

## ENIGMA OF THE MODERN MAN : VARIOUS THEMES IN SETHS *THE GOLDEN GATE*

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*The Golden Gate* is set in a metropolis, a uniquely modern city California itself especially to the urban India reader is a stereotype of modern life, a state which represents one of the most exotic location of twentieth century American capitalist culture. Inscribed within this space of modern life are certain values and lifestyles. Modern life here seems to be that of the individual alone, having shed familial and regional ties, making his/her way to an individual notion of success. As Mala Pandurang has pointed out in her essay on '*The Golden Gate*' the social phenomenon of the young upwardly mobile professional and the DINK (Double income no kids) couple is no longer culture specific to the USA alone<sup>1</sup>. As Pandurang continues and has been remarked on elsewhere, policies of economic liberalisation and a growing multinational culture, both in literal corporate terms as well as the availability of certain goods, jobs and lifestyles in India's urban centres having led to a changed lifestyles and growing material consumerism among the India urban middle classes. At this point of our history certain classes and groups in urban India are no longer as removed from the 'yuppie' culture of California as they may have been a couple of decades ago<sup>2</sup>.

*The Golden Gate* was published in 1986 it attracted wide attention culmination in the Sahitya Academy Award for the year 1988. There is however little of Indianness either in the language or in the content of the novel. This is a book about the modern fashionable life in and round California described in the typical Californian accent. It is a story of the loves and hates of a group of persons, their mutual adjustments, reactions and reconciliations arrangements and rearrangements of relationship.

A sonnet sequence is the form chosen by Seth for his novel about California its life and people. Two write a sonnet sequence then, about life and loves in California is really to form a sub-text which clearly states that the 'intention' of the narrative is to present a range of the diverse and possible kinds of loves that can and may exist in a modern city and the range of emotions and experiences evoked by those loves. In *The Golden Gate*, Seth has depicted of loves, which are possible and acceptable in a 'modern' metropolis. The metropolis is an uniquely different location which has its own unique culture and lifestyle. Presumably therefore there are also different groups that individuals exist within and different values and choices that individuals and subjected to. In this novel Vikram Seth delineates a modern metropolis, which is 'uniquely' California, so much so that many critics have commented on the specificity of the cultural signifiers that are found in the novel.

The characters of *The Golden Gate* do not acquire sharp line or depth. They are shown in their urban set-up moving around in the places and pastimes that are associated with the affluent well educated, well placed, upper middle class men and women. Seth presents vividly the various public parks, theatres and antinuclear arms demonstrations. But the idiom of thought their anxieties dreams wishes and aspirations of these characters, like John, Liz, Phil and Ed, Janet, Mrs. Dorati do not acquire much depth of shade or sharpness of outline. The story of the novel revolves round the common human search for love, affection and a sense of belonging. Deprivations, dejection and loneliness are the experiences of most of these characters and emotional fulfillment. Seth has tried to give a realistic portrayal of the life than these characters live, and the society to which they belong. The novel is also a remarkably vivid and colourful evocation of the life of San Francisco. Not simply as an observer, but as one who loves the sights, sounds and typical life rhythms of the city. Seth shows its public places parks and beaches. The characters spend a lot of their time in various restaurants and theatres, and one sees San Francisco through the eyes of one who has observed it as an outsider, and has begun to find it charming. *The Golden Gate* soars above the other public places and monuments, a symbol of mans creativity, calling forth peace and love for survival and happiness and giving the novel its title.

The group of characters that form 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.

There are five central protagonists in the book. Each of them "*is defined within the parameters of profession, personal ethics eccentricities, and family and social connections*"<sup>3</sup>. By the end of the narrative, all of them have interacted at some level or the other with each other.

Twenty six year old John Brown is a graduate of Berkeley. He is a successful but extremely lonely computer executive in silicon Valley. John is employed in the high-tech computer and electronics industry and work in the area of nuclear research. A workaholic John "*Kneels bareheaded and unshod/Before the Chip, a jealous God*". (*The Golden Gate*) He follows conservative politics and is vocal about the opposition to the anti-nuclear war peace campaigners.

Janet Hawakaya is of Japanese descent and the only 'ethnic' presence in the text. John's ex-girlfriend in the past, Jan becomes his confidant and in due time 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 a drummer in the punk band Liquid Sheep.

Elizabeth (Liz) Dorati is a 27 year old, high powered ex-Stanford Law School attorney. This vivacious, blue eyed, well- rounded blonde is from a family of Italian immigrant grower (2.27). John is impressed by her hand written reply than Jan forwards to him, and invites her to meet him. They share a short lived attraction which is soon destroyed by personal prejudices, politics and a pet called Charlemagne. Invited to a protest meeting by anti-nuclear demonstrators, Liz turns up at the meeting with her cat Charlemagne in a pram, and eloquently speaks against the Lungless Labs and nuclear bombs.

Phil Weiss is John's old college roommate and friend. He also a computer wizard, but he resigned his job and opted out of the 'rat race' he found himself involved in. He was a Jew and was married to Claire Cabot who never directly enters the story, but hovers on the margins, a

peripheral presence/ absence in the lives of her ex-husband, her son and her friend Janet Hawakaya.

All these characters are outsiders John is an Englishman [His father lives in Kent] [sonnet 1.6], Phil is a Jew, Janet a third generation Japanese immigrant. Elizabeth and Ed Dorati are Italian immigrants.

*The Golden Gate* portrays the forming and breaking up of personal relations; live, heterosexual and homosexual, neuroses and fixations, against the contemporary background of computers, anti-nuclear demonstrations, women libbers food addicts and so on.

The structure of the novel is episodic. It resembles a chain in which each part is linked to what goes before and what comes after, but it has no centre. What gives continuity to the story is the Dorati connection. Every character is in some way related to the Doratis, their family or clan as the author calls them is an interesting sample for a historian of culture. They spend their leisure hours in concert halls, movie theatres, playing chess, scrabble and hunting “Kitsch” (i.e. worthless pretentious art), they have a passion for pets and they watch the TV for football matches. The younger members are sexually maladjusted. Mrs. Dorati senior has a compulsive wish to be a grandmother. In spite of individual variations, they are a closely knit clan. They regularly go to church *‘to nod or pray’* (10.2). The Doratis are fairly representative of the affluent middle class in contemporary America.

Although it is written in verse, *The Golden Gate* has the characteristics of realistic fiction. Seth’s description of observed objects and actions is minute and accurate. In reporting the encounter between two characters, the writer tells us not only what they said to each other but also what was left unsaid.

The Golden Gate is firmly placed in the eighties of the last century. It is also placed squarely in California. The poet describes the landscape around San Francisco (11.45&46) the flora are observed with accuracy. The olive picking could not have been located in a different region. Even the habits of whales, gulls, pigeons and sea lion are observed with the eye of a naturalist.

Seth’s *The Golden Gate* is inspired from Pushkin’s *Eugens Onegin*. After reading Onegin Seth realized that he has found a medium for the story he had been wanting to tell about California, Seth was studying there at the time. The lunch meeting with a friend, a Japanese-American woman. Their discussion of their then rather unsuccessful love lives become the opening scene of *The Golden Gate*.

The Theme of the novel is one of the classic materials of all comedyman’s search for love and the various mishaps that befall him in the course of the search, although the rest of the novel leads less to the traditional comic ending, than to surprising sadness.

John Brown is the central character of the novel. His life can be divided into phases, his initial loneliness, his relationship with Liz, and his life afterwards, John is a Silicon valley computer professional who’s highly successful career stands in abysmal contrast to his personal life, which leaves much to be desired.

*The novel opens with John Browns problem.  
One Evening as he walked across  
Golden Grate Park, the ill judged toss  
of a red frisbee almost brained him.  
He thought, If dide, who’d be sad?  
Who’d weep? Who’d gleat? Who will be glad?*

*Would anybody? (1.1)*

The question certainly suggest spiritual malaise because John seems to be questioning the worth and the meaning of his life. This is significant because John is only twenty six, a graduate of Berkeley, highly paid respected all handsome, well dressed- he even owns a peugeot-in other words he is a male WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) Yuppie (Young Urban Profession). What is more, he works in 'Defence' that is helping to build bombs and missiles. And so, *John the poor little rich boy (1.31)*, *'Senses his life has run to seed (1.4)*. He feels an urgent riptide drawing/him far out, where caught in the help/of loneliness, he cries for help (1.2). As he confesses to his friend Janet;

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

Therefore John who apparently has everything is still deeply unhappy. John's problem is not external, so much as internal we get to know much of this in the first chapter itself. Lack of rooted ness in the family is the first problem of John:

*'No family Cushions his solitude' (1.6).*

His mother is dead and his father, who is English, retired, and now lives in his native Kent, *'Rarely responds to letters sent/(If rarely) by his transatlantic /offspring (1.6)*. This bit of information is used again in the novel to explain John's personality: a childhood lack of love 'as Phil puts it later (9.37). This use of pop psychology or dollar book Freud is completely characteristic of the novel.

Second his job in the high-tech high stress computer and electronics industry doesn't help:

Silicon Valley  
 Lures to ambition's ulcer Wey  
 Young graduated with siren screams  
 Of power and wealth beyond their dreams,  
 Burning their candles at both ends.  
 Thus files takes precedence over friends,  
 Labor is lauded, leisure riven.  
 John kneels bareheaded and unshod  
 Before the chip, a jealous God. (1.9)

The critique of Yuppie materialism is clear here: success, ambition, power, money-the values of the market-place gain priority over friendship, leisure, love the matters of the heart, so much so that the almighty computer Chip replaces God.

The another theme of novel is isolation and estrangement, exploring the alienation of modern American society. John best exemplifies this dilemma of modern man. He has all he could want in terms of material acquisitions, is handsome, smart, well mannered, well read-in essence, the perfect companion, and yet he is lost and lonely. Seth presents the pathology behind this, in his carefree youth, John has not given love the attention it deserves, preferring the freedom that bachelorhood connotes to most men to the shackles of matrimony. Not only John but most American men and women are equally unwilling to sacrifice what they perceive as their

freedom by committing to a permanent relationship. John and Janet break off their leasion as soon as it shows signs of developing into something serious.

Another theme in the novel is that of nuclear warfare. Seth expatiates upon the theme unhurriedly, using narration, description, dialogue, sermon demonstrations, peace marches, even diatribe to get the point across. Nuclear insanity is a very contemporary theme and it is very significant in this novel because both the theme and the novel are so quintessentially American. America is one of the few countries where people are aware enough to protest the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In the novel, Phil gives up a promising career at Lung less Labs (a place where nuclear bombs are made), to heed his inner voice, which tells him that what he is doing is ethically wrong. Liz participates in the demonstration against the wishes of John, speaking eloquently against the space to address this issue brilliantly portraying both sides of the problem in the argument between John and Phil. Seth's view point is unequivocal- He says in the novel, "*Nice flocks don't use nukes*" (152)

Another dominant theme in the novel is that of homosexuality which makes the novel particularly true to the American way of life. Homosexuality is by no means an American invention but due to its prevalence in American society it has acquired almost a cult status there. Townsend in 'Homosexuality in American culture discusses the prevalence of this way of this way of life in America. But *The Golden Gate* is not an attempt to glorify Homosexuality. It is true that it is Phil, a Homosexual, who is rewarded with a rich family life at the end of the novel, while John has nothing left but memories but Seth exposes the superiority of personal judgment over any opinion held by convention : "*You have a mind too, Ed. why don't you/go by what your heart says is right*"? (189). It is a credit to Seth's art that neither does the novel glorify Homosexuality nor does it degenerate into a vicious diatribe against it.

Another theme of the novel is the position of American women in modern American society. Contemporary American women have shown great enterprise and skill in surviving in the male dominated world. It is this independent woman Seth portrays in the novel. Liz is an epitome of the successful career woman storming the hitherto Ivy-League beatings of the law firm she works for. She is not just a dull lawyer- she enjoys music, has a pet cat and can even deliver an extempore quote- worthy speech about saving the planet from nuclear madmen. Janet represents the artistic side of the American woman she is drummer and sculptor rolled into one, and has enough confidence in her artistic ability to pursue her career wholeheartedly, even though success has eluded her till now. Through the women characters in the novel, Seth goes deep into the mind of the American woman to discover her personality. Janet and Liz both have pet cats. Through this Seth indicated that this penchant single American the alienation form human bonding. The American woman also craves the financial security that marriage brings : the deluge of letters that arrive in response to John's advertisement is proof enough. The average American woman is a victim of the extreme modernization of life. A natural corollary to the disintegrated persona of the American woman is a dysfunctional family life. As the traditional home maker, it is the women who keeps the family together even in today's overlapping and confused roles. But the average American woman is too emancipated to be tied down by any rules. It is through Phils son Paul that Seth expresses how hard children get hit by estrangement between their parents.

*" [.....] No Paul, she's gone away, "forever".  
I just can't tell you, son, but never  
think you're alone. You've got me. "*

“When will you leave me? “Phil, shocked, stares [.....] (62)

Being Separated from a parent is thus not a bad dream but a fact of life that Paul is just learning to accept. The family system providing no support, it is natural for people to turn to other social groups, and this is where friendship assumes centre stage, Gradually friends replace the warmth lacking in familial ties. This type of relationship is beautifully portrayed in *The Golden Gate*.

Another theme is that of morality Seth does subscribe to the concept of conventional India morality. The moral code presented in the novel is the moral code that America lives by casual sex is a way of life, as are homosexual relationship, pick-up bars and so on. Social morality, or what one owes to the world at large, has been brought to the forefront by the episode of the peaceful demonstration against Lungless Labs.

These are the various themes that the novel more than just merely a portrayal of contemporary California life. *The Golden Gate* is, thus, in the words of A.N. Kaul, “an extraordinary book about ordinary life”<sup>4</sup>. It has been hailed as the great Californian novel, because the themes it treats of : disillusionment from love, estrangement, discontentment at the work place, Silicon Valley, nuclear bombs, one night stands, homosexuality, rock music- all these coalesce into a very detailed picture of life in the coastal, cosmopolitan city of San Francisco, which represents the entire state of California in miniature.

## REFERENCES

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