

Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* : An Analytical Study

Sanjay Kumar

Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* is a novel in verse. It was first published in 1986 and then in 1989 by Oxford University Press, Delhi. Seth got the much coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for this book in 1988. The poet-novelist puts in about 13 month hard labour to complete this work in verse. But surprisingly enough, it bears neither Indian character, nor Indian ethos, nor even Indian locale. There are other novels written by Indian novelists like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga and Chetan Bhagat but they all employ Indian theme and Indian characters to bear upon their tales. *The Golden Gate* by Seth is a typical novel which has been written exclusively against the background of California. The novel may be called 'a Californian novel'. It is full of echoes from customs and manners, functions and ceremonies of California.

The sonnets of Seth do not sum up or summarise as they do in Shakespearean sonnet or as they employ iambic pentameter. Instead they employ iambic tetrameter, to maintain the balance between rhyme and meter for more than 300 pages and was indeed a tough task but amazingly enough. Seth succeeds in this arduous work.

There is a peculiar episode with regard to the genesis of *The Golden Gate*. Once Seth came across two translations of Alexandar Pushkin's novel in verse entitled *Eugene Onegin* (1833), and he felt tempted to compare and contrast these two translations. But later he dropped out because he found the translation by Charles Johnston quite up to the mark. After a good deal of thinking, he whispered himself, 'let me try using this stanzic form'. The second formative influence behind the staking of this novel was that of Timothy Steel, to whom the book has been dedicated. Both were in intimate term with each other and Seth learnt a lot from Timothy Steel how to handle the rhyming form with perfection.

What is remarkable about *The Golden Gate* is the systematic handling of its plot. The poet-novelist puts bricks after bricks to make a pyramid. Although the environment and social surroundings described in this novel bears no resemblance with those of Indian social setting and milieu, the story is 'undoubtedly' the product of the first hand experience of the novelist.

In English language, Chaucer, the father of English poetry, put *Canterbury Tales* in the form of verse. Later, Leigh-Hunt, the eminent poet critic wrote the story of Rimini (based on the story of Paolo and Francesco) in poetry. In India there has been a long tradition of telling a story in verse. Pt. Somdev's *Kathasaritsagar*, a poetical work was intended to entertain the queen of Kashmir who was the daughter of Trigarta (Kullu-Kandala). In Hindi Mallik Mohammad Jayasi wrote an epic *Padmavat* to narrate the story of Queen Padmavati and King Ratan Sen. But it is to be noted that none of these writings, save Somdev's *Kathasaritsagar*, is a fictional narrative. The speciality with Seth's *The Golden Gate* is that it is a pure fictional narrative. And the characters portrayed here are all the creations of the novelist's fertile imagination and the situations described are all fictitious having no relation whatsoever with actual situations, past or present.

In the first chapter, two important characters of the novel John and Janet are introduced. They are least concerned with the world around them. The atmosphere is charged with tension. But John and Janet are completely indifferent to what is going on around them. They feel completely alienated, isolated and lonely. They indulge in self analysis and self introspection. There is urgent need of a company. So, they invited correspondence for companionship and for this they make advertisement. In this way the description given in the first chapter evokes our curiosity as to what is to happen in future. An air of suspense also prevails.

In the second chapter John and Janet receive 82 letters from different corners but all of them are not equally readable. John selects only 3 out of them and reciprocates to the senders. This mitigates his tension to some extent and he breathes a sigh of relief. John also meets Wasp Bluestocking and Belinda Beale. He also meets Anne T. Friese, who is none but Janet herself. They also come across Elizabeth Dorati (Liz). John and Liz indulge in amorous intrigues. The scene described is highly romantic. John and Liz "bit the apple / Of mortal knowledge." (Seth 51)

Chapter III contains 37 stanzas. In the beginning, in 27 stanzas, we come across two additional characters – Paul and Philip (abbreviated to Phil). In the remaining 10 stanzas, there is a picturesque and graphic description of music concert. Philip and John turn out to be old chums. Liz in due course is introduced to Phil.

The description given in chapter IV is highly titillating. Here two more characters are brought to light. They are Professor Pratt and Kim

Tarvesh. The former is working on his fourth book *The Pratt Hypothesis*, while the latter is engaged in his research work in Economics like Vikram Seth himself. There is an orgy of drunken and licentious reveals and pleasant activity. Ed and Phil, both males, exhibit homosexual behaviour. Ed and Phil are pulling asunder in respect of nature and temperament. While Phil is not repentant for his activities nor does he feel guilty on the account, Ed feels guilty and cites holy Bible. Ed, however, does not want to sever his connection with Phil. He feels “unaccustomed pain” (103) at their separation.

Chapter V begins with the poets pondering over the form of the novel which sums into 5 stanzas. The chapter makes no notable advance in the story. Ed – a friend of Phil is in a fix to decide a course of action. He maintains his homosexual relation with Phil but inwardly he abhors homosexuality which he considers abominable and repugnant to human behaviour. A party is arranged, which is hosted by Ed in order to celebrate “that we’er (they are) still alive”. (111)

In chapter VI a cat Charlemagne rushes in to intervene in John and Liz’s affair. He looks upon John as his rival. Out of hatred he urinates on John’s bed near his head and tears his papers. Everybody declares him a psychological case. The cat sent to a cat’s psychiatrist. Janet laments her “fragmented life and art”.(140) Phillip Weiss (Phil) is shown here concerned with the form of government of Russian set up and American set up. The wrath of the cat seems uncalled for and unwanted.

In Chapter VII there is a plea for disarmament in the Lung less Labs of the Lung less Town. The scientists are preparing all sorts of instruments, arms and ammunitions to kill the opponents. The latest one which “batters / Live cells and yet – this is what matter / leaves buildings and machines intact”.(151) Obviously this reflects dehumanisation of the scientists. A procession is launched against armament which is addressed by a priest O’Hare who delivers a highly thought provoking speech. Liz is also invited to speak. But she refuses. She remains reticent. This chapter actually does not, in any way, fits in the sequence of novel. Reader hardly gets anything sensible or worthwhile in this chapter. The speech of the priest runs into 19 stanzas. It is extremely exasperating.

Chapter VIII is designed to further throw light upon the abnormal homosexual relation between Phil and Ed. They love each other though their motives are radically different. Phil’s love is wholly mundane and fleshy. He wants to get the body of Ed. Ed’s love is wholly platonic.

Phil's love is prompted by spiritual love. Surprisingly enough both of them try to justify their respective stand. Phil wants to sleep with Ed. But Ed wants to spend time with Phil in conversation. In this way they are contend with each other. But soon they come to terms thinking that their ends are drawing nearer. Once again Ed quotes the holy Bible in support of his conviction but Phil who is worldly wise extends him to shun all religiosity. His words fall flat on the ears of Ed.

Chapter IX marks the climax of homosexual relationship between Ed and Phil. When John comes to know about this abnormal relationship he gets infuriated but Phil does not feel shame, he simply says, "Try it yourself sometimes".(199) When Liz learns about the indignation of John he wants to laugh it off. She discloses that she knew it right from the very beginning but she did not like to reveal it. She is inclined to discuss this problem. But John backs out. Phil and Liz go for a stroll to The Golden Gate where Phil admits his homosexual relationship with Ed. Liz also opens up her heart that she too, admits that she is in love with John. An ending is given here that both of them are satisfied with their love partner. They justify their stand on account of their loveliness. Liz is the sister of Phil. So the open discussion of a brother's homosexual relation in presence of his sister is beyond the imagination of Indian mentality.

In Chapter X, Mike Dorati, his wife Mrs. Dorati and John go to trim and prone the vine creeper. John visits Dorati after complete one year after his courtship with Liz. Mrs. Dorati is a patient of liver cancer. She wishes to have grand children but her wishes are thwarted because all her children are engaged here and there against her will. John accuses Liz of having an affair with Phil, but soon

'a sick repentance seeps into John's heart'(232).

In Chapter XI, we get a description of a marriage party of Liz and Phil. Within a week of Luna Tessbab case judgment they are united in a happy wedlock. An invitation on this occasion is sent to John who frowns at it and gives a pungent reply expressing his intention to snap all his relation with Liz for good. Liz tries to pacify John twice but to no effect. John is disappointed. He moves from bar to bar in search of a girl. Jenet gets this news and calls on John in a bar. They together go to a sea side for a walk. There is no indication here as to why John makes up his mind to break up his relationship with Liz. Liz remarks, 'It's over- it's no use'.(243) John considers Liz's behaviour "suave duplicity". (267)

In Chapter XII John and Jane are described living together though with certain reservations. They go to sea-shore for a pleasure trip. Jan displays her art in a small art gallery, Markus Ladd. Her art is not appreciated. Jan feels frustrated. But she decides to pursue her art as Jane arranges a party where Liz and Phil are also invited in anticipation that John would reconcile with them. Jan goes to meet Sue who is proceeding to France for a year. In her way back, her vehicle gets out of order. Phil advises her on phone to take a "ride up with". (276) They meet an accident and a phone call from police enquires after her, 'next of kin'. (280)

The last chapter announces the death of Jane, Joan, Matt and Liz's mother and the birth of Liz's plump child who is named John Weiss. Art specialists hail Jane as a great painter after her death. John is once again torn of loneliness and isolation. He 'in a crumpled suit, unsaved / walks / on market'. (302) John slips Ed who greets him. Liz writes a letter to John to teach a lesson of love. She makes it clear that life is short and one must make the most of it. John finds himself incapable of showing his reaction to Liz's letter. He cannot say it for certain as to what course he will follow in his life.

It is worthwhile to mention that except the characters of Phil, John, and Liz and Jan other characters loosely hang on the story of the novel. There is hardly anything very striking about the theme of the novel. The incidents described here are not properly synchronised. To use a remark of Dr Johnson on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, we read this novel "for instruction, retire harassed and over burdened and look elsewhere for recreation" (Dr.Johnson 100)

The question then arises where does lie the merit of this novel? Does it lie in the story; does it lie in characterisation, in plot construction, in moral or in poetic excellence? The story is at all not absorbing. Its characters are not lively. Its plot construction appears a jarring effect. The moral it inculcates cannot be easily gulped by us. Homosexuality, not love is what is stressed here. It is a fact that entertainment is an important quality of a good novel. But what entertainment do we find while reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's' Wake*. Still they are considered classics. In *The Golden Gate* we miss the quality of entertainment also. Its reading is exasperation. Now remains the last point i.e. poetic gift of the novelist. It is unquestionably superb. The sonnets of *The Golden Gate* do give us an impression that Seth is not an upstart in

the field. He has attained sufficient skill and maturity in handling metrical verse. Seth is a consummate artist. His excellent versification in *The Golden Gate* compensates his other deficiency. By and large *The Golden Gate* is a masterpiece. Dr. Prerana Sinha, while praising this book observes, “*The Golden Gate* is a remarkable verse novel conceived in 594 stanzas, that made the readers spell bound across the globe for obvious novelty depicted in the combination of two genres- novel and poetry, a literary feat with very few attempt and accomplish”.(Sinha) She links the theme of this novel with the current philosophical creed designated as “existentialism”, which lays stress on “loneliness of man who is solely responsible for his predicament”.(108)

Roopali Gupta tries to exonerate Seth from the charge of depicting homosexual in the novel, “another dominant theme in the novel is the homosexuality which makes the novel particularly true to the American way of life. Homosexuality, by no means, an American invention but due to prevalence in the American society which has almost acquired a cult status there ... *The Golden Gate* is not an attempt to glorify homosexuality. It is true that it is Phil, a homosexual, who is rewarded with rich family life at the end of the novel, while John has nothing left but memories, but Seth exposes the superiority and personal judgement over any opinion held by convention.”(Gupta 41)

The principal character of this verse novel is John Brown, a computer engineer who is working on nuclear projects. When the novel opens, we are told that John’s mother is dead and he is feeling utterly lonely and alienated. Liz Dorati is a lawyer who vehemently protests lungless labs and nuclear bombs. Charlemagne disliked John. Bisexual Phil is John’s alienated friend who has an affair with the guilt ridden homosexual Ed, Liz’s brother. John gets along with Janet Hayawaka, the Japanese sculpture- the drummer. These are the five important characters portrayed in this novel. The plot of the novel lingers around the theme of love, frustration, rejection, and isolation –that befall the lover in his venture of love. Janet is an immigrant and lives all alone like John. She plays her drum to mitigate her suffering and loneliness. Liz’s brother Ed is a successful professional but he is unable to resolve his personal conflicts i.e. his catholic beliefs and his homosexual preferences. Liz has a very peculiar relation with her cat, Charlemagne. Charlemagne was once a famous writer in 12th century and along with his knights was famous for his heroic exploits. His involvement in Liz’s life is immense for he loved her who was always by Liz’s side, through her studies and career. He was

with her in sad moments. John and Liz love each other but John is weak and impulsive. He lacks compassion and understanding. Liz is a worldly wise woman. She does not expect too much from her lover John. She diverts her attention to Phil who dauntlessly speaks for Lungless Lab, for peace and humanity. It is Phil's sensitivity towards Liz that had attracted Ed also. Like John Ed also tries to find solution to his questions. He has been restless and restless throughout. Phil's problem is that he has always been attracted by vulnerable people. Ed and Phil are very close to each other. They even love each other. But Ed's sense of religion fills him with guilt. Ed is god fearing when he commits a mistake. The reason behind Phil's sense of guilt is his failure to prove himself a successful husband. There is no steady track of his mind. On the other hand all is not well in Liz and John's relationship. Liz is already annoyed on account of his callous attitude towards Charlemagne and Phil. Sometimes she talks about her marriage with Phil. Her love is flexible. Liz represents the novelist's concept of love. Her love is confined to physical relationship knowing that the charm and attraction is short lived. Hence Liz is often apprehensive of her love relationship with John. Liz believes that loves makes a person helpless and dependent and weak. The lover becomes a weakling. He becomes drug addict or a lame person on crutches. So Liz needs time to think over her marriage. She puts up with her parents. In chapter XI we come across a description of a wedding ceremony of Liz and Phil.

The theme of the novel is primarily concerned with isolation and estrangement in modern American society. As to the application of 'existential philosophy' in *The Golden Gate*, it can be said that 'existentialism' is a broad term which is not confined to loneliness, isolation and alienation. Its fundamental tenet is an insistence on the actual existence of the individual as the basic and important fact, instead of a reliance of theories and abstraction. To explore the existential philosophy in *The Golden Gate* is to expect too much from Seth. Such an attempt is nothing more than a useless dove-tailing.

Moreover, homosexuality is, by no means, an American invention. It is wrong to say that homosexuality is condemned and a man indulged in homosexuality is looked down upon in American society. In the famous novels written by American novelists – Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, John Dos Passus, Hawthorne, Cooper, Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck – we find the description of homosexuality and it is well known that literature is the mirror of the society. Indeed, Seth does not glorify homosexuality but the fact is that

Seth gives a minute description of homosexuality in *The Golden Gate* and it is a sufficient testimony to prove that he intends less to titillate readers and more to satisfy his pervert taste.

Reverting to the theme of the novel John, the hero of the novel, oscillates between two poles. In the beginning he is attracted towards the Japanese girl, the drummer. Then he is attracted towards Liz. But even his love for Liz knows no fixity or sensibility. Liz's love for John is also flexible. A time comes when Liz becomes a bitter critic of John and starts appreciating Phil. This kind of sexual diversion is described by Seth with all details. It is a fact that at the end of the novel John and Liz are wedded together. But the concept of love as put forward by Seth in *The Golden Gate*, is neither love nor lust, but animal love. Phil and Ed are grotesque characters. Their love for each other is normal. To conclude we can say that the cadence and sonorousness and above all the verbal music that we find in *The Golden Gate* are something of rarity.

Works Cited

- Gupta, Roopali. *Vikram Seth's Art: An Appraisal*. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers, 2005.
- Johnson, Dr. Samuel. *Lives of the English Poets*. London: Everyman's Library, 1985.
- Seth, Vikram : *The Golden Gate*. Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sinha, Prerana. *Vikram Seth: The Suitable Writer, A Critical Response*. New Delhi : Creative Books, 2007.