

5-19-2013

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## Recommended Citation

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“Learn My Language”: Exploring Translation as a Critique of National Identity in Vikram Seth’s

*A Suitable Boy*

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April 19, 2013

Dickinson College English Department

Senior Thesis

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper could not have been written without Professor Ball and the rest of my 403/404 group. Helen Hopper, Jessy Cooper, Kate Good, Emily David, Emily Arndt, Hannah Levin, Audrey Scott, Taylor Kobran, and Chloe Golod—it was a pleasure working with you all over the course of this year. Professor Ball, thank you for all of your help and guidance throughout this process. Perhaps even more importantly, thank you for your sense of humor—I’ll forgive you one day for suggesting that I read *A Suitable Boy*.

For my research, I would like to thank Professor Juliette Singh (University of Richmond) for her wonderful and informative suggestions as well as Madame Délaphine Rumeau (L’université de Toulouse 2, Le Mirail) for inspiring my interest in national identity and language. For the revision process, I would like to thank Sarah Ganong for working through my draft and asking me the hard questions. Thank you also to Aromi Lee, the best friend a girl could have, for volunteering (yes, you read that correctly) to read my drafts. Also a bouquet of roses for AJ Wildey, Ellen Aldin, and all of my fellow tutors in the Writing Center—thank you for your words of encouragement and title brainstorming sessions.

Finally, I would like to thank the English Department as a whole for their support, but specifically Professor Bowen, Professor Phillips, and Professor Saha for their insight into the writing process. Thank you to my friends and family for listening to me babble about language these past six months (especially Missy Reif, Nathalie Rosenthal, Jamie Klein, and Shawn Gessay for their patience and kindness in letting me turn our living room into a library).

Being what it is, we will not find anything simple in language, no matter how we approach it.  
-Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (168-9)

Writing, which seems to have to contain language, is precisely that which alters it.  
-Jean-Jacques Rousseau, qtd. in *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale* (Moura 83)

On the morning of August 14, 1947, Pakistan did not exist; by midnight of that same day, there was an invisible line dividing the subcontinent into two new countries. The consequences of this separation for the Hindu and Muslim populations of India cannot be understated. According to Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal in *Modern South Asia*, “the dawn of independence came littered with the severed limbs and blood-drenched bodies of innocent men, women and children” as members of both groups desperately tried to find their place between the new borders of India and Pakistan (157, 164). The fact that Partition occurred at the precise moment in which India officially achieved its independence from the British illustrates the fundamental, indelible link between the concepts of unification and separation as methods used to create both a nation and a state.<sup>1</sup> In fact, these twin concepts of unification and separation persist in Indian history—specifically, newly “Indian” politicians, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru included, began an “active and retrospective reconstruction of the nationalist past” immediately after the end of the British Raj (161). This reconstruction sought to resolve the debate among diverse groups in India—divided by class, caste, religion, and language—over what being “Indian” meant by proposing a single definition of national identity that only described the upper class Hindu community of North India. The fact that this rewriting of India’s history occurs after 1947 is not coincidental. As Kathryn Manzo explains in *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation*, “Nationalist discourse invents nations in moments of anxiety attendant upon shifting global power relations” (27). The attempt to create a cohesive, singular Indian identity after the simultaneous unification and rupture of Independence and Partition exemplifies Manzo’s

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the terms “nation” and “state” are not synonyms. Based on the distinction made by Bose and Jalal, “nation” will refer to a sense of group identity based on acknowledged and shared characteristics, while “state” will refer to the country’s government (Bose and Jalal 138; Anderson 6). Therefore, the communities of Hindus and Muslims can be considered nations within the Indian state. Though Bose and Jalal signal that this terminology is problematic because historians frequently conflate nation and state, the tension between these two terms and the danger of conflating them exemplifies why the construction of national identity requires examination in this paper.

observation.<sup>2</sup> Yet this nationalist reflex never achieves its goal—as I will argue in this paper, the nation can ignore religious, cultural, and political differences in the construction of an ideal national narrative, but those differences cannot be erased completely.

Language represents one such ambiguous space in which this national identity tries and fails to define itself as singular and cohesive. In particular, language, especially written language, is at the heart of a post-1947 nationalist desire to create a falsely homogenized Indian identity that depends on the erasure of the cultural differences between the diverse linguistic and religious communities scattered in the subcontinent. To illustrate the role of language in the creation and subversion of national identity, I will be analyzing Vikram Seth's novel, *A Suitable Boy*. Written in 1993, Seth's novel describes the repercussions of creating communities on both a local and national scale, especially in terms of the social hierarchy built according to linguistic differences. In fact, the novel calls attention to the negotiation between Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and English by its characters and the ways in which such shifting linguistic registers mimic the creation of national identity that occurs on the geopolitical scale. Though the novel explores the consequences of Independence and Partition through its depiction of political events, such as the first national Indian elections in 1952, *A Suitable Boy* primarily discusses the impact of nation formation through the personal lives of its characters. The novel recounts the overlapping stories of four Indian families from 1950 to 1952: the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Chatterjis, and the Khans. The Mehras, Kapoors, and Chatterjis are Hindu and related through marriage, while the Muslim Khans have been friends with the Kapoors for generations. Though, as the title suggests,

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<sup>2</sup> Principally, the tensions between the Hindu-dominated Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League during the 1930s and 1940s (worsened in the fight to end British rule) heralded the fragmentation of Indian national identity in 1947. After Independence, the Indian National Congress (also known as the Congress party) controlled the newly independent Indian government. It was dominated by Hindu politicians and it was the party of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India (Bose and Jalal 95). The All-India Muslim League, formed under the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, was a political party formed during the same time period to protect the interests of Indian Muslims before Partition (95). These two groups are particularly important because their rivalry led to the creation of diverse definitions of what it meant to be Indian leading up to Independence (127).

one of the principal plotlines of the novel focuses on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's search for a "suitable boy" to marry her daughter Lata, Seth writes on a much larger scale that comprises the relationships and fates of the distant relatives, friends, acquaintances, enemies, and lovers of the four families as well as those of his central characters.

Narrowing the large scope of this text to a more workable size, the novel's portrayal of the romantic relationships between characters of different religions reveals how *A Suitable Boy* ultimately critiques the linguistic singularity enforced by the creation of Indian national identity. The novel particularly reinforces that the separation of a nation's inhabitants based on region, culture, and language is always already political through the romantic relationships of Maan Kapoor and Lata Mehra. To support this, Etienne Balibar explains in "Paradoxes of Universality," that the question of integrating something (or someone) ostensibly foreign into what is familiar represents the central paradox of nationalism as a whole. He writes, "Indeed, nationalism aspires to uniformity and rationality; it is expansive. And yet it cultivates the symbols, the fetishes of an autochthonous national character, which must be preserved against dissipation" (283). The stakes of the search for a suitable boy or girl are quite high: the mate she and Maan choose would make someone who is ostensibly an "outsider" a part of their families. To put this into perspective, the threat of this integration of an outsider into a more intimate community represents what occurs at the national level. For the purpose of this paper, I will analyze the love affair between Maan Kapoor and Saeeda Bai as well as the courtships between Lata Mehra and two of her three suitors, Kabir Durrani and Haresh Khanna, in order to explore how the political formation of national identity permeates the intimate personal relationships of these characters.

Specifically, the text critiques national identity formation by highlighting the ways Maan and Lata refuse to participate in the process of translation when they receive letters from their lovers. This quality of *A Suitable Boy* emphasizes the role of writing in the articulation of cultural difference through its depiction of the characters' struggles to communicate in either the same language or to translate between two different ones. The search for a suitable romantic partner that takes place through written communication is as innately political as language itself, for Maan and Lata refuse to expend the effort necessary to translate what their love interests write. In the context of the novel, the failure to translate written language represents the failure to contend with cultural differences. Through the use of shared language as shorthand for shared identity, the need for translation even between characters that use the same language illustrates how the nation mobilizes language to separate insiders from outsiders in the novel. In the first section of this paper, I will argue that the novel's invocation of Indian history foreshadows the ways in which *A Suitable Boy* both depicts and critiques the parallels between language and the attempted obliteration of cultural, linguistic, and religious difference for the sake of an impossibly cohesive national identity during this time period. The second section will close read, through the motif of translation, how the romantic correspondence between these couples ultimately critiques the homogenization of national identity. The final section will explore how the novel itself grapples with the political implications of writing just as much as its characters. Its translation from English into Hindi and Bengali portrays the same tension between the constructed homogeneity and the actual heterogeneity of Indian society that the couples' correspondence articulates. Taken together, these three sections expose the actual heterogeneity of Indian society in the early 1950s beneath the veneer of a cohesive, singular Indian identity.

***“I see nothing, nothing, nothing at all in common between you two”<sup>3</sup>***

In order to explore the nature of this critique, it is necessary to first examine how language functions as a both model for and a catalyst in the creation and maintenance of national boundaries and identity, thereby furthering the nationalist project. Inherently, the ability to speak, write, and read the same language creates in a tangible way the sense of togetherness that national identity seeks to inspire. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*, “There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests...For it shows that from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community” (145). Unlike blood, which can be difficult to trace, and land, which can be divided and annexed with the stroke of a mapmaker’s pen, language prescribes and circumscribes the limits of a particular community because the act of using a language is immediately visible. To explain these characteristics of language, Bill Ashcroft writes in “Constitutive Gramaphony” that “the meaning and nature of perceived reality are not determined within the minds of the users, nor even within the language itself, but within the use, within the multiplicity of relationships which operate in the system...Languages exist, therefore, neither before the fact nor after the fact but *in the fact*” (301-2). Building off of the semiotic principle that language is both arbitrary and mutually agreed upon, Ashcroft emphasizes that language is both constantly in flux and dependent on those who use it as individuals and as members of a larger group. The contemporaneous nature of language that Anderson suggests stems from this fundamental fluidity of usage, and putting Ashcroft and Anderson in dialogue with one another creates a more nuanced understanding of the function of language in nation building. Considered together, these critics argue that language forms nations in the present tense—the act of creation occurs contemporaneously, in the fact. For example, national

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<sup>3</sup> Each section division is a quote from *A Suitable Boy*.

boundaries are as arbitrary and as mutually agreed upon as language itself—the very act of Partition illustrates this.<sup>4</sup> In other words, language imparts this arbitrariness onto the nation it helps create, for the nation is anything but a natural phenomenon. Anderson’s formulation of this concept, that the “nation” is above all “an imagined political community” (6), relies predominately on the ability of those who comprise it to consider themselves connected to the group as a whole. Language therefore facilitates that identification of the individual to the collective.

In addition, Ashcroft also suggests in his placement of language “in the fact” that even within one language there are considerable variations of meaning—there is no one pure form of a language where meaning is inviolate. Thus, because there is no single way in which language can be used, the national identities that stem from these possible languages are inherently plural. In the novel, when Lata’s best friend Malati tells her that Kabir is a Muslim, the discussion of names that ensues indicates the degree to which the distinction between Hindus and Muslims is largely constructed. First, the name “Kabir” itself is ambiguous—according to the text, Malati advises Lata to “always find out the last name of anyone with an ambiguous first name” in order to prevent this kind of romantic involvement with a Muslim in the future (Seth 155). Yet even Kabir’s last name is not, for Lata, an immediate indicator of his religious affiliation—when Malati tells her that his last name is “Durrani,” Lata asks herself, “So what?...What does that make him? Is he a Sindhi or something?” (155). “Durrani,” in this case, is an empty signifier that emphasizes plural possibilities rather than singular, definite meaning. The ambiguity of Kabir’s full name illustrates that the degree to which an indicator of identity as seemingly

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<sup>4</sup> Technically, the boundaries of Pakistan were not arbitrary, in the sense that they were purposefully drawn by Congress party member C.R. Rajagopalachari to encompass the large Muslim populations within the districts of the Western Punjab and East Bengal (Bose and Jalal 147). However, these boundaries nevertheless exemplify the arbitrary construction of the nation because this particular solution to the question of what the country of Pakistan would look like was one of many. For further reading on this topic, see Chapter 16 of *Modern South Asia*.

straightforward as a surname can confuse the constructed and arbitrary boundaries between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

Yet these boundaries, though fluid, are nonetheless meaningful. However, Anderson does not address the importance of boundaries within a single imagined community. India in particular, in terms of both its history and the novel's depiction of it, illustrates the failure of an imagined community to encompass each possible group and regional identity within the country as a whole. Interestingly, the very project the imagined community serves—the construction of the nation—precipitates its failure. Though language provides the model for the construction of the nation, the nation uses it paradoxically as a tool to carve out the borders and the subdivisions within the imagined community itself. The meaningfulness of the arbitrary nature of language stems from its relationship to national identity. The multiple possible uses of a language that Ashcroft describes not only construct a nation based on similarity but also separate that nation, and all who belong to it, based on cultural, linguistic, and religious difference. Though Anderson argues that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6), it is naïve to suppose that the distinction between falsity and genuineness—or communities who have a right to exist or not—does not influence the formation of nations and national identity. As mentioned earlier, the historical fact of Partition illustrates the failure of Independence to transcend the differences between the Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent. In fact, the partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan stems in large part from the regional and linguistic differences of the Hindu and Muslim communities.

Regardless of the style in which they are imagined, not all communities carry the same clout in the construction of the national (and purposefully singular) identity. Here, the setting of

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<sup>5</sup> I will be comparing Hindus and Muslims because they are the primary groups described in the novel. Though other groups (such as tribals and Sikhs) are implicated in the issues raised by this argument, due to the diversity India's population it would be impossible to address them all within the scope of this paper.

*A Suitable Boy* illustrates the disproportionate political influence of the Hindu and Muslim communities. Historically, these differences stem from the political influence of the British during the colonial period as well as the idiosyncrasies of the Hindu and Muslim populations of the subcontinent. Though Hindus and Muslims during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shared an anti-colonial perspective, the British decision to use religion to politically define the two groups indelibly and purposefully pitted them against one another. Specifically, the colonial state labeled the Hindu population as the “majority” community in India and the Muslim population as the “minority” one purely based on a census of these respective populations. This creation of political categories based on religion made it easier for the Hindu definition of Indianness—which relied on Hindu “religious symbolisms and communitarian interests”—to dominate the “emerging discourse on the Indian nation” (Bose and Jalal 100). Yet this colonial separation of two religious groups into political categories did not create tension between Hindus and Muslims *ex nihilo*. Rather, this example of British “divide and rule” only aggravated cultural and regional differences extant well before the official appellation of “majority” and “minority” communities (92). In fact, an attachment to regional interests marks the history of the subcontinent, which made the creation of a pan-Indian identity capable of including every strain of identity impossible.

Even when the Muslim population in India tried to form a more focused and cohesive community before Partition under Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the future leader of Pakistan, religion was the only factor uniting them. As a political ideology, religion could not fully unite Indian Muslims because Muslims in different regions were more concerned with protecting their own

local interests instead of unifying as a monolithic bloc.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, both options that required the cohesion of an imagined community failed. Within the Indian Muslim population, this failure to overcome regional differences largely led to the partition of the subcontinent and the centralization of power in India in the hands of upper-class Hindus from North India (159). Additionally, that the Indian government (led by a Hindu majority) allowed Partition to happen illustrates the failure of the imagined community of “India” to encompass the cultural differences of Indian Muslims. To relate this back to the novel, Lata and Maan, as upper class Hindus, are in a position of power in their relationships, which stems from their membership in the politically, socially, and culturally dominant Hindu community. As members of this community, they have the ability to decide whether or not to read and respond to the letters they receive from their lovers, which represents the uneven distribution of influence on a personal scale.

The presence of difference and the impossibility of assimilating the entirety of the Muslim population into the nascent Indian state describe the inflexibility of Anderson’s concept of imagined communities. Based on this essential inflexibility, the imagined community of India, dominated by a Hindu government, contended with the presence of difference after 1947 by simply forgetting that it ever existed. The formation of a national identity depends more on forgetting than creating, as the aforementioned brief history of Hindu-Muslim relations attests. Not all possible identity groups can be legitimate, which means that cannot all be assimilated into the overarching nationalist narrative. As French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan writes, “The essence of a nation is that all of the individuals have many things in common, and also that many things have been well forgotten by everyone” (Anderson 6).<sup>7</sup> Thus, in order to

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<sup>6</sup> Bose and Jalal expand upon this point, writing that Indian nationalist thought “was derived from many different sources—not just the rationalism of post-enlightenment Europe, but also the rational patriotisms laced with regional affinities and religious sensibilities that were a major feature of pre-colonial India” (86-7).

<sup>7</sup> All translations from French, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

resolve the tension between the arbitrarily decided legitimate and illegitimate communities within the nation, the latter must be erased.<sup>8</sup> In this way, “forgetting” actively participates in the construction of national identity by denying certain groups a place within the nationalist narrative.

A close reading of the setting of *A Suitable Boy* illustrates the novel’s awareness of the active construction of national identity through language, especially with regard to the friction between legitimate and illegitimate communities. In fact, location and language function in a similar fashion in the novel: just as Seth’s geographic choices can be considered battlegrounds for the construction of an authentically “Indian” identity in a postcolonial country, so too does language occupy “fundamental sites of struggle” in the same act of creation (Ashcroft et al. “Introduction: Language” 283). To expand Anderson’s earlier point, the contemporaneous nature of communities created through language in this case stems from the fact that language in India is inherently tied to specific regions or areas of land. In the novel, language describes their characters and their place in society, creating different pockets of communities based on language use. For example, using Hindi indicates certain characteristics about a character’s background. The fact that Maan speaks Hindi and English illustrates that he is an upper class, well-educated Hindu, whose knowledge of Urdu indicates that he lives in the North close to the border of Pakistan. Yet affiliation to one community over another has repercussions far beyond predominately using a certain language (or certain languages), especially when applied to the post-1947 setting of *A Suitable Boy*.

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “legitimate” refers to those who possess the qualities of the nationalist ideal, such as knowledge of Hindi and upper class status. “Illegitimate” refers to those who do not conform to that same ideal. These terms come from Bose and Jalal’s observation that “a unitary, post-colonial state was in the end prepared to grant legitimacy to only the one strand of singular nationalism” (161)

This setting in particular shows how the system of language, as Anderson and Ashcroft suggest, constructs the nation and its attendant national identity, which in turn imbues both with its own paradoxical characteristics of meaningful arbitrariness. For example, the political history of Northern India, known as the “political heartland” of postcolonial India due to its proximity to Delhi, illustrates this standardization of language and its consequences in the novel (Kudaisya 263). Specifically, the setting of the novel in the North recalls the history of the region as the site of numerous cultural and linguistic debates from 1947 to 1952, ranging from the renaming of the state after Independence to the decision to mandate the use of Hindi script as its official and administrative language (264-70). As Gyanesh Kudaisya explains in “The Postcolonial Naming and Framing of a ‘Region,’” this period specifically saw an important consequence of independence that directly ties into the novel’s presentation of nation formation: the renaming of formerly Anglicized regions and cities. The question of effacing the British-given “United Provinces of Agra and Oudh” in favor of a more authentically “Indian” and “national” descriptor speaks to the importance of the language and process of naming in a postcolonial context.<sup>9</sup> As Kudaisya writes, “Place names can be deeply symbolic and ideological devices to imprint a culturally constructed identity on a given physical space. They provide an intersection between hegemonic and ideological structures and spatial practices of everyday life. They connect physical territory to a history, to a commemorate past” (264-5). Though the need for a new name was unanimously encouraged by the regional government, the actual search for one metonymically echoes the cultural and linguistic tension that marks the relations between Hindus and Muslims in *A Suitable Boy*. The choice of what a name should connote is crucial. For example, Kudaisya writes that “All the proposals for renaming UP were rooted in Hindu mythology or cultural geography of pilgrimage. Not a single proposal came forward which

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<sup>9</sup> Kudaisya frequently abbreviates the name of this region as UP.

acknowledged UP's rich history as the region which had nurtured Indo-Islamic culture, arts, and language" (268). Though the final compromise—Uttar Pradesh—neutrally recalls the geographic location of the region on the subcontinent, the linguistic wrangling between the Hindu and Muslim factions in the state government on behalf of one unsuitable name over another cannot be forgotten.

Even the fact that "Uttar" is the Hindi word for North prefigures the ways in which a Hindi-dominated identity would shape India after 1947. After all, names do not just connect a space to a specific history—as Ashcroft and Anderson illustrate, the language chosen to describe a nation firmly locates itself in the present moment of creation and maintenance. With this in mind, the selection of Hindi as the official, administrative script of independent India confirms the formation of national identity through language as an insistently present-tense endeavor driven by the desire for a singular national identity. As Kudaisya writes, "Following Independence, several leaders [who wanted to make Hindi the language of the region]...did not hesitate in using their position to consolidate a hegemonic position for Hindi in postcolonial India—unfortunately at the expense of Urdu" (271).<sup>10</sup> Though Urdu and Hindi are quite similar linguistically, Hindu members of the governing Indian National Congress were hostile to the "idea of accommodating Urdu as a second language" or even as a regional language (Kudaisya 271).<sup>11</sup> The linguistic homogenizing effort tried, in effect, to construct a cohesive and therefore wholly inaccurate version of events leading up to independence by removing Urdu as an official

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<sup>10</sup> These political leaders considered themselves "Hindi sevaks," or "servants of Hindi" (Kudaisya 270).

<sup>11</sup> According to Skinner, there were few distinctions between Hindi and Urdu "until independence and the calculated 'sanskritization' of India's 'national' language" (31). In fact, "Hindi and Urdu were virtually identical (apart from their different alphabets) and known collectively as Hindustani" until 1947 (31). He clarifies that the only differences stem from the fact that Indian Muslims are predominately the speakers of Urdu and that Hindi uses the Devanagari script of Sanskrit while Urdu uses a script based on Persian and Arabic (32). Furthermore, as Dr. Syed Mahmud, minister from Bihar, stated during the language debates of 1949, for "800 years [Urdu] had been the common language of both Hindus and Muslims... While [Urdu] contained 45,000 Hindi words, the number of words of Persian or Arabic origin was only 13,000... [Even] the very word, Urdu, was drawn from Sanskrit, and not Turkish, as was commonly supposed" (Kudaisya 274).

language, which speaks to the dominant nationalist effort to turn Hinduism into a “symbol of mass mobilization and Indian ‘nationality’” (Bose and Jalal 100). This valorization of the Hindu experience forced other groups of a different religious and cultural background to become “Hinduized” in order to belong to the nascent nation of India (100). In so doing, the Hindi sevak redrew the line between Hindus and Muslims already established by Partition within the country of India itself.

In particular, this tension stems from the debate over which script the new nation would use, which permeates the setting of *A Suitable Boy*.<sup>12</sup> For example, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin write in *The Empire Writes Back* that “One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities” (7). Primarily, these critics attribute this impulse to the colonizing power. However, they do not describe the ways in which the imperial education system had to constantly maintain the distinction between “standard” and “variant” languages. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism*, “There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces” (19-20). For Said, authority itself is as inherently and subtly constructed as the ideas, traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms and transmits. His observation that authority is “virtually indistinguishable” from these modes of knowledge illustrates why

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<sup>12</sup> This question is particularly relevant to this paper, because the languages of Urdu and Hindi (as well as most of the other languages used on a daily basis in India) use different scripts, or systems of writing. This fundamental difference in the way language is written will be discussed later in terms of the way written language foregrounds the articulation of and confrontation with cultural difference. In *A Suitable Boy*, the act of putting pen to paper, which involves choosing one kind of script over another, metonymically represents the larger question of how writing presents and embodies difference.

determining the legitimacy of certain languages is such a fraught enterprise. In short, the seemingly apolitical choice of which language should be used administratively actually represents the careful perpetration of a specific political ideal. For Indian history and the novel, Hindi, rather than English, actively participates in the installation of a “standard” language and the marginalization of other vernacular languages, which in turn shaped the creation of a national identity that prized Hindu cultural symbols and values. To illustrate the strength of nationalist discourse in constructing national identity, Rashmi Sardana writes in “Questions of Authenticity and the Politics of Translation” that historians have only begun to debunk the vision of Hindi as a pure, nationalistic language of all Indians in the past two decades (314). Thus, the choice of Hindi as the primary administrative language represents a continuation of, rather than a deviation from, the traditional colonial method of asserting control through the standardization of language.

The way the characters of the novel switch between languages illustrates the negotiation between the official and unofficial languages of India, which stems from the division between legitimate and illegitimate communities within the scope of an upper class and upper caste Hindu identity. For example, during a Chatterji dinner party, Meenakshi Mehra (née Chatterji) and her mother (known as “Mago”) have the following conversation: “Meenakshi’s expression was not ecstatic. ‘I hope things are well with you, Meenakshi,’ said Mrs. Chatterji, reverting for a moment to Bengali. ‘Wonderfully well, Mago,’ replied Meenakshi in English” (395). The “code-switching” that occurs here—Meenakshi hears a question in Bengali and responds in English—shows how linguistic complexity pervades even the most banal conversation. In general, these vertiginous linguistic shifts between languages “characterize Indian social life” (Skinner 32-3). However, the novel does not simply pit English against indigenous languages, as this typical

dialogue between Meenakshi and her mother seems to suggest. In fact, code-switching occurs among the languages of India themselves as well. The presence of code-switching in Indian society and the novel paradoxically traces the absence of diversity among the languages of India. This is not to say that linguistic diversity does not exist—according to Skinner, there are several hundred languages used in the subcontinent, of which the sixteen official languages named in India’s constitution represent an incredibly small fraction (31-2). Rather, the term “lack of diversity” refers to a lack of official, national recognition. As the ratio between the constitutional languages and all of the languages of India shows, only a handful of languages are legitimized by their use in a predominately administrative sense. On one hand, this linguistic reduction is necessary—the function of the state on both the national and local level would be impossible if any of the hundreds of the *bhasha* languages could be used at any time.<sup>13</sup> Yet on the other, this justifiable reduction of linguistic possibilities does not render the presence of constitutional languages apolitical; after all, after 1947 the Indian state had to decide which languages would be recognized with official status. That Hindi is used the most as an administrative and therefore supposedly “pan-Indian” language reinforces the larger nationalist project to define the independent and partitioned Indian identity according to the characteristics of those who know Hindi.

Through their personal relationships, the characters grapple with the same questions of national identity played out on the larger political scale. The details of Maan’s first one-on-one encounter with Saeeda Bai and one of Haresh Khanna’s early letters to Lata demonstrate how written language is used to further the nationalist project in this text. To begin, the fact that Maan is Hindu and Saeeda is Muslim already signifies that they do not share the same language—to connect this point to language and community formation, Hindus predominately used Hindi

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<sup>13</sup> “Bhasha” is a Hindi word used to refer to the regional, vernacular languages of India (Sardana 309).

while Muslims predominately used Urdu. Therefore, when Maan first tries to contact Saeeda, he realizes that he cannot write to her at all. Fundamentally, his problem is one of translation: the transition from speaking to writing is just as insurmountable a process of negotiation as that which exists between languages. For these two lovers, this gap in communication is significant because it catalyzes the end of their relationship. As Seth writes, “Maan thought of writing her a note, but was faced with a problem. Which language should he write in? Saeeda Bai would certainly not be able to read English and would almost certainly not be able to read Hindi, and Maan could not write Urdu” (101). Fundamentally, this overture to their relationship poses a question that is both politically and culturally significant: What language should Maan write in? First, Maan’s certainty that Saeeda Bai cannot read English is more than an educated guess—in fact, it says much about the way language functions as an indicator of social status in this novel and in India. According to Skinner, even today “English in India is still the main language of higher education, the media, or international (and sometimes inter-state) communication...English is almost invariably a function of social class and educational level, rather than national or geographical origin” (32). What can be taken as a mere statement of fact actually reveals the extent to which Maan can correctly assume details about Saeeda’s personal life and history without having to ask her. In relationship to the nationalist project, Maan’s assumption reinforces that language defines and separates the different communities in India from one another. Saeeda’s upbringing in the red-light district of Brahmpur and her current profession as a singer and high-class prostitute eliminate English as an option. What is even more telling is Maan’s “almost” certainty that Saeeda cannot read Hindi. Beyond the fact that the scripts of both languages are markedly different, Maan’s assumption reinforces Skinner’s earlier observation that Urdu, not Hindi, is the language of India’s Muslim population (31). Then there

is the fact that Maan is unable to read or write Urdu. Even though his knowledge of the language is extensive—he can speak it fluently and has memorized many Urdu ghazals—he is unable to write a simple letter to Saeeda.<sup>14</sup> Maan and Saeeda’s relationship is marked by a linguistic gap from the very beginning, which speaks to the nationalist creation of identity on a geopolitical scale.

Interestingly, though the result of Lata’s romantic relationships is diametrically opposed to the ending of Maan and Saeeda’s, she and her suitors nonetheless contend with language in a similar way even though they share the English language. Saeeda’s assertion to Maan that “in order to understand me truly...you must learn my language” (354) applies to the written communication between Lata and her suitors, for, as Ashcroft describes, language changes based on who uses it and how. The fact that language, especially written language, can separate groups that share the same language indicates its pervasive power as a tool used to form national identity. The use of English here mirrors the ways in which the Indian government inherited more than just the administrative philosophy of the British. In fact, the presence of English in the novel as a way to separate different “kinds” of Hindus based on socioeconomic status speaks to the oddly neutral place of English in India after 1947. In spite of its former place as the language of the colonizing British, after Independence English has predominately been tied to social class and educational level, rather than national or geographic origins (Skinner 32). As Sardana writes, “unlike Hindi, English could never be viewed as representing ‘the people’; hence, its authenticity was always questioned, even after being accepted as an Indian language in a variety of realms...Knowing English fluently provides innumerable social and economic advantages, but it always exists alongside Hindi or other bhasha languages” (315). For example, Lata’s marriage to Haresh—the most suitable suitor of them all—does not erase the fact that Haresh is a different

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<sup>14</sup> A ghazal is a specific type of poetry particular to Urdu composed in rhyming couplets.

kind of “Indian” than the Mehras, as shown by his use of English. As Lise Guilhamon writes in her article on the varieties of English in India, “the differences in the usage of English are immense in a country where twenty or so official languages exist that cohabit with English and transmit onto it some of their respective phonetic, grammatical, and lexical characteristics” (224-5). To illustrate this point, when Lata receives her first letter from Haresh, she immediately notices that his English is “slightly odd” (Seth 900). For example, he writes in the more personal part of his letter, “Let me hope in the usual way that you had a comfortable journey home and that you were missed by all who met you after such a long absence from Brahmipur” (900). In particular, Haresh’s phrase “in the usual way” strikes Lata as odd. Interestingly, however, Lata never clearly explains why Haresh’s English “jarred against her sense of the language” (900). The problem is ambiguous—though she notes that there are about ten examples of Haresh’s unconventional word choice, she never goes into detail explaining how or why his English challenges her understanding of the language (900). After all, there is nothing grammatically incorrect about Haresh’s language use. This example expands upon the more obvious point made through Maan and Saeeda’s correspondence. Even in Lata’s relationship with Haresh, translation is necessary. Lata’s simultaneous observation of these awkward phrases and dismissal of their importance—she thinks “the whole [of the letter] was not unpleasing,” which barely gestures at complimenting it—embodies her refusal to translate Kabir’s and Haresh’s letters, as this paper will address in the next section (900). In fact, translation recurs throughout the novel, for none of the couples share the same language or share the same language in the same way.

***“You should have written and told me”***

Postcolonial writer Edouard Glissant provides a critical frame to consider how translation influences the creation of national identity, writing that translation challenges “the false clarity of universal models” (29). This idea that even shared language cannot bridge the differences between people speaks to the importance of translation in *A Suitable Boy* in both a literal and figurative sense. In general, translation, like language itself, does not have fixed meaning—rather, its definition depends largely on those who use it and how. Rita Kothari and Judy Wakabayashi broadly categorize this variability in *Decentering Translation Studies: India and Beyond*, writing that translation “has been accorded different statuses in different linguistic communities and at different historical junctures” (7). They provide the examples that translation could mean anything from creating an aid to further explore an already understandable text to the purification of a text into a new, more appropriate language (7). For the purpose of this paper, however, translation will function as both a practice and a metaphor. As a practice, translation calls attention to the construction of the nation and the role of language in it. As a metaphor, translation represents the simultaneous loss and gain of information as a result of an exchange in which difference is both recognized and transcended, if only imperfectly. With Glissant’s insight as a starting point, I argue that this dual function of translation predominately takes place in *A Suitable Boy* through the depiction of its failure. In other words, translation never fully occurs in the novel between the lovers, due to the creation of a national identity that prefers singularity over plurality. This constant mediation through language—characters cannot write to one another without negotiating their cultural differences—primarily constructs this separation through writing. As the following examples of written correspondence show, the couples that write to one another refuse to recognize the cultural differences that their acts of writing actively articulate, which prevents them from overcoming those differences.

To describe the link between writing and the nationalist project, the theories of Julia Kristeva and Homi K. Bhabha provide a useful framework to explore the paradox between what writing seems to do and what it actually does in the practice of translation. For Kristeva in “The Other Language, or Translating Sensitivity,” the act of writing and being a writer between communities becomes an alternative homeland for those who work with more than one language and who are inherently, irreducibly “foreign.” Split perennially between “the original family and the new community,” these speakers and writers of multiple languages are therefore stuck between multiple identities (19). For the writer-foreigner, writing is the only space uniquely their own. Kristeva reinforces this point by writing that most nations “rather than with blood and soil, identify themselves with languages” (20). Therefore, language trumps the more concrete relationships and tangible spaces—the blood and soil of a nation, to return to upon Anderson’s point on the role of language in constructing communities. Yet language, as a homeland, does not represent a space in which a sense of self and a sense of connection with others in the same community are easily determined. In fact, to expand upon Kristeva’s formulation, both foreigners and writers face the “simultaneously binding and problematic” (20) constraints of national identity, regardless of whether they write in their “mother” tongues or not. Thus the act of writing by the writer, especially one who writes from multiple linguistic traditions, replicates what occurs in the act of translation by the foreigner: the creation of a new space in which the vexed fidelities to one group or another are contested, adapted, and developed.

Bhabha’s understanding of writing develops Kristeva’s interpretation of the link between the written word and national identity. However, for him, writing is an in-between space that initiates “new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). This definition of the act of writing in terms of whole

societies results from the articulation of difference, which encompasses both the differences between one culture and language to another. In other words, Bhabha's vision of writing highlights Kristeva's assertion that writing provides the opportunity to transcend the differences it articulates. Inherently, the act of writing is transformative and complex. Though national identities themselves may be binding and problematic, they are also neither fixed nor impregnable. Bhabha addresses this tension between the meaningfulness of national identities and their arbitrariness by locating the foundation of this difference in language itself. For him, language is an "ill-fitting robe" (164), a layer of meaning that is both fluid and flawed. Fluid, because the robe of language can be removed, and flawed, because the person using language is never completely comfortable in it. Returning to Ashcroft and Anderson's earlier dialogue, the fact that language insistently takes place in the present explains this perpetual discomfort.

The idea that language is as removable as clothing seems to contradict Kristeva's description of the fraught position that the writer-translator occupies, for if one language creates ambiguous identity, it can always be exchanged for another. Yet Bhabha's metaphor supports rather than rejects Kristeva's perspective, for the ability to change robes only suggests that the literal moment of slipping off one in favor of another is simple. As soon as another language is "put on," it is found to be ill-fitting. The discomfort implicit in Bhabha's formulation of language carries over into writing, for this "in-between" space, as the fabric of his ill-fitting robe, calls attention to why the position of Kristeva's writer-translator is characterized by vexed ambiguity. To synthesize these points, though Kristeva's sense of national identity as "binding and problematic" stifles the articulation of difference through written language, it does not prevent it completely. As Bhabha explains, writing disrupts the possible formation of national identity as singular because it is the "contradictory and ambivalent" space in which culture tries

and fails to create an original, pure sense of self, either inductively or in opposition to a foreign Other (35-7). To apply this point to an earlier example from Indian history, the nationalist goal of the standardization of Hindi script exemplifies Bhabha's analysis. The attempt of the Hindi sevakas to create a fully homogenized nation under the banner of a single language and script reinforces Bhabha's identification of writing as the primary site of national identity formation. Yet the failure of Hindi to create this unification stems from the fact that writing itself articulates cultural difference. Therefore, in trying to create a narrowly defined national identity, the legislators propounding sanskritization actually undermined their own efforts by emphasizing the importance of a medium marked by contradiction.

This idea that language, especially written language, prevents communication is crucial to understanding how writing functions as the primary site of translation in the novel. However, the articulation of difference does not guarantee that the characters of the novel contend with it. An examination of the affair between Maan and Saeeda as well as Lata's selection of a husband illustrates that the letters each couple writes to one another emphasize rather than transcend the differences between them. Written language in Seth's novel serves only to constitute cultural distance, and nowhere is the denial of difference more evident than in the written communication exchanged between Maan and Saeeda, as well as between Lata and her suitors. In effect, writing becomes a kind of yardstick for the amount of effort Maan and Lata are willing to expend to overcome the fact that he does not share a written language with Saeeda and that she does not use English in the same way as her suitors. Maan and Lata exhibit a similar lack of desire to deeply interpret the writing they receive, whatever their attachment to the person who sent it. The importance of writing as the site of translation in the novel fundamentally resonates in the lives of the characters because two people cannot be together because they don't speak the same

language, either in a literal or figurative sense. In other words, writing in the novel renders the failure of translation, or the impossibility of fully understanding meaning between and within languages, tangible.

Maan and Saeeda's relationship embodies the failure of translation because this couple must negotiate between two different languages when they write to one another. Though both Maan and Saeeda speak Urdu, the fact that Maan cannot write in Urdu reinforces cultural separation based on language. Therefore, because Maan belongs to the Hindu majority in North India, he does not need to know how to write Urdu; in a political and administrative sense, knowing how to read and write this language is unnecessary because Urdu is not a recognized "official" language of India in this time period. When Maan does want to write to Saeeda, for example, he immediately thinks of a shortcut to solve this linguistic obstacle. Instead of taking the time to learn how to read and write Urdu for himself, Maan asks his best friend, Firoz Khan, to translate his sentiments for him. According to his plan, Saeeda would be "astonished to get his letter... And she would write back to him by the next post" (Seth 528). Yet his scheming leaves out an important detail—having Firoz translate his letter into Urdu does not actually solve anything, for Maan would not be able to read Saeeda's response to his letter. Though he takes Urdu lessons as he waits for her reply, Maan learns to read and write the script through his "not very energetic efforts" (665). Considered together, the fact that Maan tries to skirt the difficulty of translating and does little to improve his own ability to decipher Urdu for himself indicates that he actively refuses to confront the cultural differences embodied by language.

Even after months of studying Urdu script, Maan never progresses beyond reading "clearly printed" Urdu script and continually makes basic mistakes when writing the alphabet

(665). In fact, he is unable to decipher a handwritten letter from Saeeda Bai when one arrives in response to his letter. As Seth writes:

He saw immediately that to read this letter—with its almost evasive cursiveness, its casually sprinkled diacritical marks, its compressions—would be far beyond his own rudimentary ability in Urdu. He pieced together the salutation...made out from the physical appearance of the letter that it was laced with poetic couplets, but for the moment could get no further. (676)

Due to the intimate nature of handwriting, Maan cannot quickly and naturally interpret Saeeda's letter—as he admits, he would have to “look at it for hours and try to piece it together glyph by glyph” (676).<sup>15</sup> As with the reading of the book, writing here poses a problem of translation and interpretation. In fact, Maan directly compares his ability to unconsciously interpret Saeeda's physical movements and presence with his inability to easily decipher whether her letter meant “love or indifference, seriousness or playfulness, pleasure or anger, desire or calm” (676). Here, he “reads” Saeeda only in a situation when he can easily intuit the meaning of her actions, based on his lover's knowledge of her body. Yet when it comes to reading her letter, Maan gives up without even trying to interpret its contents. It would be easy to dismiss the letter's impenetrability as a result of Maan's lack of knowledge. However, with a significant amount of effort Maan would be able to read the letter, though it would take hours. The fact is that “Maan did not want to pore over it for hours. He wanted to know immediately what Saeeda Bai had written to him” (676). In spite of the level of attachment to Saeeda this sentiment suggests—he has been eagerly awaiting her reply to his translated letter—the novel never shows Maan reading her letter. Though he professes his love for Saeeda, to the point where he stabs Firoz in a jealous rage because he thinks his best friend and Saeeda are in love, he ultimately does not care about overcoming the differences that keep them apart. His desire to read the letter masks his

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<sup>15</sup> This letter, as with all Hindi and Urdu script referred to or used by the characters, is not shown to the reader. The significance of this choice will be discussed in the final section of the paper, which will address the construction and translation of the novel itself.

unwillingness to expend any effort to overcome the fact that they do not share a written language.

Inherently, neither Maan nor Saeeda try to facilitate communication through writing—he learns to read basic Urdu in spite of himself and she writes her letter fluidly and casually. This characteristic inability to bridge the language gap through writing recalls the political struggle and the historical language debate of Uttar Pradesh. In fact, by recalling this regional history, the novel links the linguistic differences between Maan and Saeeda to the larger national debate about language and identity. Maan, in spite of his knowledge of Urdu poetry and speech, cannot find the willpower to battle against the restrictions imposed by language, which symbolizes the nationalistic view of identity as singular. Fundamentally, the difficulty of overcoming the differences in script for Maan and Saeeda, in conjunction with the politics of language that characterize the novel and the history of the region, illustrate only one half of the postcolonial project that Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin identify. They write, “The post-colonial text, by developing specific ways of both constituting cultural distance and at the same time bridging it, indicates that it is the ‘gap’ rather than the experience (or at least the concept of a gap between experiences) which is created by language” (*The Empire Writes Back* 65). In a general sense, the post-colonial text should fulfill this dual function. However, to specifically apply this point to Maan and Saeeda’s relationship, writing only serves to constitute cultural distance, because neither one expends the effort to bridge the cultural distance constructed by language. This is particularly felt through Maan, based on his refusal to translate Saeeda’s letter from Urdu. For him especially, at the crucial moment in which difference can be recognized and confronted, Maan puts the letter down and chooses not to progress beyond the moment when he can get no further in deciphering Saeeda’s handwriting. This moment in which translation does not occur

simultaneously reinforces the role translation plays in calling attention to cultural difference and prefigures the end of Maan and Saeeda's relationship. As mentioned above, Maan attempts to kill Firoz because he suspects Saeeda and his best friend are in love. Saeeda's letter foreshadows Maan's violent reaction, for he stabs his friend precisely at the moment when he is confronted with the possibility that Firoz, a Muslim member of the wealthy, landowning upper class, might be involved with Saeeda. In essence, Firoz, at least in terms of religion and language, is more similar to Saeeda than Maan. Thus, Maan's reaction highlights that his relationship with Saeeda is inherently marred by difference from the beginning, which heralds its violent end because Maan is not willing to expend the effort to overcome that difference.

In transitioning to an analysis of Lata's refusal to translate the writing of her suitors, it is necessary to remember that her refusal to translate refers to the varieties of one language. In other words, though Lata and her suitors use English to write to one another, they do not use it in the same way, as earlier examples about Haresh's style of English indicate. By comparing Haresh Khanna to Kabir Durrani, I argue that Lata's refusal to translate the letters she receives from both suitors participates in a larger critical conversation that reinforces the legitimacy of the definition of national Indian identity influenced by the Hindu "majority" population. Both Lata and the critics of *A Suitable Boy* observe the major cultural differences presented in the novel, yet they do nothing to address them in a way that mirrors Maan's reaction to Saeeda's letter. For example, in close reading Lata's relationship to each of her three suitors, critics most often juxtapose Haresh Khanna with Amit Chatterji in order to analyze *A Suitable Boy*. Neelam Srivastava and Anna Guttman both suggest in their respective articles that the novel argues for the necessity of unity among Indians, a concept strongly propounded by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, after Independence and Partition (219; 65). Guttman expands upon

this idea by specifically identifying two of Lata's suitors—Amit and Haresh—as representative of the different paths the country could take after 1947 (66-8). These two paths are not, of course, the only options, but both she and Srivastava dwell on this binary in their articles. For Guttman (and to some extent Srivastava), the struggle to define Indian identity after 1947 predominately refers to class and language only among the Hindu population, for both Amit and Haresh are Hindu men that are theoretically suitable for Lata. What divides them is that Amit is an unemployed writer from an upper-class Bengali family, a characteristic that nonetheless strongly links him to a particular regional identity.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Haresh is a businessman who had to work his way to middle-class status. According to Guttman, Lata's choice of Haresh over Amit indicates that the novel supports a "Nehruvian" vision of a country based on "modernization without westernization" (66), in which caste and class are irrelevant.

The supposedly consistent unity of the novel's meaning signals Guttman's analytical superficiality, for she does not include Kabir Durrani, Lata's third suitor, in her analysis. For both Srivastava and Guttman, a potential marriage between Lata and Kabir is never presented as an option for the future of India because he is Muslim. For example, as soon as Lata discovers that Kabir is Muslim, he is immediately deemed unsuitable and never seriously considered as a suitor. By contrast, Haresh immediately fits Lata's mother's definition of a suitable boy: he is an employed Hindu man from the same caste. This curious critical segregation of Lata's suitors along religious lines speaks to the rhetorical and historical trends that largely defined history of the subcontinent after partition. Fundamentally, Guttman and Srivastava accept a similar kind of conflation in their analysis of the novel by their focus on the Lata's Hindu suitors. In this way,

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<sup>16</sup> According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, those who identify as "Bengali" consciously specify their identity within the Hindu community and usually consider themselves apart from the rest of the population ("Translator's Foreword" 5-6). The creation of Bangladesh speaks to this tendency to separate themselves within the broader Hindu identity.

their perspective participates in the antithetical separation between what is “Hindu” and what is “Muslim” that Bose and Jalal describe in *Modern South Asia*. Interestingly, up until the past decade or so, historians also treated India and Pakistan as “starkly antithetical entities” (Bose and Jalal 167), as if the creation of the two states effectively erased a shared history that extends as far back as the seventh century (17). This omission mirrors a similar simplification of cultural identity on the larger political level. Thus, in order to rectify this critical oversight, the letters written by Kabir and Haresh will be examined alongside one other. This juxtaposition is more productive than that of Haresh and Amit, for the cultural differences denied through Lata’s interpretation (or lack thereof) of their letters are much more pronounced. However, this juxtaposition does not simply reinforce this entrenched critical and historical opinion about the differences between Hindus and Muslims. In fact, close reading these two men side by side proves that the boundaries among Hindus is as constructed as that between Hindus and Muslims. In other words, Lata’s reaction to their letters reveals that Hindus and Muslims have more in common—namely, this shared meaningful arbitrariness—than the reconstructed, nationalist narrative admits.

A comparison of these two men and their writing shows that Lata chooses Haresh over Kabir because she deems Haresh’s letters easier to read. In terms of the general structure of this argument, this choice reflects the way writing and reading mirror the larger nationalist project after 1947. In order to prove Haresh’s accessibility, it is necessary to first describe how she reacts to Kabir’s letter. Kabir only sends one letter to Lata after she tells him that, because of their religious differences, their relationship will only work if they elope. When Kabir refuses, Lata ends their fledgling relationship immediately before her departure from Brahmipur for Calcutta on vacation. It is worth noting that this letter is not at all what she expects to receive

from Kabir—as Seth narrates, “The letter was only a page long. She had expected Kabir’s letter to be effusive and apologetic. It was not exactly that” (375). For example, Kabir writes that “I can’t think about anything except you, but I am annoyed that I should have to say so... Well, I don’t care for you so much that I’m willing to abdicate my intelligence. I don’t even care for myself that much” (375). In an explicit way, Kabir’s letter not only reinforces his lack of desire to elope on a whim and leave the country, but also emphasizes that Lata can only imagine herself married to Kabir in a completely different setting. As he writes a few lines later, “Suppose I had agreed to your crazy plan. I know that you would then have discovered twenty reasons why it was impossible to carry it out” (375). Here again, Kabir refuses to situate their relationship in a new and ostensibly less restrictive setting even as he calls Lata’s bluff with his practicality. Therefore, his letter insists on articulating their differences in the context of North India during the 1950s, which means that Kabir challenges Lata to confront their differences in order to overcome them. That he concludes his letter by asking Lata to write to him while she is in Calcutta reinforces this point. He writes, “Well, now that you have my address, why don’t you write to me? I have been unhappy since you left and unable to concentrate on anything. I knew you couldn’t write to me even if you wanted to because you didn’t have my address. Well, now you do. So please do write. Otherwise I’ll know what to think” (376). By making their potential reconciliation dependent on Lata’s ability to read and respond to his missive, Kabir acknowledges the importance of writing as a tool to transcend cultural difference.

Yet Lata ignores Kabir’s desire to directly confront their differences by focusing on what Kabir could have and should have written in his letter. After reading the letter for the first time, Lata thinks, “Perhaps she had given Kabir no opportunity to explain himself at their last meeting, but now that he was writing to her, he could have explained himself better. He had not addressed

anything seriously, and Lata had above all wanted him to be serious” (377). Yet she never provides an explanation for why she considers Kabir’s rationale for refusing to run away with her not serious—her analysis of the letter rests on a superficial level. Furthermore, her written response to Kabir similarly reflects her refusal to analyze his letter. In fact, Kabir never sees her response to his letter, for she tears it up instead of mailing it. This physical act represents the fact that Kabir might as well be writing to a void—the communication is inherently one-sided, for Lata receives his thoughts but never allows him the same privilege. That she takes the time to write out a letter she never intends to send suggests that Lata consciously recognizes and rejects the possibility of transcending cultural differences. Here, Lata recognizes the importance of writing in creating an equal exchange between the writer and the intended recipient, yet she refuses to make the effort to reciprocate Kabir’s attempt to overcome their differences. The paradox of this letter writing scene—Lata wishes that Kabir could be more serious but never gives him the chance to do so by explaining how she feels—shows her lack of effort to build an actual relationship with him. Symbolically, the fact that she even stamps and addresses this letter speaks to the gap between what Lata says and does.

The content of her destroyed letter further reflects this refusal. As she writes, “Dearest Kabir, I am not going to mail this letter...If you think I was unreasonable, well, perhaps I was, but I’ve never been in love before and it is certainly an unreasonable feeling too—and one that I never want to feel again for you or anyone” (459). Here, the unreasonableness of love is wholly dependent on the fact that Kabir is Muslim. In fact, this idea of Lata’s “unreasonableness” references her last meeting with Kabir, before she ends their relationship. As previously mentioned, Lata wants to run away with Kabir in order to escape the pressure of a society that desires a clean separation between the Hindu and Muslim populations. Instead of confronting the

difficulties of marrying a Muslim man, Lata prefers to ignore them. Yet Kabir refuses to follow Lata's plan. He says during this meeting, "Lata, we don't have a chance if we go away. Let's wait and see how things work out. We'll make them work out" (185). That he thinks their relationship can only succeed in a society that explicitly wishes it to fail reinforces that he advocates true translation—he wants Lata to recognize and transcend their cultural and religious differences along with him. Yet as soon as he tells her this, Lata tells him that he does not understand what it is like to be a girl and walks away. He tries to stop her and make her explain herself, saying, "Please listen... When will we be able to speak to each other again? If we don't talk now—" (186) before she cuts him off. In effect, Kabir replicates in his letter this initial effort to make Lata talk to him in person to find a solution to their problem. He is unsuccessful, however, and she leaves without saying another word. Ultimately, this scene acts as a dress rehearsal for the way Lata actively and definitively rejects Kabir's desire to overcome their differences by writing a response to his letter and destroying it. Her reaction symbolically ends any possibility of constructive exchange that effective translation creates.

With the example of Kabir in mind, the correspondence of Lata and Haresh seems to disprove the role of writing and translation in *A Suitable Boy* as an in-between space in which difference is articulated. After all, Haresh is apparently the most suitable suitor of them all based on his religion and caste—the fact that Haresh and Lata get married at the end of the novel seems to argue that cultural differences between Lata and Haresh do not exist at all. For them, writing actually seems to be the sole means of effective communication that Lata and Haresh share. For example, Haresh thinks to himself that "talking to Lata was different. He did not know what to say. It was much easier to write letters" (1145-6). Lata's insight matches his; as Seth writes, "She too was attempting to make conversation. Perhaps they should have kept on writing to each

other” (1146). Yet, when taken together, their mutual recognition that conversation is somehow easier in writing overlooks the larger role writing plays in highlighting how differences manifest themselves elsewhere in their relationship. In fact, the “ease” of writing between Haresh and Lata masks both their inability to communicate face-to-face, as the above quotes suggest, as well as their crucial differences even as members of the same group. For example, a scene well into their courtship illustrates the way spoken language results in miscommunication between them. When Haresh tries to convince Lata to spend more time with him during one of her visits to Calcutta, she says, “Oh, don’t be mean” (1148). Lata attributes little to the phrase—in her experience, “it meant nothing particularly wounding,” yet Haresh feels “stung to the depths of his being” by her word choice (1148). As Seth writes of Haresh’s reaction to Lata’s words:

To be called ‘mean’—ungenerous, lowly, base—and that too by the woman he loved and for whom he was prepared to do so much—he could tolerate some things, but he would not tolerate that. He was not ungenerous...As for being base, his accent might not have their polish nor his diction their elegance, but he came from stock as good as theirs. They could keep their Anglicized veneer. To be labelled ‘mean’ was something not to be borne. He would have nothing to do with people who held this opinion of him. (1148-9)

Beyond the fact that Haresh takes what Lata says to an extreme, this moment of internal indignation shows that two people who share the same language do not interpret the word “mean” in the same way. As Lata says after this incident, “But if we don’t even understand each other when we speak...what possible future can we have together?” (1149). Yet Haresh and Lata do get married at the end of the novel, which implies that their difficulties communicating when they are face to face do not prevent them from having some kind of a future together.

Yet what is the nature of that future? To answer this, an analysis of Lata’s interpretation of the accessibility of Haresh’s letters shows that she does not confront the differences presented through Haresh’s writing because, unlike Kabir, Haresh does not provide her the opportunity to contend with their differences. As a character, Haresh and the letters he writes obfuscate rather

than address cultural differences.<sup>17</sup> To continue the previous example of the “mean” incident, the fact that Haresh can only apologize through a letter to Lata indicates that he uses writing to sidestep the larger issue of how they can communicate as a couple on a daily basis. Furthermore, the content of his apology is even more telling than its format—he apologizes for being prideful rather than for his analysis of the word itself. For example, he writes in this letter, “As you know, I was very upset about a word you used, which I realize in retrospect you did not intend as I took it” (1290). However, the fact that Haresh does not name the word in his letter calls into question why, exactly, he is apologizing. Though he acknowledges that he misunderstood Lata, he does not apologize at all for his own proposed definition of the word “mean” described in the above block quote. As he writes a few lines later, he did not feel sorry for his reaction, which is why it took him weeks to write this letter (1290). The most telling part of this pseudo-apology letter occurs when he brings up the subject of marriage again. The fact that his renewed proposal of marriage is written immediately after his apology suggests that Haresh is apologizing only to move their courtship forward. He writes, “I hope that when we get married—I am hoping that it is *when*, and not *if*—you will tell me, with that lovely quiet smile of yours, whenever I take things amiss that are not badly intended” (1290). Nowhere in this excerpt does Haresh suggest that he and Lata discuss these inevitable misunderstandings in the future—rather, he prefers that she simply notify him that she did not mean to offend him. Here, Haresh terminates all possible discussion of what he or Lata originally meant in this ill-fated conversation by halfheartedly apologizing for something that he nevertheless believes to be correct—the meaning of “mean.”

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<sup>17</sup> This concept is based on Bose and Jalal’s analysis of the way Prime Minister Nehru, as the head of the Hindu-led Indian National Congress, advocated a kind of Indian nationalism and identity that “obfuscated rather than addressed the problem of cultural differences” by reconstructing the narrative of Independence to highlight the upper class strain of nationalism (140).

Ultimately, the marriage between Haresh and Lata only indicates that the cultural differences between them are less glaring than those between Lata and Kabir. However, these differences still exist. The fact that Haresh and Lata get married anyway speaks to Haresh's obfuscating role in the novel, while their marriage shows Lata's preference, which mirrors Maan's, for taking the easiest option available to her. She rejects Kabir and marries Haresh not only because Haresh represents a more socially acceptable, suitable option, but also because Haresh never gives her the opportunity to confront their differences. In a similar fashion, Maan never follows through on his stated desire to learn to write Urdu to better communicate with Saeeda because he too does not wish to confront cultural differences. However, though the novel participates in this rejection of the opportunity to transcend difference through writing by creating these outcomes, *A Suitable Boy* also foregrounds the fact that Maan and Lata nonetheless keep Saeeda's and Kabir's respective letters. With regard to Maan, the meaning of the Urdu letter haunts him for the rest of the text and sets the stage for the end of his relationship with Saeeda. Interestingly, though Maan does eventually find out the letter's contents, he never describes the process of translation; in essence, the reader does not know if Maan translated the letter by himself or if he asked Firoz to do so. The elision of this implied scene reinforces the fact that Maan does not want to work to figure out Saeeda's meaning—by the time he visits Saeeda again after being out of town, he simply knows that she “urgently enjoined him to remain away from Brahmpur a little longer” in her letter (804). The fact that Maan suspects that Saeeda wants to keep him out of town in order to be with Firoz highlights the fact that Maan's refusal to expend the effort to analyze Saeeda's letter results in his attempt to kill his best friend out of jealousy. For Lata, she keeps Kabir's letter well after she ends their relationship—when she tells her friend Malati about her erstwhile love interest, Lata shows her Kabir's letter. Malati notes

that the letter “looked well-read” (771) before she begins reading it, which further reinforces its tangible significance. Not only does Lata keep the letter after she replies to it, but she also continues to read it. These reappearances of these two letters in the text exemplify Kathryn Manzo’s idea that national separation is “never a completed action but a political ideal,” which expose the constructed nature of the nation and the degree to which its constant maintenance is necessary (27). With this in mind, the nation itself can never be a completed action either, for its existence depends on this separation of insiders from outsiders.

To situate this idea in this larger context, Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture* the difficulty of maintaining authority through the existence of paradoxes within the governing colonial structure. He writes, “To be authoritative, [the colonial power’s] rules of recognition must reflect consensual knowledge or opinion. To be powerful, these rules of recognition must be breached in order to represent the exorbitant objects of discrimination that lie beyond its purview” (111). Though Bhabha specifically situates his analysis in the colonial period, the model he describes can also be applied to the government of the independent country of India. As Bose and Jalal explain, the Indian National Congress directly inherited the administrative structures of the colonial period, an observation that suggests that the Hindu-dominated national identity created after 1947 fills the power vacuum that the British left behind (161). For Bhabha, the colonial perspective is torn between trying to establish its own authority—through the presentation of a unified, cohesive understanding of the subaltern culture it dominates—and having to assert its power by acknowledging that there are aspects of that culture beyond its control. In other words, colonial authority creates hybrid members within its jurisdiction, who subvert colonial authority by posing questions that cannot be answered and thus unsettle the authority of the colonial power. In this context, I extend Bhabha’s definition of hybridity to

describe the postcolonial nation instead of individual members of a colonized state. As Manzo describes, nationalism does not exist “in pure form, devoid of traces of earlier modes of life or conceptions of identity” (7). Yet, as the aforementioned perspectives of Bhabha and Balibar suggest, the nation nonetheless attempts to conceal this fact. Specifically, in perpetrating expansive uniformity even as it desires to claim local authenticity, the nation reveals that it is inherently at odds with itself, which the continued presence of the letters from Kabir and Saeeda shows.

***“In order to understand me truly...you must learn my language”***

The fact that the novel calls attention to this attempt to hide the hybridity of the nationalist project forms its critique of the construction of a singular, national identity. In fact, the novel not only reflects many of the same problems of translation the characters of the novel experience, but also expands the scope of this argument as a whole to include how *A Suitable Boy*, as a form of written communication itself, critiques the limitation of the imagined community of India into a single, nationalist narrative. The novel reflects and expands upon the earlier examination of translation, for it both participates in code-switching and attempts to explain the significance of that linguistic difference by simultaneously using and glossing non-English words. One such example takes place in the early stages of Maan and Saeeda’s relationship. A few months into their relationship, Saeeda makes a point of addressing Maan with the informal word for “you” instead of the more distant and polite version. Seth explains this difference, writing “‘What would you like to hear?’ she asked Maan gently. She had used a more intimate ‘you’ than she had ever used so far—‘tum’ instead of ‘aap’” (304). Here, the novel translates what is not even visible in the text: in English, unlike most languages, there is no

variation of the word “you.” The idea that Saeeda’s word choice could imply how she feels about their relationship is lost utterly on the reader of English until further explanation is provided. In addition, the use of transliteration when referencing “tum” and “aap,” instead of the script used in the written form of Urdu language, further reinforces the reader’s reliance on the novel to mediate the distance between the medium used to recount the plot (English) and the languages used by the characters who live it (the vernacular languages). For both points, the reader’s knowledge of what happens in this short moment is complete only if it is matched by knowledge of the language used. This decision to translate what would otherwise be indecipherable to a reader of English supports Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s suggestion in *The Empire Strikes Back* that “Glosses foreground the continual reality of cross-cultural distance” (61). The transliteration of the novel is the most conspicuous site of glossing of all, though the novel continually provides context clues for the ostensibly Western reader when Hindi, Bengali, or Urdu words are used by characters.<sup>18</sup> Elaborating on the initial definition of translation proposed in this paper, E.V. Ramakrishnan writes in “Translation as Resistance” that “Translation creates a script for that which is hitherto unexpressed and invisible” (30). In *A Suitable Boy*, the invisible presence of a written language that never appears in the text drives much of the conflict of the plot, especially in terms of the lovers’ miscommunications. Thus, by explicitly foregrounding its own process of translation through transliteration and context clues, the novel participates in the control and mediation of knowledge through language by reminding the reader of cross-cultural difference.

Though *A Suitable Boy* is implicated in the nationalist project based on this participation, an analysis of the novel as a written object in the context of the linguistically and culturally

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<sup>18</sup> Transliteration in this context is the use of the English alphabet to recreate the sounds of a language that uses a different alphabet or script. Visually, transliteration literally renders the non-English words “readable” in *A Suitable Boy*. “Tum” and “aap” exemplify this.

pluralistic setting of India reveals that the novel actually critiques the singularity of a Hindu-dominated national identity. Specifically, the novel heavily cites three of the main linguistic traditions of India—Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali—within an English narrative. This particular structure posits the claim that in order to fully grasp the characters and the events of the novel, multiple languages and all of their attendant cultural references must be used in conjunction with one another. One language does not suffice. In other words, as the earlier analysis of Bhabha and Kristeva shows, the writing of the novel itself both recognizes and transcends the differences articulated in the “in-between” space of writing that Lata and Maan were unable and unwilling to contend with through translation. However, the novel does not suggest that the reader needs to be a part of each linguistic community referenced in the plot in order to fully understand its significance. Rather, by intervening at precisely the moment where difference appears in the text, the novel’s glossing of certain words and phrases models a successful act of translation that starkly contrasts Maan’s and Lata’s refusal to do so. Thus, the novel’s negotiation between multiple languages inherently critiques the nationalist impulse to enforce singularity over diversity, particularly through language.

Translation, as an active critique of nationalism, also shapes *A Suitable Boy* itself, for the complex publication history of the novel illustrates how the same debates over written language and identity play out beyond its pages. Though *A Suitable Boy* was originally published in English, soon after its initial success it was translated and published into Hindi by a single translator with Vikram Seth’s consent. An examination of the Hindi version of the novel and the debate about its faithfulness to the original highlights the attempt by the dominant, nationalist narrative to both reduce the linguistic and cultural diversity of India and to hide that reduction. To frame this point, Sardana writes that “because English and Hindi represent different

perspectives on the same place, and reach different audiences living in the same region, that translation becomes a particularly significant cultural transaction” (317). This perspective reinforces the definition of translation used throughout this paper as a both a practice and metaphor for transcending cultural difference. On the surface, the Hindi version of *A Suitable Boy* seems to encourage a dialogue between two different groups based on similarity. However, the mixed reception of the Hindi version by Indian critics and translators exemplifies that the translation of the novel perpetuates the principal definition of national identity according to Hindu cultural symbols and values. For example, two notable translators—Harish Trivedi and Enakshi Chatterjee—interpret the act of translation itself in two very different ways. For Trivedi, Seth’s authorization of the Hindi version implies that “there is a true Indian identity to be found, that it is to be found in Hindi, and that it *should* be found in Hindi” (320). The fact that Trivedi so easily extracts this interpretation only from the existence of the translated text rather than its content illustrates the degree to which the Hindi version furthers the nationalist project. For Trivedi, language itself acts as a recuperative marker of authenticity, while Chatterjee emphasizes the fact that content is just as important (if not more so) as language. As Chatterjee points out, the fact that certain scenes in the novel referring to the tanning and leatherwork process are removed completely indicates how Trivedi’s “recuperative” vision of the novel is in fact biased and incomplete. These passages are removed because they are deemed “offensive” to the Brahmanic, vegetarian class of Indians who live predominately in North India. This editorial choice clearly illustrates the link between Hindi as the language of the elite and the intended audience of the Hindi version.

As Sardana explains, “This particular translation sanctions a deletion from the text based on the presumed audiences of Hindi and English novels. It is a willed and deliberate deletion

from the text. Meaning and style do not fall away as words are translated from English to Hindi. In effect, the translation never occurs” (324). These absences in the text mimic Lata’s and Maan’s refusal to contend with difference through translation. For Chatterjee, “the Hindi translation is in fact not a true rendition of Seth’s original, that it, in fact, lacks a certain authenticity that was in the English original...[and] it is not a true rendition of Indian social realities as Seth imagines them” (324). The deletion of certain scenes to cater to a culturally dominant audience reveals the stakes of translation as the novel itself presents them. For Sardana, the decision to hide “caste and caste relations of production” (325) in the novel by anticipating what is and is not acceptable “speaks to yet another aspect of linguistic authenticity, dictating whose stories belong in which language, and which authors and translators are authorized to tell which stories” (325). Therefore, the real debate of the Hindi version is about “the kinds of social and political privileges that each language assumes and subsumes” (328). The interaction of multiple languages, both within the novel and in its publication history, calls attention to “important questions of readership, audience, and community that ultimately destabilize singular notions of identity and cultural authenticity” (308). In other words, though language as a whole always already invokes a political project, the process of translation both furthers that project and, at the same time, undermines it by revealing its bias.

To put this point into perspective, Lawrence Venuti describes in *The Translator’s Invisibility* how politics marks the field of translation. He explains that critics of translated works value, above all else, a certain “transparency” of language, in which the translator acts as an objective conduit between the foreign writer and the newly translated text. Venuti’s perspective provides a frame for understanding how the nationalist project manifests itself in translation. He writes, “What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions

under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text" (1-2). The illusory nature of translation directly mirrors the reflexive, effacing work of nationalism in reconstructing a more streamlined definition of national identity. As Sardana writes, Chatterjee's perspective on the deletions from the original text "suggest that something new has entered the Hindi literary field: the cultural pressure of Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva. This pressure, which is becoming more and more of a social norm, seeks to at once elide caste differences in order to create a pan-Hindu identity and also promote upper-caste Brahmanical culture as a hegemonic influence on that very identity" (324). Ultimately, the presence of these tannery scenes in the original English version of the novel makes a compelling case for the literal presence of writing in the novel as a site of cultural difference that remains unresolved by Maan and Lata.

In conclusion, the translation of *A Suitable Boy* shows that the linguistic, nationalistic work of Independence and Partition continues today. In essence, the persistent and insistent political nature of translation, grounded in *A Suitable Boy* and applied to the larger context of its Indian setting, illustrates the importance of examining this field as more than mere methodology. The success and failure of translation as a mode of critique argues that translation is not a fixed, simple, and objective process through which one word is replaced with an exact equivalent in another language. As Venuti writes, "By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation...reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey" (21). Like language itself, translation is fluid, arbitrary, and meaningful. Acknowledging this in the context of India is particularly relevant. As Kothari and Wakabayashi

argue, the end of the nineteenth century represents the end of a tradition in which moving from one language to another in India “did not seem to constitute an act of translation, but merely a confirmation of a multilingual world not overtly conscious of its own multilingualism” (12-3). Interestingly, the moment in which translation loses its fluidity coincides with the rise of nationalism in India and the first stirrings of a Hindu-dominated definition of national identity. By the turn of the twentieth century, and definitely by 1947, the multilingual world of India was quite conscious of its own multilingualism—the reconstruction of the nation around Hindi immediately after Independence and Partition illustrates this new awareness. Thus language, particularly translation, performs nationalist work in both explicit and implicit ways, as the history of the subcontinent as well as the events of Vikram Seth’s novel about this time period show. Ultimately, it is necessary to take account of how translation is used to either define national identity or subvert it. Every act of translation is an act of interpretation, and even the refusal to translate represents a political choice.

Word Count: 14,510

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