

# Human Praxis and moral Configuration through Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*

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## Abstract

Vikram Seth, an Indian writer propagates humanism through his novel *The Golden Gate*. Modern man suffers from alienation, suspicion and mental agony.

John, Brown, the protagonist, is only twenty six years old, a graduate from Berkley University, tall, handsome, well-dressed works in a software industry dealing with production of nuclear bombs and missile. He is well paid, respected, even owns a Peugeot car, in short, a male WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) yuppie (young urban professional) but he suffers from loneliness.

Vikram Seth not only talks about alienation but also talks of the massive nuclear atoms that may cause mutual extermination, common death or omnicide. He emotionally sermonizes on nuclear insanity and hate citing historical references and examples of war. His argument that there is no victory, no survival, no defense, no place to hide in this exhaustive fratricide that threatens all culture and all civilization, all human kind and all creation.

“Change yourself. You must be the change you want to see in the world” says Gandhiji. According to Gandhiji, the change should not come from exterior but interior. We live in a competitive world. No one has a second opinion about it. But we should not forget that we are human beings.

**Keywords:** Alienation, massive nuclear atombombs, fratricide, Satyagraha, love, compassion and friendship.

## Introduction

‘The four characteristics of humanism are curiosity, a free mind, belief in good taste and belief in the human race’ (E.M. Forster 1).

Humanism prefers reason and science to scriptures and tradition. It believes ‘To err is human, to forgive is divine’. Humanism has a vital role to play on modern culture. Vikram Seth, an Indian writer propagates humanism through his novel *The Golden Gate*. It is a novel set in San Francisco of the 1980s. It is written entirely in the sonnet form. The narrative of *The Golden Gate* consists of 594 sonnets all written in iambic tetra meter (including the acknowledgement table of contents and author’s autobiographical note which are made up of a sonnet each) and follows the fourteen line stanza pattern of Eugene Onegin. For Vikram Seth, the author, the sonnets function as interlinked units which gradually progresses with the narrative pace of the novel. The pivot character in the novel is John Brown whose acquaintances fill out the multitude of San Francisco city. He is a computer programmer, working on nuclear weapon projects, but leading a lonely life without true friends or companions. The only person John can really seem to get along with is Janet Hayakawa, the delightful and funky sculptor, punk drummer, John’s confidante ex-lover. The novel portrays the contemporary Californian life style through the story of the relationships of a group of young professionals.

Mala Pandurang (77) points out in her essay on *The Golden Gate*, “the social phenomenon of the young upwardly mobile professionals and the DINK (Double Income No Kids) couple is no longer culture specific to U.S.A alone. Policies of economic liberalization and the entry of the multinational corporations into the Indian market have led to fast changing lifestyle and a growing culture of material consumerism among the Indian middle class”

The characters in *The Golden Gate* are uniquely Californian, in that they are mostly migrants or outsiders, settle in California for a financial base.

The opening stanza sets the tone of the novel:

To make a start more swift than weighty  
Hail Muse Dear Reader, once upon  
A Time, say, circa 1980,  
There lived a man. His name was John  
Successful in his field though only  
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,  
One evening as he walked across  
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged to us  
Of a red Frisbee almost brained him  
He thought, “If I died, who’d be sad

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Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?  
Would anybody? As it pained him.

It is a life of love and lust, told with wit, restraint and intelligence. It deals with white American characters except one character of partly Japanese descent that is Janet Hayakawa. She is a polite girl but a cheerful personality. Once she was so crazy about John, and the only thing she longed for in life was his love. Unfortunately the love affair ended in disappointment since John was a moody person, highly sensitive and passionate.

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

John, Brown is only twenty six years old, a graduate from Berkley University, tall, handsome, well-dressed works in a software industry dealing with production of nuclear bombs and missile. He is well paid, respected, even owns a Peugeot car, in short a male WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) yuppie (young urban professional)

I'm young, employed, healthy, and ambitious  
Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed  
But all my symptoms are pernicious (1.23)

Hence, John, who apparently has everything, is still deeply unhappy. The fact is that he is very lonely and isolated. Janet Hayakawa, a drum player and sculptor, is a sympathetic friend of John; who once loved him whole heartedly. Now, she helps him to dispel his dull mood and loneliness by suggesting him to give an advertisement in the local newspaper for a better partner to entertain his life. John's problem is not external, so much as internal. Unless, he can change himself and his personality he will continue to invite unhappiness.

“Change yourself. You must be the change you want to see in the world” says Gandhiji. According to Gandhiji, the change should not come from exterior but interior. We live in a competitive world. No one has a second opinion about it. But we should not forget that we are human beings.

Liz Dorati is a quite attractive blonde, completed her law degree from Stanford Law school and presently working as an attorney in a private legal company. Her father Mike Dorati, is a farmer, cultivating grape vineyard. Mr and Mrs Dorati have three children (Viz, Liz, Sue and Ed). After receiving Liz's letter John meets her in the restaurant 'Café Trieste', the popular coffee shop in the city. He is spell- bound on seeing her beauty and almost staring at her. Liz too thinks that he is quite attractive, handsome,

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sound, solid, practical and active. They are attracted to each other at first sight. Their meetings at frequent interval brought them closer to share their views, feelings and love. Love is not blind, but rather dumps. They are blessed yuppies, as happy as a pair of puppies.

John's college friend namely Philip Weiss is a divorced, single, father of a six year old boy named Paul. He was working as nuclear engineer in 'Datatronics' and recently resigned his job due to his sentiments against nuclear arm policy. Phil was earlier married to a girl named Claire Cabot from a wealthy family; a marriage in haste, repent at leisure. Claire's family frowned at Phil's ordinary look and his unsophisticated lifestyle. After-marriage incompatibility of taste, style and interest grew more. And more so, Phil's vigour once his great attraction, exhausted Clair now. Thus the love which brought them together diminished into a disaster of divorce.

In the wedlock of Phil and Claire, the problem in adjusting with one another is not a major one, but the compatibility of Phil's lifestyle with Cabot clan is the main problem in Phil-Claire married life. Thus the incompatibility of varied lifestyle and status becomes a hurdle in the smooth sailing of their marriage voyage.

Angeli Multani (70), while analyzing the novel *The Golden Gate* concludes that the relationships which survive are those based on understanding and even compromise, while the relationship that began on the 'modern' note of sexual or romantic passion have disintegrated. Family values, companionship, brother- hood, parental love is far more stable, and more desirable for a steady life.

Seth's affirmation to the above statement is stressed while he reasons out one of the reason for Phil-Clair break up of their wed lock is 'Phil's vigour once his great attraction, exhausted Clair now. Thus any relationship based on sexual or romantic passion will disintegrate soon.

As far as John and Liz are concerned their meetings at regular interval strengthened their love bondage. Once they went to a music concert at Stanford, at the request of Liz. In the concert, Sue, Liz sister is playing a cellist. During the interval of the music programme John and Liz met Phil with his son. John introduced Phil to Liz and invited him to a party for their new house-warming ceremony. Phil is very much pleased to see his old friend after a long time. He accepted John's invitation to the party next week.

In the house-warming party, John introduced Phil to Janet and Liz sister, Sue. But Janet, being an old friend of Claire, didn't like to meet Phil and avoided him in the party. John took Phil away for a personal chat. He enquired Phil why did he resign from his job in Datatronics. Phil replied that he did it to save the world from the threat of nuclear weapons.

Phil says,  
Imagine that the first bombs found us  
And suddenly our small world ends,  
And our vile dust is swept up, tainting  
The hills, vineyard, the seas  
With irremediable diseases. (4.19)

Being a nuclear engineer, Phil did not like to continue working in Datatronics company since it was doing research in nuclear weapons. Seth's commitment on social responsibility and human safety is well reflected in the character of Phil. The piling of atomic bombs and the mad race to accumulate nuclear weapons among different countries is a real danger to human life in the future. In this regards Seth condemns the obscene amounts of money spent on defense out-lays by the developed nations, forcing the developing countries, with their impoverished populations, to spend huge expenditure on defense, leading into untenable economic position in the mindless and senseless race of nuclear proliferation. Seth, through his protagonist Phil, critiques nuclear armament from the position of a humanist and warns the international community about the impending calamity in the wake of nuclear proliferation.

On a Sunday, Phil drops on to see John and Liz and starts talking about the 'Lungless March'— a protest march against nuclear bombs. Liz supported the protest but John criticizes that the protest march is undemocratic.

Phil startled by his vehemence, handed over some literature on anti-nuclear protest and requested John to go through them.

Dawn rises over 'Lungless park' where the protest marchers join together to start out a march parade from 'Lungless park' to 'Lungless Lab', supporting those who risk prison to protest against nuclear arms. Phil, one among in the crowd briefs the public about the protest march, handing out pamphlets to them.

As Phil moving among the protest march, he traced Liz in the crowd, surprised to see her there.

The speaker of the protest march, Father O'Hare says,

Friends, Sisters and brothers, sons and daughters  
What is our will in life? To race  
As lemming-like, Mankind is racing  
To liquidation, or to face  
With what small strength we have, the massive  
Machines of omnicide, impasse,  
Oiled by inertia and by hate .(7.19)

He further asks,

Should we not try to douse, a fire  
That – threatens to consume away  
Not just our homes but the whole city?  
Well, we have gathered here this morning  
In disparate but harmonious voice  
To show that we have made our choice;  
That we have hearkened to the warning  
That hate and fear kill; and are here  
Confronting death and hate and fear. (7.19)

Father O'Hare expresses his concern about the liquidation of mankind due nuclear arms race. He believes in the equation that 'killing is dying'. He talks of the massive nuclear atoms that may cause mutual extermination, common death or omnicide. He emotionally sermonizes on nuclear insanity and hate citing historical references and examples of war. His argument that there is no victory, no survival, no defense, no place to hide in this exhaustive fratricide that threatens all culture and all civilization, all human kind and all creation. American president Ronald Reagan once said, 'A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought'-words that the American president and Russian premier Gorbachev agreed on in their joint statement at Geneva, by which the international community heaved a sigh of relief from war tension.

Father O'Hare in his long speech plays the role of a leader while groups of protesters prepare to court arrest in front of Lungless Lab, the hub of nuclear weapon research. What Father O' Hare advocates is very close to *satyagraha*, a non-violent mass-

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movement against the mounting threat of a senseless destruction (7.26). The author pitches his might behind the peace movement, giving us a homily against hate and warning us about the impending disaster of nuclear weapons.

He called upon everyone in the march to pledge and stand together to oppose the destructive weapons of nuclear bombs that threaten to wipe out the whole mankind. The priest sat down with emotion and the crowd applauded with appreciation and support for his speech.

Vikram Seth, the author vehemently criticizes the ill effects of nuclear proliferation. He condemns that those who devise these weapons don't think that they plan death. Vikram Seth attacks the nuclear scientist and the research worker that they go to work, attend a meeting, write an equation, and have a beer. They bred their bombs and aim them at living souls to kill and maim them. While mobilizing uncertain radar we explode the sky and prod ourselves to war.

The demonstrators quietly go across the line of demarcation. All traffic stops. The protestors are arrested and carried over by the Police. Meanwhile, a sponsor of the march arranged media coverage of the protest and Phil grabs the mike and hands it over to Liz to air her view on the protest march. She is surprised at the request to air her view on nuclear arms. Though she is a sympathizer of antinuclear protest, she is not prepared all in a sudden to deliver a speech on nuclear policy. However, her concern for mankind and environment and her commitment to human welfare forced her to express her feeling on nuclear destruction.

She says,  
...There is something I  
Have often thought of. If we die  
– We humans, that is - it may serve as  
Right for our silliness and hate.  
But what we cannot vindicate  
Is killing all the other fauna  
That have developed on the earth. (7.46)

She brought to the notice of the people that if half of the nuclear bombs piled up in different countries exploded intentionally or unintentionally, a huge load of Nitrogen Oxide released from the bombs engulfs half of our ozone layers in the atmosphere. In effect, every living organism- flies, birds, fish and all animals suffer blindness and starvation to death. It is a stark reality and threat to the future of every living organism.

Liz stops and puts the mike down. For sometimes, no one speak at all. The message delivered by her was clear reflection of the will power and confidence of Liz as a strong, independent and courageous woman to speak out what she thinks right and just. Though she is unaware that she has to deliver a speech on nuclear arms at protest march, she did not hesitate to speak, without any fear or nervousness. Her commitment on social cause and public concern overcame a hesitation and shyness, to make a speech on public issue before a large gathering of people. Vikram Seth portrays the strong personality of courage and conviction of Liz on matters concerning human welfare.

### Conclusion

Z. N. Patil (26) in his review of *The Golden Gate* commends Seth for his powerful display of female characters in the novel. He appreciates that it is significant that woman like Liz Dorati participates in the public protest march like anti-nuclear demonstration. She is one of those American women who have emancipated and saved themselves from being the dreary depressed house-wives trapped in life- less house works and discovered their real strength. Liz Dorati is a strong egalitarian woman able to control her destiny. Liz as a peace marcher, strongly asserts her views that nuclear arm race will eventually result in destructions and starvation of human beings and will lead to reduction in Ozone layer in the atmosphere and finally universal annihilation. In the end of the novel, Liz joins hands with Phil not only for anti-nuclear demonstration but also for his entire life as his better half. To conclude with the words of Simone De Beauvoir

‘One’s life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion’(1).

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