



Comparative study between The Duchess of Malfi and A Suitable Boy

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative study between *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster and *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth. Although both these dramas are set in two entirely different eras (one in the Jacobean period, 1614, and the other in postcolonial India, 1993) and two different realms (one in England and the other in India), both novels show male-centric societies. Both books are filled with complex political machinations that are hard to understand and would be dull if not for the involvement of numerous family members. This article shows how male members of the family dominate the female ones, in their life, choices, opinions, and decisions. One thing common, we find in both kinds of literature is that women's fortune is always decided by their family members, or we can say, men of the family, whether it be western literature or Indian literature.

Key Words: comparative, male, female, women, literature, family.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which, men possess the majority of the power and predominate in positions of moral authority, social privilege, and property control. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a work that shows the humiliation of women in the Renaissance period, precisely in the Jacobean period. This play focuses on the Duchess as a voice against the patriarchal society in the period. Webster portrays the Duchess as the play's protagonist, fighting for her freedom from the patriarchal rule in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Cardinal and Ferdinand, two of her brothers, are interested in taking control of her life. Webster introduces the passive stereotype of women during the Jacobean

period, in the first act of his play. He claims that the Cardinal and Ferdinand pressure their sister, the Duchess, to abstain from further marriages. When Ferdinand says, “Marry! they are most luxurious, Will wed twice”, he is basically warning the Duchess that a widow shouldn’t remarry. Even though, the Duchess confirm her brothers that she won’t marry, but they refuse to believe her. Webster contends that men use religion as a tool to subjugate women. The Duchess decides to remarry to subvert her patriarchal rule. Despite being aware of all the negative effects, she still wants to discover her own identity.

The patriarchy is also portrayed in *A Suitable Boy*, by Vikram Seth. Mahesh Kapoor gave his wife no room in public and wanted her to live in a secluded world. He scolds his wife and enjoys inflicting pain on her. This is regarded as patriarchy as well. Priya Goyal imagines herself as a panther caged. She would ache for her childhood friend Veena Tendon. Veena was aware of her declining financial situation, but she was nevertheless allowed to go where she wished, even to the market, on her own, and to take music lessons. Vikram Seth illustrates that Veena and Priya's familial situation is likewise unsatisfactory. The patriarchy in post-independence Indian society is portrayed, when Mr. Sahgal tries to force himself on Lata by calling her a “lipstick girl”. Women in Islamic society don't have any interests of their own, but they must comply with their husbands’ demands. In Islamic civilization, women live their lives in the shadows of ignorance and illiteracy, which they perceive to be beyond their control. The wife of Kachheru, a Chamar of a lower caste, had remained in the villages where she was born and wedded, never venturing outside of them. The lower caste women may have been kept out of the spotlight of attractive, self-respectful, and honourable ladies due to their tradition, destiny, lack of education, and awareness. Thus, Vikram Seth has actually depicted the state of life of the ladies of post-modern society.

Arranged Marriages and Widowhood

Arranged marriages are very eminent in both stories. Families participate in match-making. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, doesn’t want their young widow sister to marry, but if so, they married to the person of their choice. As is evident from the first act only, when Ferdinand informs the Duchess of their chosen suitor, Bosola as “A worthy fellow”. The brothers hold misogynistic opinions about widows' sexuality and hold the patriarchal belief that they have the authority to control their sister's sexual life. But these viewpoints are all connected to their conviction that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman that should be chosen by the family, not by the individual, and not out of love, but rather to strengthen the family authority and

uphold elite exclusivity. This idea of marriage had been strongly connected to the upper classes by the time Webster published this work. So, when the Duchess chose Antonio to remarry, she is aware of the opposition she is going to face. Thus, at last, we see that when opposing family's choice for marriage, doesn't end well for the Duchess, as she is killed.

In *A Suitable Boy*, the societal imperative of marriage is very clear. The starting scene itself depicts the prevalence of arranged marriages in the novel, as it begins with the wedding ceremony of Savita to Pran Kapoor, whom she had only met for an hour and now is marrying him on her mother's decision. Love marriage is not regarded as a desirable act in Indian society because such unions are rarely seen as successful. Lata dislikes the concept of an arranged marriage, but her mother constantly reminds her that she must wed the man of her choice. We can see in the instance of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, a middle-class woman who wants to marry off her children to wealthy men to advance their social status. She would not have to worry about raising dowry in this way. Therefore, families play an important role in match-making. And, it has been there in society for a long period ago.

In the context of its historical and cultural background, this is another component of the play, and the attitudes of the brothers reveal a lot about early modern views on women and family honour. We find the Cardinal telling his sister that widows' vows never to remarry, while Ferdinand harps on about this theme with particular urgency, declaring that to marry twice is 'luxurious', and calling his sister 'lusty widow'. The duchess's obstinate determination to wed Antonio is a gesture that demonstrates her independence of thought and will relative to those around her. The Duchess of Malfi undoubtedly felt the pressures—both good and bad—that come with being a widow. She understands her rights as a widow, yet she still allows the normal patriarchal characteristics of her society to restrict her. On the one hand, she defies her brothers' wishes to remarry Antonio, asserting her independence.

In *A Suitable Boy*, widows are shown as dependent on their surrounding male members of the families. As with Mrs. Rupa Mehra, we see after the death of her husband, Mr. Raghubir Mehra, she is obliged to inform her every step to her sons. Rupa believes if he would have been alive, they would never have to suffer and struggle. The Mehra family was forced to struggle on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's exhausted savings, the kindness of their family friends, and later her elder son's salary. She had no fixed home, she used to either live with Arun and his family in Calcutta or with Savita and her husband in Brahmpur. For her family to survive she even had to sell her jewellery

and their small house in Darjeeling. She did all that she can to give her children schooling. Underneath her overpowering sentimentality and her attachment to the ostensibly safe physical things lay a sense of sacrifice and a sense of values.

Love Story

Love is one of the most important themes in both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *A Suitable Boy*. In both books, love affairs are shown between two people of different ranks, and different religion. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the love affair is shown between the Duchess and Antonio, representing the love between unequal ranks. While it was relatively common for powerful men to marry lower-class women, it was completely improper for a noblewoman to behave in that way. As the Duchess maintains the pretence that she has sent Antonio to assist her in the preparation of her will, the expression of love and desire must initially be restrained. Neither party wastes any time in turning the conversation to marriage, with Antonio eventually expressing a heartfelt desire for parenthood. There's also the undertone of incest love in the drama. Incest is implied in Ferdinand's original justification for the Duchess not getting married. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, love is shown to turn into violence. By identifying the homicidal jealousy in a brother's need for his sister, Webster increases our awareness of the dark side of sexual desire and the potential for some species of love to turn violent.

The main essence of the novel *A Suitable Boy* is romance. It is a love story of Lata and Kabir. It is a tale of common people entangled in a web of love, passion, humor, tragedy, and several other emotions. Lata Mehra is a Hindu girl, who had fallen in love with a Muslim boy, Kabir Durrani. Lata visits her friend Malati, with whom she talks about her interest in the bookstore boy. Lata knows that Kabir isn't "a suitable boy" according to her mother. Lata's growing romantic interest in Kabir is apparent to Malati, as she first meets him at a poetry club event, and after that, they go on walks before taking a riverboat to 'Barsaat Mahal'. The fact that Lata learns he is Muslim does not stop the two young people from falling in love. Their love story remains incomplete because of the religion. Lata is then given choices of two men for marriage, she chooses Haresh Khanna, even though she doesn't love her she is ready to spend her entire life with him because he is "a suitable boy" according to her mother.

Feminism

Feminism simply means having equal rights for all the gender. In both works we find a feministic view that expresses the female's thoughts, wishes, desires, and opinions. As we see in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess,

despite her desires being suppressed by her brothers, she decides to woo and remarry Antonio, her household steward. Also, despite being a widow and living in a patriarchal society, she is well aware of her rights. The Duchess is not weak at all. She says, “We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us”. Through these lines of her, Webster has emphasized the Duchess’s strong personality. The strongest dialogue of the Duchess in the play is: “I am Duchess of Malfi still”. This shows how confident she is in her position. Her courage in the face of death is a spiritual triumph, not a glorious loss.

Lata, the protagonist, is beautifully decorated with all the attributes a woman requires. She is charming, submissive, and a graduate of Brahmipur University. She makes the best daughter. She is also a clever girl. When given the choice of three suitors for marriage, she manages to choose the best of all for herself and make a very practical decision, as stability is what’s important for marriage, and thus, chooses Hareesh Khanna. Malti, Lata’s friend, holds a feministic viewpoint. She is a free-spirited girl. She is notorious for her outspoken views and her participation in the activities of the Socialist Party, and her love affairs. She gave Lata more confidence than she had before. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, the female and only guardian of the Mehra family, portrays a very strong character in itself. She is capable to do everything that a man can do. After the death of her husband, she has taken care of her family alone. She tries to fulfill all the desires of her children. Begum Abida Khan, who opposes the community's established viewpoint. She wants to always stay in the zenana quarter and dislikes the purdah rules. She is against teen talaq as well. There’s also Maggu Gopal, a Magical Masseur of Pran Kapoor, who spoke to him in favor of women and the need for them in our life.

Literature

The Duchess of Malfi is set in the Jacobean era in England, and A Suitable Boy is set in post-colonial India. Both these works are from two different periods, two different places, still, the common thing between both kinds of literature is that they both portray the contemporary societies they are set in. Both the literature types show the condition of women, widows, and patriarchal society. While Jacobean literature frequently had a melancholy tone and questioned the sustainability of the social order, post-colonial literature featured the writings of those who were once colonized and now are free. In addition to focusing on cultural change and divergence, postcolonial literature does not only address colonialism.

Despite the differences, one thing common in all is that a girl's fortune is always decided by their family members or we can say the men of their family. As shown above that in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the brothers of the Duchess decide whether she should remarry or remain a widow throughout her life, to prevent her from using and becoming aware of her powers and rights as a Duchess. In *A Suitable Boy*, too Lata's destiny is decided by her mother and her brothers. She is unable to marry the person she loves, Kabir, due to his religion because she knows well that she will be opposed by her family.

CONCLUSION

Hence, we can argue that women's circumstances remained unchanged, i.e., they were always under the control of men. Their families had always been in charge of their fate. They were aware of their rights but would not dare to exercise them. The situation of women in post-independent India has been portrayed by Vikram Seth. Lata had the option to choose between two men in addition to the man she loved, Kabir, but her mother chose them for her. Additionally, she felt pressure to get married as quickly as possible. Because of Kabir's religion, she was unable to marry him despite her love for him because she was certain that neither her mother nor anyone else would support such a decision.

The young widowed duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* is aware of her position and privileges as a duchess and harbours the urge to remarry. She had fallen in love with Antonio, a lowly servant, and was compelled to pursue him because she was afraid that no one would dare pursue her. She had children with Antonio as well, but she never revealed this since she was aware that no one would accept it and that doing so may result in violence. Because she was a young widow and worried that she would endanger her bloodline, several characters tortured and hurt her and ultimately leading to her demise.

Overall, despite coming from distinct geographical and historical contexts, both works have similar themes including patriarchy, feminism, widowhood, and love tale.

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