

## Vikram Seth's Journey through the Golden Gate

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### Abstract

Encircling the central theme of those typical classic resources of all comedy, the novel, *The Golden Gate*, chases a man's dream for love and the countless misfortunes that transpire him during his exploration. Commencing with a comparatively simple beginning the novel gradually enlarges in scope as it targets the bittersweet love story but subsequently becomes an amusing novel of manners as well as an uncompromising contemplation on ethics and the nuclear abyss. Vikram Seth eliminates the restrictions that are constructed in most modern societies between the public and the private by inquiring and then enlightening a person's preferences in love and in life. With the story of John Brown who wonders and observes uncomfortably that although he is trapped in a vacuum, the world around him moves by smoothly and thus life passes by him without knocking at the void he is into, Seth exposes the pain of isolation and loneliness. The elementary theme of this poetic novel is that of seclusion and separation although Seth has touched upon the various maladies afflicting the modern society like intrinsic egocentricity, obstinate refusal of individual attachment, the confining and non-sharing attitude and many more such problems which confront the contemporary modern urban society.

**KEYWORDS** –contemporary, seclusion, homosexuality, modernization, nuclear warfare, independent woman

Vikram Seth (born 20<sup>th</sup> June 1952), one of the prominent Indian English novelists and poets, received his primary education at Welham Boy's School after which he moved to Doon School and then, later, to Tonbridge School, London. He then stimulated on to study English at Oxford but soon changed his track to Philosophy, Economics and Politics and his college to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Here he developed an interest in poetry and started learning Chinese as well. Having received his graduation degree in Economics from Stanford University, California, he continued his mission of learning through creative writing at Stanford and Classical Chinese poetry at Nanjing University, China. With his extraordinary but extremely unique combination of Economics, Politics, Philosophy and Poetry, he captured the modern outlook of novelty and passion, consciousness and eloquence. He has received many prizes and awards, including the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1988 for **The Golden Gate** and Padma Shree in Literature and Education in 2007.

His first novel **The Golden Gate** (1986) is a novel in verse and deals with the lives of a number of professionals in San Francisco and encloses a powerful component of demonstrative satire. But it was actually **From Heaven Lake** (1987), the story of his remarkable journey and his encounters with Nomadic Muslims, Chinese officials, Buddhists and others, was his first extensively published book and a magnificent work that shoved him into limelight. His second novel, **A Suitable Boy** (1993), is a four-family chronicle positioned in post-independence post-partition India and sarcastically and sincerely scrutinizes topics related to nationwide political affairs, the status of lower caste people, hostility among cults and fractions, land reform and the disappearance of the feudal princes and landlords, inter and intra family associations,

academic affairs and many more such concerns of magnitude. His third novel, **An Equal Music** (1999), is located in contemporary Europe and focuses on the personal and social lives of classical musicians and their enigmatic music. On the other hand, **Two Lives** (2005) is a non-fiction family version concentrating on the lives and livings of his great-uncle and German-Jewish great-aunt with whom Seth stayed for quite some time when he was in England. **The Revered Earth**, consisting of four libretti, was published in 2011. Apart from the novels and memoirs he has also published volumes of poetry of which his first collection, **Mappings** (1980) deserve great attention. He has continued to generate volumes of poetry at intermissions, including translations of Chinese poets.

Seth has published five volumes of poetry – **Mappings** (1980), was originally privately published and it attracted little attention and it was even scornfully referred to by Philip Larkin, to whom he had sent it for a comment, though he offered great encouragement to Seth. In 2009 Seth contributed four poems to Oxfam which are used as introductions to each of the four collections of UK stories which form Oxfam's 'Ox-Tales' book project. **The Golden Gate**, which can be considered as his sixth volume, is a novel in verse which is composed of 590 Onegin stanzas (sonnets written in iambic tetrameter, with the rhyme scheme following the usual aBaBccDDeFFeGG pattern of Eugene Onegin) where the lowercase letters represent feminine rhymes and the uppercase represent masculine rhymes. The central theme of the novel is one of those typical classic resources of all comedy – man's chase for love and the innumerable cataclysms that occur to him during his exploration. Beginning with a comparatively simple inception the novel gradually expands in scope as it aims the bittersweet love story but consequently becomes a hilarious novel of manners as well as an uncompromising contemplation on ethics and the nuclear abyss. Seth eliminates the restrictions that are constructed in most modern societies between the public and the private by inquiring and then enlightening a person's preferences in love and in life.

John Brown, the hero of the verse novel, is a Silicon Valley computer professional whose exceedingly triumphant career stands as an appalling contrast to his private and undesirable life. In the beginning of the novel he is hit by a frisbee while taking a walk and his imagination overlaps the normal thinking mind-set of a person –

He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?  
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?  
Would anybody?" (p. 3)

This depressing reflection usually is not the result of any self-pity that John desires for, neither is it usually the approach that people have during such insignificant times; it is just a hardhearted assessment of the conditions and circumstances in the world in and around John. He knows that he is considered as a poignant insignificant person and nobody involves him beyond his work and this realization incites pain and passion within him. Underneath his frivolling adventures and his superficial fierceness, he too has the basic human desire to be loved by someone which the world doesn't comprehend. Uncomfortably does he observe that although he is trapped in a vacuum, the world around him moves by smoothly and thus life passes by him without knocking at the void he is into. The feeling of isolation and loneliness is so strong in him that it generates a sense of compassion and concern for the forlorn man –

A linkless node, no spouse or sibling,  
No children – John wanders alone  
Into an ice cream parlor. (p. 6)

John fails to get consolation from anything around him – neither the books nor the music, neither the surrounding nor anything that had amused him earlier. Liberals, bisexuals, homosexuals or anything that even vaguely concerns a little bit of judgment infuriates him from the core of his heart. The only lady in his life is Janet Hayakawa, a charming and funky sculptor and a drummer, the former lovers who have mutually approved to set aside their love story as it was encouraged by a phobic coercion to circumvent an enduring relationship. The two share a very special kind of friendship which is obviously devoid of any kind of personal passion –

A standing truce  
Shelters their friendship from all passion.  
They'd felt their union would constrict  
Their separate lives. As interdict  
Agreed by both, after a fashion  
They went about their singular ways,  
Slaves to the Chip or artist's daze. (p. 8)

John decides to talk and share about his lonely cumbersome life with Janet and so they meet for lunch where John ejects out his grievances to her. Coming to terms with John's complaints Janet apprehends that the therapy lies in administrating a stable and compatible relationship. When she pronounces this remedy to John and recommends him to advertise for a credible life-partner, John is taken aback by shock and dismay and clearly asserts that he can never degrade himself in this inappropriate manner. However, he fails to convince Janet and the lady takes the matter into her own fold as a result of which a torrent of letters start arriving at John's place. Although John selects three from the heap nothing materializes and finally he selects another one, Elizabeth Dorati, from the later arrivals. The two meet and fall for each other instantly –

They look, half smiling, at each other,  
Half puzzled too, as if to say,  
"I don't know why I feel this way." (p. 42)

The focus of the story then shifts to Phil Weiss, a college friend of John and a computer expert who has given up his promising profession in nuclear science to become an environmentalist. Having separated from his wife Claire he has taken up the responsibility of raising his son, Paul, all alone. Unexpectedly, out of luck and chance, he comes across John and Liz in a music concert, in which Liz's sister Sue is one of the performers. Their association is renewed and as a treat Phil is invited to attend the house-warming party of John and Liz. In the party, Phil meets Liz's brother, Ed, and they both indulge in a homosexual relationship. But their connection is beleaguered by hesitation and refutation as Ed feels culpable about it on moral grounds –

### They lapse

Into a bitter silence. Gilding  
The great bowl of a churchyard oak  
The angled sun now shifts to soak  
With liquid light Ed's office building,  
Near which, with nothing more to say,  
The two shake hands and turn away. (p. 99)

In the meanwhile, situations have changed in the lives of John and Liz as well and problems crop up more than affection. On the one hand, Liz's cat, Charlemagne, abominates John with retaliation and makes his life completely wretched; Liz is not ready to part with the cat even for the sake of John. This very clearly indicates the superficiality and abnormality of their relationship and hints at the consequences that might arise. On the other hand, although Liz has accepted the relationship of her brother and Phil which she had come to know, John is quite against it and he becomes dismayed and hypercritical and breaks-off all contact with Phil. The situation becomes so grave that when John and Liz are holidaying at Liz's parent's place and John proposes to Liz, she does not instantaneously accept, contrary to the expectations of John. This not only surprises John but hurts his instincts as well, but as a devoted and responsible lover he decides to give Liz some more time to come to a constructive conclusion. But later, to his dismay, he sees a letter from Phil in Liz's hand which forces him to abruptly conclude that Liz is dishonest and is cheating on him. He becomes so infuriated that he immediately terminates his relationship with Liz. Liz and Phil get married and, strange enough, they marry not because they are in love with each other but because of the fact that had struck both of them, that it is not passion but companionship that is actually the foundation of a relationship –

And doesn't John lament and grieve  
That you've absconded without leave?  
I can't believe that this excursion  
Carries his blessing." "Phil, you're wrong.  
Actually, John expressed his strong  
Approval of our day's diversion. (p. 166)

On the other side, John is alone again and this isolation brings him closer to Janet – they rediscover their friendship and rekindle to the pull that they had always felt for each other. But blame it on chance as one might, when John and Janet are on the brink of entrusting themselves to each other, Janet meets with a mishap and dies leaving the inconsolable and distraught John alone again. Her final words keep humming in his ears and with this the story comes to a close. This also conveys a very implicit perceptible that John will pick up the broken pieces of his shattered life and will try to renew his contacts and friendships by shunning the wall of remoteness and will finally come back to rational thinking and stability as is the expectation of every reader –

"I'm with you, John. You're not alone.

Trust me, my friend; there is the phone.  
It isn't me you are obeying.  
Pay what are your own heart's arrears.  
Now clear your throat; and dry these tears." (p. 307)

The fundamental theme of this poetic novel is that of seclusion and separation although Seth has touched upon the various maladies afflicting the modern society like intrinsic egocentricity, obstinate refusal of individual attachment, the confining and non-sharing attitude and many more such problems which confront the contemporary modern urban society. John very well epitomizes this predicament of the modern man – an elegant, attractive, refined, well-informed gentleman – the perfect companion one seeks to have; yet lost, shattered and isolated for reasons beyond his understanding. Is it because he has not received love and affection in his childhood that he stands so estranged and feels it safe to be in the cocoon of bachelorhood rather than entering the serpentine path of matrimony? Is it the reason of never having anyone to guide him throughout his early years that he still desires the sweet essence of freedom to the complicated entanglements of the shackles? –

A passionate man, with equal parts of  
Irritability and charm,  
Without as such intending harm,  
His flaring temper signed the hearts of  
Several women in the days  
Before his chaste, ambitious phase. (p. 5)

The extremity of connections and collapses are expressed very vividly through the characters of Seth – it is quite strange on the part of John and Janet to break off their relationship as soon as they feel that it is showing signs of developing into a serious union; a husband-wife relationship of Phil and Claire is washed off as Claire, without a second thought, dumps Phil as she finds him possessed of a dominating approach. John and Liz fall in love with each other but when John proposes Liz suddenly comes out of her trance and fails to commit. She comes close to Phil knowing full well that he is estranged from his previous wife and also has a relationship with her brother Ed. The homosexuality of Phil also doesn't hassle Liz and she seeks a good rapport and solidarity in their unity. The approach is undoubtedly a very modern one but to seek happiness and satisfaction one needs to cross the limits initially ensured by the society. This is perhaps what Phil and Liz have understood and the others have failed to comprehend, and so they could somehow manage to attain the security that a permanent and successful relationship offers. John fails to recognize the love that he was searching for in Janet and then when he finally realizes it becomes too late. It seems even fate plays its role in defining whom to support and whom not to – always sustaining those who are clear and confident in their approach and pulling away from the unsteady and the insecure. Even Janet, on her behalf, had restricted her attraction for John and later when she had realized it, had fallen into the trap in the hands of chance. Is Seth trying to state that, as relationships are very fragile, one should not only avoid taking any chances but also act in such a way that they don't repent in future? John and Janet have delayed their approval and acceptance and the loss is

theirs; Phil and Liz have realized their camaraderie even accepting beyond odds and so could enhance a thriving life together and the achievement is theirs. Ed, on the other hand, is a confused self ready to surrender his body but afraid to hurt his soul and so exactly doesn't know what to seek for and what not to. His dilemma causes trouble for him and his apprehension keeps him disenchanted.

Whatever the consequences and whatever the stern appearances, one thing is very clear that every character is in search of love – the desire to be loved, the passion of togetherness and the feeling of possessiveness is so strong that it changes the lifestyle of the individual. All the five central characters are identified within the constraints of their profession, private life and family oriented responsibilities and also community relevant circumstances and associations. John, the main protagonist, has many engagements, official mainly, but finally he is in search of some true love. Finally he gets it, although for a short time, from Liz and then later falls back on Janet who dies before they could commit their unity. John's longing is never answered and despite his desperate desire to be united with someone special, he remains single lacking the conviction and the determination. Although it is expected that he might recover with time, but the two instances that hit him hard definitely create an upsetting sensation in him. As for Phil and Liz, it is the other way round – they shun passionate love and settle down for companionship founded on mutual benefits and aspirations. Love was their first craving but when it failed they adjusted with something that they felt will be everlasting. Whether they are happy with the changed decision is a difficult question to deal with but they have settled down with positivity and assurance is quite justifiable. Their situation interpret that one has to choose between the two; it is the quest for love or stability.

Another concept in the novel that calls for notice is the nuclear warfare – Seth has elucidated upon the impression at his own convenience using rationalization, interpretation, manifestation, oration, conversation, demonstration etc. in order to convey his validation across. It is believed that contemporary America is one of the few countries where people are conscious enough to protest against the possession of nuclear weapons and nuclear insanity, which is one of the recent themes, is very significant in the novel as the not just the subject but the complete novel is considered typically American. Phil gives up a promising career at Lungless Labs, a place where nuclear bombs are made, to listen to his inner voice which throughout tells him that his actions are morally wrong. Against the wishes of John, Liz participates in the demonstration speaking powerfully against the race of the arms. Father O'Hare preaches, confirming indisputably, that a nuclear war can only end in total homicide and therefore nuclear weapons must never be used. Voicing all these characters, Seth has allocated quite a lot of time and space to the grave issue and wonderfully addressed the general reader by depicting both the sides of the problem in the squabble between John and Phil –

“Nice folks don't use nukes,” “Work for life,  
Not death,” and a huge “Strive with strife” –  
Quarrelling, waving, wrangling, singing,  
The lively unanimous throng,  
Two thousand minds, two thousand strong,

Submerge their disagreements, bringing  
Common concern and hope to bear  
Against the smithy of “hardware”. (p. 152)

Through his characters Seth wants to convey that such an event brings disaster not only on the human beings but to nature’s dumb creation who has to suffer the same fate despite no fault of theirs. John pursues conventional politics and is quite unambiguous about his antagonism towards the anti-nuclear war-peace activist. He declines to comprehend the propositions of the type of work he is concerned about, until the end of the book when he faces and then counters moments of self-doubt.

Seth has highlighted the independent woman – the modern American woman who, with their proficiency and endeavor, has survived with dignity and decorum in the male dominated society and with the passing of years is trying to look beyond her achievement with dedication and determination. Liz is the embodiment of a triumphant career woman; she is not just an uninteresting lawyer, she enjoys music, has a pet cat and at the same time can deliver an impromptu speech on saving the planet from the hands of the nuclear clutch. On the other side, Janet represents the artistic group of the American woman – she is a drummer and a sculptor with sufficient confidence in herself and her creative capability to pursue her career in it unconditionally even though she has, till then, not tasted the sweetness of success in her profession. It is with the help of these women characters Seth tries to go into the depth of emotions of the American women – their personality, their attitude, their mind-set. Both Janet and Liz, by having a pet cat, indicate the melancholy that afflicts urban America – the estrangement from individual attachment. To counter their loneliness they fall back on their pets but, strange enough does not justify human bonding. On the other hand, it is also true that they crave for marriage for the sake of financial security, the proof of which is the innumerable number of letters that John receives in response to the marriage proposal advertisement. Liz’s mother represents the old values but such women are few in number and most of the American women are a victim of extreme modernization forgetting the adversities that might arise because of it. Naturally they become selfish like Claire who leaves Phil and their child, without the slightest botheration, for another person. As for Liz, she is so involved in her career that, despite her mother’s desperate insistence, love fails to intervene into her life. After their initial attachment is over one finds John complaining that he and Liz do those things only that Liz recommends and not those that he thinks of. He even becomes critical of her extravagant ideas as well and grumbles about it to Phil –

She has these exhibitionistic  
Extravagant compulsions – that  
Spiel of the anti-nuclear cat  
Is just one instance: journalistic  
Inanity, but all the same  
She loved that fizzy gulp of fame. (p. 197)

A very expected outcome to this fragmented personality of the modern American woman is a complete stagnant and broken family life. If the traditional homemaker

gets confused with her role in the contemporary era it leads to disappointment and displeasure. A present day woman must know her role well – should be able to balance between the interior and the exterior with efficacy. But strangely enough a woman is so pulled down with tradition and custom that her fight becomes the quest for freedom. Her intention then is to leave aside the past and grab the diverse present – she doesn't compromise or adjust, she abandons and accepts. This results into broken marriages and homes, neurotic and disturbed children and the reigning impression of isolation and depression. Children are hit the most and, with no fault of theirs, they lead a loveless miserable life of loneliness and melancholy. It is through Paul, the son of Phil and Claire, that Seth tries to peep into the secluded and miserable life of a child who doesn't realize the reason behind and the outcome of such unfavorable circumstances –

“No, Paul, she's gone away.” “Forever?”

“I just can't tell you, son – but never

Think you're alone. You've got me.” “When

Will you leave me?” Phil, shocked, stares (p. 62)

When the family system, thus, provides no support, neither physical nor emotional, it is obvious for people to look for other social acquaintances where friendship becomes the central motivation. Children naturally look forward to such connections where they can get some comfort and solace as the child-parent relationship stands on the verge of collapse due to the highly busy schedule of the parents. The friends finally replace the position held by parents earlier as the children start hunting for warmth not in parents but in the new associates. John, in his years of loneliness, cannot approach his mother who is no more and does not feel like approaching his father who lives half a continent away, comes closer to Janet. John and Phil are very close friends until disagreeing aspirations coerce them apart. The novel ends with an emphasis on the significance of friendship – Phil and Liz decide to extend their hands in friendship to John and John, bereft and forlorn after the sudden death of Janet, hears Janet's voice in his mind as if encouraging him to renew ties of friendship.

Homosexuality is another dominant concept that prevails in American society which Seth has incorporated in the novel as one of the major elements. Of course, Seth's idea is not to glorify it but just to portray it as a possibility in modern terms of the society. He definitely favors a happy married union as is obvious from the character of Phil who is a homosexual but is finally rewarded with the bliss of a rich family life at the end of the novel. It is indeed creditable that Seth, through his art, neither venerates nor degenerates homosexuality. On the other hand, John has nothing in possession except his reminiscences and by creating these two contrasting characters Seth advocates the dominance of personal opinion over any judgment held by convention –

You have a mind too, Ed. why don't you

Go by what your heart says is right? (p. 189)

Seth has also introduced the theme of morality; he does not of course believe in pledging the concept of conservative Indian principles, but, as an artist, he identifies the complications of human temperament and portrays them in his novel. The ethical

cryptogram that he depicts in the novel is the moral code that America lives by – casual sex, homosexual relationships, pick-up bars, extramarital affairs, disloyal attitudes, untrustworthy commitments and so on. However, social morality is projected through the episode of the peaceful protest against Lungless Labs. Seth is undoubtedly aggrieved by the world around him; the mechanical striving after materialistic objectives concerns him very much. The animal-like impulse in man, craving for more and more, the unrestricted lust, the voracious gluttony for everything around, the egocentricity, the estrangement from close and dear ones – everything is not just a worry for Seth but a pinching incurable ache. He is concerned unquestionably but he doesn't want to spurt poison against what he identifies to be human shortcomings. His approach is more empathetic than contemptuous, more considerate than exasperated. In a way it seems that he tries to strip the glamour of American lifestyle and freedom – the solitude is so extreme that it seems that people have built a strong wall around themselves and somehow tries to convince themselves that they are separate entities like islands, self-doubt reigns everywhere, people are stressed with unremitting professional pressure, there are no set of ethics to fall back upon, the moral codes are perplexing and incredulous, and there is an escalating alienation from human contact. It is not the world that one should blame for all these unlikely changes and Seth is of the opinion that one should peep into one's own self and justify one's role in the backdrop of the society and so he compels his characters to search for meaning in their lives and accept responsibility. It is thus through the trials and tribulations of John and his circle of acquaintances that Seth tries to reach out to the common man in general struggling with identity and alienation in a complicated and unsystematic world.

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