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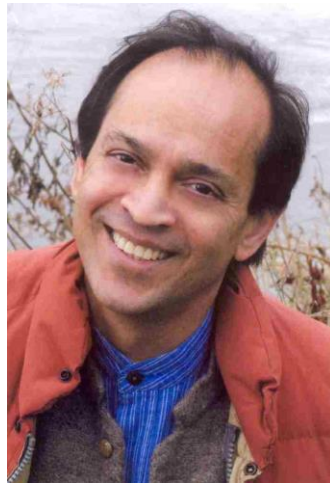
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Quest for Self-Fulfillment in Vikram Seth's Novels *The Golden Gate and A Suitable Boy*

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Vikram Seth

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Abstract

This paper presents a summation of my M.Phil. Dissertation with the title *Quest for Self-fulfillment in The Golden Gate and A Suitable Boy*. consists of five chapters. The first chapter gives a bio-critical introduction and the valuable literary output of the novelist Vikram Seth. In order to acknowledge and define influences on Vikram Seth's art and his vision some major trends in Indian writing in English upto to 21st century have been traced and outlined. An attempt has been made in the chapters to examine how Vikram Seth's novel *The Golden Gate* registers the increasing importance of life in the modern world. After the critical analysis of Vikram Seth's imagination in *The Golden Gate*, the chapters proceed to focus in particular on his representation of the crisis in post colonial India in *A Suitable Boy*.

Vikram Seth: A Significant Indian Novelist

Vikram Seth is one of the most significant Indian novelists of today. He has given a new dimension and depth to the novel by using the sonnet form for the narrative purpose. Although he is Indian by birth, by life style he is diasporic. He stands as a new comer in the stream of Indo English literature. He has made significant contribution to enrich Indian English novel with respect to both theme and techniques.

Variety of Themes

The originality in Vikram Seth's works and the language style he employs established him as a major writer of our times. He is now seen as one of the most powerful modern novelists in English. He has written extensively on political issues. There is a compelling

lucidity and simplicity in his writing which is a hall mark of a great writer. It is difficult to imagine many contemporary writers who could write a novel that gives so much satisfaction. He has succeeded in bringing the characters so fully to life.

It is certainly true that Seth has undertaken no mean task in trying to distill something original from a subject that is almost by definition generic and sentimental. It is to his great credit that despite the occasional lapse, he answers the challenge with a convincing and beautiful story of passion. In an interview he says, “I would be bored unless I wrote a book that in some sense was a challenge” (**Punekar 86**).

Seth’s Characters

Seth’s characters, major or minor, are defined not so much through a description of their consciousness, self expression or view of themselves, but through their relationship with others and others’ view of them. The value given to self expression in the west is something associated with Romanticism. Seth’s writing is more akin to the classical spirit of the 18th century Age of Reason and its emphasis on universal experience and common humanity.

Focus on Quest for Self-Fulfillment

Vikram Seth’s novels mainly focus on the concept of quest for self-fulfillment. His characters in the novels crave the basic human desire to love and to be loved. Thus every major character in his novel is involved in the quest for that special earth-shattering love. The central motif in both Vikram Seth’s novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* are the quest for a companion in life. In *The Golden Gate* Jan sends the advertisement on John’s behalf while in *A Suitable Boy* Rupa Mehra performs the role of traditional matchmaker,

which is nowadays being increasingly played by matrimonial columns of national newspapers, especially among the educated Indian middle and upper middle class people.

***The Golden Gate* – The Central Character John**

In *The Golden Gate*, Vikram Seth's perceptive view of the 1980's yuppie lifestyle in northern California is presented. The novel *The Golden Gate* reveals the story of a young man, who is unable to sustain love and companionship in his life, ending up much the same way as he began.

The central character John is a lonely and depressed human being, searching for meaning and happiness to find self fulfillment. Although he is still lonely and depressed, the loneliness and depression are not the same as that the reader finds in the initial pages of the novel. His life has come full circle and the bittersweet experience of life has made him a mature and better human being. The novel deals with personal relationships, love, loss and morality with an acuteness and delicacy of perception, a humorous yet compassionate and a very healthy understanding of human beings, particularly of different generations, not in conflict, but just different in stances and desires.

The Older and Modern Ways of Living

In this novel Seth deals with both the older and modern kind of living, feeling and thinking and sometimes crippling freedom of the post modern period, where the old monogamous love between sexes are now a part. Seth gives the message that sexual self acceptance, meaningful commitment, sincere love and stable friendship are the basis of an authentic life.

Issues Faced in Affluent Societies

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An exploration of these vital issues brings us to the problems, still by large peculiar to affluent societies of the west, the Americans in particular, and Europeans in general, such as unhappy marriages, broken homes, single parenthood, divorce and homosexuality.

Globalization and economic liberalization and a growing multinational cultures, both in literal corporate terms as well as the availability of certain goods, jobs and opportunities in India are no longer as removed from the yuppie culture of California as they may have been a couple of decades ago. Vikram states that,

The problem of search for meaning in the midst of plenty is not one that people have in the third world, the main problem is to just make ends meet. (

Mohanty 139)

Romantic Love

The pervading theme in the novel *The Golden Gate* is that of romantic love. It is presented as a possible weapon in the battle against the loneliness of life. Sensing that his life has to run to seed, the central character John looks for a companion to love and be loved by. Implicitly or explicitly, it is true for each protagonist that to be a winner a man must have “oh yes above all of course someone to love” (**TGG 6.13**). The definition of such romantic love is predictably conventional, passionate, exciting and with the possibility of perfect communication between the lovers.

Satirizing Romance and Romantic Relationships

In *The Golden Gate* Seth satirizes romance and romantic relationships. Most of the sonnets are generally associated with feelings of romantic passion. They are perceived as illusionary and short lived. John’s earlier feelings for Janet are both passionate and transient,

and by mutual consent they feel their union would constrict. They agree to part and shelter their friendship from all passion. Passion is thus seen as a force that destroys even as it blinds and no wonder then that Phil says, “Passion’s a prelude to disaster” (TGG 11.20). Seth seems to suggest that it is balanced friendship and affection which can prove to be longer lasting. John’s later relations with Janet prove this. Their love is based on mutual respect, affection and concern. However death ends that relationship.

Foregrounding

The romantic relationship foregrounded and satirized in the novel is that of John and Liz. Seth is sympathetic and indulgent to the rapture of love that entralls them. There is a blindness and lack of clarity in their love. It is chance and accident that get them together; their meeting is the result of an advertisement. Their immediate violent attraction for each other is physical, beginning even before a word is spoken between them. They register the pull of physical magnetism and their minds seem to have little room for rational thought. When the passion is satisfied, differences crop up between them. John, who is shown to be a conservative, intolerant and narrow-minded in his opinions on a range of issues like, Liz’s pet, her diets, her political stand on the march for non- proliferation of nuclear arms and her support of her brother’s homosexuality, soon loses Liz’s love and respect.

Romantic passion then cannot sustain relationships since it is selfish and demanding. Relationships that are based on respect, affection and duty form stronger and lasting bonds. Relations that are based on mutual affection and respect and which are anchored in the larger familial and social ties are the ones likely to survive.

The only romance in the novel which truly sustains is the marriage of Phil and Liz for it supports familial relationships. Similar in their views and opinions, it is respect and affection that mark their feelings. Seth responds,

I think that since people are looking for love and meaning in life and having known both happiness and tragedy it might appeal simply to a general sense of common humanity (qtd. in Punekar 90)

The Role and Function of Physical Consummation

In *The Golden Gate* physical consummation becomes the point of departure. “Everything just great in bed, yet nothing shared inside your head” (TGG 9.36). John and Liz meet on a winter Sunday, are in bed by Thursday, but part before the summer is out. 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 on the other hand 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 had 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.

Search for Ultimate Satisfaction

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

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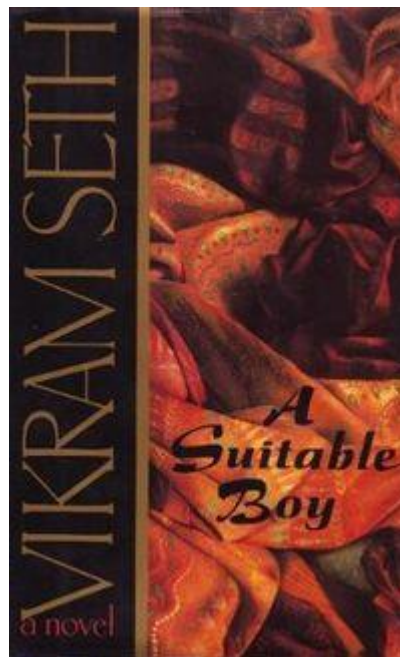
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terms with his past. John is lonely, isolated, alienated and lost. There is no one to console him except the imaginary voice of Janet who is no more. Emptiness leads to nothing but emptiness. Modernity marks a naked craze for physical comforts and there is no time for intellectual growth. The modern concept of living is the twisting of everything to make it fit into its own priorities and so a terrific disruption takes place. And modern man becomes vulnerable to such influences.

Central Values of Vikram Seth's Fiction as Seen through *A Suitable Boy*



The central values of Vikram Seth's fiction may be seen through the way he has dealt with the relationship between personal life and politics in India. The novel *A Suitable Boy* reveals to the readers how the love affairs of the protagonist unfold against a background of partition and increasing Hindu- Muslim communal violence.

Conflict between Individual's Desires and Community Demands

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In *A Suitable Boy* the main plot line is like that of *The Golden Gate*. It is centered on the question of finding a suitable partner. The conflict between individual desires and conditions imposed by the larger community is seen in Lata's conflict over the choice of husband and her final decision; Lata's choice is a boy most suited to her own culture and her place in society. The novel reveals whether the heroine Lata will submit to her mother Rupa Mehra's arrangement, or she will follow her own heart, even if that means defying not only her mother, but also all barriers of caste and religion.

Freedom to Choose the Spouse You Want – Three Suitors

In *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth allows his heroine the opportunity of choosing between three men who are totally different from each other in their appearance as well as in their behavior. The first suitor Kabir, a cricketer, dashing and handsome, but a Muslim. The second suitor Amit chatterji, Bengali poet and novelist, sophisticated, rich and a Brahmin, and the third suitor Haresh, an energetic and bright young man determined to make a career for himself in the shoe manufacturing industry. Lata and Kabir's love relationship is the main connecting strand of the novel that weaves the whole fabric of the plot.

Every woman has an inherent desire for seeking the pleasure of male companionship. Lata enjoys the pleasure of the company of Kabir and seeks emotional satisfaction in his company. But Lata finds herself discontented because she demands the confirmation of it with the repeated act of loving. It is more the feeding of her sense of insecurity rather than the exhibition of faith and love. When Lata finds Kabir is a Muslim her immediate reaction is that this would distress her mother. She is aware that her relationship with him is impossible knowing the taboos against Hindu –Muslim unions in the cultural and religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Role of Religion

In a country as big and ethnically diverse as India, religion has always played a very important part in the life of an Indian. Religious rituals pervade the lives of Indians. Religious considerations are sometimes more vital than even economic factors. And for majority of Indians no other factor is more powerful and influential than their religious beliefs and faith. They are usually insistent on following their religion and religious practices. Lata and Kabir's ill fated romance is set against the backdrop of communal conflict in post partition independence in Brahmipur. Seth also brings out the conventionality of the Indian society in this novel. Women do not have the right to choose their life partners; who their parents choose for them should be accepted without question. Vikram Seth highlights the roles and restrictions placed on women in the postcolonial India of the 1950's.

Options

In western love stories there are two typical courses for a love which faces opposition from the family. Either they can run away, or true love overcomes all obstacles, the family is reconciled to marriage, the lovers are united and it all ends happily. In the case of *A Suitable Boy*, either Lata can defy everyone, marry Kabir and live separated from her family, or Rupa Mehra can be made to change her view of her daughter marrying a Muslim. Lata does not deny that her decision is partly due to Kabir's religion, but the reader is not led to believe that she shares her mother's prejudice. Lata reiterates her disapproval of anything passionate. Lata is scared of losing her virginity with Kabir, but she is under control when she is with Haresh. Lata's innocence becomes very much evident when the narrator comments that after she has read the Dutch author's sex manual she was as much repelled as fascinated by what she had to offer.

Striking a Balance

The realization of the significance of the family and the community and the need to control passion in order to achieve balance between oneself and the larger social, cultural group with which one is affiliated is finally the driving force behind Lata's decision. Lata finally selects Haresh who considers his work as his religion, and disregards caste restriction on working in the leather industry that supposedly is polluting. It seems to be a sign of modern ideas of economic progress and social egalitarianism. Therefore, there is no guarantee that this idea of passionless union will continue throughout her lifetime. It is possible that the reader is reconciled to Lata's decision because it is realistic. The conflict between individual desire and family duty is an Indian concern and individual desire is given less importance in India than in the west, sometimes the conflict resolving itself neatly into two issues, duty to the family and personal fulfillment. The fulfillment of oneself, however, is a desirable goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society. It has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family. Sexual love and personal fulfillment which are the prime concerns of the western society cannot have similar significance in the Indian society.

Narrative Techniques

Vikram Seth's handling of narrative techniques in the selected novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* reveals his mastery of the art of fiction writing. The novel depends mainly on the refreshing boldness and achievement in using English language for creative purpose. Seth's use of post modern narrative in his novels reveals the originality of his insight and awareness of the human predicament in the post modern age. He shows absolute mastery

of the English language and has created a unique literary alchemy. Both the novels prove his genuine artistic creativity.

Bias for Arranged Marriage?

In both the novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* arranged marriage brings with it an inherent sense of understanding, adjustment and tolerance. These three prime characteristics are required for lifelong commitment. Being passionate about anything or over anything is worthy of momentary bliss. In Seth's theory romantic passion must necessarily end in some loss, since life is too frail to endure ecstasy. Passion is always synonymous with disaster. In Seth's novels couples who share passionate relationships do not end up in the 'happy married life ever after'. In *The Golden Gate* physical consummation becomes the point of departure. Love is not merely the friction of two skins and any lasting relationship cannot be predicted on a sexual or chemical affinity but must be based on respect, trust and understanding. In *A Suitable Boy* Lata opts for the safety of marriage with Haresh Khanna a passionless man. Her final choice of reason over passion and indeed, her deliberate rejection of the life of passion represented by Kabir, points to an attitude of rationality.

Painful Lessons in Personal Knowledge and Moral Self-discipline

Thus in both the novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* Seth's characters are set painful lessons in personal knowledge and moral self-discipline, as a result of which rationality triumphs over any sort of obsessive or passionate indulgence. His characters suffer but they also understand and their understanding derives from a proper exercise of rational thoughts rather than from emotional or passionate entanglement. Seth, through his characters

proposes that we deny passion and remain as far as possible in control of ourselves. Thus the great prolific writer Anita Desai says that Seth's characters,

Although in their rash youth they might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance and the unknown, they learn their lessons and return chastened to the safety and security of the familiar and the traditional represented here in the Indian fashion.

(Mohanty 199)

Thus in both the novels Vikram Seth has handled the theme of Quest for Self-fulfillment excellently. Both novels, *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* make an attempt towards a better understanding of the world and life.

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