

A Suitable Boy: Where love is intricate and the personal is political

Nair's adaptation has captured well how the personal is always political, and has explained well that religion, pride, and intent create an intricate web that is to be traversed in order to find a suitable spouse.

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I first read Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* in the mid-2000s. I watched Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* in 2001. Both these works, though ostensibly about deliberations of spouse-selection and the mayhem of organising weddings, offer insights into Indian social and political realities. So, I was looking forward to watching Nair's adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*. Seth's novel in tracing a 19-year-old girl, Lata's choice of spouse from among three suitors, lays out how an individual's quest for companionship is shaped by society, and, in so doing, convincingly explains how the personal is political. Similarly, Nair's film addresses difficult and sensitive issues of child abuse and infidelity in the joyful framework of weddings.

Nair has been bold to undertake an adaptation of this 1,500-page masterpiece. This certainly runs the risk of not being able to capture the complexities of the characters, political situations, and personal struggles. Nonetheless, this series is appealing for it has

captured two key themes of the novel, which resonate with contemporary times, namely, inter-religious marriages and the different meanings of love.

Lata's attraction and compatibility with Kabir Durrani, her first suitor, is set against the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim relations in post-Independent India. Amid rising communal tensions (due to construction of a temple right next to a mosque), Kabir's declarations of love remain insufficient to make him a suitable choice. Lata's family has nothing against Kabir, they claim, yet marrying a Muslim in those troubled times, they remind Lata, is far from wise. Written in the 1990s, this novel was set in the 1950s, but Seth could well have sketched this character to suit current times, as furore over Hindu-Muslim unions continues, evident in the reaction to the now-retracted advertisement by the jewellery brand, Tanishq.

Seth's novel has generated debates on who would have been the ideal suitor for Lata. To some, Lata's choice in Haresh Kapoor, the career-focused man, was conservative. The romantics would have opted for the suave, charming, lawyer-turned-poet Amit Chatterjee, and the daring would have liked to see Lata with the handsome, cricket-playing Muslim classmate, Kabir Durrani. In developing these characters, Seth generated a poignant discussion on whether there exists different types of love (passion, compatibility, duty), and which of these should motivate marriage.

A strength of this series is that it has developed Haresh's character well, and in doing so, contributed to this debate on different meanings of love. Nair has not presented Haresh simplistically as that choice which fits well with middle-class values and moralities of having a good job and being of an appropriate caste. Rather, she has been able to draw out that Lata chose Haresh for his sincerity, willingness to make adjustments for her, and a sense that he would let her grow into an individual of her own.

This nuanced lens, however, is not adopted for Amit Chatterjee's character, who is only depicted as a society man, charmed by Lata but too modern for her.

Whereas in the novel, we see how Amit and Lata are deeply attracted to each other, perhaps due to a shared passion for poetry, but Amit's expressions of interest are inconsistent and

too few and far between, which makes Lata think of him as unpredictable to venture into married life.

These experiences and deliberations of love and attraction seem quite relevant particularly for the urbane youth who seem to believe that romantic and passionate love must be the only worthy basis for marriage. This series, then, has reopened this debate in the Indian context, on whether marriage can be based on a love that does not emanate from intense passion, without necessarily questioning one's sense of modernity.

Nair's adaptation has captured well how the personal is always political, and has explained well that religion, pride, and intent create an intricate web that is to be traversed in order to find a suitable spouse.

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The views expressed are personal