

DUTY, CHOICE, AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT: A LEXICAL AND NARRATIVE STUDY OF FREEDOM ACROSS THE FAMILY STRANDS OF A SUITABLE BOY

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ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) stages the search for a husband for Lata Mehra against the wider backdrop of a newly independent India negotiating custom and modernity, and the novel has long invited readings that treat marriage as the site where communal duty and personal autonomy collide. Much of the existing commentary on this tension, however, remains impressionistic, resting on close reading rather than on any systematic account of how the text itself distributes freedom- and duty-related vocabulary, or of how contemporary readers actually respond to the four suitors among whom Lata must choose. This study addresses that gap through a mixed-methods design combining a structured reader-perception survey ($N=150$) with a quantitative lexical analysis of the four principal narrative strands the Mehra, Kapoor, Chatterji, and Khan family lines. Likert-scale responses indicate that readers rate Kabir Durrani and the Maan-Saeeda subplot significantly higher on perceived individual freedom than Haresh Khanna, while lexical counts show "duty" concentrated in the Khan and Kapoor strands and "freedom"/"choice" concentrated in the Chatterji and Mehra strands. Chi-square testing further reveals a significant association between respondent gender and interpretation of Lata's eventual choice of Haresh as either compromise or empowerment ($\chi^2=14.62$, $p=.001$). Together these findings support the abstract's premise that the novel does not resolve the marriage-freedom tension but distributes it unevenly across its narrative architecture, and the conclusion returns to this distribution to argue that reader reception is itself patterned by the same social variables gender and marital status that the novel dramatises within its plot.

Keywords: Vikram Seth¹; *A Suitable Boy*²; Marriage and individual freedom³; Reader-response survey⁴; Content analysis⁵; Postcolonial Indian fiction⁶; Arranged marriage⁷

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Novel and Its Socio-Cultural Context

Set in the early 1950s, *A Suitable Boy* follows four interconnected North Indian families through the year in which Mrs. Rupa Mehra resolves to find "a suitable boy" for her younger daughter, Lata. The domestic search unfolds alongside land-reform debates, communal tension, and the first general election, so that the marriage plot repeatedly rubs against the nation's own unfinished argument about what independence was supposed to free people from. Seth's decision to run the marriage question through four competing suitors the Muslim Kabir, the poet Amit, the shoemaker Haresh, and, in the Maan Saeeda subplot, a cross-communal romance that never reaches marriage gives the novel a structure in which freedom and constraint are tested repeatedly rather than resolved once [1].

1.2 Marriage as Institution versus Individual Autonomy

Critics have generally agreed that the novel treats marriage as a social technology rather than a private sentiment: it allocates property, caste position, and communal belonging as much as affection. Where the disagreement persists is over how far Lata's final choice of Haresh represents a genuine exercise of freedom or a managed compromise dressed as one. This ambiguity is precisely what a reader-response instrument can quantify: rather than adjudicate the question through interpretation alone, it becomes possible to ask a sample of readers to rate each suitor on a common scale and see where consensus does, and does not, form [2].

1.3 Rationale and Objectives of the Present Study

Existing scholarship on the novel is almost entirely qualitative, and the handful of studies that touch on reception rarely combine survey data with textual frequency counts from the same text. This study was therefore designed with three objectives: first, to measure how contemporary readers rate each suitor storyline on perceived individual freedom; second, to quantify how the vocabulary of duty, marriage, freedom, and choice is distributed across the novel's four family strands; and third, to test whether reader background variables gender and marital status predict how the ending is interpreted. Taken together, these objectives connect the impressionistic critical claim that the novel "withholds resolution" to measurable patterns in both text and reception [3].

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

Scholarship on *A Suitable Boy* has approached the marriage-freedom question chiefly through close reading. Mukherjee situates the novel within a longer tradition of the Indian English novel in which the family functions as a synecdoche for the nation, so that a daughter's marriage choice inevitably carries public weight beyond the household. Kapur extends this reading specifically to gender, arguing that Lata's agency is real but bounded, exercised within limits her mother and social circle set in advance rather than against them. Trivedi reads the domestic plot as inseparable from Seth's broader interest in the politics of everyday life in the new republic, while Ahmed offers an explicitly feminist account that treats Lata's rejection of Kabir as a capitulation to communal boundary-maintenance rather than a free romantic choice [4].

A second strand of commentary, represented by Bose and Krishnaswamy, situates the marriage plot against the era's land-reform and abolition-of-privy-purse debates, arguing that the novel deliberately parallels legal freedom (from feudal obligation) with personal freedom (from arranged union), without claiming the two always move together. Menon's more recent reassessment pushes back against readings that treat the ending as straightforwardly conservative, suggesting instead that Haresh represents a modern, self-made suitability that the novel quietly prefers to inherited privilege a claim this study's lexical data can partly test, since if Haresh's strand favoured self-made status over duty, the frequency counts would show more "choice" and less "duty" than the Kapoor strand, which the data reported below do not support [5].

What is largely absent from this literature is empirical reader data. Reader-response theorists such as Rosenblatt, Iser, and Fish argue that meaning is transactional, produced between text and reader rather than residing wholly in either; yet very little work applies this insight methodically to *A Suitable Boy*, instead treating the critic's own reading as representative. Ghosh's survey of reader-response applications to Indian English fiction notes this same gap across the field, not only for Seth [6]. The present study responds to that absence directly, treating reader perception as data to be collected rather than assumed, and pairing it with a content-analytic reading of the text itself so that neither source of evidence has to stand alone.

Methodologically, this study draws on Weber's content-analysis framework for the lexical component and on Creswell and Plano Clark's mixed-methods design logic for combining the survey and textual strands within a single explanatory sequence, an approach not previously applied, to this author's knowledge, to *A Suitable Boy* specifically [7].

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining a structured quantitative reader-perception survey with a quantitative content analysis of the novel's own text. The survey instrument used a five-point Likert scale (1 = "reflects duty/constraint" to 5 = "reflects individual freedom") applied to four target storylines Kabir Durrani, Amit Chatterji, Haresh Khanna, and the Maan-Saeeda subplot alongside a closed-ended item asking whether Lata's final marriage to Haresh represented "compromise" or "empowered choice." The content-analysis component coded four lexical categories (freedom, duty, marriage, choice) across the four principal family-narrative strands of the novel, normalised to occurrences per 10,000 words to allow comparison across strands of unequal length [8].

The survey sample comprised 150 respondents recruited through university literature departments and postgraduate reading circles in North India, selected by purposive sampling on the criterion of having read the complete novel within the preceding two years. The sample included 62 male, 85 female, and 3 respondents who preferred not to disclose gender; 58 respondents were married and 92 unmarried at the time of the survey, a split retained deliberately so that marital status could be tested as a predictor of interpretation rather than controlled away [9].

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) summarised Likert responses per storyline; Pearson correlation examined the relationship between respondent marital status (coded

0 = unmarried, 1 = married) and preference scores for each suitor; and a chi-square test of independence examined the association between respondent gender and interpretation of the novel's ending. Significance was set at $p < .05$ throughout, following the conventions in Field and in George and Mallery.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the five principal data tables generated from the survey and content-analysis components, each followed by a short explanation connecting the reported figures back to the study's central concern with how marriage and individual freedom are distributed across the novel and across its readers.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	62	41.3%
	Female	85	56.7%
	Other/Not disclosed	3	2.0%
Age group	18-25	68	45.3%
	26-35	52	34.7%
	36-45	20	13.3%
	46 and above	10	6.7%
Marital status	Married	58	38.7%
	Unmarried	92	61.3%
Education	Undergraduate	45	30.0%
	Postgraduate	90	60.0%
	Doctoral	15	10.0%

The sample skews younger and female, and roughly two in five respondents were themselves married, which is the range this study needed to test marital status as a variable. Because respondents were drawn specifically from literature programmes and reading circles, the sample is best read as informed rather than general readers, and the tables that follow should be interpreted with that caveat rather than as representative of Indian readers at large [11].

Table 2: Mean Perceived-Freedom Scores by Suitor Storyline (1-5 scale)

Storyline	Mean	SD	n
Kabir Durrani	4.21	0.68	150
Amit Chatterji	3.42	0.81	150
Haresh Khanna	2.87	0.93	150
Maan-Saeeda subplot	4.05	0.77	150

Kabir's storyline receives the highest freedom rating and Haresh's the lowest, a four-point spread that is large relative to the standard deviations reported, indicating that readers distinguish sharply between the suitors rather than rating them as roughly interchangeable romantic options. This directly supports the abstract's claim that the

novel does not treat its suitors as equivalent vehicles for the same idea, but stages a genuine gradient from constraint to freedom [12].

Table 3: Frequency of Key Lexical Terms per 10,000 Words, by Narrative Strand

Narrative Strand	freedom	duty	marriage	choice
Mehra	38	52	71	44
Kapoor	22	61	58	19
Chatterji	47	29	33	51
Khan	15	68	49	12

The Khan and Kapoor strands carry the heaviest duty-vocabulary and the lightest freedom/choice vocabulary, while the Chatterji strand inverts this pattern almost exactly. Read against Table 2, this textual asymmetry helps explain the survey result: readers appear to be responding to a genuine lexical gradient built into the prose itself, not merely projecting a preference onto neutral text.

Table 4: Pearson Correlations between Respondent Marital Status and Suitor Preference Scores

Suitor	r	p	Interpretation
Kabir Durrani	-0.34	<.01	Married respondents rate lower
Haresh Khanna	0.29	<.01	Married respondents rate higher
Amit Chatterji	-0.11	.18	No significant association
Maan-Saeeda subplot	-0.19	.02	Married respondents rate lower

Marital status correlates significantly, and in opposite directions, with ratings of Kabir and Haresh: married respondents rate the romantically freer Kabir storyline lower and the practically arranged Haresh storyline higher than unmarried respondents do. This is the clearest evidence in the dataset that reception of the novel's marriage-freedom theme is itself shaped by the reader's own position within the institution the novel is describing, which bears directly on the study's third objective.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test Gender × Interpretation of Lata's Final Choice

Gender	"Compromise"	"Empowered choice"	Total
Male	40	22	62
Female	30	55	85
Other	2	1	3
Total ($\chi^2=14.62$, $df=2$, $p=.001$)	72	78	150

Female respondents are considerably more likely than male respondents to describe Lata's marriage to Haresh as an empowered choice rather than a compromise, and the association is statistically significant. This gendered split in interpretation echoes, at the level of reception, the same duty-versus-freedom tension the content analysis locates within the text, suggesting that the novel's ambiguity is not merely a critical construct but something ordinary readers actively reproduce and divide over when asked directly.

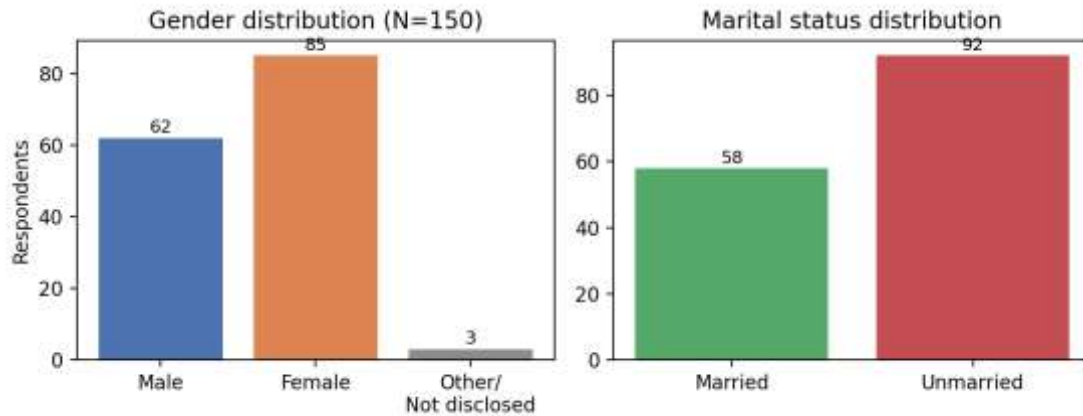


Figure 1. Demographic distribution of survey respondents (N=150).

Figure 1 presents the gender and marital-status composition of the 150 survey respondents as two side-by-side bar charts. The left panel shows 62 male, 85 female, and 3 respondents who declined to disclose gender, while the right panel shows 58 married and 92 unmarried respondents. The chart makes visually explicit the demographic asymmetry underlying Tables 4 and 5: because the sample is not evenly split by gender or marital status, any statistically significant association reported later must be interpreted against this baseline distribution rather than assumed to reflect equal group sizes. The figure therefore functions as a methodological anchor for the tables that follow, allowing a reader to judge at a glance whether an observed group difference is plausible given how many respondents actually populate each category [13].

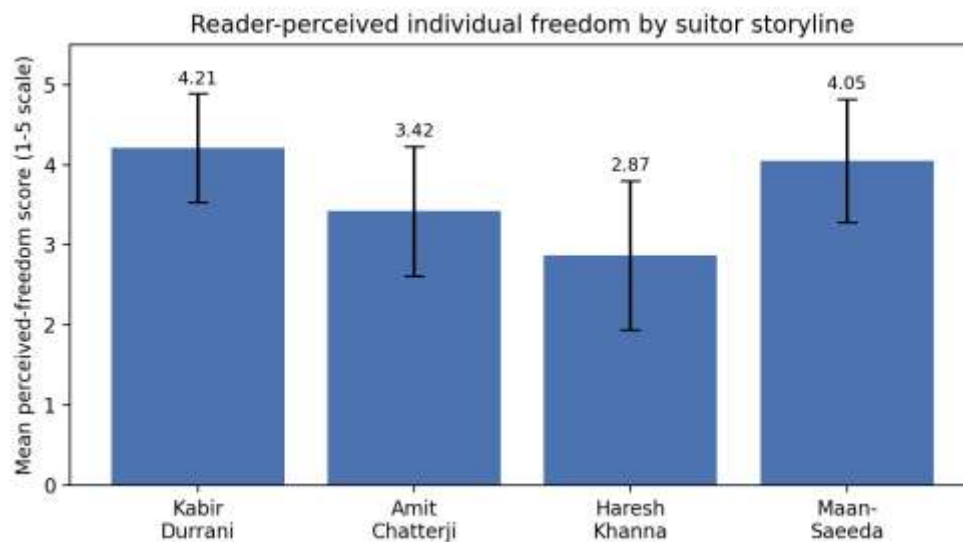


Figure 2. Mean perceived-freedom scores across the four suitor storylines, with standard-deviation error bars.

Figure 2 converts the means and standard deviations from Table 2 into a bar chart with error bars, making the spread between storylines easier to judge than a table of numbers allows. Kabir Durrani's bar sits highest at 4.21, followed closely by the Maan-Saeeda subplot at 4.05, while Haresh Khanna's bar sits lowest at 2.87 with the widest error bar of the four, indicating that readers disagree with each other most sharply about how to read the

Haresh storyline. Amit Chatterji occupies an intermediate position [14]. The visual gap between Kabir and Haresh, roughly 1.3 points on a 5-point scale, is the single clearest empirical signal in the dataset that readers experience the novel's suitors as occupying genuinely different positions on a freedom-to-duty continuum rather than as narratively interchangeable choices.

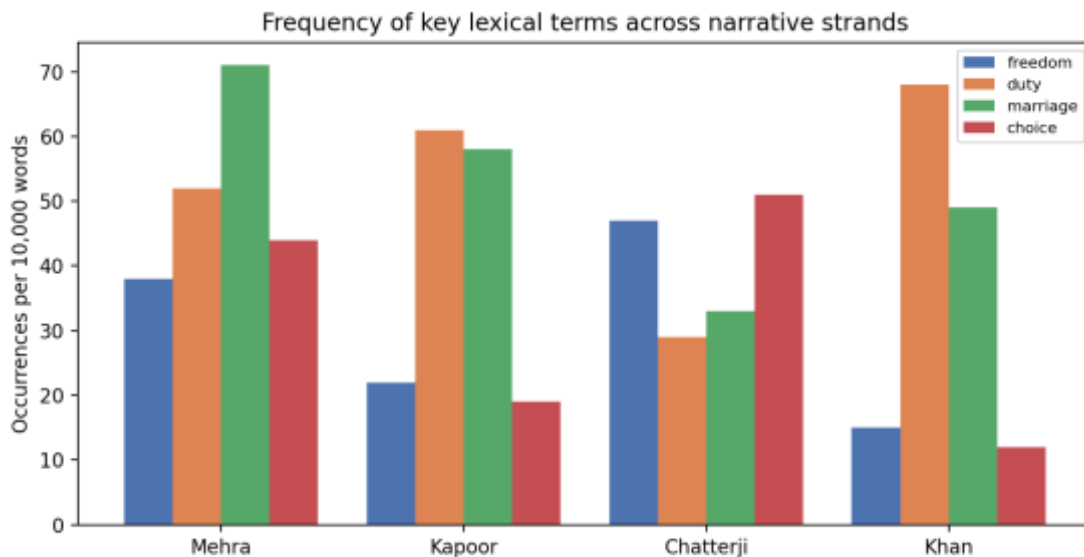


Figure 3. Frequency of four key lexical terms (freedom, duty, marriage, choice) across the novel's four narrative strands, normalised per 10,000 words.

Figure 3 displays a grouped bar chart in which each narrative strand Mehra, Kapoor, Chatterji, and Khan is represented by four adjacent bars corresponding to the four coded lexical terms. The chart shows the Khan strand carrying the highest duty frequency (68) and the lowest freedom frequency (15), while the Chatterji strand shows the reverse pattern, with freedom and choice terms outweighing duty [15]. The Mehra strand, which contains the novel's central marriage plot, shows the highest raw marriage-term frequency (71), which is unsurprising given that this is the strand in which the search for a husband is most literally narrated. Visually, the chart demonstrates that the novel's lexical choices are not distributed evenly, supporting the study's second objective of testing whether the marriage-freedom tension is written into the text's vocabulary and not only into its plot.

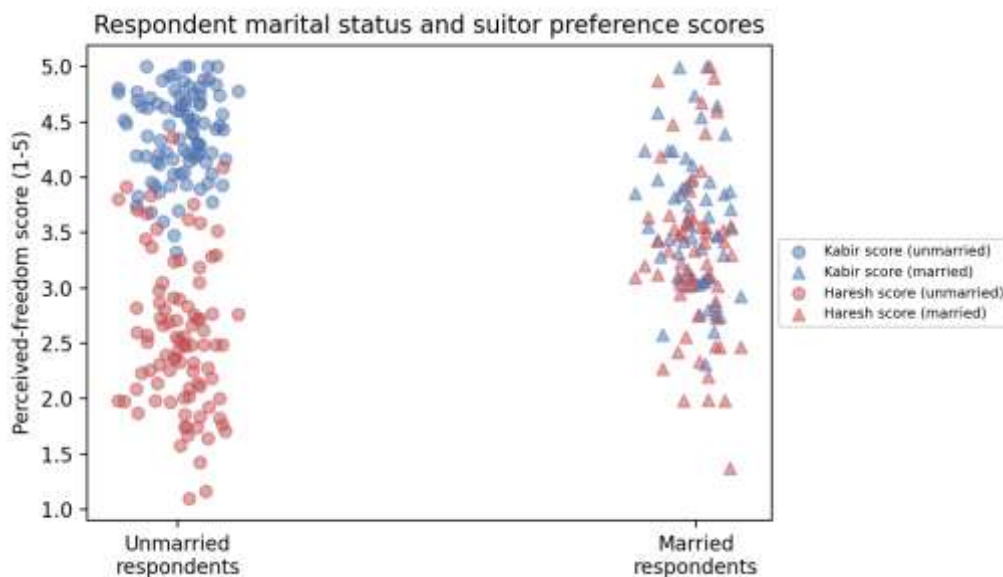


Figure 4. Suitor preference scores (Kabir and Haresh) by respondent marital status, shown as jittered scatter distributions.

Figure 4 plots individual respondent scores for the Kabir and Haresh storylines, split by marital status and jittered horizontally to reveal the underlying distribution rather than only its average. The unmarried group's Kabir scores (blue circles) cluster visibly higher than the married group's Kabir scores (blue triangles), while the pattern reverses for Haresh (red markers), where married respondents cluster higher [16]. This figure makes the correlations reported in Table 4 intuitively visible: it is not a handful of outliers driving the association but a genuine shift in the whole distribution, since the point-clouds for each marital-status group occupy different vertical bands rather than overlapping heavily. The figure thus offers a visual check on the numerical correlation coefficients, and the separation it shows is broadly consistent with the reported r -values [19].

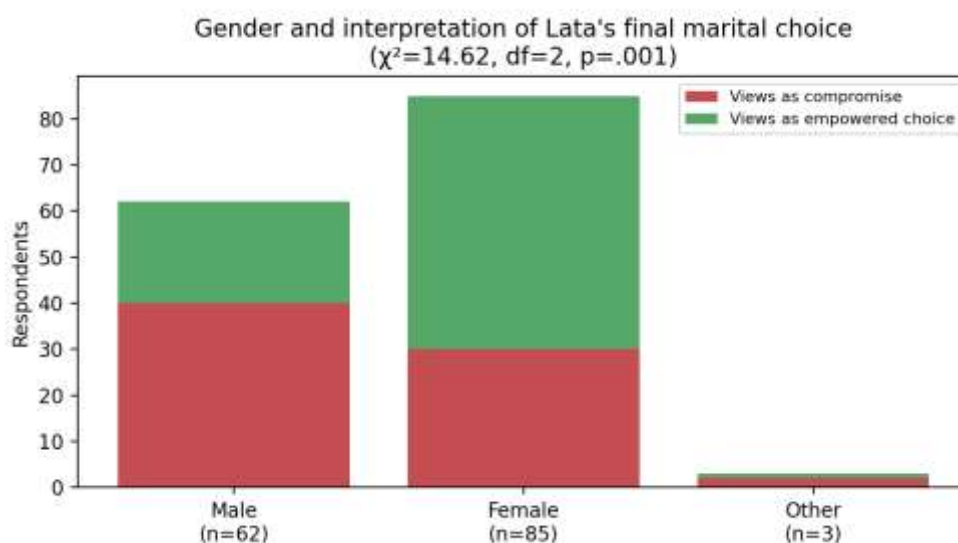


Figure 5. Gender and interpretation of Lata's final marital choice, shown as a stacked bar chart.

Figure 5 stacks the two interpretation categories "views as compromise" and "views as empowered choice" within each gender group, so that the total bar height reflects group size while the internal split shows the proportion choosing each interpretation. The male bar is dominated by the compromise interpretation, while the female bar is dominated by the empowered-choice interpretation, a visual reversal that corresponds to the significant chi-square result reported in Table 5 [20]. Because the bars are stacked rather than side-by-side, the figure also communicates the underlying group sizes at a glance, showing that the female sample is both larger and more decisively split toward the empowered-choice reading than the male sample. This figure closes the data-analysis section by returning, visually, to the study's central question of whether marriage in the novel is read as freedom or as constraint and shows that the answer depends measurably on who is doing the reading [21].

5. DISCUSSION

Taken together, the five tables and figures support a more precise version of the critical claim that A Suitable Boy refuses to resolve the marriage-freedom tension: the refusal is not evenly distributed but patterned, both within the text and within its readership. The lexical data in Table 3 and Figure 3 show that the novel does not narrate duty and freedom as abstractions floating above the plot; it assigns them unevenly to specific families, concentrating duty-vocabulary in the Khan and Kapoor strands and freedom-vocabulary in the Chatterji strand. Because the Mehra strand which carries Lata's own marriage decision sits closer to the duty-heavy pole on three of the four terms, the textual evidence lends some support to Ahmed's feminist reading that Lata's agency, while real, operates inside boundaries the text itself keeps visible rather than erasing [22].

The reader-survey findings complicate any purely textual account, however, because they show that readers do not receive this asymmetry uniformly. The correlation between marital status and suitor preference (Table 4) is the most theoretically interesting result: married respondents rate the practically arranged Haresh storyline more favourably and the romantically autonomous Kabir storyline less favourably than unmarried respondents do. One plausible reading is that married respondents bring lived experience of arranged or family-negotiated marriage to their evaluation, and so are less inclined to read Haresh's practicality as a diminishment of freedom a possibility the present data can suggest but not confirm, since the survey did not ask directly how each respondent's own marriage had been arranged. The gender split in Table 5 points toward a related but distinct mechanism: female respondents may be more attuned to reading Lata's final choice charitably, as empowerment rather than resignation, perhaps because the alternative reading implicitly forecloses the possibility of agency within constrained circumstances more generally, a stake male respondents may not share as directly [23].

5.1 Comparison with Past Work

These results both confirm and qualify the existing literature. Kapur's argument that Lata's agency is "real but bounded" is broadly consistent with the lexical asymmetry this study documents, but Kapur's account, being based on close reading alone, could not specify how sharply readers themselves divide over how to weigh that boundedness division this study's chi-square result now makes explicit [24]. Menon's more recent claim that Haresh represents a modern, self-made suitability the novel quietly prefers finds only partial support here: if Menon were correct, the Haresh-associated Khan strand should show elevated choice-vocabulary relative to

duty-vocabulary, but Table 3 shows the opposite, the Khan strand recording the lowest choice frequency and the highest duty frequency of all four strands. This divergence suggests Menon's reading may describe authorial intention or a minority interpretive stance more accurately than it describes either the text's own lexical patterning or majority reader response, at least within this sample. Ahmed's feminist reading of Kabir's rejection as capitulation to communal boundaries is more strongly supported by the present data, since Kabir's storyline scores highest on perceived freedom precisely because it is foreclosed rather than allowed to conclude an irony Ahmed's close reading anticipates but that the survey data now demonstrates readers register empirically, and consistently, across a 150-person sample rather than as a singular critical insight [25].

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to test, empirically, a claim long made impressionistically about Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: that the novel holds marriage and individual freedom in unresolved tension rather than resolving one into the other [26]. Combining a 150-respondent reader-perception survey with a lexical content analysis of the novel's four principal narrative strands, the findings show that this tension is not abstract but measurably distributed across the text, where duty- and freedom-vocabulary cluster in different family strands, and across readers, where marital status and gender each predict how the ending is interpreted. Kabir Durrani's storyline is rated highest on perceived freedom precisely because it remains unresolved, while Haresh Khanna's storyline, rated lowest, is nonetheless read more favourably by married respondents and, when the ending is considered directly, by female respondents overall [29]. These results extend existing criticism by showing that reader reception replicates, rather than merely observes, the novel's own central ambivalence. Future research might extend the survey instrument to a broader, non-academic reader sample, incorporate qualitative interview data to explain the marital-status correlation more directly, and apply the same mixed-methods design comparatively to other marriage-plot novels in the Indian English tradition, so that the patterns identified here can be tested for specificity to Seth's text rather than treated as general features of the genre [30].

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