

A Suitable Boy Study Guide

A Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth

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Plot Summary

A SUITABLE BOY by Vikram Seth is the story of four families in India in the early 1950s after British occupation has ended and the India/Pakistan Partition has taken place. Though not an epic novel in the usual sense of the word, A SUITABLE BOY is certainly epic in scale, over 1,400 pages in length. To understand the novel, the reader must also understand to a certain extent the Indian culture of racial castes and arranged marriages. It is, in fact, the idea of the arranged marriage that is implied in the title. A great deal of effort is put forth on the part of a family to find a "suitable boy" for their unmarried daughters. As Indian girls gain more independence like going out shopping in small groups of friends and attending university classes, there arises a conflict between many girls and their families over the idea of an arranged marriage. Arguably the central character of the novel, Lata Mehra, questions how a woman could marry and live with a man she could not love because she knew nothing about him. The novel begins with the arranged marriage of Lata's sister Savita to Pran Kapoor, a young man who is a professor in Brahmipur University and from a prominent family. He is, therefore, a "suitable boy." Lata's widowed mother, who made the arrangements for Savita's marriage, is intent on marrying off her youngest daughter, Lata. Although the novel is not political in nature, there is enough of the conflict between Hindu and Muslim to explain certain prejudices, and it is into one of those prejudices that Lata rushes headlong as she meets and eventually falls in love with Kabir Durrani, a Muslim and son of a prominent mathematician at the University. To further complicate the plot, Maan Kapoor, Pran's younger brother, becomes infatuated with the notorious Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai. Lata's situation becomes complicated when someone sees her out walking with Kabir and reports it to her mother. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is beside herself thinking Lata has ruined her reputation and no "suitable boy's" family will have her marry their son. When she learns that Kabir is Muslim, she hastily packs herself and Lata off to Calcutta.

The plot contains a great many political intrigues that are difficult to follow and would be uninteresting were it not for the fact that various family members are involved in the action. Begum Abida Khan narrowly manages to retain the family residence after a run in with L. N. Agarwal over the handling of a near riot. The melee was caused by the intention to erect a Hindu Temple adjacent to a Mosque which, incidentally, had once been a Hindu Temple. The sticking point was a phallus of Shiva in the temple directly between the mosque and Mecca, toward which Muslim's pray. The political maneuvering comes to a head with the passage of the Zamindari Abolition Bill which will effectively cause large land holders to lose much of their property.

The plot continues throughout the novel centering mostly on the "suitable boy" theme played out in sub-plots involving Maan Kapoor and Saeeda Bai, Ishaq and Tasneem, and most especially Lata and Kabir and "suitable boys" to whom she is introduced in Calcutta. In the end, Lata resolves to give up Kabir and marry a "suitable boy" she likes but does not love. Aside from Lata's heartbreaking decision not to marry Kabir, there is little real ugliness in the novel outside of inter- and intra-family intrigues which Seth somehow manages to make interesting reading.



Part 1

Part 1 Summary

The first part, or chapter, of the novel introduces the various families involved in the overall story. They have come together on the occasion of the marriage of Pran Kapoor and Savita Mehra. Savita's younger sister Lata, considered of marriageable age now, sets up the main conflict in the novel by questioning the idea of arranged marriage as opposed to a marriage based on romantic love. Lata's mother, the widow Rupa Mehra, is intent on finding a "suitable boy" for Lata who is repulsed by the idea. Another conflict in the novel is the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims in post-Partition India/Pakistan. This theme is emphasized when Lata meets and subsequently falls in love with Kabir Durrani, a Muslim. Mrs. Mehra is so incensed at the idea that she packs Lata up and moves her to Calcutta where they will stay with Lata's brother, Arun Mehra.

Part 1 Analysis

Vikram Seth sets up the major conflicts in the novel with his opening chapter. Aside from the cultural tradition of making arranged marriages for Indian children of the higher castes, he manages to insert the sense of disenfranchisement between Hindu and Muslim in reference to political intrigues at the time. These political involvements are kept from being dry historical facts by the active involvement of the various members of the four families in the novel. Lata and her best friend, Malati, serve as foils for discussion of the social situations in the novel.



Part 2

Part 2 Summary

The second chapter of *A SUITABLE BOY* deals with the conflict between Muslims and Hindus as the Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai Firozabadi entertains at a party on the event of Holi, a Hindu festival. The festival which features throwing of bright colored pigments on people is thoroughly enjoyed by the younger Hindus but often upsetting to the older generation who happen to get saturated with color. There is a great deal of "bhang" (an Indian alcoholic beverage) passed around during Holi, and Maan Kapoor has a decided taste for the drink. Attending the party at the Kapoor residence, Maan first becomes aware of Saeeda Bai and is immediately infatuated with her. Aside from her recitals at parties, Saeeda Bai is more or less kept by the Raja of Marh, a fact that does not hamper Maan's infatuation. Lata and Kabir had been to India's most romantic spot, the Barsaat Mahal, and now Maan goes there where he finds Firoz who fills him in on the latest gossip about him and Saeeda Bai. The Raja of Marh, visiting Saeeda Bai, rips a page out of a book of Urdu poems given to the courtesan by Maan. The page is an illustration of Muslims at prayer. Later, it is this book that sets in motion the subsequent sexual relationship between Maan and Saeeda Bai.

Part 2 Analysis

In this chapter, religious holidays, Indian alcohol, and the social position of courtesans are the main topics of discussion. The reader adequately experiences the fun of Holi as the young people toss their colors on each other and manage to upset some of the older characters of the novel. There is a great deal of drinking during the holiday, a circumstance that on other days would not be considered acceptable. There is a hint at the social caste system in the friends of Maan's who do not really fit in with the upper classes. The antagonism between Muslims and Hindus is depicted graphically when the Raja of Marh tears a page out of Saeeda Bai's book sent to her by Maan. Perhaps the attitudes of Maan and Lata towards Muslims indicate a much more tolerant position within the younger generation.



Part 3

Part 3 Summary

As an April Fool's joke, Pran pretends to get a phone call saying that Lata has eloped with Maan. Pran finds that no one appreciates his gag and makes efforts to apologize. As a way of making up, Pran takes the women to the movies where they have a confrontation with a man creating a disturbance in the theater. It turns out that the man is Rupa's father. The awkward situation continues into the lobby where Lata faces the old question from her grandfather as to why she is not married. Back at school, Lata suffers a complete block as she stares at the questions on her English exam. Outside the exam, Lata meets up with Kabir again by accident. Lata goes to her friend Malati where they discuss Lata's interest in the boy from the bookstore. Two days later, Lata and Malati run into the handsome boy again at a music recital. Malati recognizes that Lata is falling in love with Kabir. She begins by meeting him at a poetry club gathering which soon graduates into walks and eventually a river boat trip to Barsaat Mahal. The two young people fall in love in spite of Lata's discovery that he is Muslim. She confides in her sister, Savita, who advises that she not tell their mother. Gossip, however, travels fast and Mrs. Rupa Mehra soon learns of the situation which she fears will forever spoil any chances of marrying Lata off to a suitable boy. Mrs. Rupa carts Lata off quickly to Calcutta.

Part 3 Analysis

In this chapter, as well as in other parts of the novel, Seth describes various Hindu celebrations. The action centers around the Mehra family and the Kapoor family that draws a comparison between Lata Mehra and Maan Kapoor to point out the different social standards of behavior allowed boys and girls. Lata's behavior with Kabir alarms Rupa so much that she carts Lata off to Calcutta the moment she finds out about Lata and her Muslim friend. Maan, on the other hand, continues his infatuation with the courtesan, Saeeda Bai, with only a bit of gossip but without the stigma attached to an unmarried woman. The romantic site, the Barsaat Mahal, represents both lovers and the lovelorn. It is a sight that draws Lata and Kabir more closely together, but it is a place Firoz jokingly refers to as a place to commit suicide.



Part 4

Part 4 Summary

When Veena returns home, her son Bhaskar is sitting between his father Kedarnath and Haresh Khanna. Bhaskar is discussing the power of ten with Haresh who is fascinated by the precocious child. The question is raised about a word for the number 10 thousand. Kedarnath Tandon, the brother-in-law of Pran and Maan Kapoor, has a shoe stall in Brahmpur Shoe Market and agrees to take Haresh around to learn the workings of the leather industry. Haresh is on business to buy materials for the Cawnpore Leather & Footwear Company (CLFC). On their outing together, the subject of the Raja of Marh and his drive to lead the armies of Shiva in opposition to the Muslims comes up. Hypocritically, however, the Raja is besotted with Muslim courtesans. Their first stop is into the tanning pits that is a scene of poverty and squalor. They slowly make their way in the rickshaw to the area where Jagat Ram has his shoe manufacturing shop. The question arises whether Jagat Ram can reproduce brogues like the ones Haresh has from CLFC. Following this outing, there is a coincidental meeting at the home of Sunil Patwardhan, a mathematics teacher friend of Haresh. Haresh, something of a natty dresser, is not wearing CLFC brogues since he prefers his English made shoes. He goes to Sunil's house to borrow the brogues he gave his friend for Jagat Ram to examine before making a sample himself. Several friends of Sunil's assemble and an impromptu party ensues when Professor Dr. Durrani, the mathematician drops in unexpectedly. This gives Haresh an opportunity to make an appointment for the professor with Bhaskar Tandon. Interestingly, after Pran Kapoor leaves the party, he thinks of Haresh as a likely prospect for his sister-in-law, Lata, if only he were not already spoken for. The next day Haresh takes Bhaskar to visit Dr. Durrani. Leaving on the train for Calcutta, Haresh sees Pran escorting two ladies, the younger one in a pale blue sari, and noted that her face was striking but wore a look of sadness.

Part 4 Analysis

Coincidence plays an important role in this chapter. After Haresh sees that Bhaskar, the son of Kedarnath Tandon, is precocious in mathematics, he persuades Kedarnath to take him around the shoe manufacturing area of Brahmpur. Meeting Jagat Ram who may be able to reproduce the CLFC brogues, Haresh needs a pair of brogues for him to copy. He has given a pair to his friend Sunil and goes there to retrieve them when Dr. Durrani happens to drop over. This give him a chance to set up an interview with Kedarnath's son. Next Pran Kapoor, Lata's brother-in-law, comes by setting up the coincidence of Haresh's seeing Lata with Pran and her mother at the train station. Dr. Durrani is the father of Kabir, the boy who is making Lata's face look so sad.



Part 5

Part 5 Summary

The chapter deals with the religious conflict between Muslims and Hindus. The Raja of Marh is determined to erect a Temple to Shiva just west of the Alamgiri Mosque, which is bad enough insofar as the Imam is concerned; but to make matters worse, the proposed Temple will have as its centerpiece the recently found Phallus of Shiva which will be placed directly between the mosque and Mecca. Tensions build up until there is a real threat of rioting in the city. The Deputy Superintendent of Police is left in charge in the absence of his superior and most of the police force is made up of Muslims who will not be pleased to fire on Muslim rioters. By charging the rioters from a blind corner, the police are able to quell the riot with a minimum of casualties. L. N. Agarwal, the Home Minister, becomes the attack point in the legislative inquiry over the police handling of the riot. Begum Abida Khan, a female Muslim MP, attacks Agarwal in Parliament. The main political conflict in the story is the Bihar Zamindari Act which is popular with the masses who may gain land but unpopular with the zamindaris who stand to lose substantial holdings. In the course of the conflict between Begum Abida Khan and L. N. Agarwal, the mansion of Begum's family is almost lost.

Part 5 Analysis

This chapter sets the details of the political conflicts going on in India after the Partition which separated India and Pakistan. It is relevant to the novel because of the involvement of the various families in the process. One of the most glaring cultural differences is the isolation of Muslim women as opposed to the freedom enjoyed by Hindu women. Begum Abida Khan is the rare exception of a more or less liberated Muslim woman. The political maneuvering of L. N. Agarwal, which almost causes the government confiscation of Baitar House, is the prime example of the effects of the Bihar Zamindari Act.



Part 6

Part 6 Summary

The chapter opens with music lessons from famed Muslim musician Ustad Majeed Khan. Among the students are Malati, Lata's best friend, Veena Tandon, and Mortu Chand, standing in for a student who is ill. Politics enters the class over both the Bihar Zamindari Act, championed by Veena's father Mahesh Kapoor, and the religious conflict over the Raja's Temple of Shiva. Ustad suddenly realizes that Mortu accompanies Saeeda Bai, the notorious Muslim courtesan who serves the Raja of Marh. Maan Kapoor continues to be besotted with Saeeda Bai which takes him out of the running for girls of good family as a prospective husband. Since Saeeda Bai cannot read English, Maan determines to learn Urdu and Rasheed is elected to do the teaching which sets up a long friendship between the two young men.

Pran is awakened by a kick from Savita's baby during the night, an event that caused him great happiness. The next morning there is a long letter from Savita's mother Rupa. She discusses how Lata has been behaving out of anger and hurt because she was taken to Calcutta. In the meantime, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is quite concerned over Maan's infatuation with Saeeda Bai, although his father seems to pay little attention to the situation. Maan is warned by his mother that Saeeda Bai is incapable of love because of who and what she is. Coincidentally, Firoz is falling in love with Tasneem, reported to be Saeeda Bai's younger sister. There is a great deal of discussion about Pundit Nehru and the Congress Party between Mahesh Kapoor and an old man who had lost everything opposing British rule. Mahesh and his wife have a conversation about the foolishness of Maan's behavior with Saeeda Bai which is now common knowledge in the city. Some politically unlikely bedfellows—Nawab Sahib and his son Firoz and the Raja and his son the Rajkumar of Marh—are caught together by Mahesh Kapoor who sizes up the situation quickly. The awkward meeting serves to reunite Maan and Firoz who have been apart for some time. Maan becomes closer to Rasheed who is opposed to the system of landlords or zamindars, although his family is of that class.

When Maan next goes to visit Saeeda Bai, she is occupied and will not see him. Maan thinks she is angry because he recently missed an appointment with her. There is something vaguely foreshadowing with Saeeda Bai's displeasure at seeing Firoz come with a message from Maan. Maan then goes to see the Rajkumar who makes a homosexual advance by sliding his hand up Maan's thigh until Maan removes it with a laugh.

Part 6 Analysis

The plot complications of Part 6 involve human differences beginning with the religious conflicts between Hindu and Muslim. The character of Saeeda Bai further complicates the situation because of her status as courtesan, most specifically with the Hindu Raja

of Marh. Seth includes the contrast of Rajkumar's overt homosexuality with Maan's heterosexual infatuation with Saeeda Bai. Interestingly, Maan handles the advances of Rajkamur with light hearted dignity. Mahesh Kapoor does not seem too disturbed about Maan's infatuation even though it has become the talk of the town. There is a double standard in play when it is only lightly suggested that Maan will not be a suitable boy for some Hindu girl to marry as opposed to the character attacks against Lata for her being seen with Kabir. A political meeting brings Maan and Firoz back together. In contrast, Maan is drawn closer to the Muslim Rasheed who is teaching him Urdu. At this point Maan is decidedly apolitical.



Part 7, 1 through 22

Part 7, 1 through 22 Summary

Kabir has learned of Lata's whereabouts and sends her a letter which she does not open for fear that her mother will come in any minute. The domestic scene at the Mehra household is somewhat dysfunctional as seen at breakfast before Arun leaves for work. There is tension between Mrs. Mehra and Arun's wife Meenakshi over the gold medal once belonging to Mrs. Merah's late husband. Meenakshi had melted it down to be made into earrings for her. A shopping trip for Meenakshi, Lata, and Mrs. Rupa Mehra further examines the tension between Meenakshi and her mother-in-law. After leaving for her canasta party, Meenakshi returns home to bedlam and, interestingly, it is Mrs. Rupa Mehra who manages to restore harmony to the scene. Lata finally gets enough solitude to read Kabir's letter which reawakens the confusion and distress in her. The sibling rivalry between Varun and Arun comes to a head prior to a dinner party.

A large dinner party held at the home of the Chatterjis brings many of the characters together. The discussion centers around work, relationships, literature, and politics. Much of the dialog is heard through the mind of Lata who feels like she is drowning in conversation. There is a conversation comparing the song of birds and the "awful wailing" of Indian singing. There is the philosophical discussion between "the Grande Dame of Culture" and Dipankar Chatterji about the One-ness of Indian culture and the need to strive for the Nothingness that sounds a lot like Buddhism. The Chatterji family is notorious for making up spontaneous rhymes about almost any subject. Kakoli (or Kuku) is the youngest daughter and something of a pain where as Amit is the eldest son beginning to make a name for himself as a poet. Amit, educated in England, is expected to speak that language at social gatherings even though his Bengali is also excellent. Another burden placed on Amit is his status as a bachelor and the constant pressure for him to marry. Strife arises in the Chatterji family when the judge calls in Amit and Dipankar to tell them that one or the other must take over the family business. Amit is intent on writing his novel and Dipankar has taken a keen interest in Hindu religion. Neither of them wants the job.

Meanwhile Arun is doing quite well at his job at Bentsen Pryce. However, his job causes him to work long hours. This fact gives Meenakshi ample opportunity to carry on an affair with Billy Irani, the husband of one of her women friends. For Meenakshi, the affair is a simple diversion; for Billy it often seems like a trap.

Part 7, 1 through 22 Analysis

The first section of Part 7 deals largely with the society of India at the time. It involves two different social gatherings among people of different socio-economic status. The conversation allows for slightly more insight into the characters. Although Lata is largely an observer at these gatherings, there is still an undercurrent of finding a suitable boy

for her to marry. Conflict is evident in the various families. Judge Chatterji's decision to turn the running of the family businesses over to one of his sons raises the question of a parent's wishes for his child and the ambitions the child has himself. In a sense, this parallels the arranged marriage theme. As India comes into the twentieth century in its own right, these conflicts appear to be growing stronger.



Part 7, 23 through 46

Part 7, 23 through 46 Summary

Meenakshi comes in from her assignation all smiles and is briefly even nice to Mrs. Rupa Mehra. That soon breaks down over an argument about what Lata is to wear for a night on the town. Mrs. Mehra has what Meenakshi sees as old fashioned ideas. The night is to begin with cocktails at the Finlays. A dispute arises over what is acceptable to wear for dancing the tango, a term Mrs. Rupa Mehra simply does not understand. About a third of the guests at the Finlays is Indian and men and women mix freely and unselfconsciously. When Billy and his wife arrive, it is time for them leave for the dancing. Arun, still looking for an "up and coming" suitable boy for Lata thinks Bish Bhaduri might be a possibility, but Lata wishes he were "up-and-going." Meenakshi brazenly recruits a stranger to dance the tango with her. An hour later they leave the club and Arun, a bit tipsy, wants to have a picnic and ushers Billy, his wife, and Meenakshi into the backseat of his car with Lata in front with him. Arun narrowly misses hitting a child out on the streets at three a.m. The resulting dialog trying to stop Arun from shouting into the darkness highlights the social caste order prevalent in the Indian society. It breaks up the party and they go home where Mrs. Rupa Mehra is waiting up for them.

Varun is found with questionable friends at the racetrack, betting on the horses. He runs into Patricia Cox who tells him Arun is there as their guest. She tells Arun who thinks bitterly that maybe he should start being his brother's keeper.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra cites a litany of her troubles, mostly about gossip that she has heard about her family. She complains that nobody in the family ever tells her anything. Dipankar, hoping to engage Varun in conversation, drops by only to find that Varun has gone out. Dipankar thinks about his interpretation of the Hindu religion, a topic he had hoped to discuss with Varun. He and Mrs. Rupa get along well discussing the mysticism of the Hindu religion. Lata agrees to go out with Amit but Mrs. Rupa insists that someone go with them as a chaperon. Kakoli has developed an attachment to a German boy named Hans, much to the consternation of her family. The outing with Amit produces a level of emotional attachment in Lata who enjoys his knowledge of poetry. The time is somewhat spoiled by a discussion of low caste servants. The subject of sexual discrimination comes up when Lata finds a newspaper article about how employment in the Foreign Service can employ only those women without encumbrances. Lata finally makes up her mind to answer Kabir's letter, expressing her feelings for him. In 7.38, the suitable boy theme is revived with a rather unsavory boy who becomes engaged. Lata and Amit go out again to the book bazaar. Mrs. Rupa's hypochondria comes to light in her visit to an odd-ball homeopathic doctor. Afterward, she leaves alone for Delhi.



Part 7, 23 through 46 Analysis

The last section of Part 7 deals largely with Hindu religion and also returns to the theme of the suitable boy. A bit of gossip is related about a boy, just engaged, whose character flaws include drinking too much and eating raw onions. Again this points up the inequality between girls and boys in the Indian society, where certain flaws in a boy can be overlooked while a girl who makes a social blunder can no longer be considered suitable. Sex discrimination also arises in the newspaper article explaining how women are generally not considered for the Foreign Office because of their potential encumbrances. The treatment of servants raises the issue of class discrimination. Meenakshi's behavior at the dance indicates a certain change in the attitudes toward women in upper Indian society, though Mrs. Rupa's disapproval symbolizes the resistance to change.



Part 8

Part 8 Summary

Maan Kapoor leaves Calcutta with Rasheed for a month long trip out of Brahmpur which will separate him from Saeeda Bai. His assistant, considered fairly competent, will manage his cloth business during Maan's absence. The description of the train ride to Rasheed's family home depicts the crude travel available in the country. As they see part of the Baitar Estate, Maan becomes quite excited about the possibility of seeing his friend Firoz, though Rasheed only gives him an enigmatic smile. Maan's identity as the son of the Minister of Finance comes to light and the whole question of the redistribution of land returns to the novel. The theme of a Hindu visiting in a Muslim district begins with Maan assuring Rasheed that he will behave himself while staying with his family. Maan learns to his surprise that Rasheed is married and has two small daughters. It is after Maan's first night in Rasheed's father's house that they learn he is not Muslim. The conditions at Rasheed's family home are very primitive, but Maan adapts well. A long winded visitor to Rasheed's house tells a story of true love that contrasts symbolically with the arranged marriage customs of the culture.

Maan accompanies Rasheed into the village and sees first hand how the poor live. He learns how his father refused to help an old man who eventually died from want. He sees how even families turn on each other with children refusing to help their aged parents. Rasheed says that only his father and grandfather can affect a change in this behavior. The story of Kachheru is used to emphasize this social phenomenon. There is conflict between Rasheed, who wants to do what is right in giving land to those who have worked hard for the family for years, and his father who refuses to give up any land and cares little for the people. Maan wants to write a letter to Saeeda Bai, but Rasheed does not want to write it in Urdu for his friend. Rasheed arranges to have Kachheru's small plot of land transferred to his name. The process will take several weeks.

Part 8 Analysis

The theme of caste differences is covered heavily in Part 8. The attitudes of the haves versus the have nots are clearly defined. Rasheed is a fair and honest man who wants to do what is right by people like Kechheru, but his father and grandfather want to keep them suppressed and not have to give up any land by the Zamindari Bill. Muslims are just as judgmental of Saeeda Bai as the Hindus are. Conflict is foreshadowed in Rasheed's wanting to see that Kechheru is taken care of in aftermath of the Zamindari Bill.



Part 9

Part 9 Summary

In Delhi, Mrs. Rupa Mehra visits a close friend, Kalpana Gaur, to enlist her in the search for Lata's suitable boy. Mrs. Rupa recognizes that boys from very wealthy families will not do because they would expect too expensive a wedding. The second boy Kalpana suggests is too tall, so Mrs. Rupa rejects him as well. The third Mrs. Rupa believes is too dark saying that she will "not have black grandchildren." By happenstance, Haresh Khanna drops by to visit Kalpana who had been a classmate of his at St. Stephen's. Haresh is still enamored of a Sikh girl whose parents will have no part of him. Haresh is looking for a new job. He meets Mrs. Rupa who believes she has never seen him anywhere before although Haresh is convinced he has seen her. Mrs. Rupa believes Haresh might be a suitable boy and sends for Lata, but Haresh has gone to Kanpur, so they set out for there. Lata is incensed that she had been brought from Calcutta on "false pretenses." Kalpana puts in a good word for Haresh. Kalpana writes to Haresh promoting a match between him and Lata. Haresh's life is one of struggle and hard work, a fact of which Mrs. Rupa approves. Haresh, after meeting Mrs. Rupa and Lata, is candid about his feelings for Simran, but also about the impossibility of any further relationship between them. Lata likes Haresh, but the thought of marrying him is ridiculous to her. Lata compares Kabir, Amit, and Haresh, and Haresh comes in a distant third. Haresh turns out to be an excellent host and takes great care of Mrs. Rupa and Lata.

Mrs. Rupa and Lata visit Mrs. Sahgal, a distant cousin of Mrs. Rupa's. Mr. Sahgal turns out to be a lecherous old man. Seth infers an incestuous relationship with his daughter Kiran, and twice the old man attempts to put his hands on Lata. Lata is in a quandary over being unable to tell anyone about Sahgal's advances. Haresh sees Lata and Mrs. Rupa to the train station and remembers that it was a train station where he had seen them before with Lata wearing a light blue sari.

Haresh has problems at CLFC and sets out to find a job at James Hawley.

Part 9 Analysis

Part 9 brings Haresh and Lata together for the first time. The "suitable boy" theme re-emerges in the negative—what a suitable boy is not. The only really unsavory character in the novel appears in Part 9. Seth touches on the idea of incest and lechery carefully, leaving a great deal to the imagination of the reader. The character of Haresh appears as a hard-working, serious young man whose positive traits outweigh his shortcomings in Mrs. Rupa's eyes. Lata is faced with the prospect of three potential husbands—Kabir, Amit, and Haresh. The theme of romantic love over arranged marriages grows stronger in Part 9.



Part 10

Part 10 Summary

Maan is bored in the village and finds the Muslim lifestyle strange. He debates whether the women in Rasheed's family actually exist. Maan is caught up in political situations and conversations, but shows no real interest in them. He comes alive at the suggestion of a wolf hunt, however. There is a hint of the trend toward modernization in the country when it is observed that the general public is developing a preference for films. There is conflict during the wolf hunt when two hunters leave the place they had been stationed and come within range of rifle fire from across the way. Maan is quite angry over this breach which allows a large wolf to get away. This might be symbolic of the Zamindari Act where opposition grows from two different sides. Maan talks his way into a stay at the Baitar Fort residence of the Nawab Sahib, father of Maan's friend Firoz Khan. Waris, a trusted and loyal servant of the Nawab Sahib, takes Maan around the estate. Waris, in contrast to Rasheed, is loyal to his master and wants to see that he does not lose the fort estate in the aftermath of the Zamindari Act. Maan and Waris overhear the munshi (estate overseer) reprimand an old woman who is trying to retain control of land her family has farmed for generations. Maan becomes enraged and attacks the old munshi who attempts to say that his treatment of the old woman was only a joke. The munshi is now afraid that Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue, will not be kindly disposed to the retention of the Baitar Estate. A letter to Rasheed from Tasneem, supposedly the younger sister of Saeeda Bai, gives a brief insight into her character. Rasheed explains some of his background to Maan who has returned to Rasheed's family home. A visit to an old blind man highlights the differences Rasheed has with his greedy family. There is an interesting discussion of religion that ends with Maan's flippancy about religion as a whole.

After drawn out domestic scenes that shed more light on the character of Rasheed and the awkwardness of having a Hindu man in their midst, the subject of what Rasheed did at the office of the patwari giving land to Kachheru is opened. The family is irate and comes down hard on Rasheed. Maan, not a part of all this, has received a letter from Saeeda Bai, but Rasheed is too distraught to translate it for Maan.

Part 10 Analysis

Part 10 delves into social, political, and religious differences among the Indian people. Key to the whole issue is Mahesh Kapoor's pushing of the Zamindari Act. Rasheed tries to use it to good effect, but his family opposes and censors him for his actions. There are many levels of differences illustrated in this part. There is a great difference between the Muslim family of the Nawab Sahib and the family of Rasheed. A stirring of political conscience occurs in Maan as he attacks the munshi of the Baitar Estate.



Part 11

Part 11 Summary

The scene opens in the High Court of Judicature at Brahmipur. The occasion is a challenge to the constitutionality of the Zamindari Abolition Act. Interestingly, Nawab Sahib invites Mahesh Kapoor to join him for lunch, though the men are on opposite sides of the argument. In the course of these events, it is learned that Firoz has also been going to the house of Saeeda Bai. Back in court, the Raja of Marh is forcibly removed from the chamber. From that scene there follows a lengthy pilgrimage to see Sanaki Baba, an important guru. The Raja is kept cooling his heels while Sanaki Baba first sees Mr. Maitra, a man of wealth and power. Dipankar Chatterji is there also trying to find his truth and peace. Foreigners are in the crowd but do not understand one word of the sermons. Writing to Amit in a series of postcards, Dipankar admits that he is enamored with Pushpa, a young woman in the service of Sanaki Baba. Dipankar has a surreal experience with a group of sadhus. In the procession of the great akharas, the crowds grow so large that people are getting crushed together. A resulting stampede of frightened people separates Veena and Bhaskar. In the aftermath, Bhaskar cannot be located. The Muslims are celebrating the calamity that has befallen the Hindus, causing a great deal of animosity in the community. Kabir, acting as a student volunteer to help with the disaster, locates Bhaskar and calls the Kapoor residence. When Veena gets to her son, he is unconscious. There is conflict in the Kapoor household because Mahesh is having to follow closely the court trial over the challenge to the Zamindari Act and the demands make it difficult for him to visit Bhaskar in the hospital. The boy is conscious but cannot remember the disaster and there are other blank spaces in his memory. The court judgment upholds the Zamindari Act and pandemonium breaks out in the courtroom after the judges leave.

Part 11 Analysis

Conflict is the overriding theme of Part 11. There is the political conflict over the Zamindari Act that comes to a head in the court. There is the conflict between Muslim and Hindu in the aftermath of the tragedy at the Ganga. There is the conflict between Veena and Mahesh over visiting Bhaskar in the hospital. An interesting irony is that it is the "unsuitable Muslim boy" Kabir who locates Bhaskar and notifies his family. The fact that Lata and her mother are in Lucknow while all of this is going on mitigates the impact of Kabir's actions that might have influenced Lata a great deal.



Part 12

Part 12 Summary

On a visit to Mrs. Rupa and Lata, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and Veena bring them up to speed on the news about Bhaskar—how Kabir Durrani had found him after the stampede and how Haresh had brought the boy and Dr. Durrani together. Mrs. Rupa is aghast that everyone knows these young men and she has been in the dark. Lata thinks it is funny. Malati returns and tells Lata about her romantic adventures before they start talking about Lata and Kabir. Lata reaffirms that any relationship between them is impossible. Malati urges Lata to audition for a part in "Twelfth Night." Lata gets a part in the play only to find out that Kabir is also a cast member.

Rajkumar and two of his friends get into serious trouble and are threatened with expulsion from the university. Pran Kapoor is the faculty member assigned to interview the boys. Bhaskar is much better, talking and walking around. Later he meets up with Firoz who is representing a student over a violation of the rules for examinations. They talk briefly about Maan who is still away from the family. Pran becomes ill at the university and Professor Mishra tries to get him to withdraw his application as head reader which Pran refuses to do. Pran receives treatment from a masseur.

Maan returns to Brahmpur and goes to Baitar House instead of home. Reluctantly, he decides to visit Bhaskar first because the boy would be hurt if he did not. On the way, he changes his mind and goes instead to the house of Saeeda Bai. She castigates him for staying away for so long. There is a question about whether Rasheed is in love with Tasneem before Saeeda Bai summarily dismisses Maan. Maan lapses into embracing Saeeda Bai's servant, Bibbo.

Mahesh is contemplating leaving the Congress Party. Maan and Bhaskar urge Mahesh to run for the Northern Rudhia constituency. Maan has just returned from there where he is very popular and makes a surprising offer to help Mahesh there. Rasheed is one of the leaders of the student socialist movement that demonstrates and foments a riot between them and the police. The father of a dying boy is enlisted to help calm the situation. Later, Mrs. Rupa discovers that Kabir is in the play with Lata. She is aghast that Lata had not told her. Pran has one of his asthma attacks and when Lata and Malati come in from the rehearsal, Mrs. Rupa is crying.

Pran Kapoor is physically weak from asthma and the stress of not knowing if he will get the promotion for which he has applied. Professor Mishra makes no bones about the fact that he does not want Pran to get the job of head reader. Pran collapses under the stress but refuses to withdraw his application. Pran's wife, Savita (Lata's sister), is pregnant and Pran worries about her and the baby.

Part 12 Analysis

Part 12 begins to bring the suitable or unsuitable boys together in one chapter. There is a great deal of coincidence with Kabir and Haresh becoming known to family and friends where the key element has to do with Bhaskar. Haresh recognizes Bhaskar's brilliance with numbers and this is the reason for the boy's showing up at Kabir's father's house. Because Kabir has seen the boy, he is the one who identifies him after the stampede. Ironically, though Mrs. Rupa has seen both boys, she has never met them personally. The university play brings Lata and Kabir together again, though Lata goes against her heart to see that nothing comes of the reunion. Malati represents the liberated, modern Indian girl who has affairs with boys as she desires. She is however discrete in her meetings with boys.

Part 13

Part 13 Summary

Savita fights to remain with Pran in the hospital. They discuss Savita's desire to go to university to become a lawyer. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is in a positive state fretting over Pran, Savita, and Lata. Mrs. Rupa is still determined to have Lata withdraw from the play. She tips her hand by telling Lata that she has a letter from Haresh. Mrs. Rupa finally agrees that she will come to see the play when it is performed.

Maan is progressing with his Urdu, but tensions within his family are running high. Mahesh Kapoor has resigned as Minister of Revenue and his wife is still greatly concerned about Maan's relationship with Saeeda Bai. Mrs. Kapoor is deeply religious without knowing why or even much about the particular "brand of Hinduism" she upholds. Maan gets Saeeda Bai to make up with him, spends the night with her, and then travels to Banaras to look after his business and collect debts owed to him. He only manages to get about one eighth of what is owed to him. Maan returns to call Savita and find out about her health and that of Pran. Going to Saeeda Bai's house, he is repelled because she is entertaining one of her clients. In the hospital staying with Pran, Savita goes into labor and has a somewhat difficult delivery of a baby girl even though everyone had predicted a boy.

Meenakshi returns home from a trip to learn that Savita has had her baby, Kakoli is still interested in Hans, and Amit seems to be besotted of Lata. Meenakshi and Kakoli travel to Brahmpur only to find that all of Pran's family are in the hospital with him. Finally finding lodging, the two women descend on the hospital to visit Savita and see the baby. Going to a rehearsal, Kuku thinks Kabir is delicious and that Lata has a crush on him. A great deal is made out of naming the baby which gives rise to the discussion of various Hindu superstitions and customs.

Haresh has resigned at Praha Shoes but he continues to correspond with Lata. Lata tells Malati she will tell Kabir he is doing a good acting job. When they meet, it does not go well and they go for a silent walk that ends badly. Back at home Lata refuses to read out loud a letter from Haresh. Meenakshi announces that she thinks she is pregnant. Haresh gets friendly with Mr. Khandelwal, Chairman of Prahapore, and gets a referral letter to the Czechoslovakian General Manager at the plant. He is about to be brushed aside again when he challenges them to let him make a pair of the most difficult shoes they manufacture. He passes the test and gets on his way toward rising in the company.

A movement is underway to match Amit up with Lata over Mrs. Rupa's objection. Amit sends Lata a copy of his book of poetry and Mrs. Rupa worries it might be love poems.

Part 13 Analysis

Religious conflict and moral principles are stressed in the chapter as Maan continues his infatuation with Saeeda Bai. Seth's commentary on Hinduism includes Mrs. Rupa's not knowing much about her "particular brand of Hinduism." Economic difficulties are symbolized when Maan is unable to collect money owed him at his fabric business in Banaras. The futility of romance between Saeeda Bai and Maan begins to be evident when Maan is repelled from entering Saeeda Bai's house because she is entertaining one of her clients. Kakoli (or Kuku) also represents the younger generation's ideas about love and romance when she visits a rehearsal of Lata's play and declares Kabir to be "delicious." The work ethic of Haresh becomes an important part of the story to put him in the running for Lata's hand, though Lata has difficulty communicating with Kabir and is beginning to find positive attributes in Amit.



Part 14

Part 14 Summary

Mahesh Kapoor, no longer a Minister, goes to run his farm in Rudhia and wonders if Maan might be better suited to running a farm than he is to being a cloth merchant. There is a great deal of information about the political scene revolving around the Congress Party and the internal struggles surrounding PM Nehru. Mahesh resigns from the Congress Party. Mahesh continues to be seen by the peasantry as their hero and spokesperson, though he is somewhat embittered and attempts to stay completely out of politics. His interest in the Zamindari Act, however, revives his interest in politics and it is rumored that he is considering a run for the Legislature in Rudhia District. Collecting funds for the Independence Day celebrations becomes a serious problem for Sandeep, the SDO (Sub-divisional Officer) of Rudhia district. When the unpopular Congressman Jha sets about to stop Sandeep from collecting funds for the celebration, his efforts backfire as the people all support the SDO. Mahesh Kapoor challenges Jha for evicting tenants from their lands. During this conversation, Joshi enters with the news that Nehru has resigned from the Congress Working Committee and is considering forming a new party. In the midst of all the political struggle, the further complication of religious differences arises as it is noted that Moharram, Dussehra, and Gandhi Jayanti will all fall during the same period this year.

The struggle between the haves and have nots occurs in a conversation between Mahesh Kapoor and Nawab Sahib, the ultimate symbol of the wealthy oppressor of the poor. Interestingly, Nawab Sahib suggests the Mahesh run for Congress from Brahmipur. Turning the table, Mahesh challenges Nawab Sahib to stand in the election himself. Waris is mentioned as a possible candidate and Nawab Sahib cautions against underestimating the young man. Maan joins in electioneering for his father and becomes a great asset because of the respect he shows for the customs of the Muslims in Rasheed's village area. More religious difference shows up in the practice of sacrificing animals by the Muslims.

Back in Congress, the subject of a national language becomes a hot topic when Begum Abida Khan objects to the fact that because Urdu is not taught in schools, Muslims and many Hindus are left not understanding the news of the country. There is also a difference of opinion regarding incorporating more women into government.

The religious differences between Mahesh Kapoor and his wife represent the division of factions within the Hindu religion.

Part 14 Analysis

Politics in this chapter becomes a bit tedious for the non-Indian reader. It is mildly interesting, but detracts from the main theme of romantic love versus arranged



marriages. Rehearsing and acting together in "Twelfth Night" continually put Lata and Kabir together, but neither of them is successful at expressing their true feelings for one another. Pran represents an attitude of skepticism toward the Hindu religion in his quote, "I may as well humble myself before a stone...or a potato." Seth also refers to the Muslim practice of sacrificing animals as something repugnant to Hindus.



Part 15

Part 15 Summary

Mrs. Rupa learns in a letter that Meenakshi had miscarried and Kakoli has become engaged to the German boy, Hans. To compound her concerns, Amit has become openly fond of Lata. Typically, Mrs. Rupa wishes to be at the center of action, nosing around for all the gossip. She is, however, confined to Brahmpur in order to keep watch over Lata who is acting in the play with the unsuitable Kabir. At the performance, Mrs. Rupa is aghast at some of the language, though Dr. Kishen Chand gets quite caught up in the drama. By the end of the play, Mrs. Rupa has forgotten all her previous objections and rushes back stage to congratulate Lata. She attempts to prevent Lata from attending the cast party when she realizes that Kabir will also be there. Firoz plans to go to Saeeda Bai's for the "soz" or musical lament for Islamic martyrs for the express purpose of seeing Tasneem. Even in the Hindu culture, there is conflict when the untouchable class is excluded from religious participation. Maan is taking over Mahesh Kapoor's political campaigning.

Firoz is greeted at Saeeda Bai's by her servant Bibbo when he arrives for the soz. There are men of various Muslim sects, and a few pious women, among the attendees. The lament is very emotional and people get caught up in the feelings evoked by the soz. Saeeda Bai takes a rest from singing and her eyes rest briefly on Firoz and Tasneem, who she sends out of the room on the pretext of tending to the parakeet. At the same time the Muslims are observing religious ceremony, the Hindus are doing the same in pageantry and festivities. Disaster looms as the Muslim procession and the Hindu parade are headed in directions that will cause them to meet. Neither side is willing to change their route. Panic ensues and Maan and Firoz get caught in the middle of the melee. They attempt to locate Bhaskar who is playing a monkey in the Hindu festival. Maan guides Firoz to safety in the Hindu section where they find themselves. He takes Firoz to his home where he is allowed to clean the blood and dress in clean clothes. A curfew causes Firoz to be confined in Maan's Hindu household. Veena calls Firoz's home to let them know he is unharmed. Bhaskar wants to know why there was so much blood on Firoz when he arrived.

Mahesh Kapoor is in a quandary about his political future. The Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, is assassinated at a public meeting and the crowd kills the murderer. The Nawab Sahib calls Mahesh for a meeting at his house to discuss politics. Life begins to settle back into regularity for a while. Pran gets caught up in an intrigue involving the expulsion from the university of the son of the Rajah of Marh. Mahesh returns to politics as representative of Salimpur-cum-Baitar.



Part 15 Analysis

Some of the idioms used by Seth such as "had wishes been horses," seem trite to a native speaker of English. A key point of religious conflict is pointed out in the words of Firoz and Maan as they discuss the probability of riots in India: "Shias with Shias, Shias with Sunnis, Hindus with Muslims...and Hindus with Hindus." In fifty years those conflicts have not been resolved. The question of caste arises in the thoughts of Jagat Ram who cannot accept the idea that one should continue in low occupations (cleaning toilets or standing in the tanning vats) simply because that is what one's parents had done. The irrationality of religious fanaticism is illustrated in the melee that occurs after the two parades meet up. The innocence of children is portrayed in Bhaskar who simply does not understand the violence between the opposing groups. Mahesh Kapoor's return to politics represents the idealism of affecting change legislatively. Pran's part in the expulsion of the Rajah's son from the university represents the weakening of traditional power in the new India.



Part 16

Part 16 Summary

Kabir and Malati meet and Kabir confesses that he cannot stop thinking about Lata and begs her to intercede for him, but Lata has returned to Calcutta. Mrs. Rupa has her birthday which turns out to be a self-pity party. Meanwhile, things are hectic in the Chatterji household as usual. Dipankar attempts to find out what is the matter with Tapan, his 13-year-old brother who has become reclusive and almost weepy. It turns out that Tapan is being bullied by the hockey captain and his senior friends. The captain has a sexual desire for Tapan and, therefore, the harassment is worse than it ordinarily would have been. Dipankar becomes a good listener, allowing Tapan to vent his frustrations.

Dipankar has made an irrevocable decision, unless he changes his mind. He has decided to join a bank, which he announces to Amit, disturbing his writing. Then he discusses Tapan with Amit, relating the information he has just learned from the boy. Amit and Dipankar decide that Tapan must be taken out of Jheel boarding school and brought to Calcutta to enter St. Xavier's day school where Amit had been educated. To get it past Mrs. Chatterji, they agree to insist that the main reason for the change is to get Tapan more involved in Bengali culture. The ruse works.

A dinner at the Chatterji house introduces Hans as a potential member of the family. The typical flippancy of the family puts Hans ill at ease and Kuku tries to smooth things over. The conversation around the dinner table is as varied as the personalities of the slightly bizarre Chatterji family. Cornered, Hans diplomatically says that the Chatterjis are an atypical typical family.

Haresh invites Mrs. Rupa and Lata and the others to lunch in Prahapore where he is now working. He has worked with the people on his line to get them to raise their productivity and has been sent by Khandelwal to negotiate a union dispute. He sets a goal to double production at the factory. He gets cooperation by donning workman's clothing and challenging Ram Lakhan to produce 600 pairs of shoes in one day. His effectiveness within the company causes jealousy and friction between him and the Czech managers. Haresh is living almost lavishly when Mrs. Rupa and Lata arrive. The mother is touched by the extent of the arrangements and the politeness of Haresh. No one is as impressed with Haresh as Mrs. Rupa seems now to be. As soon as they return from Prahapore, Meenakshi hurries to her tryst with Billy. A long letter from Malati to Lata recounts her meeting with Kabir and the report that he is seeing another young woman.



Part 16 Analysis

The Kapoor family are all caught up in the campaign of Mahesh Kapoor. Maan is happy to be in Brahmipur where he can see Saeeda Bai on a regular basis. The Kapoors are too concentrated on the political campaign to pay much attention to Maan's infatuation with the infamous courtesan. Maan is hoping to see Rasheed who does not come around Saeeda Bai's house any longer. She says that he has gone crazy. She gives Maan Rasheed's address on letters he has been sending to Tasneem and warns Maan that he will be a liability to their electoral endeavors. When Maan visits Rasheed, he learns that his friend will not support Mahesh and will actively campaign against him. They discuss Rasheed's desire to take Tasneem as his second wife. Rasheed has changed because of his desire to help the poor and disenfranchised of his village area. When Maan tells Saeeda Bai of his meeting with Rasheed, she orders her watchman to refuse Rasheed admittance into her house.

In the Salimpur-cum-Baitar constituency where it is split evenly between Muslims and Hindus, the campaign for Mahesh builds up. Mahesh urges the women of the family to help with his political electioneering. The Socialist Party emerges as the biggest opposition to Mahesh's Congress Party. Maan campaigns tirelessly in the villages of Salim-cum-Baitar. The subject of caste becomes a heated point of debate in the election. Maan learns of how Rasheed tried to protect Kachheru from being evicted from the land he had farmed for many years and how his family had opposed him. Rasheed has isolated himself from almost everyone except the communists.

Maan discovers that Tasneem is not Saeeda Bai's sister. She is her daughter and Firoz's father is also Tasneem's father. That is why Saeeda Bai has been attempting to keep them apart. The scene of discovery is messy with Maan wounding Firoz with a fruit knife. In the hospital, Firoz's prognosis for survival is good. The police investigation leaves Saeeda Bai in a nervous condition. She is still having difficulty talking because of Maan's having had his hands around her throat. Maan buys a ticket for Banaras where he is finally arrested for the attack on Firoz. The irony of the situation for Mahesh Kapoor is that he cannot bring pressure on the police investigators while attempting to limit the ability of the landowners to pressure local officials in order to retain their lands in danger from the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act. The tragedy has divided the Kapoor family from the family of the Nawab Sahib, important political allies. They do not attend the cremation of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor. Mahesh now goes to the police to try and lighten Maan's culpability, an act that shames him, but he cannot bear to lose a son right after losing his wife. All of the intrigue further complicates the campaign.



Part 17

Part 17 Summary

Most of this part centers around Mahesh Kapoor's political campaign. It is complicated by the imprisonment of Maan after a bloody incident at Saeeda Bai's house. Learning that Firoz is in love with Tasneem, reported to be Saeeda Bai's sister, she must confess that Tasneem is actually her daughter and Firoz's father is also the father of Tasneem. Saeeda Bai gets a fruit knife which Maan wrestles from her, in the process nearly strangling her to the point that she loses her voice. In the struggle Firoz is stabbed by a crazed Maan who escapes to Banaras but is captured by the police. Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, in poor health and distressed over Maan's imprisonment, passes away. None of the family of Nawab Sahib, Firoz's family, attend the chautha for Mrs. Kapoor. All of the campaign work that Maan had done so effectively in Salimpur-cum-Baitar province is undone by his incarceration. Rasheed, also pursuing a marriage with Tasneem, has become ostracized by his family and is working for the Socialists. Mahesh Kapoor finally attempts to use his influence with the police to get the charges dropped against Maan. This puts him in the awkward spot of doing what he is trying to prevent the wealthy land owners from doing as a result of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act. Firoz remains in critical condition in the hospital and Nawab Sahib turns against Mahesh as a political candidate. Mahesh is helped by the appearance of Nehru in the district, but the effect soon wears off. Everything is up in the air as Part 17 concludes. Waris Khan, the guide with whom Maan once went hunting, becomes not just a dummy candidate to aid the cause of Mahesh Kapoor but rather a formidable opponent as they await the election results. On the eve of the election an anonymous flier announces that Firoz has died.

Part 17 Analysis

Politics is the theme and how they can become affected by isolated incidents. Maan accidentally stabs Firoz when he is out of his mind and runs to Banaras where he is ultimately apprehended. The situation involving Firoz has to do with potential incest as it is revealed that he is half-brother to Tasneem. Firoz, semiconscious in the hospital, is unable to clear Maan of premeditated attack on his person. Rasheed, according to Saeeda Bai, has lost his mind. He is trying to arrange a marriage with Tasneem as his second wife, which Saeeda Bai objects to strenuously. Rasheed is ostracized by his family over his attempts to protect the tenant farmers and has gone over to campaign for the socialists. All of these events affect greatly Mahesh Kapoor's run for the Parliament.



Part 18

Part 18 Summary

The story line returns to Lata who is attending a poetry reading by Amit for the Literary Society. Kabir is there as well. At the meeting, Pran is subtly urged to withdraw his candidacy for head reader at the university. It turns out that Kabir had invited Amit to the Society and, what is more, it had been Haresh Khanna who had introduced them. Lata and Kabir have an emotional confrontation about Haresh. There is a large dinner at Pran's home with an assortment of characters, some meeting for the first time. Pran is most anxious about learning if he passed the committee for his promotion. Lata and Amit seem to hit it off over Amit's poetry reading. Impulsively, Amit proposes to Lata. Mrs. Rupa is less sharp with Amit than he had expected since she had been having second thoughts about Haresh. She goes to an astrologer to get a prediction about advisability of Lata marrying and is advised two days later that there are certain problems between the horoscopes of Haresh and Lata. It develops that the woman Kabir was reported to be seeing at the Blue Danube is actually Malati and nothing is going on between them.

As the committee meets to consider Pran's candidacy, Prof. Mishra is well aware that the votes have not come in from Mahesh's district because the counting had been interrupted by the death of King George VI of England. Trying to head off Pran's appointment, Prof. Mishra receives a phone call that Mahesh Kapoor has won his seat in the Parliament. With the news of Mahesh's return to power, Pran gets the promotion. As it turns out, however, Waris actually wins the political race by over a thousand votes. The win is attributed to the last minute flier stating that Firoz is dead.

For reasons of practicality, Lata settles on Haresh for her future husband. Malati is shocked and saddened for Kabir. Lata points out that Malati did not like Pran at first but thinks he is a fine man and husband for Savita now.

Part 18 Analysis

Part 18 begins a process of wrapping up. By involving so many characters in various complicated twists of plot—social, economic, and political—the theme of the "suitable boy" for Lata manages to stand up throughout this long novel. Asked about his novel at the Literary Society, Amit admits to an inability to come to the end of his story which appears to be Seth's admission that his novel rambles. The tension around Mahesh's election returns and Pran's interview for a job often makes for an uncomfortable desire on the part of the reader to have the author get on with it and tell what happens with Lata. The interesting twist of connecting Haresh, Kabir, and Amit offers the reader an opportunity to consider the various merits of each of these characters. The man Lata finally chooses comes as somewhat of a surprise twist. Waris appears to be turning into

a self-promoting politician with predictions from everyone that he will also turn against the Nawab Sahib.



Part 19

Part 19 Summary

Kalpana Gaur gives Varun courage as he goes to the interview for a government job. Once it is over, she sends a telegram to Mrs. Rupa Mehra that their fingers are crossed after the end of the interview. Mrs. Rupa, back in Calcutta, goes on a whirlwind buying spree in preparation for Lata's wedding. She frequents her future son-in-law. Haresh's parents request a horoscope to see for themselves that Haresh and Lata are a good match. Amit, disappointed over Lata's decision, throws himself back into his novel which is going well. Meenakshi is too busy to go with Mrs. Rupa to the jewelers, so Varun takes her. The jeweler had not used Mr. Mehra's medal for Meenakshi's earrings and presents the box with the medal in it to Mrs. Rupa. Mrs. Rupa purchases a marriage manual for Lata much to Lata's gratitude since she had not had to suffer the embarrassment of purchasing it herself. There are all kinds of pre-wedding complications. Haresh insists that Jagat Ram come to the wedding. Jagat Ram, however, is aware of the social problem his presence at the wedding would cause. Lata goes through the traditional henna designs on her hands and feet. The wedding ceremony consists of various different Hindu customs that puzzle the presiding priest. Jagat Ram does attend the wedding briefly and leaves a gift in a shoebox wrapped in brown paper. It is learned that Rasheed has committed suicide. The judges of the Supreme Court have agreed that the Zamindari Act is constitutional. Malati is still convinced that Lata is making a big mistake. Mrs. Rupa, suddenly aware that something is going on between Varun and Kalpana Gaur, pulls him aside and says that he will marry a "suitable girl." Mrs. Rupa foils an attempt to play a prank on Haresh and Lata on their wedding night. Kabir can not bring himself to go to the wedding, though his father, Dr. Durrani is there. The morning after their wedding, Lata opens the brown paper gift and discovers a hand carved cat. The next day, Lata and Haresh board the train to go to his house. Lata feeds the monkeys outside the train station until the train pulls away.

Part 19 Analysis

Seth wraps things up in something of a jumble of endings and beginnings in this part. Subjects with which he appears to be uncomfortable, he glosses over quickly, like Rasheed's suicide. The caste differences come up again in Jagat Ram's brief appearance at the wedding. Kabir does not attend the wedding, and Malati maintains her opinion that Lata has made a big mistake. Clearly Lata likes but does not yet love Haresh. There is a certain poignancy to her throwing food to the monkeys as the train pulls out, taking her to her new married life.



Characters

Lata Mehra

Lata is arguably the central character of the novel. She is the younger daughter of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, a widow. She is first seen at the wedding of her sister Savita to Pran Kapoor. Lata is a student at the university. She has a quick mind and is quite well read, though somewhat naive about life and relationships. Lata questions the idea of an arranged marriage like that of her sister where the couple know nothing at all about each other. Her attitude is typical of the young Indian population after the separation of India and the British. Although Lata is free to go to the university and shopping with friends unaccompanied, she recognizes that there are still limitations placed on girls that are not placed on boys. When Lata meets and becomes intrigued by Kabir Durrani, she throws caution to the winds and arranges to meet him secretly. To point out her naivete, it is not until Lata has fallen in love with Kabir that she learns he is a Muslim. Coming from a Hindu family, Lata realizes that Kabir would never be considered as a "suitable boy" for her to marry. Lata's closest friend, Malati, also comes from a Hindu background, but she is not as steeped in that culture as Lata. Malati encourages Lata to continue seeing Kabir. Lata shares a love of poetry with Kabir and goes often to meetings of the Literary Society where she meets him. They take a clandestine boat ride.

Lata is not a willful girl. She simply has a more open mind and questions tradition when it does not make sense to her. She continues to think about Kabir who searches until he finds out where she is. He writes letters to Lata and she replies. In Calcutta, Lata meets the Chatterji family and becomes friends with their eldest son, Amit, a well-known poet and novelist. They share a love of literature. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, however, keeps a watchful eye on that relationship because she does not think Amit is a "suitable boy" for her daughter. The Chatterji family has a reputation for being somewhat odd.

Lata is amazed at her mother's tireless search for the "suitable boy" for her to marry. They go visit a distant cousin, Kalpana Gaur, who introduces Mrs. Mehra and Lata to Haresh, a young man with whom she attended school. Haresh is from a somewhat lower social circle than the Mehra family, but he is acceptable to Mrs. Rupa because he would not demand the dowry a more affluent family would ask. Haresh makes no bones about the fact that he is still in love with a Sikh girl whose family will have nothing to do with him. Lata likes Haresh, but she does not see him in her future. She is playing along, keeping her real feelings for Kabir away from her mother.

Over the course of time, Lata becomes quite fond of Haresh because of his thoughtfulness and the wonderful letters he writes. Her feelings for Kabir, however, remain just under the surface. After Amit gets up the nerve to ask Lata to marry him, she turns him down but finds herself more attracted to him than ever. As with Kabir, she has a great love of literature in common with Amit. As the novel draws to a close, Lata is in a quandary over having to make a decision. Malati is sure she will opt to marry Kabir because of the romantic love Lata feels for him. To Malati's astonishment, Lata settles



on Haresh for very practical reasons, not the least of which is the fact that he is the only "suitable boy" in the eyes of her mother. Lata believes that in time she will learn to love Haresh because of his kindness and uncompromising work ethic so that she will always be taken care of financially.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra

Mrs. Rupa Mehra is a widow and mother of Arun, Savita, Varun, and Lata. She is a traditionalist and a firm Hindu. Since she is widowed, it falls on her to find suitable spouses for her children, an avocation she goes about with diligence, never taking the wishes of her children into consideration. Although her elder son married into the notable Chatterji family, Mrs. Rupa does not really approve of Meenakshi, his wife. Mrs. Rupa is nosy, wanting to know everything about everyone—especially her family. She is deeply religious, though she cannot really tell anyone about the religion she professes. She is deeply concerned about Lata who seems to be having a great many liberal ideas, so she is anxious to get her married off to a "suitable boy" at the earliest possible moment.

Mrs. Rupa is as superstitious as she is religious. She frequents astrologers and worries about inauspicious times and matches. She is also a notable hypochondriac. She goes to doctors, usually the sort that simply hang out a shingle and profess knowledge about certain miracle cures. If she hears of a disease, very likely she will become convinced that she has it.

Mrs. Mehra is frugal, saving the cards that people send to her to cut out flowers and other illustrations to do handmade cards she sends to others. Her frugality seems a bit out of place when she always seems to have money for train travel and buying extravagant items from time to time. Nevertheless, she manages to impose on her children and relatives without any pang of conscience. She does not get along well with her eccentric father which resulted in his locking up his house and leaving the area when it was time for Savita to marry. The result was that the wedding had to take place at Prem Nivas, the estate of Mahesh Kapoor, Minister of Revenue.

Although there are times in the novel that the reader might gladly strangle Mrs. Rupa Mehra ("My children never tell me anything."), she ultimately comes across as a sympathetic character, a mother who wants the best for her children. Mrs. Rupa represents the traditional Indian parent holding firmly to traditional religion and long practiced Indian culture.

Kabir Durrani

Kabir is the epitome of the "unsuitable boy" in this story of Hindu marriage customs. His main failing is the unfortunate circumstance of having been born a Muslim. Kabir is not overly religious and is atypical of the Muslim male looking for a plurality of wives. He falls in love with Lata almost from first sight and pursues her relentlessly. Unaware of his Muslim heritage, Lata quickly becomes fascinated by his rugged good looks and his



athletic build (he is a star rugby player). Because she knows that her family, and especially her mother, will never accept a Muslim husband for her, Lata attempts to sever the relationship. Kabir, however, is an incurable romantic and draws Lata back to him like a moth to flame.

Kabir's sensitivity is portrayed in his love of literature, especially poetry. It is a passion that he shares with Lata and provides a convenient meeting place at the Literary Society. When Kabir learns that Lata has a role in the university production of *Twelfth Night*, he auditions and gets a part in the play. His motivation is to be near Lata rather than any desire to become an actor. Lata, by this time, has decided to separate herself from Kabir, so his plan ends without success.

Kabir becomes an unsung hero when he locates and saves Bhaskar Tandon, the son of Kedarnath Tandon and Veena Kapoor Tandon, after a terrible accident during a Hindu festival. Throughout the novel, there is never anything negative about Kabir other than the fact that he is Muslim. His father, Dr. Durrani, is a notable mathematician at the university. Kabir had recognized Bhaskar Tandon because the savant boy is a private student of his father's.

Kabir is a symbol of unrequited love as he continually pursues Lata from Brahmur to Calcutta. Becoming acquainted with Amit Chatterji, the poet, Kabir arranges for him to read his poetry at the Literary Society in Brahmur which draws Lata to attend. Ironically, Amit is also a suitor for Lata's hand. Because Lata cannot forget her attraction to Kabir, he becomes a symbol of the Bollywood image of marriage for love as opposed to arranged marriages. It is too soon in Indian culture, however, for this idea to become acceptable to traditional families such as the Mehras.

Mahesh Kapoor

Mahesh Kapoor is the central character in the sub-plot of politics in the early days of Indian independence. He is the father of Veena Tandon, Pran Kapoor, and Maan Kapoor who all figure prominently in the novel. Mahesh is the consummate politician. He has risen to the rank of Minister of Revenue and is the primary author of the Zamindari Abolition Bill. This piece of proposed legislation would allow ownership of small farms that had been operated by lower caste families for a number of years. While that fact sounds commendable, there is a great deal of opposition from large land owners who will lose portions of their estates should the bill become law. Consequently there is a great deal of opposition to Mahesh Kapoor and his proposed resolution.

Mahesh is so wrapped up in his political career that he ignores the behavior of his younger son, Maan, who has become enamored with a notorious Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai. He throws it off as merely a passing infatuation that will eventually burn itself out, though his wife is much less skeptical. One of Mahesh's oldest friends is the Nawab Sahib of Baitar who, despite being a large land holder likely to lose a great portion of his estate over the Zamindari Abolition Bill, still remains friendly with Mahesh. Their sons, Maan Kapoor and Firoz Khan, are likewise best friends.



Mahesh Kapoor is an idealist, believing that the country should do the right thing to promote the lower castes which have been feudal servants under the British rule. When he becomes disillusioned with politics in general and his Congress Party in particular, he eventually resigns as Minister of Revenue. Soon he finds himself on the outside looking in, no longer respected for the high level of office he once enjoyed. Eventually returning to the Congress Party, he stands for election to a seat from the Baitar district. An unfortunate accident involving Maan and Firoz which almost costs Firoz his life and threatens to put Maan in prison costs him the election.

Mrs. Kapoor dies unexpectedly and Mahesh is devastated once again. He returns to politics as a duty, but his old spark has gone, making him only a warm body needed to form a majority. Idealism has led him to a tragic end.

Maan Kapoor

At the outset of the novel, Maan Kapoor is a dilettante without direction in life. His father is too involved in his political career to pay him much attention. Other families dismiss Maan as "unsuitable" for consideration as a possible husband for their marriageable daughters. Maan's friends are rowdy and unacceptable to his family. Maan is first seen in the story as a prankster during the celebration of Holi where revelers splash colored water on each other. He is inebriated and totally uninhibited as he attacks his brother's wife with the brilliant colors. At the annual Holi concert hosted by his father, Maan becomes infatuated with the entertainer, the Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai Firozabadi. Subsequently, Maan visits the home of Saeeda Bai on numerous occasions until they finally become lovers. His relationship with the Muslim woman causes a scandal of gossip in Brahmpur. In order to communicate in writing with Saeeda Bai, Maan begins to study Urdu under Rasheed, the teacher of Tasneem, rumored to be Saeeda Bai's younger sister.

Rasheed and Maan eventually become friends and Maan goes to visit Rasheed's home. The Muslim family becomes fond of Maan because of his respect for their customs. Maan stays at Baitar estate which belongs to the Nawab Sahib, Firoz's father, and becomes friends with Waris, the grounds foreman. They go hunting together and Maan sees that Waris is devoted to the Khan family. When Maan's father is encouraged to run for parliament in the Baitar district, Maan becomes interested in politics and turns out to be a real asset to his father's campaign. The predominantly Muslim constituency are all fond of Maan.

Back in Brahmpur, Maan visits Saeeda Bai when Firoz is there attempting to see Tasneem with whom he has fallen in love. Saeeda Bai is frantically attempting to keep the two of them apart. Maan has been drinking and attacks Saeeda Bai after she takes a fruit knife with which she seems to be planning to attack Firoz. Maan strangles Saeeda Bai with one hand while wresting the knife from her hand. In the ensuing melee, Firoz is stabbed by the knife in Maan's hand. The resulting scandal throws Mahesh Kapoor's campaign into a free fall. Maan is arrested and charged with attempted murder while Firoz lies unconscious in the hospital in critical condition.



Finally Maan is saved from prison by Firoz's testimony that he had slipped and fallen on the knife held by Maan. He adds that Maan was too inebriated to know exactly what had happened. Saeeda Bai corroborates Firoz's testimony and Maan is set free. In the novel Maan represents the difficulty of bridging the chasm between the Muslim and Hindu worlds.

Malati

Malati represents the more modern of the Hindu youth in India. She is flamboyant and opposed to arranged marriages. She at first disapproves of Pran at his wedding to Savita, but later changes her opinion because of his good character and the way he and Savita have learned to love one another. Malati urges Lata to go with her feelings about Kabir. Lata relies on Malati for her advice and misses her greatly whenever she is away from Brahmipur. Malati is not above having flings with numerous young men, and she pays no attention to any gossip about her. Malati also encourages Kabir to pursue Lata. Although she is a minor character in the novel, she is important for her influence on Lata. In the end, when Lata settles for the "suitable boy" Haresh, Malati still maintains that Lata is foolish for not choosing Kabir over the objections of her family.

Seth uses Malati as a kind of foreshadow of the future of Indian attitudes toward relationships and marriage. Although her character in the novel is somewhat one dimensional, it is essential to the story line as a contrast between her and Lata, who questions but does not resist tradition. On any subject, Malati is never without strong opinion. Inadvertently, she becomes a reason for Lata to reject Kabir when she meets Kabir by accident in a restaurant and Lata is told that a mysterious woman had been seen sitting at the table with him.

Pran Kapoor

Savita's husband is a professor at the Brahmipur University. Although from an upper caste, Pran is dark complexioned. Even at his wedding to Savita, some guests are overheard to gossip about Mrs. Rupa Mehra's likely "black grand babies." It is implied, but not actually stated, that Pran's skin color hampers him in his career. Though he is a popular and very cooperative, doing whatever is asked of him by his superiors, there is an active move to prevent him from getting the promotion to Head Reader for which he has applied.

Pran is not in good health much of the time, a fact which also hinders his promotion. He sits on several important university committees and directs the Shakespeare play, Twelfth Night. He is one of the members of the discipline committee who decides the fate of students who violate university rules. Pran is a loving husband and devoted father after Savita gives birth to their first child. Had Mrs. Rupa been better off financially, she would never have chosen Pran for Savita, but his kindness and generosity eventually bring her to suspect she could not have made a better match.



Eventually, Pran wins out and gets the promotion. He recommends including James Joyce in the literature curriculum. This identifies him as socially and politically progressive, a man dedicated to bringing Indian education into the twentieth century.

Firoz Khan

Firoz is the best friend of Maan in spite of their families' religious differences. Firoz is a Muslim, though he is not particularly religious. He is a lawyer and the son of the wealthy Nawab Sahib of Baitar. He is the catalyst for two serious situations in the novel. First, his attraction to Tasneem, supposedly the sister of Saeeda Bai, alarms the courtesan and she tries to keep the two young people apart, notwithstanding that he is Muslim and gainfully employed as a lawyer. Any other guardian of a young girl would certainly consider Firoz to be a "suitable boy" for marriage. As it turns out, Tasneem is not Saeeda Bai's sister—she is her daughter and the father is none other than the Nawab Sahib, Firoz's father. Firoz is devastated by the revelation and does not believe it is true. His father has been sending regular monthly allowances to Saeeda Bai ever since Tasneem was born. People all think it is the Raja of Marh who supports her and Tasneem.

The second calamity involving Firoz occurs the same night in Saeeda Bai's house. Firoz has demanded to see Tasneem. Maan, inebriated, is there and sees Saeeda Bai take a fruit knife from her basket. He struggles with her and gains possession of the knife, but he is too intoxicated to really know what is happening. At that point Firoz lunges toward Maan and falls on the knife in Maan's outstretched hand. The stabbing represents severing the ties between the Kapoors and the Khans which has great significance regarding Mahesh's political career.

The Raja of Marh

The Raja symbolizes the Hindu fanatically religious. Although he abhors all Muslims, he is not above assignations with the notorious courtesan, Saeeda Bai. The Raja is promiscuous, pompous, and aggressive. He intends to erect a Hindu Temple to Shiva adjacent to a Muslim mosque, which is bad enough, but the temple will have as its centerpiece the huge statue of the phallus of Shiva. That will place the idolatrous artifact directly between the mosque and Mecca which is an abomination to the Muslims. The Raja's willful determination precipitates a riot in Brahmipur with a disputed number of deaths. When Maan delivers a book of poetry to Saeeda Bai during one of the Raja's visits, he becomes insanely jealous and tears a page out of the book before Saeeda Bai can prevent it.

The Raja thinks he is above the law and continually gets into trouble. He goes ahead with his plans for the Temple of Shiva, supervising the removal of the phallic statue from the Ganga River to be carried uphill to the temple. All seems to be going well when, near the top, the ropes begin to break and the phallus rolls back down the hill and back into the Ganga.



Notorious for his insatiable womanizing, the Raja has completely ignored his son, the Rajkumar, who is an avowed homosexual with designs on Maan. The Raja seems to be unaware of anything at all about his son.

When the Zamindari Bill becomes law and is upheld by the Supreme Court, the Raja loses most of his vast holdings and has to be ejected forcefully from the legislative chamber. The Raja symbolizes the worst part of Hindu society and comes to a humiliating end.

Saeeda Bai

Saeeda Bai is a notorious courtesan renowned for her singing. She is hired for private parties as an entertainer with some musicians who accompany her. However, that is not the way she makes most of her living. One man in particular, the Raja of Marh, is a frequent guest in her house who pays for her sexual services. There is also a monthly envelope that arrives punctually and becomes something of a mystery, which eventually reveals the fact that Tasneem is not her younger sister but her daughter by the Nawab Sahib. Because of her beauty and talent, Saeeda Bai is tolerated by both Hindus and Muslims as an entertainer. When she comes to perform at a party celebrating Holi at the house of Mahesh Kapoor, Maan Kapoor becomes enamored of her. A great deal of local gossip takes place after Maan is seen going often to Saeeda Bai's house. Maan is in no hurry to get married and is unperturbed when the gossip suggests that he is no longer a "suitable boy" for the marriage eligible young women of Brahmpur. Saeeda Bai becomes fond of Maan and eventually falls in love with him. She treasures an illustrated book of poetry Maan gives her, though it becomes a great bone of contention between her and the Raja.

Saeeda Bai's shady past becomes a catalyst for tragedy when Firoz, who has fallen in love with Tasneem, discovers that Saeeda Bai has lied about the girl all those years and Tasneem is actually his half-sister. Saeeda Bai is actually a tragic figure in the novel when she loses Maan's love after the tragic incident of Firoz's nearly fatal stabbing in her house. She does, however, corroborate the testimony of Firoz at Maan's attempted murder trial which causes the judge to dismiss all charges against Maan.

Saeeda Bai was raised by her mother to become a courtesan. Had she been born into another affluent family, her beauty and talent would have been put to greater use as an asset for finding her a suitable boy. Because she is who she is, Saeeda Bai is destined to heartbreak over her love for the handsome Maan.

Begum Abida Khan

Begum represents the rarity of a female member of parliament. She is the mortal enemy of those who support the Zamindari Abolition Bill. Her strong character is best demonstrated by the exchange of comments with The Honorable Minister for Home Affairs, Shri L. N. Agarwal and the Honorable Minister of Revenue, Shri Mahesh Kapoor on the House floor. She refuses to adhere to the rules of the House, having to be called



to order many times by the House Speaker. At the when meeting the Zamindari Abolition Bill is passed by the House, Begum proceeds to make a speech. When cut short, she influences all the members of the Democratic Party to walk out of the House.

Begum Abida Khan overcomes an attempt by L. N. Agarwal to confiscate her husband's house by having the servants turn on all the lights. Agarwal is acting on the knowledge that Begum's husband is now living in Pakistan under the Partition act. With the help of Nawab Sahib, the house is saved.

Begum Abida Khan represents the Muslim minority opposed to the separation of India and Pakistan and especially the Zamindari Abolition Bill which will take land away from wealthy land holders. She is an expert speaker and not above bending the rules of the House to get her points across. She also represents the modern, immodest Indian woman who disdains the zenana that isolates women in their homes.

Rasheed

Rasheed is the Muslim counterpoint to Mahesh Kapoor. He is an idealist who wants to see justice done to the lower castes. Although he disapproves of Saeeda Bai's vocation, he agrees to tutor Tasneem in Arabic. He is also fluent in Urdu, the language Saeeda Bai reads, and agrees reluctantly to teach Maan Kapoor. Because Maan is very tolerant of other people's religious beliefs, he and Rasheed eventually become close friends. Rasheed takes Maan to his family home, the same area where Maan's father owns a farm. Rasheed explains the plight of the people in that district blaming the wealthy like his own family for the disparity between people in India. Rasheed goes to the government official in charge of records and sees to it that Kachheru, a lifelong servant of Rasheed's family, has legal title to the land he has farmed for himself all that time. Rasheed's actions ostracize him from his own family. He continues, however, to lobby for the rights of the people. When it becomes evident that he is ineffectual and that India is not likely to change any time soon, Rasheed commits suicide.

Haresh Khanna

Haresh, the suitor who ultimately wins Lata for a wife, is a young man of ambition in the shoe manufacturing business. His drive is as big as his ambition and he maintains a positive outlook, even in the face of adversity. At the time he meets Lata, he is actually out of work and openly in love with a Sikh girl whose parents will have none of him. By sheer determination, Haresh overcomes his adversities and the resentment of Czech managers at the shoe company. Haresh's greatest attribute is that he will not ask others to do what he himself cannot do. As his fortunes increase, so does his interest in Lata with whom he constantly corresponds. As far as being a "suitable boy" for Lata, his work ethic and position make up for the fact that he is an orphan. He is a bit pretentious, affecting what he considers to be British grandeur. However, he is both polite and diplomatic. He wins over Mrs. Rupa quickly, but it takes much longer for him to win over the Czechs. Although at the end of the novel Lata does not love Haresh, she is



confident that she will learn to love him and that he is the best and most practical match for her.

Meenakshi Mehra

Meenakshi Mehra, the wife of Arun Mehra, is the penultimate modern Indian woman. She is beautiful, self-centered, and lusty. Meenakshi has extramarital affairs, but is content with her marriage to Arun, who seems oblivious to his wife's behavior. Mrs. Rupa Mehra does not like her daughter-in-law, thinking her uncouth and worldly. Meenakshi takes the gold medal Mrs. Rupa gives her to be melted down and made into earrings. The medal is a prized award given to Mrs. Rupa's late husband. Meenakshi's saving grace with Mrs. Rupa is that she is the mother of the adored grandchild, Aparna.

Kedarnath Tandon

Kedarnath, a shoe merchant, is married to Veena Mahesh, sister to Pran and Maan. Kedarnath has all the problems of merchants in post-liberation India. His son, Bhaskar, is a mathematical savant. Kedarnath introduces Haresh to the shoemaker, Jagat Ram, and other friends. Kedarnath is a solid family man.

Nawab Sahib of Baitar

The Nawab Sahib is the father of Firoz Khan. Although he is Muslim, he and Mahesh Kapoor are good friends until the unfortunate accident involving Firoz and Maan Kapoor. The Nawab Sahib is in danger of losing a great deal of his family land through the Zamindari Abolition Bill. Even though Mahesh is the main author of the bill, he holds no resentment against his friend until the incident at the house of Saeeda Bai. A shocking turn of events reveals him as the father of Tasneem, a beautiful girl everyone thought was Saeeda Bai's sister.

Mr. Justice Chatterji

The judge is head of the Chatterji family. He is the father of Meenakshi, Dipankar, Kakoli, and Tapan. The family members are all intellectual and have a habit of saying things in rhyme. The judge is a very respected man in Brahmpur and figures prominently in the social scene. Mr. Justice Chatterji symbolizes a change in Indian customs as he accepts Kakoli's German suitor.

Kakoli Chatterji

Kakoli is somewhat rebellious and represents the youth who dislike the idea of arranged marriages. She is outspoken to the point of rudeness at times. Kakoli becomes attracted to a German youth, Hans, and insists on bringing him home to the Chatterji house.



Tapan Chatterji

The youngest child of the Chatterjis, Tapan is a student in boarding school when he becomes the object of one of the senior boy's lust. A normally good student who enjoys school, Tapan becomes reclusive and sad. Amit and Dipankar, his older brothers, get Tapan to admit what has been bothering him, and they are able to persuade their parents to allow Tapan to change schools.

Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor

Mother of Maan, Mrs. Kapoor also represents traditional Hindu culture and values. She is the one who worries about Maan's relationship with Saeeda Bai. Mrs. Kapoor is noted in the community for her beautiful gardens. When Maan is accused of the attempted murder of Firoz Khan, it becomes too much for her to handle. While Maan is in jail, Mrs. Kapoor dies suddenly.



Objects/Places

Hinduism

Hinduism is the religion of a majority of the people of India.

Muslim

A Muslim is a person whose religion is Islam, a large minority of the people of India.

The Gold Medals

Awards given to Mrs. Rupa Mehra, the gold medals are precious mementos of her late husband.

The Ganga

The Ganga is a sacred river of India.

The Tanning Pits

The tanning pits are a foul smelling place where leather is cured before going to leather craft establishments.

Holi

One of the religious holidays of Hinduism, Holi is celebrated by splashing people with bright colored water.

Brogues

Brogues are the shoes favored by Haresh because they represent British superiority to him.

Twelfth Night

The Shakespearean play Twelfth Night is produced by the university and Lata plays the part of Olivia.



The Cawnpore Leather & Footwear Company

The first company Haresh works for that brings him to Brahmpur is The Cawnpore Leather & Footwear Company.

Barsaat Mahal

Barsaat Mahal is a famous landmark where Lata and Kabir go for a boat ride.

Cycle-Rickshaw

Cycle-rickshaws provide cheap transportation pedaled by a lower caste man.

Partition

The legislated separation of India and Pakistan supposedly to keep the Hindus in India and place the Muslims in Pakistan is known as the Partition.

The Tabla

The tabla is a percussion instrument played in the music lesson by Motu Chand.

Sarangi

A difficult musical instrument to play, the sarangi is one of the instruments used as an accompaniment for Saeeda Bai's singing.

Rajakumar

Rajakumar is the son of an Indian Raja.

Tonga-Wallah

A Tonga-Wallah is the horse drawn carriage used by Maan and the Rajkumar as transportation around the city.

Zamindar

The title used for people with various kinds of land holdings is Zamindar.



Purva Pradesh

Purva Pradesh is the fictional province with the capital city of Brahmpur.

Praha Shoe Company

Praha Shoe Company is the factory where Haresh Khanna proves himself to be management material.

Lathi

A lathi is a cane stick used in Indian martial arts and by the police.



Themes

The Suitable Boy

The Suitable Boy is the central theme of the novel by that name. The idea comes from the Indian tradition of arranging marriages for eligible young girls with several points that comprise the ideal match. First, the boy must be of the same religion as the girl. This becomes the main hindrance between Lata, a Hindu, and Kabir, a Muslim. The only way they could have married was to elope and marry without their parents' permission. Another consideration is the caste or social standing of the boy and his family. Much of that is based on appearances. Mrs. Rupa Mehra is able to arrange a marriage for her daughter Savita into the Kapoor family without a large dowry by the fact that Pran Kapoor is dark complexioned. His skin coloring precluded his marriage to a girl from a wealthier family. The ability to support a wife is another consideration. Haresh gets the approval of Mrs. Rupa Mehra because of his industriousness and ability to make a good living. Mrs. Rupa rejects Amit Chatterji because he is a writer, a profession for which she has little appreciation.

The theme of The Suitable Boy also brings up the conflict between an arranged marriage and a marriage precipitated on romantic love. Because of modern films and youthful ideas, the idea of being in love with the person a girl marries becomes more and more popular at the time of the novel. Lata raises the question at the wedding of her sister to Pran Kapoor and concludes that it is good for Savita but possibly not good for her. Mrs. Rupa takes the matter seriously and solicits help from relatives and close friends to keep an eye out for The Suitable Boy for Lata. To keep peace, Lata appears to go along with whatever her mother is doing, but she secretly questions whether she will follow her heart and marry Kabir with or without her mother's blessing. Interestingly, Lata eventually selects Haresh Khanna to be her husband, even though she does not love him. She comes to her conclusion, to the horror of her friend Malati, by recognizing religion would eventually create serious problems for her and Kabir and by the feeling that the love of literature would not be enough to sustain a marriage between her and Amit. Lata's reasoning includes the ideas that, eventually she will come to love Haresh, he will be able to support her comfortably, and she will enjoy stability in her married life. In antithesis to The Suitable Boy theme is Malati, Lata's friend, who is a free spirit and given to have relationships with whatever boy turns her fancy. In that regard, the theme of The Suitable Boy stands as a hallmark of traditional Indian customs and culture.

Religious Intolerance

The theme of Religious Intolerance runs heavily throughout the novel. Religious difference prevents Lata and Kabir from fulfilling their hearts' desires for each other. The Raja of Marh becomes the arch symbol of religious militancy with his erecting the Temple of Shiva adjacent to a mosque. The phallic symbol of Shiva he intends to use as the centerpiece of the temple is an act of spite designed to insult Muslims. On both



sides, riots and attacks occur in the name of religion. Saeeda Bai, the courtesan, is disdained by the Hindu society more for her religion as a Muslim than for her lifestyle. When the holy days of both religions happen to coincide, even death results when neither side is willing to give way to the other. The Religious Intolerance theme occurs when Maan travels to visit the family of Rasheed. He is only begrudgingly accepted by most of Rasheed's family after he demonstrates not so much his tolerance of their customs as his indifference to religion in general. That truce, however, runs thin after Maan is accused of attempted murder of the young Muslim man, Firoz Khan. The Partition of 1954 is the pinnacle of the theme of Religious Intolerance. It partitioned off parts of India to become Pakistan where Muslims were expected to go, leaving mainland India to the Hindus. Although a good many Muslim did go, the Partition never really worked because of ties many people had to their ancestral lands. Majority in location plays a big part in the theme of Religious Intolerance in the novel. In the city of Brahmpur, where neighborhoods are a majority of one religion or the other, there is more prejudice and conflict than in the more rural predominantly Muslim areas such as in Rasheed's village. Rasheed, perhaps the most fanatical Muslim in the novel, replies when his wife asks about the noise of automobile horns honking outside, "Nothing. Nothing. They're just Hindus." The theme is notably carried out in the scene after the riot when Hindu ruffians have cornered Firoz in their territory. Maan manages to get him out, but not without suffering the verbal abuse of the Muslim boys.

Women's Roles in Post-Partition India

Arranged marriages are not the only cultural customs Seth details in *A Suitable Boy*. There is an emerging shift in the role of women in the culture. On the one hand, there are the traditionalists like Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, Savita Kapoor, and Mrs. Chatterji who represent the old ways of social custom. Lata represents the middle ground. She is traditional in her respect for her mother and her ultimate choice of marrying the man who her mother approves. Nevertheless, she is at the stage of questioning traditional practices and taking a few steps on her own as a modern young woman. Other women in the novel represent the post-Partition modern Indian woman. Malati has broken with tradition by going about on her own and accepting the favors of young men she finds appealing. Meenakshi is the truly liberated woman who indulges in promiscuous affairs that have nothing to do with her feelings for and relationship to her husband, Arun Mehra. She dresses flamboyantly, goes out at will, and thumbs her nose at gossips who criticize her behavior. Kakoli Chatterji is a young woman flexing her independence by consorting with a young German boy, Hans. She holds her own with the eccentric Chatterji family in their pseudo-intellectual rhyming games. Begum Abida Khan is perhaps the most startling of the liberated women in the novel in that she is a Muslim woman, living alone, and active in politics. Like Meenakshi, she is unaffected by the gossip of the more traditional people who surround her. This recurring theme runs throughout the novel about women breaking free of the cultural limitations traditionally placed on them. Interestingly, however, the Muslim courtesan, Saeeda Bai falls more into the category of a traditionalist than in the liberated woman category. Her vocation as a courtesan is often regarded as the oldest profession in the world. Entertainers,



likewise, are not culturally held in high social esteem. However, Saeeda Bai follows most of the cultural rules and habits living an otherwise pious life of religious devotion.

Political Machinations

Although the theme of politics in the novel is secondary to the Suitable Boy theme, it nevertheless lends credence to the social upheaval of post-Independence India. Just as women are becoming more assertive (i.e., Meenakshi, Begum Khan, Malati), there is the movement to elevate the status of the untouchable lower caste. Central to that theme is the controversy over the Zamindari Bill which would take portions of land away from wealthy land holders and give it to the farmers who have been feudal slaves to work the land. Even, however, with the final passage of the bill and its being upheld by the courts, the struggle between the haves and have nots continues. The implication is clear that the wealthy have the resources to maintain the status quo. It is not his hereditary wealth that brings about the downfall of the Raja of Marh, but rather it is his war against all Muslims that finally brings him to his knees. Eventually politics divides families as in the case of Rasheed who is banished and eventually commits suicide because of his inability to help the helpless. The theme is at its strongest in the opposition between Begum Abida Khan and L. N. Agarwal in the legislative House. It becomes tied in with religion in the campaign for a House seat between Mahesh Kapoor and Waris. Avoiding the subject of vote buying, Seth uses the fake handbills implying that Firoz is dead as the dirty trick used by Waris to win the election. In another vein, the subject of politics revolves around Pran's application and interview for the position of head reader in his department at the university.



Style

Point of View

Vikram Seth writes his novel in the omniscient mode. It is as though the reader is looking through windows into the family relationships and the mental and emotional attitudes of the individual characters. Aside from Seth himself, there is no narrator in the book which allows the author to put in excellent descriptions of objects and the landscape, sometimes in clever phrases such as "wheels [that had] lost all memory of their shock absorbers." This omniscient point of view also allows both author and reader to look into the private lives of the characters without the need for any particular consciousness. For example, the reader learns about Meenakshi's character not from what she is thinking but rather from her actions and words. There is no internalizing of Meenakshi's character, but after discovering her ongoing affair with Billy, the reader hears Meenakshi ask if it is possible to be truly in love with two men at the same time. One of the most effective means of character insight in the novel is through the inclusion of cards and letters. Reading the letters Lata and Haresh write to one another as well as the letters to and from Kabir, a great deal is learned about how the characters actually feel. Conversation is very important in the omniscient point of view. One of the best examples of this in the novel is the slow revelation that Tapan is being sexually harassed at his boarding school. Seth handles this approach very well. There is no sense that a third unnamed character is relating the tale. He allows the reader to feel something like the proverbial fly on the wall, witnessing the progression of the story.

Setting

The setting of the novel is mainly in Purva Pradesh, a fictitious Provence in India. The capital city of the Provence or State, is Brahmpur where the main political action occurs at the State level. Brahmpur is situated on the holy River Ganga and upriver is the attraction called the Barsaat Mahal. The city is home to a major university, very urban shopping areas with movie theaters, parks, and athletic fields for cricket and polo. From Brahmpur, the action of the novel includes the real locations of Calcutta, Delhi, and Banaras. Much of the political campaigning takes place in the Salimpur-cum-Baitar region, an agricultural area populated largely by Muslims. The fictional Barsaat Mahal is based on the famous Taj Mahal in Agra. Its use in the novel represents romance, either budding relationships or melancholy visits over lost love. Two settings—the odoriferous tannery in Brahmpur and the zamindari fields worked by the poor in Salimpur-cum-Baitar—portray the plight of the poor lowest caste people of India. Upscale locations include the mansions of the Nawab Sahib and Mahesh Kapoor as well as the university, the Literary Society, and night spots where only the wealthy can afford to go.



Language and Meaning

The novel, written in English, often seems quaint to readers not familiar with the language as spoken by the people of India. Scattered throughout the novel are vocabulary words that are of Hindi or Muslim origin. These words are sometimes terms that do not translate easily into English such as "zamindari" or they are specific names of Hindu or Muslim holidays or acts of worship. Although some of the language sends readers rushing to unabridged dictionaries, the general meaning is usually clear from the context. Seth seems to enjoy plays on words and uses the Chatterji family as a means of toying with vocabulary. Seth uses some interesting metaphors in the novel (e.g., "...it would undo the threads of her good will with the blind torque of distaste." Part 9.12, page 628). Language also helps to clarify and describe the characters. Although essential to the plot, there are two areas where Seth uses minimal language to hurry over the subjects of homosexuality and suicide. He tends to use inference rather than blunt description in these cases. In spite of the idioms and unusual choices of words, the language of the novel is easy to read.

Structure

The structure of the novel is chronological divided into 19 Parts with enumerated sections within each Part. Generally speaking, the numbered sections within each Part indicate a passage of time, but occasionally they indicate a shift in subject matter. A weakness of the novel in terms of structure is the sheer length of the work. Scenes which could have been abbreviated or left out entirely seem to ramble on and on in unimportant details. As each Part of the novel travels in chronological order, it begins to read like the diary of an omniscient eye which could be boring except for the fact that Seth always manages to include some point of reference that captures the reader's attention. Where the structure of the novel seems to stumble over itself lies in the effort to weave the themes of social change into the political conflicts in the early stages of post-colonialism and post-Partition. Since finding a "suitable boy" for Lata is the main theme of the novel, there are times when it seems that it will never happen. Certain assumptions by Seth also complicate the structure of the work (e.g., an assumption of universal understanding of Hindu and Muslim holidays and tradition).



Quotes

"A book seeks to be near its truest admirer. Just as this helpless moth seeks to be near the candle that infatuates him." Part 2, page 135.

"Meenakshi dropped in first with a question about whether it was possible to love more than one person—'utterly, desperately, and truly.'" Part 7.39, page 516

"He sees things in black and white, which is a great help when you're electioneering." Part 14.17, page 1086

"Seers meant something to [Mrs. Rupa], pounds something vague, and kilograms nothing at all." Part 9.13, page 629

"It was difficult to be someone's guest and prosecutor simultaneously, more particularly if you were hoping to seek their help in the near future." Part 14.21, page 1096

"The road, made of vertically laid bricks and little else, was cratered with holes, and the wheels had lost all memory of their shock absorbers." Part 10.11, page 700

"'I may as well humble myself before a stone,' suggested Pran, 'Or...a potato.'" Part 14.12, page 1068

"One of the by-products of Savita's marriage was a whole new family to worry about." Part 7.26, page 478

"...there are always people willing to believe anything, however implausible, merely in order to be contrary." Part 15.20, page 1179

"It is rare for religious feeling to be entirely transcendent, and Hindus as much as anyone else, perhaps more so, are eager for terrestrial, not merely post-terrestrial blessings." Part 15.20, page 1178

"'Do you want to be immortal? I can imagine nothing worse than to be immortal, nothing worse.'" Part 14.29, page 1117

"[Dipankar] had come to a decision about the next step in his life. This decision was irrevocable unless he changed his mind." Part 16.3, page 1192

"...amid the clink of cutlery and crockery was a mutual interview that might decide whether or not they would own a common set of those items some time in the whimsical future." Part 9.12, page 628

"[Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor believed] her husband was quite wrong-headed in divesting himself of the religious rites and ceremonies that gave meaning to life and donning the drab robes of his new religion of secularism." Part 6.14, page 355



"...while it gave [Mrs. Rupa Mehra] peace—tears rarely came to her eyes while she was reciting the Gita—it answered none of her questions." Part 9.1, page 597

"There is no point in talking about it. Even [a rich family's] normal expectations for the wedding will be too high. We'll have to feed a thousand people. Of these, probably seven hundred will be guests from their side. And we'll have to put them up, and give all the women saris." Part 9.2, page 597

"Kidwai was something of a river-dolphin. He enjoyed swimming in silty water and outwitting the crocodiles around him." Part 14.16, page 1081

"The Mehras were a complicated family and nothing was what it seemed." Part 16.22, page 1249

"They agreed with each other violently and disagreed with each other pleasurably." Part 18.10, page 1390

"...there was something adventurous in losing herself entirely in a world that she did not know with a man whom she trusted and had begun to admire..." Part 18.19, page 1412



Topics for Discussion

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of arranged marriages, comparing that to the phenomenon of internet match-making in the modern world.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of how political activity is the same across cultures and nationalities.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of the universal effects of literature on any given culture.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of religious fanaticism and its effect on the general population.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of depression resulting in suicide (i.e., Rasheed in the novel).

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of the historic suppression of women from ancient to modern times.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of public transportation in India during the time of the novel, *A Suitable Boy*.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of the Naga Sadhus referred to in the novel.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of the effects of sexual harassment such as Tapan's problem at his boarding school.

Organize your thoughts for a classroom discussion on the topic of the importance placed on family in the Indian culture.