

Social Realism in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*

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Abstract: *The Golden Gate*, follow the lives and exploits of a group of young Americans living in the 1980s it also portrays the empty promises of life. *The Golden Gate* is a true novel, as author and publisher insist. A novel with a feel of Realism, written in a verse form, and it conducts us on a psychological journey through the life of five interesting souls. Upwardly mobile young professionals, they all live and work in San Francisco and the Silicon Valley, with no awareness of the outside world. Cosmopolitanism or the impact of cosmopolitan lifestyle upon the individual have been dealt with in great detail. Seth's verse novel, *The Golden Gate* superbly sticks to canons of Realism in an explicit way. The novel follows a linear pattern of narration, splendid characterization, and it is adorned with a plot of plausible and truthful nature. Seth's unique social concern truthfully portrays the angst of the hypermodern American society with prophetic insights imbued with powerful observation.

Key words: Realism, Cosmopolitanism, American society, social concern.

The Golden Gate, is a novel that brings about and portrays in a broader light, the realities of the world, and makes not only the characters in the novel to understand it, but

also create an awareness among its readers, which many writers fail to mention in their works. The realization that these novels are based on real events and happenings and their ultimate state, brings about a state of rejuvenation, happiness and the presence of goodness, happiness and a spirit of humanity among the readers. Writers who speak about partition problems, brings about the subjugation and horrors faced by the people residing in that area. Right from Cheran, who speaks about the Srilankan – Tamil crisis, to Darwish, when he speaks about the happenings in Palestine to Agha Shahid Ali, who suffers from the dislocation of his homeland, Kashmir. All these writers have spoken about the horrors of their homelands. The physical violence accompanied by epistemic violence find an important place in their works. The religious madness with racial hatred and most importantly, the Politics has transformed man into beast when human value is recklessly thrown to dust. But the greater quality of humanity and love have been maintained through the ages even after instances of crisis.

The novel deals with personal relations, love, loss and morality. It also presents an acuteness and delicacy of perception as well as a humourous, compassionate and a very healthy understanding of human being. The difference in generations is also seen in the novel. But this difference is doesn't means conflict but it is in terms of stances and desires. Seth deals with two kinds of living, feeling and thinking the older and the modern. He also contrasts sometimes the crippling freedom This watermark does not appear in the the post-modern period with the old monogamous love between sexes which has become now a part of a rosy past. The novel encompasses all the important facets of human life: love, marriage, birth and death. Seth while exploring these vital issues, throws light on the problems of the affluent societies of the west, particularly the

Americans. These problems are unhappy marriages, broken homes, single parenthood, divorce and homosexuality. But India, which is supposed to be a comparatively conservative society hasn't remained untouched by these problems. Unhappy marriages, broken homes, homosexuality etc. are no longer taboo in our country. They are gradually coming in light and are bringing along with them an awareness and acceptance. Globalization, economic liberalization and a growing multinational culture as well as the availability of jobs and opportunities in Indian Urban centers have given birth to a lifestyle which worships material consumerism, comfort and freedom.

Cosmopolitanism is a concept more prominent in the western countries, and can be defined as a bond that brings together different people, different cultures, different religions, different languages as one in a cosmopolitan city. This city provides you with almost everything of the western culture and makes the individual think of it as his own. Fougere de Montbron in his 1753 autobiographical report, *Le Cosmopolite*, calls himself a cosmopolitan, declaring "All the countries are the same to me" and "[I am] changing my places of residence according to my whim" (130). Karl Marx and Engels regarded Cosmopolitanism as the direct reflection of Capitalism. To them, Capitalism was directly linked to capitalistic globalization, which led to the adverse growth of some, which is the businessmen and indirectly affected and exploited the livelihood of the poor and the needy. In the novel, *The Golden Gate*, Seth spares no effort to portray the Californian lifestyle.

Socializing is something in the traditional, indigenous families in India as they always lived as a group and had the back of one another in any circumstances. But, in a Cosmopolitan city, one can witness socializing events such as housewarming parties,

winemaking picnics, a variety of clubs and so on. The people residing in these places share exclusive relationships with their pets. A child, before the advent of a more sophisticated live style is known to spend its time in the farm, hunting, playing some sort of outdoor games, as a result of which stayed healthy, while a child's pastime in the present era ranges from watching movies, importantly animated movies, playing technologically developed games, listening to some music bands performing and so on. Cartoons are also prevalent in the era. In the novel, the reference to a well – known cat, Gartfield is found, “Gartfield, that egregious cat, /Grows daily larger and more fat.”(38). Another incident also find its place. Two characters in the novel, Phil and Liz discuss the relative merits of the cartoon characters, Tin Tin and Asterix: “Haddock, Gorgonzola, Wagg, Moon rockets, grog, Red Rackham swag.” (26). Advertisements play an important role a cosmopolitan society. Billboards and holdings can either be harmful as well as useful. John Brown, one of the characters in the novel talks about the slogans conveyed in a satirical manner, “Honk for Jesus” and “to hug your whale today”.

With the advent of Consumerism and Cosmopolitanism, the phenomenon of young mobile professional and The DINK(Double Income No Kids) couple is no longer culture specific to USA alone, as it had spread to almost all its consumer markets and even it has become a trend to be followed.

Matt and Joan Lamont claim they'll devote
Their lives once they've retired at forty
To birds and orchids (29).

Yuppie, According to the Urban dictionary, is the term used to describe someone who is young, possibly just out of college, and who has a high-paying job and an affluent

lifestyle. It can also be used to describe any rich person who is not modest about their financial status. Yuppie, can be found only in the capitalistic society, where the individual is paid more in a less time and he doesn't know how to take the sudden growth. The crisis of Yuppies is now also to be found in Indian metropolitan cities. In the Golden Gate, the young John Brown moans to himself:

I'm young, employed, healthy, ambitious.
Sound solvent, self – made, self – possessed.
but all my symptoms are pemicious
The Dow Jones of my heart's depressed.(12).

With the emergence in the recent years of a homogenization of the consumerist cultural preferences among the Indian upper – middle class, the spiritual – malaise and social blight that Seth is concerned is no longer restricted to the behavior of just a handful of people, while the others are made slaves to consumerism.

In the opening stanza of chapter one, Seth gives us the exact time, place and persons of the novel which is largely fictional than poetic. So, Seth Says, in 1980 there lived a man called John Brown, who is a computer scientist working for a software company linked to nuclear arms. Seth gives us a picture of John through perfect detailing:

John's looks are good.
His dress is formal, His voice is low.
His mind is sound. His appetite for work's abnormal
A plastic name tag hangs around His collar like votive necklace.
Though well-paid, he is far from reckless,

Pays his rent promptly, jogs, does not
Smoke cigarettes, and rarely pot, Eschews both church and heavy drinking
(4).

There are five central protagonists in the novel. Each of them, “is defined within the parameters of profession, personal ethics, eccentricities, and family and social connections” (Misra, 15). Each come from different background, different cities, different professions, yet they exist in the same society, making them the perfect example for what it means by a Cosmopolitan life. John Brown is a successful but lonely computer engineer in Silicon Valley. John is employed in a high – tech computer and works in the area of nuclear research. A workaholic, John “kneels bareheaded and unshod / before the chip, a jealous God”. He follows conservative policies, just like any other employee in a cosmopolitan setup. He does not question the ideological apparatus that constructs his consciousness. He could not be considered as an ideal co – opted subject.

He chooses to ignore what can't hurt him;
some things are his concern, some not.
His politics have strongly, slowly,
Rigidified. (14).

However, the author portrays the trauma and pain experienced by John in his childhood. His present state is better compared to his previous state:

It's a reflection, in a sense,
Of a rigidity deeper – seat.
A bit of an emotional waif

Since, a small boy, he used to chafe,
Against the fate that he'd been meted,
The mother's love he'd never had.
He clung to "standards" good or bad (2.14).

There is indeed nothing heroic or godly about John as he represents the common aberrations of common person in the fast-paced rural, cosmopolitan society evident not only in California but also in everywhere. It is the same sordid tale of the ambitious but an unhappy man of today. He is respected for his professional acumen as he has risen in his job at a very early age, but he is lonely, the antithesis in 'respected' and 'lonely' is unmistakable. It serves to heighten the theme of 'existential anguish'. Regarding the term 'existential anguish', the critic Ashok K. Jha comments that *The Golden Gate* acts, "As a phenomenological preoccupation with the state of whole society obtaining in the behaviour of a handful of people. Such a preoccupation is existential rather than ideological in a narrow extent." (62)

It implies that John's anguish and loneliness is universal as symbolized by Californian life, John has to fight for his happiness and existence, learn about his follies and accept his fate. He is indeed alone in such a world where no one can look up to someone for guidance and for spiritual sustenance.

Janet Hawakaya is of Japanese descent and the only 'ethnic' character in the text. John's girlfriend in the past, she becomes his confidant. She is a sculptor and a drummer in the band Liquid Sheep. Janet plays an important role in the novel. Janet strives so hard towards a possible re-conditioning of John's narrow perspectives. At a stage she is portrayed as the voice of liberal ideas and of women, as she reacts angrily against John's

sexist remarks on women by reprimand him for his narrow mind and intolerance of women and Gays.

Johny Boy, your mind needs cleaning
Of the debris of prejudice (1.33)

Janet's works haven't got the desired critical acclaim she desires and the critics' common nose sniff magisterially at her shows' (9). Seth makes fun of the heartless and brainless art critics in the following lines:

“With smooth and blinkered savagery,
Servile and shave, obsessed by fashion,
These chickenhearted chickenshits
Jerk off their weak and venomous wits” (10).

Seth presents Janet as an average second generation Japanese American. So she has her pet cats Cuff and Link which 'have fish to eat and cream to drink' (11).

Liz Dorati is a Law school attorney, from the family of Italian immigrant Vine – growers. John and Liz share a short lived attraction which is soon destroyed by personal prejudice, politics and a pet cat called 'Charlemagne'. She is portrayed as a revolutionary in the novel. In accordance to Newton's third law, if there is something going on, there will be for sure a few to revolt against it. Liz attends the anti – nuclear protests and speaks eloquently against the Lungless labs and nuclear bombs. She goes to the extent of being the lawyer for the protestors, and makes a spirited defence in the court.

Phil, John's former roommate was once a nuclear engineer in Datatronics and somewhat of a computer wizard, his moral vision compels him to opt of the cosmopolitan setup, and to devote himself as anti – nuke movement as a 'peacenik'. He has a six year old son called Paul, and is another victim of depression and trauma which happened as a result his wife leaving him for another man. What Phil yearns for the present is,

To live
Without this emptiness – to give
A little love, to get a little (9.35).

The sentimentality that characterizes John engulfs Phil also. He is divorced from Claire; and live with his son. The father-son duo make a melancholic note; Phil sometimes remembers his ex-wife and her habits. When Paul demands a spider, as a pet, Phil remembers his wife:

“Why rabbits, Dad?” “They make great pets.

Your mother used to like...” Phil falters,

Halts in mid-utterance and alters

What he had meant to say (75)

Phil has a unnatural relationship or a Gay relationship with Liz's brother Ed, but he eventually marries Liz.

Ed Dorati is a twenty three year old, “intense, athletic / silent” (4.24), caught in a dilemma between his religious duties and his natural homosexual preferences. He shares a

tender relationship with Phil, but is unable to grapple with feelings of guilt, a consequence of his catholic upbringing.

Seth ingeniously brings his self-portrait during the course of narration. In the party hosted by John and Liz for their house warming, Kim Tarvesh (an anagram of Vikram Seth) makes a fleeting appearance as a research student among the guests:

While, bowed down with gray futility

Of his dank thesis, Kim Tarvesh

Ogles convexities of flesh

And maximizes his utility

By drowning in his chilled Chablis

His economic Ph.D (101).

Seth maintains linear narration throughout the text which strengthens the realist characteristics of the novel. John is a representative of the power mongering, techno savvy impatient youth, who are lured by the promises of the Silicon Valley. During their College days, John and his Berkeley friends used to have 'beery jokes and fights' amidst their pursuit for grades and knowledge. But in the Silicon Valley 'files takes precedence over friends and labour is lauded at the cost of riven leisures'. Seth faithfully picturises the contemporary reality of American youths who are behind power and money and, their resultant despair and loneliness.

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