



A PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH OF THE PORTRAYAL OF THE CHARACTER RUPA MEHRA IN AN ADAPTATION OF A SUITABLE BOY (NETFLIX SERIES) BASED ON THE NOVEL BY VIKRAM SETH

SEHNAZ KHUSHROW IRANI

Research Scholar
Dept. of English and Languages
Sandip University, Nashik
(MS) INDIA

DR. RANI SARODE

Associate Professor,
Dept. of English and Languages
Sandip University, Nashik
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This Research Paper delves into the psychoanalytic aspects of the Netflix series adaptation of Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy". The study aims to uncover the underlying psychological motivations, conflicts and dynamics of the character Rupa Mehra played by Mahira Kakkar in the adaptation. We will dive into her character and its interactions with the others in the story using the many theories and themes as put forward by the psychoanalytic school of thought. While many often attribute this to Freud's theories we will be focusing on a more varied approach specifically linked to female study as the character is portrayed as an era appropriate widowed mother in 1950's post partition India. Over all the portrayal is quite unique and true to class matching itself with most findings of the mentality matching with a mother figure of those times. A true testament to her art, Mahira Kakkar has provided a full immersion into the role and its various dogmas giving the viewer an uncensored taste of Rupa Mehra.

Keywords: *Psychoanalytical, Psychoanalysis, Freud, Carl Jung, Female, Ethics, Portrayal, Mother, Character*



INTRODUCTION

In Post-partition India, a young student of a widowed mother, Rupa Mehra resists an arranged marriage and a politician's son has a transgressive affair. "A Suitable Boy" 2020 Limited Series on Netflix is based on Vikram Seth's novel of the same name. The literary work, situated in the early 1950's, delves into the experiences of its varied cast of individuals within the context of a society undergoing transformation. It illuminates the societal expectations, constraints and difficulties imposed by conventional gender roles. The series exhibits the pervasive traditional gender norms that were strongly ingrained in Indian Society during the specified period. Rupa Mehra, can be seen as attempting to release her daughter, Lata from the shackles of challenges that she faced herself as not only a wife and a widow but also as a woman going through the hardships of life alone with children struggling to find suitors for her children who are everything to her. She wants her children to marry into families who are cultured and have a good socio-economic background as her late husband was the Chairman of the Railway Board and commanded respect in the society.

Throughout this journey of analysis, the Researcher will be using the following theories and themes of the Psychoanalytical School of Thought.

From Erik Erikson's Theory of the stages of Psychosocial Development we will be discussing the stages of Generativity vs Stagnation and Integrity vs Despair. Due to the availability or lack thereof, the Researcher cannot make inferences of the earlier stages which transpire at different times of the lifecycle. Since the Researcher is observing the middle and later adulthood of the character, the Researcher will restrict to the two stages that occur during these durations.

From Carl Jung's proposed arche types we will be discussing the following roles:

1. **The Persona:** This is the outward face we present to the world, concealing our real self. It's the mask worn in public.
2. **The Shadow:** The shadow represents the unconscious part of our personality, which the conscious ego does not identify in itself. It often contains repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts, and shortcomings.
3. **The Anima/Animus:** The anima represents the feminine aspects of a male psyche, and the animus represents the masculine aspects of a female psyche. These archetypes are the source of our creativity and inspiration.
4. **The Self:** The self is the archetype that represents the unification of the unconsciousness and consciousness of an individual. The creation of the self occurs



through a process known as individuation, in which the various aspects of personality are integrated.

5. **The Hero:** The hero is often portrayed as a character who faces trials and tribulations but ultimately triumphs. The hero archetype represents the quest for overcoming obstacles and achieving certain goals.
6. **The Mother:** This archetype symbolizes nurturing, warmth, and protection. It can also have negative aspects, such as the overbearing or controlling mother.

There is sufficient data in the form of behaviors and traits for us to discuss the above-mentioned traits and make conclusive assessments of her fulfillment or failure of the roles and their responsibilities.

Karen Thorney's Theory of Feminine Psychology, which challenges Freud's views on female psychology, could be applied to understand the mother character's sense of identity, self-worth, and struggles within a patriarchal society, especially relevant in a period piece, and Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique critique of the idealized image of womanhood and motherhood in the 1950s and 1960s can be relevant. It can be used to analyze the mother character's struggle with societal expectations, personal fulfillment, and identity. As a female and as a mother the character is ideally suited for analysis in accordance to these theories.

Knowing the association of Freud with this school of thought the most expected Oedipus/Electra theories are unfortunately invalidated as there is little to no observation of any traits of jealousy towards the same sex parent and affinity towards the opposite as neither are portrayed to allow for any observations or interpretations.

Also once considered for analysis, The Object Relations Theory was also invalidated due to non-exhibition of the required time period i.e. Rupa's own childhood in the Netflix series which is the crux of the analysis for said theory.

Essentially apart from the theories mentioned henceforth the rest can be considered as eliminated from discussion due to either lack of or absence of observable material in the portrayal of Rupa Mehra in this adaptation.

Vikram Seth's 1500-page-plus book, A Suitable Boy, written in 1993 has been adapted into a 6-part series for BBC television drama miniseries directed by Mira Nair and adapted by Andrew Davies, the series is set in 1950's India. It is the first BBC period -drama series to have a non-white cast. Set in the backdrop of post-independent India, A Suitable Boy follows four linked families during eighteen months, in North India, and centre's on Mrs. Rupa Mehra (Mahira Kakkar) who is in search of a suitable husband for her youngest daughter, Lata (Tanya Maniktala). Meanwhile, Lata who is a 19-year-old university student, refuses to be



influenced by her domineering mother or opiated brother, Arun Mehra (Vivek Gomber), is torn between her duty as a daughter and the idea of romance with her suitors.

To convert a novel into a series without losing out its originality was a challenge for Mira Nair. To give justice to the series as written in the novel, politics was shown evidently. In fact, Lata was the new India. As she found her way to select the best suitor for herself, India also found its way in its first democratic election. So, the series beautifully depicts the interwoven quality of the political and personal aspects. None is bereft of the other which makes it interesting, intriguing and involving for the viewers. Secondly, to give authenticity to the characters, Urdu, Hindustani, Awadhi is spoken by the characters making it real. Maan is clear that he doesn't really know Urdu and is comfortable with Hindustani. But Saeeda Begum, is obviously someone who's steeped in the refinements of Urdu and Ghazals. The third thing, that stands out in the series which is unavailable for a reader reading the novel is the apt utilization of background music. Anoushka Shankar's sitar is the embodiment of young Lata. The music is not just music, it comments on the drama in her heart, in her suitor's heart and on the action in general.

The first episode starts with the marriage of Savita Mehra (Rasika Duggal) to Pran Kapoor (Gagan Dev Riar). The Mehra's consist of four siblings. Rupa keeps telling Lata that she is next in line for marriage. Lata is a Literature student at Brahmipur University. She is free-spirited and wants to make her own path in life. She meets Kabir Durrani (Danesh Razvi), a History student at the University. After a few meetings, she decides to meet him secretly as he is a Muslim and Rupa would object it outright. In a parallel setting, the Kapoor family is shown. Mahesh Kapoor (Ram Kapoor) is a Revenue Minister in the Purva Pradesh Government. Kapoor lives with his wife (Geeta Agarwal Sharma) and youngest son, Maan (Ishaan Khatter). Rupa insists on accompanying Lata to Kapoor's house for Holi as there is a recital by Saeeda Begum in the evening and she wants to keep an eye on Lata lest she gets influenced by the desires of others.

In Episode 2, Lata and Kabir continue to see each other in secret. Rupa finds about Lata and Kabir and is devastated when Mrs. Kapoor and her friends tell her about it over tea. She decides that the family will go to Calcutta. Meenakshi takes the Mehra's to a party where Lata meets Meenakshi's brother Amit (Mikhail Sen), a highly appreciated and famous poet. Rupa doesn't like Amit as he doesn't practice law and is content being a poet. Rupa feels that Amit should practice law like his father and grandfather who retired as famous and respectable lawyers of Calcutta.

In Episode 3, Amit shows Lata around the city and they become friends. Rupa visits a friend, Aruna in Lucknow to find "a suitable boy". Rupa is introduced to Haresh Khanna (Namit Das) in Lucknow and she asks Lata to visit her. They meet Haresh and visit the shoe factory



where he works. Rupa is impressed by Haresh's honesty, work ethics and integrity. She allows Haresh to write to Lata after they leave Lucknow.

In Episode 4, Haresh resigns when his boss doesn't support him but finds a job with a European Company. When Savita is having labour pains, Rupa tells her that the birth of the first child always takes a long time and so it's painful but once the baby is born a mother forgets all the pains she has gone through during childbirth. Savita gives birth to a baby girl and everyone including Rupa is happy. She's knitting woollen garments for the baby since the time she hears of Savita's pregnancy. Lata joins the student drama society production of Twelfth Night, meeting Kabir and performs the drama in front of an audience which includes Rupa. Rupa becomes extremely uncomfortable and disturbed when she sees Kabir and Lata together. Lata isn't sure a relationship with Kabir would work as tension between the two communities is at its peak. Rupa is keen on Lata selecting Haresh as her life partner and doesn't approve of Amit as well as Kabir.

In Episode 5, Rupa and Lata are in Calcutta. Haresh invites everyone to a Christmas meal. He takes immense care of everyone's personal preferences and spend almost a month's salary on the entire family's lunch. Rupa is touched by his quality of taking care of the intricate details right from presentation, ambience and preferences. On New Year's Day, Haresh goes to meet Lata but she upsets him. Rupa is quite disturbed that Haresh left the house without meeting her as he lovingly called her "Ma" and wouldn't do anything to displease her. Maan attacks Firoz and seriously wounds him in a fit of rage and intoxication.

In Episode 6, Maan runs away to Benaras and surrenders to the police there. Lata finds Kabir oppressive and Amit frivolous. Firoz says that it was an accident and Maan is honorably acquitted from an attempt to murder Firoz. Rupa is delighted to know that Lata has chosen Haresh as her life partner. At the wedding she tells her younger son, Varun that even he has to marry the person of her choice.

Coming to the psychoanalytical analysis of the character of Rupa Mehra played by Mahira Kakkar the interpretations are as under:

As per Erik Erikson's Stage of Psychosocial Development, the middle adulthood stage of Generativity Vs Stagnation is seen prominently in Rupa's character as a widow in 1950's, where she wishes to create successful and fulfilling relationships through marriage for her children which will outlive her and give her a deep sense of satisfaction of her duty as a parent. Integrity Vs Despair is seen in Rupa when she succeeds in finding a suitable boy for her daughter Lata and sees it as a major responsibility of hers as fulfilled successfully.

According to Carl Jung's Archetypes, The Persona is reflected when Rupa tries to cope up with the responsibilities of a widow in finding, "A Suitable Boy" for her daughters in a very respectable manner. Her elder son, Arun passes a comment at Savita's wedding that had their



father (who was a Chairman of the Railway Board) been alive, he would have better choices for his sisters. The Shadow in Rupa is visible in her desire to get her children married in families of good culture and repute. She's uncomfortable and disapproves of Lata's liking for Kabir Durrani as he is a Muslim. The Animus in Rupa is reflected when she takes up the responsibility of finding a suitable match for her children in 1950's as a widow and doesn't hesitate to share her views to her children. She takes pride in the fact that she's capable of choosing the best life partner for her children. The Self is reflected in Rupa when she's insistent on being heard and prefers to voice her opinions quite openly without any apprehension. Rupa becomes The Hero when her daughter Lata chooses the boy, she finds most suitable for her. She gains triumph over all when Lata acknowledges that she's chosen Haresh without any external influence or pressure. Rupa embodies The Mother as she leaves no stone unturned in fulfilling her responsibilities as a single parent in a dignified and respectful manner. Rupa nurtures her daughters, talks to them both as a parent as well as a friend, reprimands them when she's displeased due to their actions and loves them unconditionally.

As per Karen Horney's Theory of Feminine Psychology, Rupa's struggle to find a suitable boy for her daughter, Lata as a widow in the post partition period is to keep up with the idealized version of her image and to keep up with the insecurity of an supportive father who has a wife younger to Rupa and no husband as he passed away due to a heart attack eight years ago.

As per the Attachment Theory, Rupa has a beautiful relationship with her daughters. She commands respect from them due to her beliefs, ideologies and sacrifices she's made. She dislikes the idea of Lata marrying a Muslim and Lata being aware of it categorically tells Kabir that a Hindu Muslim alliance isn't possible. Rupa is able to give the right upbringing to her children and takes credit and pride in the way each one has bloomed and prospered.

As per Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique, Rupa proves her identity as a widowed mother who is single handedly capable of handling life's challenges and coming to terms in life and accept it as it is. She has fixated opinions and makes sure that her personal desires and demands regarding the life of her children are fulfilled by them.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion it can be stated that this portrayal of Rupa in this adaptation by Netflix is considered as a healthy portrayal of a thriving and surviving individual in accordance with the theories of the psychoanalytical school of thought by this research. Through all the challenges Rupa has been shown to have a relatively healthy emotional and physical response



and process of coping. During her moments of achievements, and upliftment also Rupa has shown healthy and normal emotional and physical celebration. Overall, this is a perceived sign of strength and resilience in a widow of 1950's post partition Independence Era.

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