

Representation of Hypermodern Society in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the portrayal of hypermodern American society in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. It is a tragic love story of twenty-six-years old, John Brown, a high-tech computer executive, who works in nuclear research, leads apparently materialistically comfortable life but it is deprived of real happiness, pleasure and peace of mind. There is vacuity, ennui, discontentment restlessness companionlessness and lovelessness in his life. He is in search of love as an antidote for loneliness. The story revolves around five characters in different combination. *The Golden Gate* presents contemporary' American society fully equipped with high technology. Americans apparently are leading happy and comfortable life but in reality, it is discontented, lacking harmony, real love, companionship and peace, all are very realistically presented. The free sexual relationship and homosexual relationship which are prevailing in the society are also portrayed. In the novel, the prevailing social realities such as house-warming parties, wedding parties, wine making, picnics, weekend jaunts, sumptuous breakfast, art exhibitions, gestalt groups, protests and relationship with their pets are truly mirrored.

Keywords: Hypermodern American, Technology, Human, Love, Homosexual, Relationship

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Vikram Seth is in fact a citizen of the world and he is an international writer but he is deeply-rooted in Indian soil. In brief, he makes a sincere attempt to supersede the restrictive boundaries of nations and distinct cultural registers through a philosophy of universal humanism and has great concern for humanity. His novels are post-avant-garde and he performs the duties of post advance guard of human race.

Vikram Seth's first novel, *The Golden Gate*, receives a close look and clinical interpretation. He produced a novel entirely in rhythmic verse in the form of sonnet sequence. Its publication heralds a new era in the history of Indian English Literature. In *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: A Reader's Guide*, Angela Atkins elaborately points out that:

In 1986 *The Golden Gate* was published. This novel in verse about 20 somethings in San Francisco met with huge acclaim. It uses the verse form of Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* ... each stanza is 14 lines long with the rhyming scheme ababccddeffegg. Sonnets have different rhyming scheme ... the lines are Octosyllabic and the rhymes are alternately feminine and Masculine. A feminine rhyme is one where two or more syllables rhyme, as in "various" and "precarious" and a Masculine rhyme is one where the last syllable only rhymes, as with "verse" and "purse" In stanza 5.3, the poet refers to his use of the rhyme scheme of *Eugene Onegin* as "This whole passe extravaganza" but this old fashioned novel in verse went down very well with the public.

... It is organised in the same way as *Eugene Onegin*; both are divided into chapters and stanza s with each being numbered 1.1, 1.2, and so on to 13.51. This is a structure Seth was to use in his two subsequent novels. There is little elaboration within stanzas or chapters, instead a world is created through their interplay. (13)

The novel thematically depicts loneliness, alienation, disillusionment, discontentment and isolation that characterise contemporary life in America.

It is a tragic love-story of modern Americans living in San Francisco, California in 1980's who are called Yuppies. There are serious ruptures and the cracks within the social fabric of the cosy and comfortable but discontented life of the middle class professionally

employees in the ulcer alley of the Silicon Valley, which is synonymous with the latest software technology. It portrays realistically “the artificial culture of consumption” of United States of America’s society. The present hypermodernism is an outcome of modern high technology. It has finally resulted in hyperactivity, which is indicative of a nervous restlessness in American culture.

Hyperactive society shows dislocations and the symptom of sullen resignation, passivity, and incapacity to produce new things or invent new things or to do a creative work. It has produced a kind of paralyzed irresponsibility among Americans. The novelist presents a tale of relationship between five characters in different combination such as the story of John Brown and Janet Hawakaya in terms of love, separation, reconciliation, reunion and final loss. The novelist dramatizes existential anguish of these major characters. It is a critique of the seductive materialist hypermodern society.

Vikram Seth presents contemporary society of America with its economics, culture, science, technology, history, philosophy, religions, morals, politics and sexual behaviour with peculiar conditions of hypermodernism, which is in fact a direct product of modern high technology. The prevailing conditions are devoted to the design of technologically sophisticated and glamorously unreal universe. It has resulted in hyperactivity, which has produced nerve restlessness. The life of people appears to be successful but it is under tremendous pulling forces of family, culture and religion. All these are unsubordinated to the pursuit of life materialistically successful and as such this hyperactive society creates dislocations. Media advertising propagates the social trends of ‘sullenness’ and passiveness and there is a cancerous growth of the video, television and advertisement culture. It is a critique of the seductive, material vitality of hypermodern society. It can be classified as a novel of manners with unsentimental mediation on morality and the nuclear abyss. It dramatizes existential anguish of the characters forcefully and the writer advocates for strong

family bond and need of person to person contact and communal cohesiveness to combat the perils of Hyper-individualism.

It portrays realistically Californian life-style and social realities objectively as “an insider” sympathetically. There is plethora of details from trivial to serious social issues such as contemporary sexual mores. It also mirrors realistically the exclusive and very cordial relationship of characters with their pets, a Siamese cat named Charlemagne and an iguana called Schwarzenegger and the other two cats Cuff and Link. There is also mention of pastimes from children’s addiction to the Star War, to art exhibitions and classical symphonies and also performances of a raucous punk rock musical band called Liquid Sheep.

It exclusively mirrors the icons of pop culture and advertising world. Janet Hawakaya is one of Japanese descendant, John’s former girlfriend. The story is set in motion when she takes the initiative to place a personal advertisement in a newspaper for John’s sake. Every major character “is defined within the parameters of profession, personal ethics, eccentricity, family and social connections”. The interactions with each other and between them are presented. John Brown is a graduate of Berkeley, who leads a successful life but he is extremely lonely. He is an executive employed in the high-tech computer and electronics industry with specialisation in nuclear research. A workaholic, he kneels bareheaded and unshod/before the Chip, a jealous God. He is a follower of conservative politics and is vocal about his opposition to the Anti-Nuclear War Movement. He does not realise fully the implications of the work he is involved in until the end of the novel when he develops self-doubt. He does not question his ideological belief that constructs his consciousness, along-with the other nuclear plant employees. “Those who devised these weapons, decent/Adjusted, family-minded folk”, he is an ideal co-opted subject. / “He chooses to ignore can’t hurt him;/ some things are his concern, some not/ His politics have strongly, slowly, Rigidified” (31).

However, there are some other aspects of John’s psychical history. John phones Phil

but there is no response. Later, he phones Janet and reflects how they led their lives now. The love affair between John and Janet is broken. Now there is no strong passion and warmth in their friendship. Hayawaka is a sculpture by profession and her ambition is to become famous. She is fond of music and plays a drummer in a musical band. She keeps two pet cats “Cuff” and “Link”, who are companions in her loneliness. This is a bitter reality of hypermodern American Society that men and women prefer to have the company of pets (animals or birds) instead of human beings. John stands behind the phone and visualises Janet’s warm beauty, her calm smile, dark eyes, high boned features, her black falling hair-pony tail. She appears before his eyes. He rings her again but in vain. Later he keeps himself engaged in reading literary books full of philosophy of pessimism and as such lives in gloomy mood. Then the phone rings and Janet invites him for a lunch next day at the Shu Jing. Next day, he dresses smartly “cologne, scented, hyper- immaculate” then he goes and waits there but Janet reaches rather late. John first inquires about Janet’s pet cats and her musical band. Janet desires to know the root cause of his neurosis but he wants to know her diagnosis. He pathetically exclaims. “I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!” On hearing John’s remarks, she says “You need a lover, John, I think.” And her suggestion is to place an advertisement in a paper for a life partner. She also advises him that life is short and youth’s span is very brief. Now he is nearly thirty and as such it is proper time to choose a companion. She further says that it is better to select a loving life partner now, who might love him otherwise with the advancement of age, he would repent and the loneliness in his soul would make him weep in the silent nights in the end.

John reminisces his childhood days when he was a small boy, he used “to chafe against the fate” (31) and he never had “mother’s love” (31). Later he walked off freeway in search of company, love and oblivion. He was alone and he led bleak life. John is in his flat and there is a bunch of letters which he has not read so far. Out of these he selects letters of

three women and he begs the pleasure on three successive Saturdays. The second woman is Belinda Beale. He meets her and they see American drama *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He describes his encounter with Belinda truly. John is free exactly a week later. John further tells his experience with her in detail.

It is a letter from Elisabeth Dorati, who is 27, ex-Stanford Law School attorney. She is vivacious, blue-eyed and ‘well rounded’ blonde from the family of an Italian immigrant vine-grower. The novelist mirrors very realistically the first meeting between John and Liz in the Cafe Trieste. John finds her lovely and Liz finds him quite attractive. There is a long conversation between them. John and Liz decide to live together and as such they move in an apartment and live happily. It was a winter Saturday. They are together in the bed. When it is a morning, John gets up from his sleep but Liz is still in the bed. John is happy in their new house with Liz. John thinks about life and man’s basic needs of life such as house, wealth, well paid employment, i.e. and above all, of course, someone to love.

Philip-Weiss is a computer wizard, who is John’s friend. He has resigned from his job of a nuclear engineer in Dataronic. His self-accepting psychic bound and moral visions compels him to be out of “the rat race” that John is caught up and he devotes to AntiNuclear Missile Movement as a ‘Peace-nik.’ He is a Jew by faith but married to Claire Cabot, a Christian and is recovering from the traumatic experience of his wife, Claire deserts him with another man and returns to East Coast. Claire’s Christian family had never approved of her marriage to Phil, a Jew. Now, it is desire of Phil to live without the present emptiness and loneliness and wishes to have a “little love” and in return to get a little love from a woman. They have a six years old son called Paul. She is ever present in the lives of her former husband, her son, Paul and her friend Janet Hawakaya. Their married life lasted for only six years.

Vikram Seth’s novel presents a range of the diverse and possible kinds of love and

sex between Man and Woman and Man and Man that exist in a modern American Society. And their passions, feelings and emotions and experiences evoked by those loves depicted realistically and range of love and sex which are in practice in 'modern' U.S.A. society. The American metropolis has its own unique culture and lifestyle. There are various choices made by the different characters in respect of love and sex are presented. It portrays their capability and ability or incapability and inability to lead contended, happy or fulfilling lives. The landscapes of the locations, the social settings, the values, politics and customs, food, traditions, weather, atmosphere and pets play significant roles in the lives of the characters. From the beginning to the end of novel there is a premium placed on friendship and companionship rather than love and passion. Almost every relationship is doomed to be a failure, only that relationship which is based on mutual respect, understanding, adjustment, liking, companionship and even with a spirit of compromise that come to fruition and survive.

The lives of major characters are full of loneliness, companionlessness and vacuity and as such these pets are just like companion or partner and they are in fact substitutes of human beings. In the hypermodern, high-tech society of U.S.A., they apparently lead a cosy and materialistically comfortable life full of pleasures and joys but inwardly they lead a discontented life deprived of spiritual happiness and real joy in absence of any human companion or perfect mate or a loving partner. In their lives there is vacuum which is partly filled up by these pets. When John Brown meets his former lady-love, Janet Hawakaya at the Shu Jing after a long period, he first enquires: "How are the Cats? And what about her? And the sculpture" (74)

Vikram Seth is puissant promoter of postmodernism. He has a rather un-nerving experience because he carries his subversive rebellion to nearly every aspect of his book. In terms of plot it is unexpected in the norm. The trials, tribulations, agonies and mental

tormentations of John as he comes to terms with his beloved Liz marrying his best friend Philip, who has had a homosexual affair with his future wife's younger brother Ed, are the most unusual twists and unexpected turns of the story. The novel, therefore, resists narrative closure in the best postmodernist tradition.

The thematic revolt is also worth noting, it traces the bitter experiences of the hero, John Brown as he comes to terms with his own loneliness and the sexual aberrations of his friends and acquaintances. It can be considered as a "bildungsroman" or a novel dealing with the coming of age of the protagonist. It is the first English novel to deal with homosexuality in an open, frank, candid and bold manner revealing all the aspects connected to it, emotional, religious, physical, sexual and psychological.

In this respect, the novel proves to be metafiction as the novelist writes about writing the written. He is also indicative of the authorial involvement with the readers and the text as opposed to the earlier trends in modernism where the focus was on objectivity. Stylistically speaking, Vikram Seth is a very conscious craftsman, with a purpose. He invokes Muse and subverts the socio-political, religious, literary and cultural myths thereby deconstructing and dismantling the underlying traditional assumptions. He also makes the European generic form the target of his parody. This provides him the pretext to interrogate the socio-cultural-political assumptions in the sonnet form. He deconstructs the canonical models with a view to question, expose and dismantle the underlying structures and question the imperialist assumptions. Reviewing and rewriting the mythic structures and assumptions are therefore Vikram Seth's greatest contribution to the new discourse in Indian English literature.

The need of a loving life-long companion with virtues of tolerance, adjustment, understanding and even sacrifices in both life partners are essential to pass the life happily. One may not agree with Vikram Seth's philosophy of "mistrust of passion in life" and his view that in respect of love, one must give preference to reason over passion. It cannot be

denied that most significant decisions in one's life is taken by heart and not by mind. One must trust in the wisdom of heart. Vikram Seth seems to say that the most important institution in human society is a "family" that cannot be replaced by any other such "loose organisation" without moral principles, liabilities, duties and responsibilities. In reality, there cannot be any other alternative to age-old "Family Institution" in a civilized society.

It is a fact that due to scientific and technological advancement there is immense material progress and social changes are taking place in every country. But due to this fast-changing world there are rifts and cracks which are appearing in human relationship and particularly family, friendship, society, community etc. It cannot be denied that due to unrestrained and unrestricted freedom enjoyed by an individual and the individual's disregard for any set of moral values and also the loosening hold of a head of a family have created large number of new social problems. Vikram Seth seems to say that in an individual of Modern World there is need for tolerance, strong bond of family and respect for other's point of view or opinion to lead a happy, contented and peaceful life.

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