was a strong advocate of returning to the ideals of Nehru to take the country forward as a secular democracy in which the individual's progress and wellbeing was determined by the content of their character and not by their religious or caste identity by showing that from the time of the partition to the present the country has not evolved and that the religious and sectarian divides that made the partition a reality may also end up being another source of turbulence and hindrance to development and progress toward democracy. While the Hindutva was pushing for a Hindu majority rule Seth was calling for a secular democracy and separation of state and religion, which echoed the Nehruvian philosophy of the past. Srivastava notes:

History was being rewritten along communal lines and the Muslims were seen as invaders and destroyers of a pure Aryan culture that the more extreme proponents of Hindutva were intent on recuperating. The novel can be read as a way of addressing the perceived 'present needs' of the Indian polity by proposing a return to Nehruvianism, by recreating a national narrative set in the heart of the Nehru era, the heyday of secular nationalism in the aftermath of Partition. Thus, contrary to Hindutva ideology, Seth proposes not a break with the nation's secular past, but a return to it in order to address the present needs of the polity, which is being fragmented along communal lines. Multiculturalism, rather than a majoritarian ideology like Hindutva, is the only solution for a functioning polity. What Seth appears to have in mind is a strongly statist multiculturalism à la Nehru. Srivastava, 2008 (11-12).

In the novel, *A Suitable Boy*, Seth uses Mahesh Kapoor, who is the Minister of Revenue for the state of Purva Pradesh to make all the important statements regarding the philosophy of secularism and the state of political affairs in India. All the legislations that Prime Minister Nehru had been trying to push through the Legislative Assembly by representing the Congress Party are represented by the character of Mahesh Kapoor in the novel. But inside the Congress Party, there were conservative elements who had strongly opposed not only this political philosophy but also rivaled Mr. Kapoor himself in the political affairs of Purva Pradesh. A particularly astute rival was L.N. Agrawal, who was the conservative Home Minister. Nehru's secularist philosophy was viewed by these characters not as a defender of democracy or a political champion of equality but as a defender of the followers of Islam. Through Mr. Kapoor, Seth pushes the narrative that the basic aim of Nehru, especially after the bloody violence which ensued the period of Partition was to try to contain the situation and look forward with the only option that seemed quite feasible to him. That option was the option of Secularism. Otherwise the political rivalry and the religious intolerance that was still festering would consume the country beyond repair again even after Partition itself. *A Suitable Boy* narrates how the right wing Hindu nationalists and the followers of Nehruvian secularist state were at loggerheads in the early 90s despite belonging to the same political party, the Congress Party. It meticulously

recounts the historical narrative that the cause of their infighting was on the account of how the Nehruvian secularism would give advantage to Indian Muslims. For the rightwing Hindu nationalists the secularist state of Nehru did not only provide Muslims equal rights in the political life of India but also the platform to change the demography and culture of the country, which they viewed entailed the destruction of the Aaryan culture. This turbulent political upheaval was a cause of uncertainty not only due to the possibility of a split in the Congress Party that it could bring but also in making the efforts of Nehru to push his agenda of secularist state. It also greatly undermined his leadership and compromised any future success of his political philosophy taking root and bringing about meaningful changes in India. Being a young democracy, India was going through a rough path in its leader's desire to constitute a nation which was religiously tolerant to all and one in which all religious differences would not matter as long as the country followed secularism as its *modus operandi*. The narrator of *A Suitable Boy* recounts:

What made things worse was the steady stream of refugees, mainly now from East Pakistan into Bengal, that put an unsupportable burden upon the state. They were fleeing because of ill treatment and insecurity in Pakistan, and several hardliners in India suggested under a theory of reciprocity that for each Hindu migrant from Pakistan a Muslim should be expelled from India. They saw matters in terms of Hindus and Muslims, of collective guilt and collective revenge. So successfully indeed had the two-nation theory—the Muslim League's justification for Partition—taken root in their own minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally; and were willing to visit upon their heads punishment for the actions of their co-religionists in the other country. Such talk repelled Nehru. The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second-class citizens sickened him. (Seth 1993: 1037)

In *A Suitable Boy*, the main aim of Prime Minister Nehru was retold as one that centered around making not only that Secularism would be the rule that the country would adopt for its harmonious continuity but he seemed focused on ensuring that Muslims were not considered as second class citizens in their own country. There is no explicit protection in the sense of a special treatment for Muslims that Nehruvian secularism advocated and the philosophy would benefit all minorities as well as every individual in the country in the event that state and religion were separated in the public affairs of the nation. This was seen as Nehru's attempt to try to contain the situation that was forcing Indian Muslims migrate to Pakistan in the masses and it created an atmosphere of hope for them that they could even make it all the way to the hierarchy of the Congress Party despite them coming from the Muslim League. The massive migration to Pakistan had entailed another major problem in India that the evacuees' property had become a point of bitter conflict and controversy. The Indian Muslims who preferred to migrate to Pakistan were left with little option but to forgo the properties that they left behind in India. The issue of the properties that were left by the evacuees was taken up by the Custodian-General of Evacuee Property which followed very strict measures that disfavored the migrating Muslim Indians. That is why the Nehruvian secularist state was seen with much controversy as the Muslims saw it as an appeasing one as it guaranteed the properties they were forced to relinquish otherwise and by the Hindu opponents as one that was too much protective of Muslims who had betrayed the motherland. The Muslims on their side saw the strict measures of the evacuee property policy as one that was aimed at only confiscating the properties and a materialistic motive that had nothing to do with betrayal of the motherland at all. But for the Nehruvians the need to soften the policies of the evacuee property was just to encourage the Indian Muslims to feel secured and settle to life in India and participate as equal class citizens in the political future of their motherland rather than relinquishing not just their properties but their Indianness as well. *A Suitable Boy* presents the orator skills of Nehru and how he always advocated for the unity of India regardless of religion or sect and how consistently he had pushed the agenda of unity for the harmonious and peaceful coexistence of the young nation of India. It shows him relentlessly preach to hammer in the change of attitude in the communities which were tearing each other apart because of their religious intolerance. He wanted all Indians to think of themselves as Indians first and put their religious differences aside while respecting their private faiths, both as majority and minority in their own lives. The only distinction Nehru was pushing for was the separation of state and religious affairs in

the political matters of the young Indian nation. The novel narrates how Nehru not only spoke but also took relentless actions to make sure that the country didn't fall into another civil war again having suffered Partition which was only made possible due to violent religious hatred among the communities. And the only political mechanism he saw fit to implement his agenda of a united India in which all citizens enjoyed the same equal rights and in which citizens respected each other's faith was by adopting the secular state in India. The novel showed if Nehru had not followed that path there was a strong possibility that Indian Muslims were to suffer the brunt of the vigilante retaliation for what happened in Pakistan. *A Suitable Boy* narrates:

All these actions infuriated people who saw Nehru as a rootless, deracinated Indian, whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism, and who was divorced from the majority of his own Hindu citizenry. The only problem for his critics was that his citizenry loved him and would almost certainly vote for him, as it had done ever since his great tour in the 1930s, when he had travelled around the country, charming and stirring up vast audiences. (Seth 1993: 1037)

*A Suitable Boy* presents the challenges that were faced with introducing a feasible mode of secularist state in the young Indian nation. The voices of opposition coming from the Hindu and the Muslim religions were very fierce. While the Hindus were unhappy with the Muslim dissenters whom they accused of being disloyal and fanatic to the nation the Muslims felt aggrieved by many actions that the Hindu organizations were taking, which they felt was to undermine their religion of Islam. But most importantly there was a lot of violence and clashes based on religious conflicts that people were dying in large numbers. If not secularism then what could be the solution to the existing problem was what the novel's narrative stressed on. The novel highlights one of the Hindu nationalist leaders, the Home Minister of Agrawal, who constantly criticized the Muslims for thinking in terms of religious fanaticism. He was constantly making speeches about how the Muslims were living in a country of tolerance and yet they were fanatics. He was a very influential voice among the Hindu nationalists that it seemed the Muslims on their side thought that he was an inciter. They thought that all the violence and the police heavy-handedness was owing to rhetoric such as his and the people were simply following leaders like him and that the minority were suffering as a result. His speech is very abstract and very ironic because he seemed to allude that the Indian nation was the most tolerant nation and that its communities were very peaceful and non-violent. On the other hand he seemed to imply that the Muslims were unwelcome and that the country was somehow not theirs, when he said that they were living in the most tolerant country. Discourses like this made the Muslims feel that they were considered as second-class citizens in their own country. Their leaders on their side criticized him bitterly when the opportunity came. One of the examples brought up in *A Suitable Boy* is when a Muslim representative in the parliament known as Abida Khan challenged him in the assembly very ferociously and that she implied the blood of all the victims of police brutality was on his hands. This begs the question that if the country was as tolerant and peaceful as the Home Minister was describing it, then what was the reason for the rejection of the Nehruvian secularist state in India. If the communities on both sides were tolerant and peaceful, they would even be called secular and would have provided such a conducive atmosphere for the political leadership of the country to institutionalize a secularist system. The novel presents the debates that were going on in the assembly and paints the gruesome violent clashes that were taking place on the streets, all thanks to religious conflicts. The novel portrays the Linga Rakshak Samiti as an organization known for its fierce criticism and repulsion of the secularist policy. It was most hated by the Muslim League leaders and when their leaders found the opportunity to speak in the parliament they fiercely blamed it as well as leaders such as the Home Minister as agitators for intolerance and not secularism in India. It was both the Minister's speech and the organization's actions that the representative attacked in the assembly. The narrator presents what the Home Minister of Agrawal had said:

'They were all fanatics, these Muslims, who appeared not to realize they were in this country on sufferance' – (Seth 1993: 270–1)

In response to this the Muslim representative said in the assembly:

.....The honourable Minister should be ashamed of himself.... If it were the blood of his own co-religionists that was flowing in the streets, the honourable Minister would not 'wait until such time'.

We know of the overt and tacit support he gives that foul organization the Linga Rakshak Samiti, set up expressly to destroy the sanctity of our mosque – (Seth 1993: 270–1)

*A Suitable Boy* presents the debates that were going on in the Legislative Assembly and indicates that it was followed by the people. The two most vocal opposing voices that were constantly being involved in the clashes were the Hindus and the Muslims. The public took what it wanted out of it and mostly identified with its affiliated representatives. Therefore the communities outside were feeding off of the speeches and political rhetoric that were at times filled with ill-veiled and abstract religious venom. On the positive note; however, the democratic discourse and debate would be used in discussions by the educated circles and the most reasonably cool-minded people of the country as a healthy process toward a secular democratic nation. The only problem highlighted by the novel was that the two sides were not gearing toward secularism but representing a certain religious community rather than sincerely putting the agenda of the idea of Nehruvian secularism and its merits for the young democracy and the way forward. That is the reason that not much change had yet appeared from the time Nehru had attempted to install the secularist state after the Partition of India and Pakistan in the 60s and the publication of this novel in the 90s. *A Suitable Boy* is a historical novel that was narrating about the events in the early days of Indian independence and there it seemed as a novel that was presenting the vivid present India which was still grappling with the same questions that Nehru was. The riots were continuing, the protests were still violent, and the country was enduring a great disaster due to these sectarian conflicts, despite the continuous parliamentary debates and acts and abolition of acts being made in it. Despite all the opposition and the resistance to accept Nehruvianism, the novel suggests that it was still the only shining path toward a peaceful and harmonious coexistence in the world's largest emerging democracy. But it was not given a chance as the representatives of either religious communities tried to outmaneuver and perform the other party and ensure their side's dominance and success rather than aspiring to grow together, despite their religious differences. Vikram Seth presented the ideal of secularism as the best for the continuity of the country by identifying with the Nehruvian secularist state. The irony of it was that he did it in the novel not by showing examples of success of secularism in India but the severe consequences of its lack thereof. But the narrator also doesn't a gloomy picture of the failure of Nehruvianism to achieve a perfect secular state. This was made clear by showing that it was not a zero-sum game; because, at least, during his life, Nehru had been able to convince many toward his secularist ideal due to his charisma. *A Suitable Boy* therefore is a clear tribute of Nehru not only for his secularist state philosophy but also for his leadership qualities. While at the same time showing that he had found it hard to accomplish a perfect secularism for the country, it shows that pushing an agenda like that could be very hard to accomplish if charismatic leadership doesn't accompany as noble ideals as secularism in a multi-cultural and multi-religious nation as India. This, perhaps could be considered as the big lesson, that unless an elected leader is prepared to bite the bullet and go against majority electorate that had put him in power in the first place and make a huge sacrifice as Nehru did and educate his people who loved and trust him as their father, change is pretty much impossible. The novel narrates:

They cheered when he talked about the size of the Bhakra dam, they cheered when he said that the Americans must not oppress Korea – whatever Korea was. And they cheered most of all when he requested their support, which he did almost as an afterthought. In the eyes of his people, Nehru – the prince and hero of Independence, the heir of Mahatma Gandhi – could do no wrong. (Seth 1993: 1354)

The technique which Vikram Seth has used in *A Suitable Boy* for describing his characters and the Indian nation in general strikes as a historical narrative and the reader is left with no doubt as to what the conflict and the desired solution was. At an individual level he has tried to bring about an attitudinal change of tolerance and secularism with the narrative of the young lovers' journey which involves a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy. At a national level he had been constantly bringing up the Nehruvian philosophy of secularism and he glorifies it as the sole solution to the multi-cultural nation of India. On a state level; however, he was very careful to not antagonize a certain community by naming them or making a certain state of the country appear as if it were the epicenter of all the

violence and feud circling around religion. He, instead invented a fictitious state in India which he named Purva Pradesh. It is in this state that the majority of the action takes place. However the realities of life as narrated in the novel as taking place in that state are very much resonating to those that were happening across the country. Therefore he crafted the fictitious state of Purva Pradesh as an adequate representative of all Indian states and the characters as representatives of all individuals. That way he was able to avoid finger-pointing at a certain state and possibly legal litigation from any particular community, had he named any one of them. The invention of a fictitious state gave Seth the chance to narrate in his novel the Indian situation objectively. At the individual level he used the young girl Lata who was looking for a suitable boy to marry. She had not only to choose her life companion for love but also challenge the tradition of arranged marriage in her community. The arranged marriage custom meant, without the question that the suitor had to be someone from the same religious background as hers. Secularism at the individual level then had to be shown when she accepted Maan as her life companion despite his Muslim faith. He had also to show his true love and secularism by accepting her as his life companion despite her being a Hindu. By showing that it could be done at the individual level, Seth now widens the ideal of secularism to the families and explores the conflict it raises. When in the end these lovers decide that religion was not above their love, it became a clear indication that a Hindu and a Muslim could live together in harmony and work together at the individual level, at state level, and at country level without any prejudice. As one can't start a fire without a spark, the love of these two young couple would set the agenda of acceptance and comradery and be an example of a change of attitude and education to all peace-loving Indians. In this fictitious state of Purva Pradesh, in the fictitious locality of Brahmpur of the fictitious city of Brahmpur, Vikram Seth sparked the fire of love and secularism centering two young lovers who defied religious division. Lata muses:

And yet, Lata thought, her mind wandering from one thing to another, perhaps this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India . . . and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge. The thought did not seem in the least trite to Lata; it helped her control her irritation at, indeed resentment of, Pran. (Seth 1993: 16)

By painting the picture of a heroine and a hero, who championed not only love but also secularism, Seth also painted a picture of villains in the form of the mobs and the crowds and agitating politicians who were on the opposing forces for change in the country. While the young lovers would prevail in their quest for love and companionship the mobs and crowds were subject to retribution from the law authorities who eventually had to contain them for the sake of peace and harmony in the country of India. Therefore the disorder and chaos created by the vigilantes, the mobs, and the crowds was put under control in the end. As Nehru had written in his *Discovery of India*, the nation finally achieves its goal of thriving in unity in diversity. This was the ideal that was desired both by Nehruvian philosophy of secular state as well as by Vikram Seth, a nation in which neither temples nor mosques were desecrated and pilgrims sojourned peacefully toward the tranquil rivers to enjoy their spiritual fulfilment regardless of their religious affiliation. In conclusion Vikram Seth's novel, *A Suitable Boy*, though an individual quest of love and marriage, is a narrative of the historical and contemporary socio-economic and political life of India after the partition to the publication of the story. By showing that young couples could find it in their heart to marry without any objection and feud a suitor from another religion and open their hearts for each other, on one hand, the opposition they face and the prejudices in the communities from each side of the religious background, on the other.

To conclude Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* has been able to demonstrate that secularism is the only way forward for the multi-cultural society and nation of India as aspired by Nehru after the devastating violence following the Partition. The narrator pictures this kind of India:

Men, women and children, old and young, dark and fair, rich and poor, Brahmins and outcastes, Tamils and Kashmiris, saffron-clad sadhus and naked nagas, all jostled together on the roads along the sands . . . all combined to give Dipankar a sense of elation. Here, he felt, he would find something



of what he was looking for, or the something that he was looking for. This was the universe in microcosm; somewhere in its turmoil lay peace. (Seth 1993: 766)

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