

Desire And Despair In The Golden Gate Of Vikram Seth

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ABSTRACT

The novels of Vikram Seth has multiple layers of themes but his theme of love poetry entirely different in nature and treatment from his other themes. He does not present only the beautiful and romantic side of love rather he talks about the unsatisfied desires which lead his lovers to despair and loses their emotional balance in life and becomes a victim. Love, being the basic desire of the universe, plays an important role in the life of every individual. The omnipresent and omnipotent love, is the cause of the growth of this universe and every living being of it. Desire of love ties us all together. Everything and everyone who has taken or takes and will take birth on this earth, is born without religion but not without love. But the study of this research is focused on love between lovers. The desire is the cause of every pain. When desire is not properly satisfied or fulfilled it causes despair, frustration, separation. Nothing remains in the life of a lover except darkness, despair, sorrow and negativity. At this stage nothing remains good or positive for them.

KEYWORDS Desire, Love, Lovers, Separation, rejection, Despair.

INTRODUCTION

Vikram Seth, born in Kolkata, India, is trained as an economist and has lived for several years in England, California, China, and India. He is a well-known poet, novelist and writer of children literature. He came across various cultures of the world that colour his writings profoundly. Vikram Seth, well known for his noted works, possesses the art of creating a living and breathing world that keeps the readers focused and engaged. He has authored three novels, *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, *An Equal Music*, *A Suitable Girl* and a number of poems and short stories. He received the Crossword Book Award, 1999 for best fiction in English, Padma Shree in Literature and Education (2007).

The themes of his works consist of family relationships, tension, pain and frustration. He maps out the sorrows and failures, the agonies and ecstasies, the wit and despondence, love and hate, and myriad other emotions. The glimpses of nature, love, despair, nostalgia and homesickness reverberate in his works.

The story of the novel revolves round the common human search for love, affection and a sense of belonging. Deprivations, dejection and loneliness are the experiences of most of these

characters but not emotional fulfilment. Seth has tried to give a realistic portrayal of different characters, and the society to which they belong. Different kinds of love are explored such as love between friends, love between parents and children, and that between lovers, and between lovers of the same gender.

Seth exemplifies everything in a realistic point of view. He introduces John, one of the principal characters to the readers as a Silicon Valley executive who reads eclectically from Mann to Bede, Janet, a sculptor and drummer in a band called Liquid Sheep; Liz, a lawyer and the owner of a fearsome tabby named Charlemagne; Phil, a divorced father unsure of his sexuality, who has left his job at Datatronics for reasons of conscience; and Ed, haunted by religious conflicts, the owner of an iguana named Arnold Schwarzenegger. The relationships among the central characters grow, change, break off, and re-establish themselves in varying patterns. Need for a loving relationship, be it that of parent and child, man and woman, or man and man is the essential need for all the characters in the novel.

The Golden Gate clearly exhibits the inner and outer success of the characters. Inner success is stable and long-lived resulting in a feeling of fulfillment, inner joy and contentment, whatever the external circumstances. Outer success is transitory and short-lived resulting in a feeling of emptiness or despair once it has passed. The characters do not acquire sharp line or depth. They are shown in their urban set-up moving around in the places and pastimes that are associated with the affluent, well-educated and well-placed, upper middle class men and women. Seth presents portrays the forming and breaking up of personal relations; love, live, heterosexual and homosexual, neuroses and fixations, against the contemporary background of the Internet, computers, anti-nuclear demonstrations, women's libbers, food addicts and so on with no importance to social life, friends and relatives But the idiom of thought their anxieties dreams wishes and aspirations of these characters, like John, Liz, Phil and Ed, Janet, Mrs. Dorati do not acquire much depth of shade or sharpness of outline.

Seth grapples with various issues of sexuality, religion, and nuclear war protests that force the characters looking for love and meaning in a consumerist culture resulting in loneliness. John, the protagonist is a lonely and depressed human being, searching for meaning and happiness to find self-fulfilment. His life has come full circle and the bittersweet experience of life has made him a mature and better human being. During his search for a companion he wanders from place to place after completion of his work schedule each day in order to ease him. Janet gives an advertisement for a companion for her friend John. Janet as a friend takes up on herself the task of getting a companion. She is not concerned for a family life. John is not concerned about the system of family but is more concerned about having a companion.

After much hesitation, the advertisement for a companion for John is given. Though there are many more responses, John selects Liz, as he is attracted towards her at the very first instance. The words she uses for her response attract him. In the west the system of marriage is not given greater importance. People are more interested in relationships than having a family life. Though, the system start with the urge of romance, the extent to which the relationship would go on depends on the bonding between the partners. The initial stages of the relationship between John and Liz are marked by incessant talk. John and Liz meet on a winter Sunday are

in bed by Thursday but part before the summer. Seth shows that love is not merely “the friction of two skins” (52). In *The Golden Gate* however, physical consummation becomes the point of departure. John is always on the run for earning more material wealth.

Though he is well settled in life, he does not find solace as he is without a companion. Material wealth does not bring in comfort to his heart as he is emotionally depressed. John’s disturbed state of mind portrays the trauma and pain experienced by John in his childhood. His present state is better when compared to his previous state: “John has grown up all alone. He has never tasted the warmth of parental care. After reaching adulthood, he feels very much empty within himself” (123). His life goes on without fulfilling the emotional thirst within him. Ashok K. Jha contends 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 spiritual sustenance.

Janet Hawakaya, is of Japanese descent and the only ‘ethnic’ character in the text becomes John’s confidant though she was his girlfriend in the past. She strives very hard towards a possible reconditioning 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 reprimanding him for his narrow mind and intolerance of women and gays. She reprimands him “Johny Boy, your mind needs cleaning / Of the debris of prejudice (33). Since he has been all alone for a while not having anyone to show concern towards him, John develops misunderstanding but later when Janet explains things he understands and sheds of his false notions. There after he adheres to her words. Janet plays a prominent role as the mentor more than a friend in the life of John. She makes herself available at times of his distress.

Liz Dorati a central character in the novel is a law school attorney from the family of Italian immigrant vine – growers share a short lived attraction towards John 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 with Newton’s third law, if there is something going on, there will be for sure a few to revolt against it.

Phil who is also called Philip, is John’s former roommate has a six year old son called Paul, who is another victim of depression and trauma which happened as a result of his wife, Claire 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. (35)

The sentimentality that characterizes John engulfs Phil also. Phil has an unnatural or a gay relationship with Liz’s brother Ed, but he eventually marries Liz. Phil has married Claire but

due to incompatibility in their married life they part ways though they have a boy child. The parting of his wife creates a void in Phil's life. His homosexual emotions are aroused when he meets Ed and they both carry on with their affair for a while. Ed Dorati a central character, is a twenty three year old, "intense, athletic / silent" (84), 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. But later due to the emotional conflict within Ed's mind regarding their affair, they part ways. Phil develops a liking for Liz, John's partner and they eventually end up their relationship in marriage.

Seth faithfully pictures the contemporary reality of American youths, who are behind power and money and their resultant despair and loneliness. The social life has been abruptly disturbed by the mechanized life. In "Crossing the Postmodern Divide", Borgmann warns that "an attempt to develop a system of intelligence that would exceed human intelligence in reach and capacity could be counter – productive" (65). New information technologies encourage users to keep in touch with friends and family only in a shallow sense, thus obviate the need for people to move towards each other. This in turn leads to a "disconnected, disembodied and disoriented sort of life" (The Golden Gate 52). The Golden Gate depicts John as a victim of this new trend. Feeling lonely and dejected, John seeks the help of Janet, his first love for some sort of solution. She suggests him to give an advertisement for a partner.

Phil, a homosexual, who is rewarded with a rich family life at the end of the novel, while John has nothing left but memories. Phil encourages and convinces Ed to a very great extent that he indulges in homosexual relationship satisfying Phil's desires. But such a person is redeemed by having a happy married life with a beautiful girl but John is left all alone. John holds anti – homosexual opinions thinking that gay life is irreconcilable to family life. He is a strong supporter of the view that, male and female are programmed to mate with the opposite sex. On the other hand, Phil's divorce, and the painful experience of incompatibility with Claire leads him to his friendship with Ed. Ed and Phil share the compassion and closeness usually associated with a natural relationship. For the bi- sexual Phil; "made it with a guy in college? well, once or twice" (95), the relationship is natural and spontaneous. Although Ed has more homosexual tendencies, it is he who eventually opts out of the relationship because of an overwhelming sense of guilt. Phil being separated from his wife is very much stressed in heart. Though he goes on with his day to day affairs, emotions within him are left unattended. When he meets Ed emotions are aroused within. Ed too shares similar emotions and reveals his love for Phil. The end of this homosexual relationship is stated in Phil's own words: "I loved a woman and was dropped - / I loved a man – and that also flopped" (244). Phil has married Claire at the early part of his life but he could not go on with their relationship due to lack of understanding. The pain of the broken relationship disturbs him a lot. Later he develops a liking for Ed and enters a homosexual relationship with him. But that too ends up in failure because of the turmoil within Ed's mind. Mutual understanding is very much important regarding relationships. Since such an understanding is lacking in Phil's life he ends up as a failure. Later he develops a romantic relationship with Liz, John's lady love and marries her by betraying John.

Seth, through his poems ask people to consider the fact that though technology may be heartless and soulless, the men and women sitting behind the controls have a conscience and should exercise it instead of merely following blind orders. There is a definite theme of alienation seen in how the characters take refuge in pets and how easily friends can lose contact; the widespread use of the Internet and the blossoming information age, which has led to the destruction of the previously maintained social life. John, is portrayed as an isolated lonely person, who is alienated from his culture. Upon losing his relationship with Elisabeth Dorati, his loneliness is aggravated and lost and empty. Emptiness leads to nothing but emptiness.

John's life exemplifies this dilemma of modern man. He has all he could want in terms of material acquisitions, is handsome, smart, well mannered, well read-in essence, the perfect companion, and yet he feels disillusioned and lonely. Seth presents the pathology behind this, in his carefree youth, John has not given love the attention it deserves, preferring the freedom that bachelorhood connotes to most men against the shackles of matrimony. Not only John but most American men and women are equally unwilling to sacrifice what they perceive as their freedom by committing to a permanent relationship. John and Janet break off their relationship as soon as it shows signs of developing serious misunderstanding.

Through Phil's son Paul that Seth expresses how hard children get hit by estrangement between their parents, "No Paul, she's gone away," "forever" (62). Phil explains to his son about his wife who has left them both for another man. While the son eagerly enquires about his mother, the father tells him of the impossibility of meeting or reuniting with her. When the family system does not provide any support, it is natural for people to turn to other social groups, and this is where friendship assumes centre stage. Gradually friends replace the warmth that is lacking in families.

The novel thus presents personal relations, love, loss and morality. Seth also dwells sometimes on the crippling freedom. Seth while exploring these vital issues throws light on the problems of the affluent societies of the west, particularly that of unhappy marriages, broken homes, single parenthood, divorce and homosexuality. The initial stages of the relationship between John and Liz are marked by almost incessant talk and hunger for dialogue, as they decide to give up. However as they move into an intense sexual relationship they lose out on their hunger for conversation that had earlier brought them together.

The relationship between Liz and Phil lacks in any physical rapture and sexual excitement. When Liz finally chooses the homely looking and balding Phil over John it is on the basis of companionship; she recognizes this as the compatibility that she has failed to establish with John. Similarly, John is also allowed a very brief period of ease with Jan, before her sudden death in an automobile accident. They move into sexual relationship only after they have begun to truly communicate with each other. Sex is the extreme part of love and nobody can have successful sex without proper love and affection. Seth clearly explains the nature of sex between the impulsive and repulsive genders so he uses homosexual ideas.

Janet's death constitutes an unusually poignant moment in the protagonist's search for ultimate satisfaction and beauty as he turns upon himself in a characteristic effort to come to terms with

his past. John is lonely, isolated, alienated and lost. There is no one to console him except the imaginary voice of Janet who is no more.

The novel *The Golden Gate* ends with two realizations. The first realization has been brought out by Ed, that is it takes more than lust to make for love. He says that lust, in the present era is common, but love is rarely found. Deception often occurs in love:

...Lovers indeed

Must shed more than their clothes, They need

To shed their bodies. Flesh and fire

Can meet but can't merge. It's a state

Only out souls can consummate. (182)

Here in these lines physical love is given more importance. Openness of mind is more important in the case of romance. Though physical love may seem good it will not last long. Phil and Ed express their love for one another more physically than emotionally and it can be very well understood from the above lines.

The second realization in the novel has been brought out by Phil, who brings out the idea that there is something more than love that makes for enduring relationships towards a better tomorrow:

...I've found

That love's a pretty poor forecaster.

I loved a woman – and was dropped.

I loved a man – and that too flopped.

Passion's a prelude to disaster.

It's something else that makes me sure

Our bond can last five decades more. (244)

Here Phil's emotional turmoil over love at different phases of his life is explained. He ends up with a failure in romance twice in life, first towards a woman and secondly towards a man. But later on ends up with a lasting relationship with a woman. Here Seth emphasizes the importance of man-woman relationship. The disintegrating family system in America is portrayed in the novel, and this trend has been followed in almost all cosmopolitan regions. Broken family, separated children, lack of love and care all find their place in the novel. One does not come across the so called ideal, gentle and good woman, but a loving, unselfish, self-sacrificing mother, which brings in an Indian essence into it.

The attitude of the people towards the changes which come across the society is very well described in these lines. John not being able to withstand loneliness and ends up in a disturbed state which is similar to darkness where there is no hope. Along with John the other characters add flavour to the story. He is economically strong but emotionally weak. The ups and downs in his life are clearly described giving a glimpse of the Yuppie life. He starts and ends as a lonely man not giving emotions the required space in his life. Though there are no instances of intense romantic encounters between John and Janet, he depends on her.

The romantic effect in domestic life is lost due to the politics among the persons.

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