

## HOMOSEXUALITY IN *THE GOLDEN GATE* OF VIKRAM SETH

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The objective of this paper is to present Vikram Seth as a novelist who has great understanding of homosexual relationship. For this purpose Vikram Seth's novel *The Golden Gate* has been taken into consideration. Vikram Seth has presented the homosexual relationship through two main characters of the novel — Phil and Ed. Both Phil and Ed establish physical relationship and enjoy their love-making. Seth has depicted their relationship, their caressing, and love-making in such a marvellous and lively manner that needs a deep insight and understanding on the part of the writer. Seth has proved himself a genius in the depiction of homosexual relationship in such a lively manner. Being a homosexual, Seth himself has experienced this type of relationship in his life and his personal experience has enabled Seth to depict it in such a marvellous way. *The Golden Gate* is set in the background of American society and it seems that such a relationship is not considered odd or strange in Western countries.

Vikram Seth, a famous poet, novelist, travel writer, librettist, children's writer, biographer, and memoirist was born on June 20, 1952 at Kolkatta in the house of Prem and Leila Seth. He got his schooling at Dehradun Public School, his graduation at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and enrolled himself in Stanford University in California, U.S.A. for Ph.D. He could not complete his research as he devoted himself to *The Golden Gate*. The literary inspiration intervened or rather overwhelmed his interest in economic demography, and eventually his thesis, as he himself put it, went out of the window. Seth has confessed in *Two Lives* that "my dissertation work fell by the wayside, and I devoted myself to *The Golden Gate*" (35). Seth is a polymath who has lived in Asia, America, and Europe and written in a variety of genres — poetry, fiction, non-fiction, travelogue, and libretto. His world-wide travel has given him the tremendous advantage of a wider exposure of life and communication across cultural background — Indian, European, Chinese, and American. He has studied several languages as Welsh, German, French, Mandarin, English, Urdu, and Hindi. Vikram Seth is known for his novels, though he has characterized himself as a poet first and a novelist second.

Vikram Seth is a versatile writer. He has written three novels and all the novels have their own speciality. *The Golden Gate* (1986) is written in verse, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is the bulkiest novel in English literature, *An Equal Music* (1999) depicts the minute descriptions of the Western music. He has written beautiful poems, travelogue *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983), Children's book *Beastly Tales From Here and There* (1991), a libretto *Arion and Dolphin* (1994), a memoir *Two Lives* (2005), a non-fiction family memoir presenting his family background and his grand uncle and aunt. Vikram Seth has got recognition around the world because of his amazing artistic insight and bagged many prizes and awards in his literary career as: *Thomas Cook Travel Book Award*, *Commonwealth Poetry Prize*, *Ingram Merrill Fellowship*, *Guggenheim Fellowship*, *Sahitya Akademi Award*, *Irish Times International*

*Fiction Prize, Commonwealth Writers Prize, Emma, Order of The British Empire, Pravasi Bhartiya Samman, Padam Shri Award, The 25 Greatest Global Living Legends In India.*

Homosexual is a person, “usually a man, who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex” (Hornby 747). Homosexual relationship falls in the category of love but in a different way, as it is a kind of love and physical relationship between the people of the same sex. Homosexuality is a “same-sex attraction; meaning the physical, emotional, and psychological attraction to persons of the same sex” (<http://study.com/academy/lesson/homosexual-definition-lesson-quiz.html>). In modern times, the term ‘true homosexuality’ is used for homosexuality which is defined as “an exclusive attraction to the same sex” (<http://study.com/academy/lesson/homosexual-definition-lesson-quiz.html>).

The word ‘homosexuality’ is fairly modern, created in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by a psychologist named Karoly Maria Benkert. Societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships are varied over time and place. It is augmented that no one in antiquity or the Middle Ages experienced homosexuality as an exclusive, permanent, or defining mode of sexuality. But John Boswell has countered this argument by citing ancient writings as; in Plato’s *Symposium* there are discussions of homosexuality and sexual acts between same-sex were depicted in stories and artwork as well. Homosexuality in China has been recorded since approximately 660 BCE. Homosexuality in Japan has been documented for over one thousand years and had some connections to the Buddhist monastic life. In Thailand homosexuality have been a feature of Thai society and Thai kings had male as well as female lovers. Homosexuality is accepted in Thailand and there had never legal prohibition against homosexuality or homosexual behaviour. With the growth of the Roman Empire there came about a slow adoption of a negative view of same-sex attraction but this view of same-sex acts has been attributed more with social and economic turmoil rather than as something religious or moral.

In 1867 Karl Heinrich Ulrichs became the first self-proclaimed homosexual person to speak out publically in defence of homosexuality when he pleaded at the Congress of German Jurists in Munich for a resolution urging the repeal of anti-homosexual laws. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century homosexuality was viewed not a choice of a person, but somehow a diseased, defective, or pathological condition. This was given a great deal of credence due to the scientific nature of medicine at this time. On one hand, psychiatrists and doctors campaigned for repeal or a reduction in the criminalization of the homosexual act and on the other hand, therapies were being developed to rehabilitate the ill individuals. Though homosexuality was deemed to be a psychiatric disorder for many years, but later this study was found flawed.

Homosexuality is common in Western countries and a lot of literature has been written on this subject. Now-a-days some homosexuals demand for marriage but they are different to marriage by nature as they lack the complementary roles of man and woman. Neither can two people of the same sex form the conjugal sexual union which exists in marriage. It is not a current term but it was known to America, China, Japan, Thailand, Europe, Rome, Italy and many other nations since time immemorial and it was not considered illegal relationship. In 1973 homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness in the United Kingdom.

Societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships have varied over time and place, from expecting all males to engage in same-sex relationships, to casual integration, through acceptance, to seeing the practice as a minor sin, repressing it through law enforcement and judicial mechanisms, and to proscribing it under penalty of death.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_homosexuality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_homosexuality))

Vikram Seth is one of the few Indian writers who deals with the issue of homosexuality and spearheads a campaign in India in connection with it being a legal offence. “Seth quite courageously takes up the decadence of relationship where he incorporates the discussion of homosexuality, a taboo topic which he boldly takes out of the closet” (Sinha 106). Seth’s *The Golden Gate* and Shashi Throor’s *The Great Indian Novel* are the rebellious Indian fictions of the nineties. Supria Karunakaran concedes rebellion as originality where Seth and Throor both adopt “the asunder by earlier and lesser writers” (31), appearing as supremely successful challengers of literary tradition for blurring the genre theory. Seth has incorporated homosexuality in his works; in some of the works he has simply referred to it, while in *The Golden Gate* he deals with it in great detail. It must be remembered that the issue of homosexuality was being raised as a legitimate concern during the period of Seth’s stay in America. While Seth portrays his two homosexual characters with a great deal of sympathy, he is yet aware that it is not a socially accepted mode of sexuality. Seth introduces the concept of homosexuality in his novel *The Golden Gate* to give it a touch of American society. As this novel depicts the culture, traditions, and values of American society, so the picture of American society would be incomplete without the reference of homosexuality. The reference of homosexuality makes the novel particularly true to the American way of life. Homosexuality is by no means an American invention but it prevails in American society at large scale and it has acquired almost a cult status there. But Seth does neither inspire anyone to establish this type of relationship nor makes an attempt to glorify it.

In homosexual relationship, romance and love develops in the same way as it develops in heterosexual relationship. The homosexual persons also make love, they kiss and caress each other, pine for each other, have an urge to meet, and have satisfaction during their homosexual activities. Lisa M. Diamond, a psychology professor, proposes that sexual desire and romantic love are functionally independent and that romantic love is not intrinsically oriented to same-gender or other gender partners. Her theory suggests that “it is possible for a homosexual to fall in love with someone of the same gender as for someone who is heterosexual to fall in love with someone of the same gender” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance\\_\(love\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_(love))).

In *The Golden Gate* homosexual relationship is established between two persons Phil and Ed. In a party Phil drinks too much to drive home himself. Ed drives him to his own lodgings and asks him to share his bed and even his toothbrush too. When Phil lies on the bed, he reaches out and touches Ed. Ed also, assembling his courage, touches Phil’s face and Phil “puts his arm around Ed’s waist” (Seth *The Golden Gate* 4.33. All the subsequent references are to this edition and mentioned as GG with stanza number). It is the beginning of their love making and homosexual relationship. Ed yawns and half gets out of bed, returns and nuzzles Phil’s shoulder, puts on his jeans and asks his Iguana, his pet, to sleep underneath the bed that night. But in the morning, Ed feels that he has done something wrong and goes to church to confess his guilt and after coming back home, he says to Phil, “Phil ... I don’t know quite / If what we’re doing is ... is right” (GG 4.45). But Phil is not interested in this talk and at night when they pull the covers over themselves, Phil says, “Ed. I’m glad / For these three evenings that we’ve had...” (GG 4.46). Phil does not establish homosexual relationship with Ed for the first time, but he had this kind of relationship with a guy at college once or twice and even after his marriage with Claire his eyes might stray toward other men. Phil has been attracted by vulnerable people and Ed, though he is eager, confused, intent, abstracted, but he is passionate in both speech and bed:

How good it is to be admired;  
And how much more to be desired!

Ed's restlessness, sudden calms,  
And, as he lies in Philip's arms,  
His sad and serious expression  
Affect Phil more than he can say. (GG 4.48)

Though Phil enjoys Ed's company and love but Ed's consciousness does not allow it and he feels it an immoral act. Ed has great faith in *The Bible* and he feels that he is not doing good in establishing a relationship with a man and it will impure his soul. "His Catholic upbringing has taught him to view his sexuality as a sin and the religiosity of his nature is at war with his sexual inclinations" (Punekar 92-93). Unable to shake off his intense experience of guilt or to ignore the natural biological demands of his body, Ed's is an unstable and brooding personality and he says to Phil:

Phil, last night  
I almost thought that I was dreaming.  
But now—I know it wasn't right.  
I have to trust my faith's decisions,  
Not batten on my own volitions.  
The Bible says, if a man lie [lies]  
With a man, he must surely die. (GG 4.50)

But Phil, on the other hand, is a bisexual and he is liberal in his approach to sexuality, he finds nothing blameworthy in either his or Ed's sexual tendencies. He laughs at Ed's thinking and says that there are plenty of rules in *The Bible* and there is nothing wrong with sex. Ed says that the main point is that his body is not his alone, but it is God's instrument and its perfection resides in love and he does not want to disdain it. Phil asks Ed what was wrong or odd with last night's loveliness between them and tells Ed that love is the beautiful gift of God to human beings so there is nothing wrong with their relationship:

Given a God, if had seen us  
And he is just and loving-kind,  
Why should you think that he would mind  
My touch, your trembling. Our caresses,  
The loving smart in your clear eyes,  
My hands ruffling your hair, our sighs?  
If anything, I'd say he blesses  
The innocent bodies that express  
So forthrightly such happiness. (GG 4.53)

Though Ed is a Catholic, yet he enjoys his physical relationship with Phil and before parting they promise to be in touch and Ed asks Phil to invite him to his home. After Phil's departure, Ed looks gloomy, sad and full of woes. A month goes by in wait that Phil might call him. Sometime Ed tries to ring or write to Phil but his unfixed intention fails every time. Ed feels an urge to meet Phil and one day he goes to meet Phil. During their meal Phil looks at Ed from time to time who flushes a dark rapid red. When Paul (Phil's six years son) falls asleep Ed says, "I'm glad you're able / To bear my company at all" (GG 5.17). Seeing Phil looking at himself, Ed feels his intention and he says to Phil that he has a fear that he just likes his body. Phil accepts Ed's charge of liking his body and asks him not to vivisection this matter but go to bed. "I say we ought to go to bed. / We seem to sort things out much better / When horizontal ... hey, don't blush!" (GG 5.19). But Ed says that he has to go to meet Sue and as he gets ready to leave, Phil mutters to Ed to stay that night with him and Ed gets agree at his request or proposal and spends

night with him. The feeling of committing a sin enters in Ed's mind again and confession helps to ease the pricking of his relentless conscience. Next day Phil again asks Ed to stay another night with him and to go the next morning before the rush hour. Ed accepts Phil's proposal and stays on another night with him and "as day is dawning across Phil's double bed next day / Packs bag and beast, and drives away" (GG 5.44).

The main purpose of Phil to establish physical relationship with Ed is to have sexual enjoyment. When Ed asks Phil about Claire, he becomes sad with the memory of Claire and asks Ed to provide him some light refreshment. Phil wants to establish physical relationship with Ed but Ed says that although he loves him, yet his desire goes beyond sex, because according to him:

Lovers indeed  
Must shed more than their clothes. They need  
To shed their bodies. Flesh and fire  
Can meet but can't merge. It's a state  
Only our souls can consummate. (GG 8.19)

Ed asks Phil to be just friends and to continue their love through the shared touch of conversation. At this Phil becomes sad and gloomy and says to him that he has insured himself with heaven and asks Ed to sleep on the bed, or on the floor, whichever boosts his godly score. Phil says to Ed that he is fed up and maddened by hearing his contempt for their love making and asks him what facet of their love outrages his puritanical purity. Phil asks Ed to do what his heart says is right and to remember their first night and strong love they had made. He further says that it is absurd to keep a sword between them when they sleep and their heart is aching with desire. Though Ed enjoys his relationship with Phil, yet he finds himself struggling between his religious beliefs and homosexuality and feels himself unable to resolve his personal contradiction between his Catholic beliefs and his homosexual preferences. Phil says to Ed that love is whole or else it is nothing and he cannot see him as this disembodied soul. Phil asks Ed to give him his hand but "Ed withdraws his hold / And pulls back from the swiftening vortex / In desperate strokes, till he's on shore, / Trembling, but steadier than before" (GG 8.35). That night they sleep apart on the same bed, unshared the longing each feels for the other. Phil neither expresses his love, desire, need to have sexual enjoyment nor pleads Ed due to his pride. Ed falls asleep at last but Phil is wakeful still two or three:

Wakeful by the loved body, hours,  
Hours to lie, untouched, apart,  
While memory's unpitying powers  
Gauge out the past, and lost thoughts start,  
Shaming the will with their insistence,  
Against all counter of resistance....  
At dawn, Phil falls into a sleep  
That's as exhausted as it's deep.  
When he wakes, Ed has packed. (GG 8.37)

To have a relationship with the same sex seems something odd and extraordinary. John also does not believe in Phil's words about his love with Ed and says that it is not possible to have a relationship with the same sex and emits a small bleat of disgust at this "malformed and sickening lust" (GG 9.14) and asks him what do two men do together. Liz remains cool knowing about the homosexual relationship between Phil and Ed. On the other hand, John gets infuriated, dumb founded, and astounded at Liz's cool reaction at homosexual relationship of Ed and Phil.

It seems that homosexual relationship is not something odd in American society because when Liz asks John what he and Phil were talking, Phil responds very coolly, “Oh, just that Ed and I had an affair!” (GG 9.18). Liz also does not show any surprise or disgust at Phil’s statement and tells Phil that she knew the score a month ago when “you both wore the same mismatched socks” (GG 9.21). Liz suggests Phil to continue their relationship, as she hopes that they two are suited for each other. But Phil tells Liz that he could not understand her brother as he is heaven-struck. Liz asks Phil to give Ed a chance to change his stance. Phil tells her that he is so lonely and wants to live without his emptiness, to give a little love, to get a little but their love is over now. When Liz gets married with Phil, Ed is shocked and greets Phil with tightness within his chest, his heart moves toward his former love and stands there wordless, cold, and trembling and thinks, “I’m acting like a martyr. / Bad from on Liz’s wedding day” (GG 11.9). After marriage Phil also expresses his views to Liz that passion is a prelude to disaster as “I loved a woman—and was dropped. / I loved a man—and that too flopped” (GG 11.20). The homosexual relationship of Phil and Ed comes to an end with the marriage of Phil and Liz. When Liz asks Ed about his relationship with Phil, he says that it is all finished. Regarding homosexual relationship of Phil and Ed, Punekar says that “Phil’s bisexuality seems to be privileged over Ed’s homosexuality” (94).

In the Western countries homosexuality is a common thing and it is not considered wrong but on the contrary, it is considered entirely natural. Liz represents the American mentality about homosexuality, as she does not get shocked hearing about the homosexuality of Phil and Ed and asks them to continue their relationship. Although John is shocked to know about their relationship, but his incomprehension, shock and disgust at receiving the news of his friend’s relation with Ed, is a critique of the dominant views on sexuality. According to Punekar, there are three major perspectives on homosexuality in the novel: “John’s disgust represents the dominant conservative faction; Phil’s passionate defence of sexual difference shows the liberal view; and Ed represents the religious perspective” (93). Ed’s passion for Phil is at war with his religiosity and is thus fated to an end. At the end of the novel Ed is left with neither a friend nor a partner, as Phil gets married to Liz and they both set their sail in the cool pond of life happily, leaving Ed to pine alone with his religious beliefs.

The homosexual relationship of Phil and Ed is described here in detail, as it forms one of the important strands in the novel. Their love-making, caressing, sharing the bed together and pining for each other find place here. Though Seth has described these two characters with a great deal of sympathy, yet he seems to be aware that it is not a socially accepted mode of sexuality, so he does not made his characters to continue this asocial relationship much longer. He has made his homosexual characters to understand their folly very soon and to end their immoral relationship. Seth has made Ed’s conscience to prick him time and again about his homosexual relationship and passion for Phil. His soul remains at war with religiosity and homosexual relationship and at last he prefers his Christian believes over homosexuality and thus fated to an unavoidable end.

*A Suitable Boy* is another novel of Vikram Seth that also deals with homosexual relationship but in this novel the homosexual relationship of Firoz and Maan is just hinted and not described fully like the relationship of Phil and Ed, as this novel is set against the background of Indian society of 1952 and such type of relationship is not permissible in Indian society. Homosexuality is not considered social or moral in traditional Indian society and culture like the Western society. Regarding the relationship of Maan and Firoz Roopali Gupta says that Maan has a “homosexual relation with his friend Firoz” (65). Another critic David Mayer calls their

friendship as “homoerotic friendship” (148). There are some clues in the novel *A Suitable Boy* that make it sure that there is something strange in the relationship of Maan and Firoz as: they embrace each other when they meet, they spend nights together whenever they get a chance, “Maan and Firoz lay in bed, yawning and talking” (Seth *A Suitable Boy* 1005), waking up early in the morning Firoz asks Maan smiling if he had slept well, Maan ruffles Firoz’s hair lovingly, etc.

Vikram Seth could depict the homosexual relationship in such a lively manner, as he himself is a homosexual and has experienced it personally. His personal experience of homosexuality has enabled Seth to depict this relationship so explicitly. His mother reveals this fact in her autobiography, *On Balance*:

This understanding comes to me much later and I found it hard to come to terms with his homosexuality. Premo found it harder ... But we loved him and accepted it without understanding it. It is only now that I realize that many creative persons share this propensity and that it gives them a special nurturing and emotional dimension. (Sinha 16 Oct. 2005)

Vikram Seth tells about his homosexuality in his interview with Aditya Sinha as: “It’s worth a direct answer. People don’t want to talk about their homosexuality or heterosexuality, but I don’t have to worry about being sacked ... It’s just a part of life” (16 Oct. 2005). Now-a-days homosexuality has become a burning issue in India also, as in a landmark judgement, Indian Supreme Court has accepted homosexuals “as the third gender and granted them several opportunities including admission in educational institutions. It even ruled that they be given employment on the basis that they belong to the third gender” (Singh 26 Sep. 2015). In short, being an Indian, Seth has taken a bold step to describe about the burning issue of homosexuality in his novels.

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