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Marriage and Homosexuality in *The Golden Gate*



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ABSTRACT

Vikram Seth's verse novel Golden Gate appears like a family saga. It affirms the family values which are rather disappearing in the West. The novel ends with the protagonist John Brown's realizing such old family values and traditions where an individual finds not only happiness but also peace.

KEYWORDS

Vikram Seth, Golden Gate, Family, Marriage, Homosexuality.

RESEARCH PAPER

Indian English poetry is a strange phenomenon. It began with Toru Dutt and Henry Derozio. Later Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo enriched it. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is a great work of poetry. It is an epic tale really.

After India's independence in 1947, Indian poetry took a different turn. More so it was a reaction to the old Romantic or Victorian tradition of Tagore or Aurobindo. By the fifties, the 'new poetry' had already made its appearance. In 1958, P. Lal and his associates founded the Writers Workshop in Calcutta which soon became an effective forum for modernist poetry.

The New Poets are Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, Dom Moraes, A. K. Ramanujan, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawallah, A. K. Mehrotra, Keki Dharuwallah, Jayant mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Shiv K. Kumar, Kamala Das and others.

The major problems with Indian poetry are these:

- *English is not our mother tongue, even in cities,*
- *There is no oral English-speaking culture*
- *Modern Age and print era have little taste for poetry.*

It is for these reasons Salman Rushdie once dismissed poetry as ineligible thing in genre race. This scenario is seen in African English literature too. On the other hand, countries like England, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa have no problems. They do not have any of the three problems cited above.

Tabish Khair in her article "No Golden Gate for Indian English Poetry? Reading Vikram Seth's Novels in Verse in the Context of Indian Poetry in English" observes aptly:

As I have pointed out in a forthcoming paper in *Kavya Bharati*, Indian English poets are in a position that is *similar* — though *not* at all *identical* - to that of a working-class British poets with an elitist education, someone like Tony Harrison. Unlike the Maxwell generation of post-modern citizens of High Capitalist countries, the Indian writes about a world that is neither uniformly post-modern nor significantly High Capitalist. Moreover, it is a world that is not even uniformly anglophone - only about 4 per cent of India's population speaks and writes English, and even most of these speak English along with one or more other Indian languages. Because of both her social positioning and her personal circumstances, the Indian writing in English works, of necessity, on a fissured surface. The Indian English poet cannot take the surface of his or her language for granted as a site for 'play'. (Khair 50)

Many English writers have written novels, not to speak of plays (for example, Eliot and Yeats' plays in verse) in verse. Compositions written in meter are known as verse. The characteristic features of verse are accent, syllable, meters, and rhythm. Verse novels include William Ellery Leonard's *Two Lives*, George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) as a sonnet sequence. In the west many people have attempted novels in verse. John Fuller's novel *The Illusionists* in verse and it is excellently drafted.

It is in this background all enlightened readers take up a study of Vikram Seth's verse novel *The Golden Gate* for study. The novel has unfettered the Indian English imagination almost as much as Salman Rushdie's post-modernist novel *Midnight Children*. *The Golden Gate* is written about an alien culture and that way it is a bold step. Instead of being forced to write only about India and Indians - or related matters - it became possible for Indians to write about other spaces too.

By writing about (hi) yuppies in California, USA, Seth showed that Indian writers could write about other spaces - and write about them with independent agency and not in the largely imitative way of some 19th century Indian English novels set in Europe.

Vikram Seth's novel *The Golden Gate* dwells on the issues of marriage and gender. Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender. Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for what sex. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between the sexes.

The major trends in family structures and their shifts over the past decades are well known: Fertility rates have declined and childbearing occurs later and more often outside marriage; marriage, too, has been postponed and is more often foregone, and couple relationships - both marital and non-marital ones - have become more fragile in America.

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 (nuptials all around), than to surprising sadness. The novel begins from this relatively simple inception and steadily enlarges in scope as it becomes a bitter sweet love story, a wickedly funny novel of manners, and an unsentimental meditation on morality and the nuclear abyss.

The Golden Gate begins with a dedication, also in verse. The book is dedicated to one Mr. Timothy Steele, and it is in thirteen chapters. The poet acknowledges that the whole affair was an enterprise and had a heady labour. The thirteen chapters took thirteen months!

The Golden Gate is set in a metropolis San Francisco, a uniquely modern city. California state itself, especially to the urban Indian reader is a stereotype of modern life, a state which represents one of the most exotic locations of 20th century American capitalist culture.

Here the characters belong to different nationalities. All these characters are outsiders - John is an Englishman (his father lives in Kent), Phil a Jew, Janet a third-generation Japanese immigrant, Elizabeth and Ed Dorati Italian immigrants. None of these characters has a personal hangover of displacement, no sense of loss of cultural roots. What they share, however, is their overwhelming personal loneliness, the sense of a loss of companionship and understanding.

The sense of anguish arises primarily in John, as a deep need for companionship, for friendship and love. Each character represents one particular aspect of love and of friendship. John Brown embodies the capitalist/consumerist values. He is the central character. He is a successful young man, having everything but not love. He finds love later and it is not to his satisfaction.

The novel opens with John Brown's lack of friendship and love. In his loneliness, he calls his old college friends Phil Weiss and Janet Hawakaya. If Phil Weiss is a Jew, Janet Hawakaya is a reformed Japanese.

When John meets up with Janet Hawakaya, his former girlfriend, they discuss the various ways and means through which John's loneliness might be overcome. Some of the novel's central themes might be traced back to this incident. John displays some of the characteristics that will later form the cornerstone for his condemnation as a character, and Janet Hawakaya preaches compromise as a more reliable route to happiness.

Janet Hawakaya speaks of the importance of friendship and understanding as the bedrock of a lasting relationship. But not the qualities of other passions like sex or love not to speak of

wealth. One day Janet Hawakaya writes a letter to John Brown talking of three codes. This particular letter was sent by Janet Hawakaya herself (maybe for fun) and when John Brown receives the polite refusal from Janet Hawakaya's alias, Anne T. Friese (her friend), he feels a strange sense of regret.

Phil Weiss's marriage with Claire Cabot is one such relationship that is established as a failure right from the opening of the novel. Their marriage was unconventional in most ways, going against Claire Cabot's background, family and her family's personal values. The breaking away of married relationship of Phil Weiss and Claire Cabot affects John Brown and Liz. Ed Dorati too represents the loneliness of an individual who is unable to reconcile his personal (or political) beliefs with a practical functionality in society. Ed Dorati is a devout Catholic, with homosexual tendencies.

Angelic Multani feels that Phil Weiss, Liz and Jan Hawakaya form the trio of positive characters in the text. Despite his family breaking up and his being an outsider in the most literal sense from the 'yuppie' culture of California, Phil Weiss, the drop-out from society has built the most cohesive and supportive family group around himself.

T. S. Eliot's kind of insistence on following tradition enquiringly is seen in the novel. The emphasis on tradition (although modified by modernity) is expressed through the art of Janet Hayakawa.

Janet Hawakaya is a friendly, and most sociable character. She helps John brown and Liz Dorati though they do not like her. She convinces him about the importance of human relationships. Sandhya Rao Mehta observes,

The Golden Gate, Seth's epic fiction in verse, borrows modernism's assumptions of ennui and purposelessness into the context of American upper middle class. The novel has been praised for being able to "deconstruct the canonic models with a view to question, expose and dismantle the underlining structures and question the imperialist assumptions. (Gupta 54)

The Golden Gate is, thus, in the words of A.N. Kaul, "an extraordinary book about ordinary life." (Kaul, 163)

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