

A Psychoanalytic Study of Vikram Seth's the Golden Gate and a Suitable Boy

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Abstract:

Vikram Seth explores the psyche of human beings through the characters in his novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*. He innovated the psyche of John Brown and Lata Mehra as the characters who are affected seriously in their life and their mind is in search of real identity. The novel GG is made up of a sequence of nearly six hundred sonnets in iambic tetrameter over thirteen chapters, with the Acknowledgements, Dedication and a Charming contents list, all in perfect octosyllabic sonnets. John Brown is a successful computer scientist, and an erudite man who reads Donne's Sermons of his evening's pleasures and works for a software company linked to nuclear arms. He is healthy and handsome but finds himself unaccountably sad and lonely. It also reveals that, physical passion and the mental stress hardly leaves any breathing space between the lovers, which are essential for a successful and lasting relationship. Seth also presents homosexual love underscores the barrenness of a society. He implies that when relationship will undergo deterioration due to loss of values, the result could be guilt-ridden people, indulging in malformed relationships. The novel SB depicts the middle class, Northern India milieu. Each of the characters seems too familiar to Indian traditional ways they are the representative of how religion, cast, class and secular values deals in the contemporary society

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INTRODUCTION

THE GOLDEN GATE

The Golden Gate occupies the watershed position in Vikram Seth's life. The inspiration for the novel was Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. After reading *Onegin*, Seth realized that he had found a medium for the story he had been wanting to tell about California. The basic theme of the novel was provided by a lunch meeting with a friend, a Japanese-American woman. Their discussion of their then rather unsuccessful love lives became the opening scene of *The Golden Gate*. The theme of the novel is one of the classic materials of all comedy / man's search for love / and the various mishaps that befall him in the course of that search, although the rest of the novel leads

less to the traditional comic ending, than to surprising sadness. The novel began from this relatively simple inception and steadily enlarges in scope as it becomes a bittersweet love story, a wickedly funny novel of manners, and an unsentimental meditation on morality and the nuclear abyss.

The title Seth has chosen is of special import, because the name *The Golden Gate* Bridge captures the quintessence of modern California. It stands as a defining feature of America's west coast, just as the Statue of Liberty is the defining feature of the eastern one. In the novel, Seth uses the bridge to indicate the setting of his tale, and the identifying landmark of San Francisco. The humor in the novel is predominantly of this kind, the

humor of situation coupled with the somewhat endearing neuroticism of the characters. The replies that John gets in response to his advertisement, his description of the mess that is his life, Charlemagne's campaign to oust John from his domain and John's mounting helplessness, Ed and his pet iguana, even the description of John and Liz in the first flush of love: all these episodes provide Seth with an opportunity to display his wit, and make the novel irresistibly funny.

Seth also takes a close look at the institution of marriage. The ideal marriages presented in the novel are those of Janet's parents and Liz's parents. Both these marriages are based on old world values, with both spouses committed to one another and to their respective families. In stark contrast is the marriage of Phil with Claire and the relationship between John and Liz. On the other hand Phil and Liz succeed in maintain a relationship chiefly because they have learnt a lesson from their previous relationships. The novel becomes a bildungsroman as it traces the growth of John from his childish, petulant phase to a maturity and an acceptance of life.

The novel both begins and ends with John alone, but in the course of the tale John comes some way towards understanding and tolerance, recognizing the value of such mundane institutions as friendship and marriage. The bildungsroman thus maps the journey of John from stumbling blindness to self discovery. Seth makes all the characters, and most of all John, recognize that money, power, or any such worldly standards must not become ends in themselves. Seth is a conscious and an intelligent writer. He wrote medium sized novels using 'verse form' and interior monologue respectively for the two novels, *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*; verse form was to show the fast life of Californians and for a dull, lugubrious life

of western classical musicians, he gave appropriate prose form.

Seth chooses the sonnet sequence for his novel to describe California and its people. In the novel he has depicted a range of loves which are possible and acceptable in a modern metropolis evincing unique culture and lifestyle. The characters' attitudes to love reveal their attitudes of life, to issues that are 'outside' or beyond the 'private' question of romantic or sexual love. In *The Golden Gate*, John Brown represents Eugene who is unable to respond to Janet Albeit Tatyana when there was time for them to have future together; it only brings out Johns' weak and self-indulgent nature. The various choices made by the different characters in *The Golden Gate* represents their ability or inability to lead personally happy or fulfilling lives.

John and Ed, Seth's heroes become conscious of the complexes within them on this bridge and are later purged of their pain, anxiety and self-love. John too visits it in the beginning of the novel when he is more imperfect and confused, he revisits it when he is in abject pain at the death of his beloved and the bridge becomes a metaphor of peace and though unseen, it becomes a metaphysical power that ennobles John during his tragedy while Ed succeeds in achieving a spiritual uplifting of mind and soul. Janet Hayakawa, a Japanese immigrant, is single and like John, indulges in her job excessively and plays the drum to assuage her loneliness. Similar contrasting images are evidenced in her characters; 'stress and pleasure', toil and leisure' have been coined together to describe Janet's routine. Janet stresses and toils in order to get leisure and pleasure; a stark irony of cosmopolitan life is evinced here.

Liz represents the unfeminine, modern women. However, she is simple, candid humble and intelligent, the hallmark

of the wise and prudent person who can establish the right values for others to emulate. Her brother Ed, too is a successful professional. But he is unable to resolve his personal contradiction vis-a vis his catholic beliefs and his homosexual performances. The cats, Iguana Schwarzenegger and Cuff and Link are an important extension of the guilt-ridden male characters representing their existential anguish. He is like his keeper, Ed, a weak person from inside. Liz, the main heroine shares a very special and an unusual relation with her cat, Charlemagne.

John and Liz are apparently in love. But being complex and weak, John poses certain problems to Liz. Since he lacks compassion and understanding, he becomes intolerant towards Charlemagne. His insensitivity to Charlemagne is a serious lapse, perhaps more serious than his insensitivity to the 'gay' relation of Ed and Phil. Liz cannot overlook this fact and is seriously monitoring John's actions and reactions as a life partner. John, on other hand has to face the consequences of his intolerance, impetuosity and impulsiveness. He is not able to understand the basic fact that ages after ages, man will keep on making efforts to be sensible and free from human weakness. Liz suggests that love makes a person helpless, dependent and a handicap. The lover becomes as incapacitated as a drug addict or as a lame person on crutches.

John obviously is a loser; dejected and desolate. He feels insulted. Seth manages to incorporate all the harsh facts of life with great craftsmanship; not even a single reference remains an ordinary one. The novel ends satisfactorily. A healthy nine pound baby is born to Liz and Phil. A large – hearted and compassionate couple that they are, they accommodate willingly Matt and Joan's son Chuck, Paul (Phil's son),

Janet's Cuff and Link, and Liz's Charlemagne. Having overcome his timidity, Ed is adamant on standing on his own feet. Interestingly, the baby is as healthy the fertile, complete family of Phil and Liz. Both suggest to John that he should be their son's godfather and name the baby 'John'. The novel ends at a positive note. John decides to pay his heart's arrears by resuming friendship with the two.

A SUITABLE BOY

A Suitable Boy in every way assumes the form of a realist novel of Seth takes great pains to give exact documentation to get the facts right in depicting India in the true sense in its fifties and the popularity of the novel till today does establish its appeal that great classic writers have earned for themselves. Seth took nine long years to complete this novel. A long preparation went into the conception of this magnum opus. No wonder the novel was an outright success. It made a history of its kind, just as the author had made in his prolific career. Like Austen, Seth intends to uphold the restrictions imposed on women in the patriarchal society regarding stereotypical notions of the masculine and the feminine.

The main strand of the story like Austen's is the search of a groom for not five but one eligible daughter. Yet, the problem of Mrs. Rupa Mehra is far more complex and complicated than that of Mrs. Bennett as the Indian society is multi-layered and complex. In *A Suitable Boy*, Lata is a victim of this patriarchal society in 1950s that presupposed a similar marriage market where she can attract bidders. She is in a more vulnerable state as she has lost her father, Mr. Raghubir Mehra, Chairman of the Railway Board, and as rightly pointed out by Arun, her brother that had their father been alive, it would have brought a constellation of brilliant matches for the daughters. Arun was not happy even with

the elder sister, Savita's marriage, who has been married to Pran, Mr. Mahesh Kapoor's son who is just a small provincial town minister.

During the marriage of Savita, Mrs Mehra cautions Lata that she too is going to marry the boy she would choose for her. Lata, the main protagonist of the novel however, is not pliable. She is unable to visualize how Savita, her sister could decide to marry Pran whom she had met only for an hour and that, too, in her mother's presence. Lata fails to understand how she could sleep with a man who was a complete stranger to her. To her the whole idea was unromantic. For the readers, the struggle and the conflict becomes amusing as well as an enlightening issue as all through the novel, Seth ironically hints at the social aberrations present in the middle class society that inevitably makes marriage, an institution that has taken an ugly form, owing to dowry harassments and deaths.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra's plight is indeed unfortunate, and by making her appear boorish and foolish, Seth has tried to disguise the crude facts of life that are too serious to be ignored. But Seth, the ingenious writer makes us laugh at her in instances like, she regrets that she cannot wear colourful saris she gobbles up compliments like the gulabjamuns, as she is a diabetic. The social taboos imposed on windows has nevertheless been implied which has been likened to other restrictions like she should not also abstain from sweets. Seth suggests the hypocrisy of our society that forever wants to keep women subjugated to man. A similar implication is given through the fact that many women don't have first names; even Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and Mrs. Agarwal don't have first name only have surnames.

Lata's marriage evinces two main problems which are essentially Indian; one

is the looks of the girl, and as already indicated, the status of the family which presupposes economic and social situation. Lata is deficient in both the aspects. Lata falls in love with a Muslim boy, Kabir Durrani; but the courtship stops sooner than it begins because the cautious mother takes charge of the situation immediately. Lata, understanding the encumbrances and visualizing the impossibility of their relationship going any further makes things very clear to Kabir. Art Kabir's insistence that she should wait for him for two years until he got employed. Lata knows quite well that it would be too difficult for her mother to accept Kabir who was neither of their caste nor was he employed.

Moreover, Seth does not seem to approve of Kabir as a suitable boy for Lata as he is not decisive. Instead of taking the problem as a challenge he simply quits. Seth quite subtly points to Kabir's weakness, like Austen. Displaying his genius at story-telling, Seth grounds his narrative in some of the most important social and political issues of the day. Regarding the quest for love, Seth holds fast to his earlier philosophy, seemingly advocating that a level headed commitment is more enduring than youth's dreams of passion. *A Suitable Boy* presents its characters with many choices most of them dark and heavy. Maan has to choose between Saeeda Bai and his father's reputation, Lata has to choose between the first love of her life (Kabir) and her mother's happiness.

Seth's use of language in the novel is also unique, because *A Suitable Boy* is the only work in Seth's canon that occasions an examination of language. All Seth's other works employ flawless English, but with such an Indian subject, a tale written in unadulterated English would perhaps not have been so convincing, apart from being less apposite as well. Seth's style in this

novel involves conjuring up a brilliant sense of the comic, evident especially when he writes about the Chatterjees and their circle. From the conversation to the landscaping, from the rich splendor of Saeeda Bai's chambers to the rustic simplicity of Rasheed's household, from the Chatterjee mansion to Mrs. Rupa Mehra's annual rail pilgrimage, there is no doubt whatsoever in the reader's mind that things are exactly as Seth portrays them. Seth takes great pleasure in describing what he sees, and he has the knack to see straight to salient feature, or conversely, to its absurdity.

CONCLUSION

Vikram Seth's work is housed in a variety of eclectic and traditional forms and location of his prose and poetry move across the world, making literary homes of distant land and cultures. About homosexual concern Seth implies that when relationship will undergo deterioration due to loss of values. The result could be guilt-ridden people, indulging in malformed relationships. While concluding Vikram Seth's fiction, we can see that the central motif in both *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* is the quest for a companionship in life.

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