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Reviving the “Great Tradition” of the British Novel: Realism and Transparency in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*

Published twelve years after Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993) has received comparatively little scholarly attention. A prodigious feat of unmagical mimeticism, this massive novel marks a striking divergence from the bulk of postcolonial fiction: Seth reanimates the “Great Tradition” of the English novel as it is notably represented by Jane Austen and George Eliot, throwing into sharp relief the notion of transparency. This paper argues that Seth’s ostentatious resumption of the realist project of the nineteenth century does not by any means exhaust itself in an autotelic exercise or a docile reproduction.

Born in Calcutta in 1952, Vikram Seth occupies a highly original place on the post-colonial literary scene, owing to the dazzling variety of his work: “[f]or him, writing is partly a matter of creating genres, as if it’s not enough to create an oeuvre, but a whole tradition in miniature...” (Chaudhuri 508). Seth’s career has been one of restless reinvention: skipping from economist to poet, to travel writer, to novelist-in-verse, to librettist, to translator and to children’s writer, Vikram Seth even tried his hand at biography in *Two Lives*. His writing thus displays a staggering versatility: every new book by Seth creates a fresh departure in genre and theme and moves seamlessly from one geographical and cultural location to another, revealing a distinct cosmopolitan sensibility that makes Seth’s affiliations and cultural moorings all but impossible to fathom.¹ The few critics who have delved into Seth’s impressive repertoire of writing have struggled in vain to pigeonhole it: Seth’s protean body of work proves miraculously immune to any definitive categorization.

The striking generic heterogeneity of Seth’s work masks a hidden unity which lies in a deliberate use of literary reprise, as *A Suitable Boy* exemplifies. In this novel, Vikram Seth treats Western canonical genres as raw material in an ostensibly unfashionable attempt to go back to an earlier model of literary tradition defined by the line from Jane Austen to George Eliot. In *The Great Tradition*, a highly influential and contentious book, F. R. Leavis traces an essential continuity from Jane Austen to George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Leavis’s normative definition of the English canon has been decisive in shaping modern views of English fiction, and establishing English literature as a central discipline in the humanities. His passionate celebration of the vitality of the English language rests on a conception of literature as the life force of the nation and as a nationalizing force – which makes his position so problematical. A rewriting of the distinguished tradition delineated by Leavis, and more specifically of the novels by Austen and Eliot, *A Suitable Boy* centers on a young woman’s search for a suitable husband: Lata, the young Hindu heroine, considers the claims of three rival suitors before making her choice in the closing pages. While the title of the novel refers to the Indian market of arranged marriages, this theme is treated in the Austen vein. Seth’s reappropriation

1. A linguistic chameleon, Vikram Seth adapts to the environment he explores with such ease that it becomes pointless to attempt to put a national label on him: he resorts to British English in *An Equal Music* (which is set in London), while he uses American slang in *The Golden Gate* (which follows the lives of a group of yuppies in San Francisco).

of the realist mode characteristic of the novels by George Eliot displays a rare confidence in the possibility of representational transparency: *A Suitable Boy* is characterized by a third-person omniscient narrator, strikingly linear chronology and psychologically consistent characters whose thoughts are rendered through the ubiquitous use of free indirect speech.² The novel's immense scope is contained within a seemingly transparent prose: although Seth uses a few words in Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, the dominant mode is a feather-light example of idiomatic, standard English that betrays a desire for clarity and accessibility. This subtle, unobtrusive style reveals a clear-window aspiration that stands in stark contrast to Salman Rushdie's pyrotechnic prose which often subverts the very morphology of the English language.

The notion of transparency – both as clarity and referentiality – thus operates at a structural level in *A Suitable Boy*. Why does Vikram Seth strive to preserve the Great Tradition of the English novel so ostentatiously? Originality is a concern of the utmost importance for a whole literary tradition that deprecates imitation, believes in self-begetting and yearns for absolute originality. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, a series of essays published in 1991, Jameson harshly criticizes pastiche, which he perceives as the symbol of a capitalist society where even culture has been integrated into commodity production. It was from architectural debates that Jameson's conception of postmodernism initially emerged, but it came to encompass a mutation in the whole sphere of culture. For Jameson, pastiche is a neutral practice of imitation that marks the unfortunate collapse of personal style, defined as “what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body” (17). Thus, Jameson argues, the end of idiosyncratic, “inimitable” style in the realm of postmodern aesthetic production pushes society into a terminal repetition of emptied-out stylizations that epitomize the primacy of mechanical reproduction and are devoid of any political bite. I will argue that Seth's unvarnished attempt to go back to the Great Tradition of the English novel does not by any means boil down to a mechanical or nostalgic repetition of always-already-written texts.

Often described as “anachronistic” and downright “Eurocentric,”³ *A Suitable Boy* does not fit current expectations of the postcolonial: in the heyday of magic realism – an essentially hybrid genre which brings together realistic and imaginary elements, familiarity and strangeness, forcing one to constantly question one's vision of reality – “[Vikram Seth] writes as if Salman Rushdie had never authored *Midnight's Children* or *The Satanic Verses*, firmly turning his back upon the unconfined imagination and dangerous fantasy” (Desai). Although Seth's *opus* as a whole proves impervious to any definitive categorization, it must be noted that each individual work complies strictly

2. In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn explores the complex technique of free indirect speech, which she calls “narrated monologue,” underlining the mutual dependence of narrative realism and imaginary psychology.

3. Seth's embrace of the classical realist form has been seen by some critics as a throwback to the past, as the entry on *A Suitable Boy* in *The Reader's Companion to the Twentieth Century Novel* illustrates: “Willfully anachronistic, it runs the risk of drawing attention more to its virtuosity than to its content, less to its substance than to its facsimile charm. Paradoxically, its great achievement is to revivify a dying form” (Parker 673). In *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999), Pascale Casanova expresses her grave discomfort with this seemingly “Eurocentric” novel: “Loin d'être le signe d'une 'libération' littéraire et d'une accession des anciens colonisés à la grandeur littéraire, ce roman est au contraire la preuve irréfutable de la domination (presque) sans partage du modèle littéraire anglais sur son aire culturelle” (174). (“Far from furnishing evidence of some sort of literary liberation, or of the sudden accession of the formerly colonized to literary greatness, *A Suitable Boy* offered irrefutable proof of the virtually total domination of the English literary model over its cultural area.” Trans. by M.B. DeBevoise. 121-2)

with the distinct constraints and conventions of a specific literary genre.⁴ Amidst the prevailing postmodern skepticism towards realism, *A Suitable Boy* adheres to the salient features of mimetic realism Philippe Hamon analyzed in "Un discours constraint," namely exhaustivity, consistency and readability. The exceptional length of *A Suitable Boy* reflects an essentially realist desire for exhaustivity: through Brahmputur – an imaginary chronotope representative of north India – this "large loose baggy monster" (James 4) provides an impressively detailed and documented reconstruction of India in the years immediately following Independence. Vikram Seth skillfully represents a society in transition in its multiple political, religious, cultural and communal ramifications: woven into the main plot is the story of the troubled times of the early 1950s, the rise of the Indian middle class, the internal workings of the Congress Party, the abolition of feudal land-holdings, religious strife, communal hatred and sectarianism, shoe-making, bureaucracy and academia, and a myriad of further issues of importance to the large gallery of characters. Focusing on the sprawling kinship networks of four Indian families (three Hindu, one Muslim), the author interweaves countless subplots into patterns of great intricacy. The recurrent use of the conjunction "while," which entwines seemingly disparate plot lines into a consistent whole, highlights the tight structure of the novel. Thus, section 4.1, in which the reader first encounters Haresh – the rather uncouth but intelligent, self-made shoemaker Lata eventually settles for – begins with the following statement: "While Lata was falling in love with Kabir, a quite different set of events was taking place in Old Brahmputur, which, however, were to prove not irrelevant to her story" (205). The understatement "not irrelevant" stresses the striking internal coherence of the novel, which leaves no room whatsoever for chance. In compliance with Bersani's analysis, *A Suitable Boy* is governed by an overarching structure of significance: "The *tour de force* of realistic novelists from Jane Austen to the later Henry James is to combine a superficially loose, even sprawling narrative form with an extraordinary tightness of meaning" (52). Apparently isolated and trifling details are coerced into integrating a continuously meaningful chain of events: thus, the novel is strewn with foreshadowing devices (dreams, hints, prophecies, etc.) and repetitions, ensuring the utmost transparency of the message. Paradoxically, the realist novel negates the vicissitudes of reality: Seth's transparent hermeneutics departs from reality, where nothing makes such consistent sense. The universe of ordered significance that governs *A Suitable Boy* is best epitomized by the figure of the family tree,⁵ a reassuring space of coherent identity that confers meaning upon the subject by defining his/her position in a symbolic structure enfolding and transcending the individual. The stabilizing, reifying verticality of the family tree is an apt metaphor for the realist text: "the realist space is concatenated (see Zola's preparatory sketches for his novels) or arborescent (the family tree)" (Hamon 147, my translation).⁶ Through the character of Amit who, as the writer of monstrously garrulous historical novels, functions as the author's surrogate, Vikram

4. A notable exception is *Two Lives*, a text that blends two distinct genres: biography and autobiography. Even the astounding hybridity of *The Golden Gate* draws from a specific generic model, the novel in verse exemplified by Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Seth thus stands in stark contrast to Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh, who constantly mix a variety of genres in their writing.

5. Seth follows the nineteenth-century novelistic convention of prefacing the narrative with family trees. These trees describe the intertwining lives of several generations of four representative families: the Mehrahs, the Khans, the Kapoors and the Chatterjis.

6. "l'espace réaliste est un espace emboîté (cf. les croquis préparatoires de Zola pour ses romans) ou arborescent (l'arbre généalogique)."

Seth overtly compares his work to a banyan tree: “it sprouts, and grows, and spreads, and drops branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks” (524). This metafictional comment implies the slow and ample growth of an entity that acquires imposing dimensions through size and intricacy of design; it suggests that through all the digressions and diversions, the thread of the narrative is always maintained in *A Suitable Boy*. It is by no means coincidental that the metaphor of the tree should be re-employed by Dr Durrani, the mathematical genius: “You said, apropos the Pergolesi Lemma, ‘The concept will form a tree.’ It was a, er, a brilliant comment – I never thought of it in those terms before” (228). The metaphor, which unveils deep affinities between the realist novel and scientific discourse, reveals *A Suitable Boy* to be an epistemological enterprise: Seth’s text reflects a holistic view of the novel and an optimistic attempt at deciphering the world. Contrary to what postmodernists hold, the novel suggests that reality can be deciphered and represented through the conventional lens of verisimilitude.

This unshakeable belief in readability and intelligibility is potently evinced by the ruthless repression of chaotic forces within the novel. The main plot is provided by the doomed Hindu-Muslim romance of Lata and Kabir against a backdrop of communal tensions – a romantic *topos* that is integrated into the realist novel. Although disruptive forces are central to the development of the realist plot – if Lata had not fallen in love with Kabir, her mother would not have instituted a search for a suitable boy – Vikram Seth keeps fragmentation at bay, corroborating Bersani’s claim that “realistic fiction admits heroes of desire in order to submit them to ceremonies of expulsion” (67). Seth’s elimination of disruptive forces is further exemplified by the character of Rasheed, who nurtures socialist ideals and tries to ensure the land reform can take effect in his village so Kachheru, his family’s senior worker, can gain rights to the land he has been tilling for years. Having incurred the wrath of his family, and inadvertently provoked the ruin of the man he was trying to protect, he goes mad and commits suicide. As evinced by Kabir’s brutal dismissal and Rasheed’s suicide in the last chapters of the novel, the anarchic forces at work in the novel are duly eradicated, in an ostensible attempt to stage the ultimate triumph of rationality over the wild ecstasies of passion, and of sense over sensibility.

In fact, the very title of Seth’s novel is an unveiled reference to the leitmotif of Jane Austen’s fiction – finding a suitable match or a “proper object” (*Emma* 32). In *A Suitable Boy*, reality effects are constantly subverted within the text by overt metafictional allusions to canonical English novels. A strand of self-references revolves around the character of Amit, the Bengali novelist and poet who stands for the author’s intradiegetic double: “Jane Austen is the only woman in his life” (415), Amit’s sister declares. Moreover, when summoned by a reader to justify the meandering structure of his novels – “as if he were personally responsible for the nervous exhaustion of some future dissertationist” (1370) – Amit states: “I too hate long books: the better, the worse. If they’re bad, they merely make me pant with the effort of holding them up for a few minutes. But if they’re good, I turn into a social moron for days [...]. I still bear the scars of *Middlemarch*” (1370-1).⁷ These somewhat wry gestures of filial tribute display

7. The reference to *Middlemarch* is not fortuitous: just as George Eliot examined the great political and social changes in an earlier England, so Seth writing in the 1990s recreates a bygone period of transition. Besides, the *Middlemarch* of

a mix of intimacy and irony, exposing Seth's novel as a rewriting of the Great English novel. Transparency is achieved here, not through referentiality but through the ostentatious superimposition of one text over another. In fact, there are many mirror-effects in *A Suitable Boy*. Mrs Rupa Mehra's lament – "I have to do everything in this house, and no one cares for me. [...] I have slaved for you all my life, and you don't care if I live or die" (405) – echoes Mrs Bennet's endless wailing in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "nobody is on my side, nobody takes part with me, I am cruelly used, nobody feels for my poor nerves" (76). Likewise, the glamorous Meenakshi is an Oriental version of Rosamond in *Middlemarch*: both women are characterized by their superb arrogance and breath-taking beauty; both marry a man from another caste or another class against their parents' advice and end up indulging in adultery. In *Middlemarch*, the narrator's descriptions of Rosamond are strewn with references to her gracious neck, a symbol of her vanity; therefore, it is not surprising that the depictions of Meenakshi in *A Suitable Boy* should stress her beautiful neck.⁸ Seth puts forth an elaborate system of intertextual connections, establishing complicity with the reader who is able to spot these playful reflections: "By revealing the makeup itself, the signer does not defraud the author whose work he exploits. Far from fooling the reader, he appeals to his complicity" (Jeandillou 119, my translation).⁹ In fact, the novel is dotted with subtle, strategically placed Austenian moments. Thus, the passage in which Haresh looks at a photograph of Lata as he writes to her in section 18.18 mirrors a scene in the last part of *Pride and Prejudice*. As Elizabeth tours the estate of Pemberley with the Gardiners, she comes across a portrait of Darcy and realizes that her deep antipathy toward the young man has turned into more tender feelings: "There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original" (191). Seth reproduces this formula almost *verbatim* to describe Haresh and Lata's incipient love: "I have your framed photograph on my desk before me, and it brings to me tender thoughts of the original" (1411). The term "original" is crucial. Though on a first level, the substantive clearly refers to Lata, it also has a deeper import: through the notion of "original," this passage openly posits itself as a translation of Jane Austen's novels.¹⁰

Translation is an illuminating paradigm in *A Suitable Boy*: by transplanting the Great Tradition of the English novel to the Indian postcolonial context, Vikram Seth establishes difference at the heart of similarity. In the third part of the book, the description of the Barsaat Mahal operates at a metafictional level, revealing *A Suitable Boy* to be a distorting mirror: "its reflection in the water almost perfect, almost unrippled" (180). The adverb "almost," which is repeated twice and further highlighted by the binary rhythm, echoes Homi Bhabha's definition of "mimicry": "almost the same, but not

the title is, like Seth's Brahmur, a fictitious provincial city offered to the reader as typifying an actual society (another model for Brahmur might be sought in that other imaginary city, Narayan's Malgudi).

8. "stretching her long, tawny neck like a relaxed cat..." (10); "The long-necked Meenakshi" (69); "Meenakshi stroked the side of her neck with the long, red-polished nail of the middle finger of her right hand" (71); etc. In *Middlemarch*, references to Rosamond's neck abound: "[...] said Rosamond [...] with eyes swerving towards the new view of her neck in the glass" (113); "she [...] turned her long neck a little" (160); "Rosamond [...] gave a certain turn of her graceful neck" (344); "she gave her neck a meditative turn" (351); etc.

9. "En rendant perceptible le maquillage lui-même, le signataire ne dépouille point celui dont il exploite les œuvres, et loin de berner son lecteur, il sollicite sa complicité."

10. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge underlines the correspondence between literary reprise and translation: "One variety of literary translation in the wider sense is imitation, the production of a work that follows the stylistic and generic norms established by another work – a kind of translation into the same language" (74).

quite" (122). It is precisely in the light of this crucial concept that *A Suitable Boy* should be construed. Through mimicry, which "is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 123), the novel exorcizes the inherent authority of the Great English novel as F. R. Leavis circumscribed it. This tradition was intrinsically bound up with the growth of Empire, serving as "a template for the denial of the value of the 'peripheral,' the 'marginal,' the 'uncanonized'" (Ashcroft 3). The alienating power of the English classic is an acute concern for the postcolonial author who needs to define his origins and assert his originality in a tongue and a space/time in which the boundaries between same and other are problematic. In *Figures du double: Du personnage au texte* (2008), Nathalie Martinière assesses the value and purport of literary reprise in the postcolonial context. Drawing on Harold Bloom's work but disputing his vision of literature as an autonomous, autotelic universe cut off from historical contingencies, she underlines the petrifying power of the classic for the postcolonial writer: "Today, anxiety takes the form of the already written text/novel, a petrifying Medusa," and further on: "It is the relation to previous texts that reveals itself as alienating" (11 and 12 respectively, my translation).¹¹ The most potent way for Seth to exorcize this "anxiety of influence" (to take up the title of Bloom's famous book) is to hover endlessly between repetition and disparity. Though most critics have used binary paradigms (such as subjection/resistance, rejection/adhesion, etc.) to analyze *A Suitable Boy*, the novel's relation to the Great Tradition cannot be seen as altogether complicitous or simply adversarial.¹² The complex dialectic operating in *A Suitable Boy* stresses that it is by no means a "transparent" – i.e., identical, undistorted – reflection of the novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot. Although Seth's text is seemingly disconnected from the postcolonial impulse, close examination of his prose reveals that this is in fact not the case.

Seth's prose features a "doubleness" (Atkins 58) which, while being immaculate English, often espouses the movement and sentence structure of vernacular languages. The complexities of the Indian language mosaic raise issues that have concerned many Indo-Anglian writers: since most Indians master more than one language and constantly shift from one language to another, the depiction in English of a multilingual society will most of the time involve some degree of translation. When Seth's narrator specifies the language in which a dialogue occurs – "I hope things are well with you, Meenakshi," said Mrs Chatterji, reverting for a moment to Bengali. / 'Wonderfully well, Mago,' replied Meenakshi in English" (427) – he posits himself as a translator, thus shattering the transparency of the realist text insofar as the text is not true to the original, though the message gets across the barrier of language without any distortion. However, Seth is not so much translating from vernacular languages into English as using various poetic devices to instill otherness into his prose and make his text read like a translation. For instance, when the courtesan Saeeda Bai reproaches the Raja of Mahr for not paying a visit to her, the ostensibly ornate, courtly quality of the prose signals she is speaking in Urdu: "How long it has been since these eyes last saw you. [...] You have become as difficult to sight as the moon at Id" (131). The synecdoche "these eyes" and the

11. "En période contemporaine, l'angoisse prend la forme de cette tête de méduse pétrifiante qu'est le texte/roman déjà écrit," and "c'est le rapport aux textes antérieurs qui se donne à voir comme aliénant."

12. In *Postcolonial Con-texts*, John Thieme underlines the simplism involved in seeing the relationship between postcolonial texts and their canonical intertexts in terms of a purely oppositional model of influence: "the relationship between postcolonial con-text and canonical pre-text is invariably a complex and ambivalent one..." (2).

comparison with Eid-ul-Fitr – a Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan and is determined by the sighting of the moon – introduce linguistic otherness into the heart of the English language. The same phenomenon is to be noticed when Saeeda Bai reprimands Maan for neglecting her: "Rumour has it, Dagh Sahib, that you have been in town for some days now. [...] But the hyacinth that obtained favour yesterday appears withered today to the connoisseur" (871). The elegance of Saeeda Bai's English, along with the striking imagery of these passages, function as a "symbolic" Urdu (Srivastava 871). Beneath its carefully polished surface, Seth's prose contrasts Saeeda Bai's sophisticated Urdu with the coarser Urdu spoken by peasants with little or no code-switching. Likewise, the types of English in *A Suitable Boy* range from the idiomatic British English of Lata and Amit to the more laboured schoolroom English of Haresh or the comically mangled *Babu English* of other characters. A fascinatingly supple medium, Seth's seemingly transparent prose thus encompasses a rich linguistic mosaic.

In the above-cited excerpt, the beautiful image of the flower draws on the tradition of Urdu poetry, the *ghazal*. As the music that brings together Maan and Saeeda Bai – two of the main characters – this poetic form plays an important role in the novel's plot. Through the character of Amit, who resorts to yet another comparison to describe the structure of his novel, likening it to the unfolding of a *raga*, classical Indian music is also given prominence in *A Suitable Boy*. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré has shown that Seth's novel rests on an extensive transposition of the Hindustani musical modes: the first pages are a slow improvisation (*alap*) on arranged marriages, a theme that forms the novel's "tonal" background. In fact, *A Suitable Boy* is strewn with the names of specific *ragas* (*Bhairava*, *Todi*, *Ramkali*, *Darbari*, etc.), which distance the average Western reader who has no knowledge of modal music and is therefore utterly unable to distinguish one *raga* from another. Likewise, the untutored reader is unlikely to grasp Ustad Majeed Khan's outrage when one of his students wants to learn *Malkauns*, a late night *raga*, in the morning: "'So you've come in the morning today,' said Ustad Majeed Khan. 'How can I teach you Malkosh in the morning?'" (315). The author does not mention a crucial distinguishing feature of modal music, namely that each *raga* conveys a specific sentiment which is attuned to a definite season or moment of the day: departing from the parameters set down for each *raga* is, as it were, a sacrilege. The *ghazal* and the *raga* thus serve as a potent reminder of cultural otherness.

The issue of transparency casts powerful light on *A Suitable Boy*. Though Vikram Seth displays an unfashionable belief in representational transparency, his resumption of the realist project of the nineteenth century is so ostentatious – so transparent – that it shatters the referentiality of the realist novel, drawing attention to the text's status as a translation of the Great Tradition of the English novel. *A Suitable Boy* does not by any means boil down to a servile replication of the novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot. In fact, by transplanting this novelistic tradition to the Indian postcolonial context, Seth establishes striking interrelations between same and other, injecting linguistic and cultural opacity into the heart of the Great English novel. Although many critics berate Vikram Seth for evading the politics of his own cultural, historical and political location because of the problematic assumption that realist writing is inherently less subversive and therefore less postcolonial than non-realist modes, Seth's reproduction of the representational apparatus of the Great English novel actually has a profound critical and political dimension. Indeed, it is precisely literary reprise – this seemingly introverted

practice – that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, rooting artistic productions in a historical context that cannot be left aside or forgotten. *A Suitable Boy* thus emphasizes that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 55).

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