



## Vikram Seth

**A Suitable Boy**  
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**Q: Reviewers often, perhaps mistakenly, describe Amit Chatterji as your stand-in, or alter ego. The scenes in which he holds inquisitorial fans at bay are some of the funniest in the novel, so it is with some trepidation that this question is posed: do you find questions about your writing as irritating as he does?**

A: Well, yes, sometimes, but usually they're the kind of questions that come from a bumptious person who clearly likes holding forth. In general, questions are fine; you can always seize upon the parts of them that interest you and concentrate on answering those. And one has to remember when answering questions that asking questions isn't easy either, and for someone who's quite shy to stand up in an audience to speak takes some courage.

**Q: Pushkin's Eugene Onegin is said to be the inspiration for your novel The Golden Gate, and a conversation with a violinist friend begat An Equal Music. How did A Suitable Boy germinate? Did you always conceive of something as epic in scale as the final version?**

A: It began with the shred of conversation, "You too will marry a boy I choose." The "too" implied a wedding; the wedding led to the wedding guests; I became interested in their various lives; and the novel expanded from the simple domestic story I'd envisaged to the monster it became.

**Q: Music is central to many characters in A Suitable Boy, and your novel, An Equal Music, was about musicians. Your own musical interests and accomplishments are well known. Does the kind of music you happen to be listening to, during a certain period, affect your writing? Or does the writing dictate your choice in music?**

A: I rarely listen to music while writing. If I don't like it, it bothers me, and if I like it, it absorbs me so much I can't write. As for what I listen to after writing, it could be anything—but I've noticed that if the current book contains music from one tradition, it is music from another tradition that most relaxes me.

**Q: You trained as an economist. How did you realize that writing was your true métier?**

A: I was feeding demographic and economic data from my research in Chinese villages into a computer at Stanford. After many nights of this, one morning I stumbled into Stanford Bookstore and found myself in the poetry section, where I began reading Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. I loved it, and after a while began writing a novel in verse about my own time and place. But my dissertation had to be put aside, and (once I got the idea of a novel set in India and returned home to write it) never got completed.

**Q: A Suitable Boy marks a notable stylistic divergence from most modern literature. Why did a realistic style appeal to you? Could you speculate as to why realism, in general, has fallen out of favor? What do you think of the term "post-colonial," especially in regard to your own work? Do you feel kinship with R. K. Narayan and V.S. Naipaul, who are, respectively, indifferent and critical of the term?**

A: Realism hasn't fallen out of favor with most people, who are interested in people's lives, rather than gymnastics of style or literary trends. It's a certain kind of academic who undervalues realism, largely because it is not amenable to endless exegesis. As for "post-colonial", the term is o.k. as far as it goes as an academic category, but for the person being categorized (i.e. the writer), it's best not to concentrate on it—or other—simplifying terms, but to get on with understanding and delineating the complex and un-categorizable mesh of the story they're seeking to tell. (In that, I agree with R. K. Narayan, whose writing I also greatly admire.)