



THE SORROWS OF YOUNG JOHN BROWN IN SETH'S *THE GOLDEN GATE*

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Abstract

In the contemporary era, our human relationships have become fleeting and transitory. Loss of steady companionship seems to be the way of the modern world. This paper is an attempt to evaluate a specific case of John Brown, the central character of Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986). The paper is a study exploring how and why John suffers sorrows and what factors contribute to harm his close relations.

Key Words: John Brown, Alienation, Romance, Tragic Flaws, Trauma, Annihilation

"If I died, who'd be sad?

Who'd weep? Who would gloat? Who
would be glad?

Would anybody?" (Seth 3)

Introduction

In contemporary human relationships assurance, seems to be lost. Personal, interpersonal, professional, and social relationships are weighed down by the influences of materialism, uncertainty, and treachery. Our relationships have been becoming short-lived and transitory. The cases of mismatched marriages, divorces, dysfunctional families, superficial friendship, dissolution of morals, and values are emerging, day-by-day. It is no regret to mark that the loss of a steady companion has become, the way of the modern world. We have landed ourselves in the competition to grab power, success, and money that we have forgotten, to continue the human civilization which usually calls for peace and love for human survival.

Vikram Seth is a versatile Indian English writer. Seth was born in 1952 in Calcutta (Kolkata), India. He spent the early part of his life in India. The pursuit of education took him abroad. England,

California and China are the countries which he had travelled for education. He found himself influenced by the culture and the lifestyle of these countries. Seth's experiences and observations from diverse milieus have helped him to produce the literary creations of different genres and styles. So far, Seth's works include his four collections of poems, a libretto, a travelogue, several translation works on Chinese poets and two more novels.

Seth took the inspiration for *The Golden Gate* from the translated copy of Eugene Onegin by Pushkin. *The Golden Gate* is a novel in verse. It has thirteen chapters, comprising of 594 sonnets, and is in iambic tetrameter. The novel won, Seth, 1988 Sahitya Akademi Award, which is the second-highest literary honor in India. While living in California, Seth had already obtained a considerable experience and observation of the Californian life. This experience shaped the story of *The Golden Gate*. Seth wrote the novel in a comical and a sympathetic manner. The novel is also considered as a novel of manners with a feel of social realism. It includes a wide range of themes such as alienation, estrangement, man's search for love, broken relationships, the quest for belonging, intolerance, homosexuality, nuclear war

issue, and feminism. The themes confirm Namita Gokhale's view on Seth that Seth is a writer who writes about human beings (qtd. in Prasad 183).

The Golden Gate paints the sorrows of a modern young man-woman (yuppies). The backdrop of the narration is 1980s San Francisco. There are five major characters in the novel- John Brown, Liz (Elizabeth Dorati), Janet Hayakawa, Phil Weiss, and Ed Dorati. All the characters are interlinked and suffer alienation and ordeals. Seth presents the theme of alienation in the kaleidoscopic relationships. He also exposes the different dimensions of love. Emphasizing the importance of the novel, the critic, Gupta states, "The strength of the book lies in the fact that the issues it treats of are those that will not pass away with time: the book will continue to speak to each successive generation" (Gupta 37).

The novel begins with John Brown, the central character of the novel. Ruth Morse, another critic, highlights the critical flaws in John Brown. She remarks about John, "John is selfish, rigid, uncomprehending, independent of family and an agent of destruction" (Morse 150). Considering Morse statement, the researcher carries out the study probing flaws in John's personality and how these flaws count for the destruction of his sweet bonds.

John Brown and His Sorrows

"There lived a man. His name was John./ Successful in his field though only / Twenty-six, respected, lonely," (Seth 3). Seth introduces John, Janet and Liz in the first two chapters, focusing on John's search for a love-companion. John is a young lad who works in Silicon Valley. He is a successful, handsome youth, but lonely. He is on a search for a romantic hook in the midst of life's uncertainty, loss and disillusionment. Janet and Liz are the two women who influence his life significantly. However, the relationship with Liz, John's girlfriend, exposes John's follies. Day-by-day, John steadily broods his miserable life, "a linkless node, no spouse or sibling/ no children-..." (Seth 6).

Janet Hayakawa plays a role of a close companion and a guide to John. She used to be a

girlfriend of John. There is a considerable evidence to ascertain that the romantic relation of John and Janet had been incongruous. It has been now six years since they parted, but Janet remains a John's close friend. John feels free to share joy and grief with her. As a good friend, Janet is always ready to offer a help to John. When John faces futility and anguish in the existing San Francisco's cosmopolitan lifestyle, undertaking a psychological journey of self-alienation, it is Janet whom he chooses to confess his innermost dilemma. He says, "heart is depressed, youth is wilting, dream is tilting, zest is blurred and life is absurd" (Seth 14). Janet identifies John's anguish at once and as a solution suggests him to get a love. For a young mind, love lives in a relationship filled with romance, passion and dream. However, Seth offers a contrary reality of such love with all its ill-effects on lovers through John's internal faults.

On behalf of John, Janet places an advertisement to find a lady-companion. "Young handsome yuppie, 26/ Straight, forward, sociable but lonely,/ Cannot believe that he is the only/ Well-rounded and well meaning square/ Lusting for love. If you, out there,/ Are friendly, female, under 30, / Impulsive, fit, and fun, let's meet" (Seth 25). After this want ad, John gets a number of responses from girls. One of the responses is from Liz (Elizabeth Dorati) which is liked by John. Liz writes, "I'm friendly, female, 27,/ Well- rounded too, and somewhat square./ I'm fit- at least, I'm not convulsive;/ [...] I have heard several people say/ I am good-looking, in my way" (Seth 37). John gets excited to meet Liz. He fixes the date and meets Liz. John and Liz get involved instantly. The romance filled with infatuation, passion and desires, blooms right away that John even forgets to say thank you to Janet. The young love birds fly from the mental obsession with sexual passion and from sexual passion to dream thrills.

The love story progresses and John emerge as a despotic lover. Seth displays John's various flaws in the light of real-life based situations. Some of the major flaws in John's characters are here: passion, intolerance, self-centredness or self-absorption and non-beliefs in gender equality. Passion makes John love-sick. It springs jealousy, possessiveness and distrust in him. Intolerance begets prejudices. The

best instance of intolerance is John's negative attitude to Phil's homosexuality. Self-centredness or self-absorption attitude marks John as a narcissist. It makes him to disconnect with friends, family and loved ones. John's non-beliefs to see women as equal to men affect his relation with women in a harmful manner. The modern ladies like Janet and Liz ultimately break off from John.

"Passion's a prelude to disaster" (Seth 244). The line is said by Phil Weiss and gets a support from Liz that passion really leads up to disaster. John's break up from Liz is the result of his passionate nature. Seth shows the serious flaw in the amusing episodes in the novel. The first quarrel occurs between John and Liz because of Charlemagne. Charlemagne is a pet cat of Liz. John usually gets jealous from Charlemagne as Liz pours much of her love on the cat, ignoring him. He gets irritated and in return the cat starts hating John. Liz observes John's action towards Charlemagne, but ignores. She thinks one day John and Charlemagne might be friends. She says, "John, darling, try to understand him./ He's a brave, fine, and usual cat" (Seth 193). But John starts showing neurotic attitude. He is intolerable to live with the cat and often complains to Liz. But Liz always defends her cat. John gets furious and withdraws from Liz occasionally, thinking, lack of attention given by Liz to him. Once John makes it clear to Liz in harsh words, "Some people like cats, and some hate'em./ I must be of the second kind./[...] Believe me, Liz, [...]/ Either you get that cat declawed/ Or I'll-" (Seth 136). But nothing happens. Liz resolves she would never part with Charlemagne. When it comes to make a choice between Charlemagne and John, Liz chooses Charlemagne. John feels offended and abandoned bitterly.

Another disagreement between the couple John and Liz is erupted because of their dissimilar political views. John and Liz relation also is harmed by John's jealousy and suspicion nature. John's neurotic craze to possess Liz ends with a conflict. After finding a letter to Liz from John, he goes mad and accuses Liz of having an illicit relationship with Phil. However, Liz does not tolerate John's suspicious nature and splits from him without any regret. There is an another incident where John is depicted as an authoritarian man who wants Liz

under his shadow. John supports the nuclear warfare advancement, whereas Liz opposes it. John notices a streak of rebelliousness in Liz when she delivers anti-nuclear talk and participates in anti-nuclear campaign with Phil, John's friend.

Homosexuality is one of the major themes in *The Golden Gate*. Vikram Seth truly believes that intolerance towards homosexual is violence. John hates Phil just because he is homosexual. Phil Weiss is a former university friend of John. He is estranged from his wife Claire with whom he has a son named Paul. John runs into Phil at the music concert. They both renew their long-lost friendship. John also invites Phil over his housewarming party. Liz is already introduced to Phil. Ed Dorati is Liz's brother. When Phil and Ed meet at the party, they instantly have an intense sex. When Liz learns the homosexual relation of Phil- Ed, she accepts them gladly. But John expresses his disgusting thoughts. He breaks of his friendship with Phil. He thinks, "Get out of my life, Phil" (Seth 220). But Phil does not react to John's anger. He shows the understanding of his traumatic-mind. Phil says, "You know, Liz, this rigidity/ Of John's is less a function of/ Innate intemperate rabidity/ Than of a childhood lack of love...." (Seth 210). John does not accommodate Phil in his life. Thus, he gets estranged from Phil who has always been a good friend. G.R.Yadav also confirms through her article that John suffers "due to his inability to accommodate views and beliefs of others" (Yadav 360).

"Friends claim he's grown aloof and prim./ (His boss, though, is well-pleased with him.)" (Seth 4). John is a materialistic, self-centred, and self-absorbed man. He pursues materialism and becomes workaholic. John ignores his hometown (L.A.) friends after moving to Silicon Valley. "They write, "We must meet up some day..." (Seth 30). No wonder, he is estranged from his natal friends. But he also loses touch with friends like Janet and Phil. "Yet even those who havn't drifted/ - Like Phil, or Jan- too far from John," (Seth 30). This kind of self-absorbed and self-centred attitude harms John's relations with the people who care for him.

Another flaw in John is his narrow-mindedness. He shows less respect to women and their emotions. He has a self-constructed set of parameters to judge females. He easily gets disgusted at a girl on date who shows odd behaviours. "The others just aren't right for me" (Seth 32), John utters the line after making decision to check what kind of girls can suit him. He calls women "chicks" (Seth 16). Janet always reproaches John for his lower thinking about women. Once she reprimands John and calls him a 'Male Repentant Pig'"(Seth 16) .

In some scenes, one can also notice John's insupportable attitude towards people and things around him. John's picking up a quarrel with a cop intentionally, getting angry with his boss and judging people and things around him are some instances to highlight John's negative behaviour. He talks to himself, "It's not that I'm fastidious.../ I wish they'd turn that music down.../ It's gross. That calendar is hideous.../ (He stares at the distasteful clown.)/ ...I have waited half an hour, blast her!" (Seth 13).

After Liz marries Phil, John finds his pride damaged. The failure of the relationship is unbearable to John. He hunts women for a one night stand. He starts visiting bars. In this way, John tries to satisfy his injured pride. However, it is Janet, who tries her best to bring John back to his normal life. John realizes his love for Janet but before it is revealed to her, he learns the news of her death in an accident. He is shattered and devastated. He ultimately withdraws himself from the people and society as he does not have anybody to share his anguish. Morose states that John is a lonely in the beginning of the novel and he remains a lonely till the end. John's flaws are the tragic flaws which lead him to annihilate not only his own self but his relationships also.

Conclusion

To sum up, John's character represents the journey of every man-woman who suffers because of the affliction of internal flaws. Seth, through the character, John Brown, seems to air a message, 'one should show tolerance and one should use an accommodation skill' in order to avoid a tragedy in relationships like Mr. John Brown.

Note: The researcher owes the title proposal from the epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe.

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