



## A Suitable Boy

By Vikram Seth  
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### Introduction

In mid-century India, Mrs. Rupa Mehra is on a quest. Her youngest daughter Lata remains unmarried, and the widowed Mrs. Mehra has decided to rectify the condition by enlisting friends and relatives to help her find Lata "a suitable boy."

Families form the backbone of the novel, as the story revolves around four deeply intertwined clans, three Hindu and one Muslim. The Kapoors represent the Hindi-speaking elite, gaining ascendancy through politics, while the middle-class, Anglicized Mehras firmly believe in the superiority of convent schools, English literature and proper manners. The Chatterjis, eccentric and rather scandalous members of the Bengali intelligentsia, indulge in rhyming couplets and coddle a manic dog named Cuddles, as the Muslim, landowning Khans face legislation that threatens to dissolve their culture and Urdu language along with all feudal land-holdings.

Through these people, Vikram Seth vividly recreates life in post-colonial India, a subcontinent trying to find its bearings, and to reconcile differing religions and languages in one national identity, as it stands on the brink of its first general election. *A Suitable Boy* is both social satire and social history, a novel whose scope ranges from the politics of a great man to the maneuvering of a mother, from an epic account of a nation at infancy to the torment of a young girl in love.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Consider Maan Kapoor's love for Saeeda Bai, and that of Lata Mehra's for Kabir Durrani. Why are these relationships highly unsuitable? In what ways do Lata's three suitors, Kabir, Amit and Haresh, represent three vastly different aspects of love, and equally different options for her future? Did Lata have a choice when she accepted Haresh Khanna, a man "as solid as a pair of Goodyear Welted shoes"? How does the novel navigate the conflict between culturally conservative 50s India and the young people trying to break free of the existing system without dishonoring their parents?
2. What criteria does Rupa Mehra use to assess potential prospects for Lata? How does each of the seven candidates compiled by Kalpana Gaur fare? Were you surprised by her prejudices? How do Lata and her mother eventually come to agree upon the same candidate?
3. The stampede at Pul Mela leaves Dipankar Chatterji's search for, "great concepts and great gods" severely shaken. "Baba, how do you explain all this?" he asks a guru, who mildly replies, "I think there was a flaw in the administrative arrangements." Do you think the guru speaks for the author at that moment? How is religion portrayed in *A Suitable Boy*?
4. Two political-historical events figure prominently in *A Suitable Boy*: the Zamindari Abolition Act, whereby all feudal land-holdings were dissolved, and the general elections held in 1952, the largest democratic election ever held in the world at the time. How do these two events symbolize the transformation of India into a modern nation?
5. Consider the central dialectic of the novel: the tension between established social order and the centrifugal forces that threaten to fragment that order. What disruptive forces did the old social structure of Rajas and Zamindars face? From landowners faking records to electioneering misdeeds, what other forces attempt to fragment the new social order? Is there an overriding philosophy in the novel that makes constant turmoil bearable? Does traditional, neglected old Mrs. Kapoor's faith, which does not undermine other creeds, provide a template for harmony?
6. Maan Kapoor thinks that for his own sake, Rasheed must "see the world with all its evil in a more tolerant light. It was not true that one could change everything through effort and vehemence and will. The stars maintained their courses despite his madness, and the village world moved on as before, swerving only very slightly to avoid him." How does this theme, of cosmic indifference to the desires of man, echo throughout the novel? In what manner does Rasheed exemplify of the futility of assuming otherwise?
7. Although Gandhi passed a constitutional provision abolishing untouchability, the results were more symbolic than practical. However, the untouchable shoemaker, Jagat Ram believes "that the victory for its formulation lay less with Mahatma Gandhi, who rarely concerned himself with such legalisms, than with quite another – and equally courageous – man." Who does Jagat Ram believe in? How does this character break taboos by refusing to be cowed by social proprieties, and simply following his innate decency? Why is this method for social change more effective than Rasheed's?
8. How would you describe the friendship between Maan Kapoor and Firoz Khan? Are there signs that they may be more than friends? Do they represent hope for amicable relations between differing religions? How does Maan's evolution from callow youth to a thoughtful, repentant adult embody the notion that salvation lies in the private world of marriage and family?
9. Could the Raja of Marh's attempt to raise the Shiva-linga be viewed as a metaphor? In a chapter that includes a tragic misunderstanding between Lata and Kabir, the self-serving machinations of Professor Mishra, Waris Khan's slanderous election posters, and Mahesh Kapoor's crushing defeat, what is the significance of the last sentence – "the Shiva-linga rested on the bed of the Ganga once more, the turbid waters passing over it, its bloodstains slowly washed away?"

10. How does the author's use of a third-person, fully-omniscient narrator successfully convey an intricately variegated, yet determinedly un-exotic, Indian reality? Consider the author's wry, affectionate, self-deprecating poetic word of thanks to the reader. Is it possible to extrapolate the author's point of view from the style and tone of these lines of verse?

#### **About the author**

Vikram Seth was born in India and educated there and in England, California, and China. He has written acclaimed books in several genres: verse novel, *The Golden Gate*; travel book, *From Heaven Lake*; animal fables, *Beastly Tales*; epic novel, *A Suitable Boy*. His most recent novel, *An Equal Music*, was published in 1999.