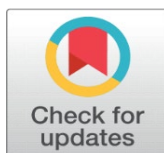


BRIDGING LITERATURE AND CINEMA: A STUDY OF A SUITABLE BOY AS NOVEL AND WEB SERIES

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DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.6325

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the adaptation of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* into a web series directed by Mira Nair, exploring the intersection of literature and cinema. By analyzing both the novel and its screen adaptation, the paper investigates how key themes such as tradition versus modernity, religious tensions, and personal versus political dilemmas are translated from text to screen. The study looks at the difficulties of reducing a 1,300-page book to a six-part television series, emphasising characterisation, narrative structure, and theme representation. It also covers the wider trend of novel-to-web-series adaptations in the digital age, highlighting the influence of streaming services on modern narrative. Ultimately, the paper aims to assess how Nair's visual interpretation opposes and enhances Seth's literary vision, taking into account the wider effects of serialised novel adaptations.

Keywords: Adaptation, Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, Mira Nair, Web Series, Tradition vs. Modernity, Religious Tensions, Digital Age

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. A SUITABLE BOY – A NOVEL BY VIKRAM SETH

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, first published in 1993, is a landmark in Indian English literature, known for its ambitious scale and depth. Spanning over 1,300 pages, it is one of the longest novels ever written in English and is set in post-independence India in the early 1950s. The novel presents a detailed panorama of Indian society during a time of intense political, cultural, and social change.

The narrative of Lata Mehra, a lively young lady, and her mother's tenacious search for her a suitable spouse is at the core of *A Suitable Boy*. Lata's quest for liberty, self-discovery, and love unfolds against the backdrop of a newly independent India that is battling political unrest, caste relations, and religious strife. Three distinct families—the Mehras, the Kapoors, and the Khans—representing various facets of Indian society, are interwoven with Lata's story.

The novel follows Lata's interactions with three potential suitors: Kabir Durrani, a passionate young Muslim; Amit Chatterji, a poet from a prosperous Bengali family; and Haresh Khanna, an aspirational businessman from a lower caste. Lata's mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, is obsessed with finding her daughter a husband. A major topic of the book is the conflict

between contemporary aspirations and conventional expectations; Lata symbolises the struggle of many young Indians in that era who were torn between these opposing forces.

But the book is more than just a family drama—it's a multi-layered depiction of the political landscape of 1950s India. Seth includes talks about land reform, the first general election in India, and the tense relations between Muslims and Hindus after Partition. Seth explores the manner in which political decisions impact human lives with individuals like Muslim landlord Nawab of Baitar and progressive politician Mahesh Kapoor. The individuals' political and personal journeys highlight the post-colonial battle for identity and nation-building.

Throughout the novel, religion is a major theme, especially in the interactions between Muslims and Hindus. The developing hostilities between both cultures are reflected in Lata's relationship with the Muslim child Kabir, which encounters significant resistance because of their divergent religious views. Seth depicts the intricate and frequently tense linkages between politics, religion, and class in a society that is changing, perfectly capturing the spirit of the time.

The epic breadth of the novel is sometimes likened to 19th-century works with a similarly large cast of people and complex subplots, such as those by Dickens and Tolstoy. It is a valuable text for study because of its complex depiction of Indian politics, culture, and history. It is also a social document that illustrates the challenges and victories of a recently liberated country.

In 2020, *A Suitable Boy* was adapted into a six-part web series directed by Mira Nair, bringing Seth's characters and narrative to a new generation of viewers. While the adaptation condenses the novel's expansive storyline, it retains the essence of Lata's search for love and identity amidst the socio-political currents of India in the 1950s.

1.2. A SUITABLE BOY- A BRITISH TELEVISION DRAMA MINISERIES AND NETFLIX ADAPTATION DIRECTED BY MIRA NAIR

In July 2020, BBC One hosted the launch of *A Suitable Boy*, a British television drama miniseries directed by the well-known director Mira Nair. This six-part series was written by Andrew Davies and produced by Lookout Point for the BBC and Netflix. It is an adaptation of Vikram Seth's 1993 novel of the same name. The enormous source material—which totals more than 1,300 pages—and its portrayal of the sociopolitical milieu of post-colonial India made the series much awaited.

The miniseries centres on the entwined lives of four Indian families and is set in 1951, four years after India attained freedom. Lata Mehra, a young woman at the core of the narrative, must balance her own aspirations with those of her family and society while her mother looks for a "suitable boy" for her to marry. The series' emotional centre is around Lata's quest for love and her path of self-discovery. Lata is portrayed by Tanya Maniktala, who gives a standout performance that brilliantly captures the character's inner conflicts between tradition and modernity.

The novel's rich cultural context and its examination of the intricate social and political structure of post-partition India are retained in the adaptation. The series provides viewers with an understanding of the country's changing identity through subplots concerning land reforms, the first general election, and tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The series, on the other hand, distils the expansive storyline of Seth's novel by simplifying some of the more general political comments and emphasising more important human ties. The novel's brief adaptation has caused controversy among readers, with some applauding its condensed style and others bemoaning the removal of some characters and plot points.

The visual direction of Mira Nair vividly and authentically captures the past of India. Known for her films like *The Namesake* and *Monsoon Wedding*, Nair highlights the richness of culture everywhere she goes—from the busy streets of Brahmpur to the elaborate palaces and parliamentary buildings. With expansive views of vast palaces, bustling bazaars, and rural villages, the cinematography beautifully depicts the country of India. Because of her close ties to India, Nair gives each scene in the miniseries a sense of realism and depth.

The ensemble cast of the show is outstanding, especially Ishaan Khatter's portrayal of Maan Kapoor, the disobedient politician's son, and Tabu's portrayal of Saeeda Bai, the courtesan Maan falls in love with. One of the main subplots in the book, their tragic and intense romance adds depth and intensity to the narrative. Critics complimented Khatter's portrayal of the impulsive, passionate Maan and Tabu's subtle performance as the sophisticated, jaded Saeeda Bai.

Although the novel's speed and condensed nature drew criticism, *A Suitable Boy* was largely praised for its lavish production qualities, powerful performances, and confident directing by Mira Nair. It was praised for being one of the

few foreign TV shows with a cast and plot that were totally Indian, providing viewers around the world with a glimpse into a pivotal time in Indian history. Following its BBC One debut, the series was made accessible to viewers worldwide on Netflix, so broadening its appeal and bringing Seth's renowned story to a new audience.

1.3. "THE TREND OF ADAPTING NOVELS INTO WEB SERIES"

Novel adaptations into web series have been increasingly popular in the digital age, changing the entertainment scene. The adaptability of streaming services, which enable serialised narrative and provide plenty of room for intricate plotlines and character development, is a major factor driving this trend. Web series have the ability to go deeper into the source material, providing viewers with richer, more immersive experiences, in contrast to traditional films or TV shows that are limited by time.

The emergence of digital platforms is a major factor contributing to this change, as they offer accessibility to a worldwide audience. Because viewers can now watch content whenever and wherever they choose, web series are becoming the favoured format for stories with literary influences. Because web series are episodic, more accurate adaptations can be made because a novel's complexities can be covered in numerous hours of content, which provides greater depth and understanding than a two-hour movie.

Additionally, the lack of stringent censorship laws on digital media allows filmmakers to explore more daring topics and intricate social issues that could be toned down for traditional film. This artistic freedom frequently leads to more genuine and audacious adaptations, attracting viewers who are hungry for provocative material. Less limitations allow artists to push the envelope and adapt topics that would have been deemed too complex or contentious for traditional media.

The increasing popularity of literary adaptations for online television is also a reflection of modern audiences' changing tastes, who are drawn to complex plots and intellectually stimulating material. Web series are perfect for presenting multidimensional storylines since they allow for experimentation with structure and tempo. Technological developments have also opened up production, enabling filmmakers to experiment with visual storytelling methods that enrich the original stories. In summary, the practice of turning novels into web series is changing the way that literature is portrayed on film. A fresh and fascinating approach to enjoy literary works is provided by streaming services, which have become a dominant force in modern entertainment due to their flexibility, audience demand for deeper storytelling, and lack of creative limitations.

2. CRITICAL DISCUSSION

There have always been trade-offs and innovative decisions made when adapting literary works for the big screen. One of the longest novels written in English is *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, which is renowned for its meticulous depiction of India after independence. Translating a vast, intricate story into a condensed visual form was a challenge for filmmaker Mira Nair when she adapted the book into a six-episode television series in 2020. This conversation examines how Nair's adaptation, which preserves the integrity of Seth's literary universe while examining thematic representation, narrative devices, character development, and socio-political criticism, crosses the boundaries between book and film.

2.1. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CONDENSATION

A novel spanning over 1,300 pages must be condensed into a six-hour series while making thoughtful decisions about storyline and character development. Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is a vast story that delves into the interwoven lives of four families, each of which represents a distinct aspect of India's socio-political scene. Seth provides a thorough examination of the first election held in India after independence, conflicts between religions, and the inner struggles of individuals like Lata Mehra and Maan Kapoor. This range is reduced in Nair's version, which primarily concentrates on the story's romantic and familial elements while omitting certain socio-political commentary.

The narrative in Seth's book is broad and intricate, giving characters ample opportunity for self-examination and long-form conversation that gradually reveals more significance. Nair, however, cuts a lot of these components to meet the constrained amount of screen time, which results in the loss of some subplots and the nuance of supporting characters.

Mukherjee points out that this reduction is a typical adaptation difficulty, with visual storytelling frequently giving priority to important plot events above internal character development (Mukherjee 113). As a result, the show focusses mostly on Lata's romantic journey and Maan's tumultuous relationship with Saeeda Bai, leaving out the interior monologues and historical details that make up the book.

The story's flow is likewise changed by this condensation procedure. The series proceeds at a faster speed to keep viewers interested, whereas Seth's novel moves slowly, allowing for ponderous pauses and digressions. The novel dives deeper into Lata's psychological problems and societal constraints, but the series portrays her decision-making process involving her three suitors—Kabir Durrani, Haresh Khanna, and Amit Chatterji—as more decisive. The audience's attention is diverted from the larger socioeconomic backdrop of post-partition India to a more intimate, romantic story by this streamlining, even if it is required for the format.

2.2. THEMATIC REPRESENTATION: TRADITION VS. MODERNITY

The conflict between tradition and modernity, which shapes not only the lives of the protagonists but also post-independence India, is one of the main themes of both the book and the television series. The question Lata Mehra faces—whether to marry a "suitable boy" per her mother's wishes or to follow her own heart—serves as a metaphor for the greater national conflict between upholding traditional traditions and embracing contemporary, individualistic ideas.

From Maan Kapoor's romance with the prostitute Saeeda Bai to Lata's romantic entanglements, Seth's book painstakingly examines these issues via a variety of people and situations. This tension is depicted on screen by Nair, albeit he emphasises the personal above the political. The Zamindari Abolition Act and other political topics covered in-depth in the novel are also covered in the series, though not to the same extent. Desai claims that although the television adaptation keeps the main ideas of the book, it simplifies some of the more intricate socio-political relationships in order to make the story more readable (Desai 22).

But Nair's use of visual storytelling gives the conflict between tradition and modernity a fresh perspective. Complementing the notion of a nation in transition is the lush visual scenery, which depicts bustling marketplaces, family gatherings, and political rallies, creating an immersive experience. The characters' psychological conflicts are mirrored by the contrast between contemporary metropolitan life and traditional rural settings, especially Lata, who is torn between her personal goals and her family's expectations. The conflicting visual themes of modern, colourful cityscapes and ancient, dilapidated family estates emphasise this tension even more.

2.3. CHARACTERIZATION AND PERFORMANCE

Making sure the characters maintain their nuance and complexity on film is one of the biggest obstacles in adapting a literary work. Seth provides well-developed characters in *A Suitable Boy* that speak to various aspects of Indian society. For example, Lata symbolises the struggle between personal desire and family obligations, whereas Maan Kapoor's passion for Saeeda Bai is a defiance of social norms.

Character growth in the series is mostly dependent on actor performances. As Lata, Tanya Maniktala embodies the character's carefree joy and subdued rebellion, while Tabu, as Saeeda Bai, contributes an emotional depth that portrays the courtesan's strength and sensitivity. On the other hand, some critics contend that the brevity of the series hinders the character development, especially for the supporting cast. For example, Amit Chatterji, who is a major presence in Lata's life in the novel, is reduced to a supporting part in the television series. Similarly, there is less focus on Haresh Khanna's career goals in the series, which mirror India's economic goals (Mukherjee 117).

In addition, Ishaan Khatter's portrayal of Maan Kapoor is crucial to the show's examination of both individual and political disobedience. Maan and Saeeda Bai's relationship, which defies social expectations, is delicately and nuancedly described. But a lot of Maan's psychological development—especially his political enlightenment, which is covered in more detail in the novel—is omitted from the series. In this instance, Maan's emotional journey takes precedence over his political one, as Naremore observes that adaptations frequently have to prioritise certain character arcs over others (Naremore 45).

2.4. VISUAL AND CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

The visual splendour of Nair's *A Suitable Boy* is striking, as the filmmaker makes use of India's colourful surroundings to accentuate the narrative. With its dilapidated havelis, congested streets, and vast rural areas, the series, which was filmed on location in places like Varanasi and Lucknow, perfectly encapsulates 1950s India. Rich colour schemes and cinematography complement the novel's examination of a nation in flux, stuck between the ruins of its colonial history and the opportunities of a contemporary future.

In addition, the series skilfully employs music to enhance its visual narrative. Important sequences, especially those involving Lata and Maan, get emotional depth from compositions by Anoushka Shankar and Alex Heffes. The novel's narrative effectively communicates the tension between tradition and modernity by providing extensive descriptions of cultural customs and familial obligations. Similarly, traditional Indian instruments like the sitar are employed to highlight this contradiction.

Even though the story itself is abridged, Aiyappan points out that one of the merits of Nair's adaptation is its capacity to conjure a feeling of place and time through visual and audio signals (Aiyappan). For example, the lavish wedding that kicks off the series is a visual depiction of the cultural and familial expectations that shape the protagonists' behaviour throughout the narrative, in addition to being a display of colour and song. Because of this, the series' rich visual palette makes up for some of the story's simplifications and provides viewers with a visceral experience that enhances Seth's meticulous world-building.

2.5. RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Both the novel and the television show feature a great deal of religious tension, especially in the relationship between Lata and the Muslim Kabir. This partnership serves as a metaphor in Seth's book for the deeper religious tensions that simmered in India after the partition.

Through complex character interactions and historical backdrop, the novel depicts the complexity of Hindu-Muslim relations, providing a thorough examination of the effects of partition on both individuals and the nation.

These subjects are touched upon in Nair's version, while some of the political and theological criticism is simplified. While delving less extensively into the larger historical background, the show places a strong emphasis on the personal stakes of Lata's relationship with Kabir.

According to Aiyappan, the show occasionally forgoes political nuance in favour of narrative clarity, especially when it comes to how Hindu-Muslim interactions are portrayed (Aiyappan). The series does, however, maintain some of the socio-political depth of the novel thanks to the inclusion of significant historical events, such as the discussions around the Zamindari Abolition Act.

In the plot between Maan and his father Mahesh Kapoor, a politician advocating for land reforms, the show also emphasises the personal costs of political choices. The novel's overarching themes of societal and political transition are reflected in this subplot. Nair makes sure that the series stays approachable to a worldwide audience while yet addressing the core topics of the novel by concentrating on the individual effects of these political discussions.

3. CONCLUSION

Mira Nair's adaptation of *A Suitable Boy* successfully bridges the gap between literature and cinema, translating Vikram Seth's sprawling novel into a visually rich and emotionally engaging series. While the adaptation inevitably condenses the novel's narrative and simplifies some of its more complex themes, it retains the essence of Seth's exploration of post-independence India. Through its focus on the personal dilemmas of Lata and Maan, as well as its depiction of a country in transition, the series captures the tension between tradition and modernity that defines both the novel and its historical context. Ultimately,

Nair's *A Suitable Boy* is a testament to the possibilities and limitations of literary adaptation, offering viewers a visual interpretation of Seth's literary world while highlighting the challenges inherent in translating text to screen.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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