



Women of Creative Sensibility in the Novel of "The Golden Gate" – Vikram Seth

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KEYWORDS

The Golden Gate brings poetry and novel together in a more formal way. Using verse as the narrative mode the novel incorporates not only linguistic features but also the formal structural pattern. The poetic form is not only the outer garb; it governs the total vision of the novel also. Action, character, details of the outer empirical reality – aspects of the novel, as they are, are governed in *The Golden Gate* by a poetic spirit and structure. The novel consists of 13 books in equal length, with about 530 stanzas in all. The characters grow in the context of their specific time and place, and the poet gives those details to verisimilitude. Yet the characters and their world are permeated with a tinge of the universal and that makes it a story of human experiences, common to people all over the world. The use of verse to describe scenes from the various places in San Francisco lends these places beauty and elegance.

The publication of *The Golden Gate* brought immediate recognition to its young writer Vikram Seth. Reviewed very favourably for the use of verse form, the novel has been taken to be an indication of a change from free verse to rhyme, metre and rhythm in poetry. For the first novel, the acclaim it has received is indeed very impressive. John Hollander calls it "a brilliantly fashioned" tale of life among a number of Bay area "Yuppies" and that it is "never anything less than quaintly and most unqualifiedly marvellous" (32). X.J.Kennedy admires its "fluency" (1) and an astute critic like Susan Sontag compares *The Golden Gate* to Pushkin's Eugene Onegin in its "particular mix of wit, sagacity and rue," and praises *The Golden Gate* as a "thrilling, subtle literary achievement" (TGG 37 - 46).

The title Seth has chosen is of special import, because the name The Golden Gate Bridge captures the quintessence of modern California. It stands as a defining feature of America's west coast, just as the Statue of Liberty is the defining feature of the eastern one. In the novel, Seth uses the bridge to indicate the setting of his tale, and the identifying landmark of San Francisco becomes the novel's *raison d'être* as well. Becoming the majestic backdrop of the human drama that unfolds, however, the bridge is more than just as identifying feature in Seth's tale. In ancient alchemy, the element corresponding to the emotion of love was gold; gold, the metal that stands for all that is pure and worthwhile in human life. The Golden Gate Bridge, with all its connotations of the materials of which it is a namesake, is thus the concrete image of human love reaching out and connecting people. The bridge becomes a symbol of love, representative of the soul test of worthiness, which all the characters must traverse before being let into the sanctum sanctorum of the kind of love they have only ever dreamed about, never known. Janet, with her broad human sympathy, has already crossed it, as have Phil and Liz, in their own compassionate way. John learns the lesson last of all, as Janet' voice calls to him from beyond the grave. The bridge is thus an apt symbol of the effort each one must make to reach out and connect with the rest of one's fellow beings. Seth says in the novel:

... In life's brief game to be a winner

A man must have ... O yes, above

All else, of course, someone to love.(129)

The groups of characters that from the stories of *The Golden Gate* are also uniquely Californian, in that they are, mostly, migrants or outsiders, who have found a spiritual home or a financial base in California. It is through the choices made by this group of people, the situations that they find themselves in or create for themselves that one can read the author's comment on modern lives and choices. John Brown is the character with whose story the novel opens. He is 26 years old, an Englishman and a software engineer. Phil Weiss, John's old college roommate and friend, also was a computer wizard, who resigned his job and opted out of the rat trace he found himself involved in. Phil, a Jew, was married to Clarie Cabot, (a name that evokes everything traditionally opposed to Phil Weiss and all that he represents in the text) who never directly enters that story, but hovers on the margins, a peripheral presence/absence in the lives of her ex-husband, her son, and her friend Janet Hawakaya.

Janet Hawakaya, is a sculptor, a musician. She and John had a relationship while they were in college, and renew their friendship when the novel opens. Elizabeth Dorati is a lawyer, a graduate from Stanford and the daughter of an Italian immigrant family. Her brother, Ed Dorati is also successful financially, but is unable to resolve his personal contradictions vis-à-vis his Catholic beliefs and his homosexual preferences.

It is John Brown who represents the author's indictment of a capitalist and consumerist life, a life which is entrenched in conservative political opinions, and who stands for, above all, a rigid inflexibility in understanding another person's point of view. In many ways John Brown may be called the central protagonist of *The Golden Gate*, if we read the novel as a cautionary tale of the dangers of rigidity and non-understanding in life and as a process of discovering flexibility and understanding. John is a successful young man, who has "everything but love," to use an oft repeated cliché. However, when John does find love, it seems to come fairly low in his list of priorities. John is an example of that young professional who seems to need other people more as a foil for his loneliness and to add to his list of possessions than as friends or lovers to cherish and grow with. In sonnet 6.13, Seth writes:

John looks about him with enjoyment.

What a man needs, he thinks, is health;

Well-paid, congenial employment;

A house; a modicum of wealth;

.....of course, someone to love.

The irony here is obvious. John Brown's lack of friendship and love has opened the narrative of *The Golden Gate*. In his loneliness he telephones two old friends from college, Phil and Janet, both of whom he has lost touch with in his race for professional success. Caught up in the "syndrome of possessions" (2.13) John has moved on in life, but has no one to share a cup of coffee or a meal with.

When he meets up with Janet, his former girl friend, they discuss the various ways and means through which John's loneliness might be assuaged. Some of the novel's central themes might be traced back to this incident. John displays some of the characteristics, and Janet preaches compromise as a more reliable route to happiness.

. . . The grail, perfection,

Dims, and we come to view rejection

as an endurable result

of hope and trial, and exult

..... still night. (TGG 21)

Seth uses the character of Janet to first voice an opinion, which is reinforced through various episodes later in the novel, that friendship and understanding, rather than passion (emotional or sexual) are the basis of a lasting relationship. When John first looks through the replies sent to the personal advertisement placed on his behalf by Janet, he selects three. Two of these don't work out after he meets the women, and he never gets to meet the third. This particular letter was

sent by Janet herself, ("for fun") and when John receives the polite refusal from Janet's alias, Anne T. Friese, he feels a strange sense of regret:

"The King's third daughter,," John thinks sadly.

"If this were just a fairy tale. . .

Why am I taking this so badly?

She's just a name brought by the mail,

Gone with the wind." (2.23)

Janet feels a similar strange sense of disquietedness when she accidentally sees John and Liz engrossed in conversation at their first meeting: The pair are now rapt in discussion.

Jan comes in, sees them, cannot hear

What they are saying- could be Russian

For all she knows; she does not steer

Too close, takes in the situation,

.....I'm in the mood." (2.3)

Janet functions as a semi-peripheral character for the most part, although it is her act of placing the personal ad on John's behalf that actually instigates the action. She is also responsible for the coming on women made by Phil and attacks him:

From where Jan leaves him, rooted, staring.

He leans in foggy shock on Ed.

Then in a voice drunk and despairing:

"I'm plastered! What was it I said?"

..... share my bed"

Jan hovers around the margins of the other relationships, helping out, commenting, and being the confidante for John and Liz even when she is herself abandoned by those in love. It is Jan's friendship that helps John through his miserable state after his break-up with Liz, and just as Jan had steered him to a relationship with Liz, this time too, she is the one who helps him find true friendship and companionship.

And when John and Jan (re) discover their love for each other, it is of a different quality from both the love shared with Liz as well as the first time they were together. Neither of the prior relationships was based on friendship or companionship, which is the firm basis of this new relationship. However, no matter how true or solid John's relationship with Jan might be, he cannot be fully healed, and therefore cannot be part of an enduring relationship until his bitterness and alienation are swept away. Until John forgives his estranged friends, and makes love the basis of his life, rather than anger or hate, he is doomed to non-completion.

The assumption that Art and Love are incompatible, and worse, mutually destructive, is clearly apparent. The message is easier to take in *The Golden Gate*. Inevitably the morose and inflexible John loses the lovely Liz and is restored to sanity, if not happiness. Liz and Phil give and take what happiness they can, extending themselves to create a family embracing an orphaned boy and a former lover's two Siamese cats who, remarkably, play happily with the common and cantankerous tom-cat Charlemagne. Liz's mother dies and a baby is born to Liz and Phil. Life goes on. Common sense and tolerance prevail. There is lightness to the narrative and playfulness in its execution which, coupled with the extraordinary feat of producing a novel in sonnet form, command admiration.

It is significant that women, like Elisabeth who is a young attorney in Cobb and Kearny law firm, participate in the anti-nuclear demonstration. She represents American women pacifists. She is one of those American women who have emancipated and saved themselves from being the dreary, depressed housewives trapped in life-less housework and who have either discovered their strength or are in the process of discovering it. Elisabeth Dorati is a strong egalitarian woman able to control her destiny. She, as a peace marcher, argues that our nuclear insanity will result in starvation, blindness, reduction of ozone due to overload of nitrogen oxides, horrible increase in ultraviolet rays and finally universal annihilation. Elisabeth is not the only woman participating in the peace movement-Rowena Craven is another lady who is a pacifist.

Liz marries Phil and gradually the two have charge of three children: Phil's son, Paul, by his first marriage, little Chuck Lamont, the son of their friends who meets sudden death in an accident, and a child of their own, whom they call John. Their friend John suffers deep humiliation and agony from their marriage and refuses to get reconciled to them. Janet tries to help him once again, but this time death takes her away-she dies in same car in which the Lamonts die. John becomes more depressed and lonely and almost half-crazy. After the death of Liz's mother Liz and Phil try to appeal to him for friendship. Their letter announces the death of her mother and birth of their child. John opens the letter reluctantly, and "when he's done his chest is tight, and he is crying." The letter says,

. . . Dear John, we have a son.

We hope that you'll be his godfather.

We've called him John,...

Please speak to us, John. In the end,

We'll all be old or dead or dying,

My mother died two weeks ago...(TGG 13.51)

Through this reconciled letter Liz has proved that she is wise, calm, warm and vivacious bold, cold and dynamic. Affection, mutual consideration and compatibility make a surer ground for the success of any relationship, more as of a relation as close and intimate as that of marriage. Liz gives importance to the other's ability to be a good parent while considering marriage. She also loves John and accepts him as he is. She plays a vital role as a peace maker to bring unity and peace to everyone especially with John. She only takes initiative to make reconciliation between herself and John again between Phil and John. She has proved that really she is successful career woman.

The American woman is equally successful in artistic field. Sue Dorati is a marvellous musician and Janet Hayakawa is a drummer in a band called Liquid Sheep. Moreover, she is a sculptor waiting for sober critical attention which her Three Eggs, An adolescent Lion, Clothed Nude, Study of Young man ogress have not yet brought her. Nevertheless, in spite of malicious critical efforts during her lifetime to label her works as "feeble" and as inferior to the works of Moore and Calder in terms of inscription and artistic versatility, her sculptural models are posthumously acclaimed as "classics" displaying "strength", "sureness and maturity" and she is ranked with great sculptors like Moore, Kurosava, Pollock, Ashley and Cage. Thus, Seth has successfully presented a Portrait of young American woman as artist.

Janet Hawakaya represents the artistic side of the American woman; she is of Japanese descent and the only "ethnic" presence in the text. She is a drummer and sculptor fused into one, and has enough confidence in her artistic ability to pursue her career wholeheartedly, even though success has eluded her till now. John's ex-girlfriend in the past, Jan becomes his confidant, good angel and in due times his lover once again. The artistic and sensitive Janet is passionately involved with her sculpting of "Ma Hen, her maiden work in stone"(12.16). She is also drummer in the punk band Liquid Sheep. Jan plays a pivotal role in the narrative. The story is set in motion when she takes the initiative to place a personal advertisement in a newspaper for John's sake. It is to the text written by her that Liz Dorati responds. John's sickness is diagnosed pretty quickly. The fact is that he is very lonely. Jan, his troubleshooting, sympathetic friend-cum-therapist, is prompt with the cure as well, "you need a lover, John, I think" (1.23). Most importantly, Jan strives towards a possible re-conditioning of John's narrow perspectives. She reacts angrily to John's demeaning sexist remarks on women by reprimanding him for his intolerance of women and gays. "Johnny Boy, your mind needs cleaning of the debris of prejudice," (1.33). Janet knows that John's vision of life is a lopsided one; he tends not to see things in their perspective and blows out of all proportion. He is not broadminded enough to tolerate change or differences of opinion. Janet recognizes the predicament they are all in:

... the loneliness within our souls

Our febrile clawing for mean goals

Our programmed cock fighting and rat races

Our dreary dignity, false pride

And hearts stored in formaldehyde (TGG 20)

The lesson Seth expresses is this: the perfect idols our minds build up do not exist, and instead of trying to make others conform to our expectations so that one may find it easier to love them, one ought to make an effort to adjust with other people as proof on one's love. Every relationship has a chance of succeeding if people are willing to make changes in themselves, instead of just opting out of the relationship when things starts to get sticky: "while those who wait, as age ad-

vances aloof for Ms. Or Mr. Right weep to themselves in the still night" (21).

She is very generous and tries to understand John very well. Before her death she herself had a plan to bring everyone together. In fact, she loves very much John but he does not realize her pure and true love. Yet, Janet is very generous and would like to do anything for John. She looks her life as an art. Being an artist she would like to remain and keep her life full of active and ideal till her death. She never regretted for anything in her life and she has not expected anything from John. Therefore, she is a wonderful and marvellous woman character of this novel. Throughout her life she passes love, peace, harmony, understanding, wisdom, knowledge and etc. towards human being.

Families do not loom large in Seth's novel. It is the young unmarried ladies who play the decisive roles. Nevertheless, old ladies do play certain roles in the novel. Mrs. Marie Dorati, wife of Mike Dorati and mother of Elizabeth, Edward and Sue, is a loving and anxious mother. This rheumatic lady fears that her children might prove fruitless crew and she might die a grand childless death. Fortunately, she lives to see Elisabeth's married life, her ripening years and the boon of a child. She goes rapturous about her grandson and like any other grandmother gloats over the nose and smiles of the child: "Look that nose, Mike it recaptures father's nose. Look, look, he smiles. Oh, what a darling what a beauty what name have decided on?" (13.48)

In *The Golden Gate*, the female characters especially are totally unlike the half-hearted caricatures one usually finds in poetry. They are full blooded, able-bodied, talented, creative, professionally successful, and psychologically stronger and more mature than the complexed and guilt-ridden male characters like Ed, Philip and John himself.

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