

The Portrayal of The American Way of Life In Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate

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Abstract

Vikram Seth is an Indian English writer who has achieved critical acclaim and several prizes for his body of work. The remarkable thing about Seth is that he has never been limited by genre, and is at ease while writing novels, poems, novels in verse, travelogues, biographies, and even a libretto for an opera. His novel-in-verse The Golden Gate explores the American way of life, with one of America's most famous landmarks as its backdrop. This paper aims to explore the delineation of America in the novel.

Keywords

Novel-in verse, America, California, Onegin.

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*The Golden Gate*¹ occupies the watershed position in Vikram Seth's life – it marks his transition from being a poet to establishing himself as a novelist. The inspiration for the novel was Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.² After reading *Onegin*, three things came together: the idea of the novel, the actual structure and the classical structure of the stanzas, and the idea of writing about California and life in California, because Seth was studying there at the time. 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 (nuptials all around), than to surprising sadness. The novel begins 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.

John Brown, the hero, is a Silicon Valley computer professional whose highly successful professional life stands in abysmal contrast to his personal one, which leaves much to be desired. When he gets hit hard by a frisbee while taking a walk, he thinks:

. . . If I died, who'd be sad?
Who'd weep? Who would be glad?
Would anybody?³

This dismal rumination is not in the nature of paranoid self-pity; it is a cold-blooded evaluation of the state of affairs in John's world. John is an emotional non-entity. Nobody needs him beyond his work, and this irks him no end. He uncomfortably senses that he exists in a vacuum, while around him life is passing him by. Nothing offers solace anymore - not books, or music, nor any of the things he was happy doing earlier. His only female friend is Janet Hayakawa, his erstwhile lover, now, through mutual agreement (prompted by a neurotic compulsion to avoid a permanent relationship), the two share a friendship that is shielded "from all passion."⁴

When the two meet for lunch, John pours out his woes to her. Janet astutely diagnoses that what John needs is to be in a stable relationship. Her proposal that John advertises for a potential life-mate is met with horror by John, who declares that he will not demean himself in this manner. However, Janet takes matters into her own hands by advertising for John. Out of the deluge

of letters that arrive, John selects three, but nothing comes of them. More letters arrive later and out of these John selects one he likes - that of Elizabeth Dorati. The two meet, hit it off instantly, and fall in love.

The story now shifts to focus on Phil Weiss, a college friend of John and fellow computer professional. Phil has given up a promising career in nuclear science to become an environmentalist. He has a son, Paul, whom he is raising all alone, because he has become estranged from his wife, Claire. Phil runs into John and Liz at a music concert, in which Liz's sister, Sue, is performing. Having renewed their acquaintance, Phil gets invited to John and Liz's house-warming party, where he meets Ed, Liz's brother and the two start a homosexual relationship.

In the meantime, things are not going so well for John and Liz. Charlemagne, Liz's cat, detests John with a vengeance, and makes his life miserable. But Liz is not ready to part with the cat, even for John's sake. She has also learned of the affair between her brother and Phil and has accepted it, but this becomes a major bone-of-contention with John, who is disgusted and censorious and breaks off all contact with Phil. Things come to a head when the two are holidaying at Liz's parents' place. John proposes to Liz, but contrary to his expectations, she does not immediately accept. John is surprised, and when he sees a letter from Phil in Liz's hand, he rashly concludes that she is cheating on him and ends their affair. Phil and Liz now get married, not because they are in love but because they have both realized that companionship is a more solid foundation for marriage than passion.

Meanwhile, John, alone again, rediscovers his friendship with Janet, and the love he had always felt for her. But as fate would have it, when they are on the verge of committing to each other, Janet dies in an accident, and John is left heartbroken and bereft.

The basic theme of the novel is thus that of isolation and estrangement. Exploring the alienation in modern American society, Trilling says, ". . . the individual is not only isolated from society, but he is also isolated from everyone he knows, even his own love partner,"⁵ and Seth unflinchingly presents this malady afflicting modern society.

John best 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 is lost 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, to the shackles of matrimony. Not only John but most American men and women are equally unwilling to sacrifice what they perceive as their freedom. John and Janet break off their liaison as soon as it shows signs of developing into something serious. This fanatic obsession with keeping the heart aloof from the rest of the body lies at the root of the problem. In psychological terms, this is known as 'relationship anxiety' - the refusal to grow into a mature relationship. Almost every major character in the novel suffers from this anxiety and John most of all. John and Janet too are getting over their anxiety in the course of the novel but when Janet dies it is suddenly too late for them. Phil and Liz are the only ones who do not suffer from it and appropriately, they are the ones rewarded with secure, happy lives. Apart from Phil and Liz, the other characters somehow fail to realize that the security provided by a permanent relationship cannot be replaced by an outwardly successful life, and that pets can never fully substitute the warmth of human bonding.

Every major character in the novel is involved in a private odyssey, the quest for that special, earth-shattering love. John has had many flings in his day, but what he really wants is to settle down with somebody he truly loves. He finds that feeling temporarily with Liz and is very content until Charlemagne drives them apart. Janet too is holding out for the perfect man, and although she finds that perfection in John, she dies too early for anything to come of it. The quests of Phil and Liz are more complex: each of them has tried romantic love, and both have found it lacking. They would rather settle for companionship, based on shared interests and goals. This quest for love and permanence motivates the actions of the characters.

Another theme in the novel is that of nuclear warfare. Seth expatiates upon the theme unhurriedly, using narration, description, dialogue, sermon, demonstrations, peace marches, and even diatribes, to get the point across. Nuclear insanity is a very contemporary theme and it is very significant in this novel because both the theme and the novel are so quintessentially American. In the novel, Phil gives up a promising career at Lungless Labs (a place where nuclear bombs are made), to heed his inner voice. Liz participates in the demonstration against her wishes of John, speaking eloquently against the arms race. Father O'Hare sermonizes, proving irrefutably that a nuclear war can only end in omnicide, and therefore nuclear weapons must never be used. Through all these voices, Seth has devoted considerable time and space to address this issue, brilliantly portraying both sides of the problem in the argument between John and Phil.

Another dominant theme in the novel is that of homosexuality, which makes the novel true to the American way of life. Homosexuality is by no means an American invention but due to its prevalence in American society, it has acquired almost a cult status there. Townsend discusses the prevalence of this way of life in America.⁶ However, there is no attempt to glorify homosexuality in the novel. It is indeed Phil, a homosexual, who is rewarded with a rich family life at the end of the novel, while John has nothing left but memories, but Seth espouses the superiority of personal judgment over any opinions held by convention and it is a credit to Seth's art that neither does the novel glorify homosexuality, nor does it degenerate into a vicious diatribe against it.

The role of American women in modern American society is also explored. American women have always shown great enterprise and skill in surviving in the male-dominated world; they have been pioneers in every field. It is this independent woman that Seth portrays in the novel. Liz is the epitome of a successful career woman, storming the hitherto Ivy-League bastions of the law firms she works for. Janet represents the artistic side of the American woman - she is a drummer and sculptor rolled into one, and has enough confidence in her artistic ability to pursue her career wholeheartedly. Through the women characters in the novel, Seth goes deep into the mind of the American woman to discover her personality. The average American woman is a victim of the extreme modernization of life, and consequently, she is selfish, à la Claire, who leaves Phil for another man without a backward glance, in spite of having a son she is leaving behind. Liz is involved with her career to the extent that love has had no place in her life, despite repeated pleadings from her mother who would like to see her settled down. After the initial flush of love has died down, one finds John complaining that now they (he and Liz) do only those things that Liz wants to do and not the ones that he (John) does.

A natural corollary to the disintegrated persona of the American woman is a dysfunctional family life. As the traditional homemaker, it is the woman who keeps the family together, even in today's overlapping and confusing roles. But the American woman is too emancipated to be tied down by any rules, and if her quest for freedom and self-satisfaction entails leaving in her wake a trail of broken marriages, broken homes, and maladjusted children, then it seems to be of no consequence to her.

The family system provides no support, it is natural for people to turn to other social groups, and this is where friendship assumes center stage. Due to minimal parent-child interaction (a by-product of busy lives), children fulfill

their need for affection by bonding with their peers, with whom they spend long hours, at school and at play. The added advantage is that friends are by and large uncensorious, unlike parents. Gradually, friends replace the warmth lacking in familial ties. This type of relationship is beautifully portrayed in *The Golden Gate*. John is lonely, but it is not his mother (who is dead) or his father (who lives half a continent away) that looks out for him but his friend Janet. Matt and Joan Lamont name Phil (who is their friend) as their son's guardian in the event of their deaths. The novel itself ends on a note emphasizing the importance of friendship.

The moral code presented in the novel is the moral code that America lives by: casual sex is a way of life, as are homosexual relationships, pick-up bars and so on. Social morality, or what one owes to the world at large, has been brought to the forefront by the episode of the peaceful demonstration against Lungless Labs.

These are the various themes that the novel encompasses, and they make the novel much more than a portrayal of contemporary California life. The theme is the outcome of a deep choice. Seth sees the world around him and it pains him. He sees the mindless striving after materialistic goals, the insatiable greed for everything the world has to offer, the ungoverned lust that is more animal than human, the self-centeredness, and the estrangements from loved ones. But he does not believe in spouting venom against what he perceives as essentially human frailties. He is more compassionate than censorious, more understanding than outraged. In a quiet manner, he strips the glamour from American yuppiedom: there is more to this life than sunshine and California wine - there is loneliness so intense that people build walls around themselves to convince themselves that they are islands, there is self-doubt, unrelenting professional pressure, no set of values to live by, confused moral codes, and an ever-increasing alienation from the human touch. Seth compels his characters to search for meaning in their lives, and to assume responsibility for their actions instead of blaming the world at large for everything that goes awry. The novel thus traces the trials and tribulations of John and his circle of friends as they come to terms with their loneliness and several aberrations.

In the novel, Seth also explores the psychological possibilities that shape the behavior of his characters in a convincing and realistic manner. John's petulant rashness is a logical by-product of his unhappy childhood, as Janet's and Liz's tolerance stems from their solid family structure. The neuroticism that each character exhibits, to a lesser or greater extent, is the regrettable legacy

of unrelenting pressure to perform better in every walk of life. Each character that appears before the reader is easy to place in real-life California. One recognizes that countless Johns exist, trapped not only in Silicon Valley (which Seth calls “ambition’s ulcer alley”⁷), but wherever there is an overemphasis on materialistic goals. The portrayal of homosexuality is very realistic too. The psychological and social dilemmas that homosexuals face are brilliantly portrayed by Seth, each point of view receiving his equal attention and rhetoric. Seth seems to have drawn the characters, even their dialogue, from direct contact with life, and coupled this with a knack for psychoanalysis.

The Golden Gate is, thus, in the words of A. N. Kaul, “an extraordinary book about ordinary life.”⁸ It has been hailed as the great Californian novel, because of the themes it treats of: disillusionment from love, estrangement, discontentment at the workplace, silicon Valley, nuclear bombs, one night stands, homosexuality, rock music - all these coalesce into a very detailed picture of life in the coastal, cosmopolitan city of San Francisco, which represents the entire state of California in miniature. The novel is plush with details about California. Even the language is reproduced as it is spoken; it is replete with the color and idiom of American English. Thus both linguistically and thematically, the novel is an American novel. The picture of San Francisco that Seth conjures up is three-dimensional. From the way the mind of the city works, its physical attributes, its oddities, its moral standards, work ethics, single parenting, love, leisure, and friendship, all together create quite a complete mosaic.

Yet, the novel is more than just a realistic look at California in all its hedonistic glee. It is a gentle and urbane satire of life in a fast-paced culture. By focusing on the improbable probability of a nuclear holocaust, Seth enlarges the scope of the novel. The story becomes serious and moves beyond the personal concerns of the characters. 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. Both these associations falter because they have been made by people who are too self-involved to try to change themselves for someone else. On the other hand, Phil and Liz succeed in maintaining a relationship chiefly because they have learned a lesson from their previous relationships. Seth also advocates that shared likes and dislikes and compatible interests, not merely a physical attraction, are the foundation of a long-term relationship. Liz ultimately

recognizes this and this is the reason that she chooses the dull but sensible Phil over the passionate but volatile John and Seth seem to commend her choice.

The novel becomes a bildungsroman as it traces the growth of John from his childish, petulant phase to a maturity that entails an acceptance of life as it is. 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 that friendship is a very important in life. 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.

But in spite of the local topography that Seth introduces: the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, and the Bay area and so on, the story could be about any given set of people anywhere in the world, and their concurrent modes of existence. The subject matter of the novel is not for one particular place but for all places and for all time - love, life, work, eating, drinking, politics, conversation, music, parties, friendship, alienation, death, birth, loneliness, pain. These are the issues addressed, and they make the novel much more than just a novel about life in an American city.

The novel was awarded the 1986 British Airways Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

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