



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

A Study of Humor and Satire in Vikram Seth's Fiction

Dr. Priyanka

Former Research Scholar, Shri Shaligram Sharma Smarak (P.G.) College, Rasna (Meerut) UP, India

Abstract:

The name of Seth shows the image of a learned person who has experience of different parts of the world. He is dexterous in both poetry and prose. The present research paper throws a light on the use of humour and satire in Vikram Seth's fictional works.

Seth is a prolific writer who sees the world in its real form. He skillfully depicts the characters through brilliant and witty conversation. They are charged with pathos, irony and humour. He is a mellow satirist but he does not use his satire to show the follies of his characters. He uses satire to make his characters realize their follies so that they can improve. He aims satire generally at social problems. Seth's satire undoubtedly emanates from his traditional outlook, and his penchant for older writer viz. Pope, Swift and of course, the Victorians. But the main canvas of the irony evinces Seth's Indian origin coupled with his originality in successfully combining tradition with modernity.

Seth creates humour by emphasizing some small insignificant details. Seth's humour predominantly the humour of situation coupled with the somewhat endearing neuroticism of the characters. A tentative definition of the humour through characterization in Seth, is that it is something we get whenever a character makes us laugh by himself or herself. A witty use of sarcasm in a narrative based on heightened passion displays Seth's unique hold on his subject. He has different shades of humour in his novels. In all his novels the characters are presented only in vignettes and as they push the story forward, Seth adds a touch of sardonic humour by inserting the authorial voice. The style is ideal, both for the medium, which demands levity and wit to keep it from sinking into a maudlin formlessness. Seth's wit is razor - sharp and it never crosses the limitation of good taste. The use of animals such as a CAT and DOG as characters in Seth's narrative provides a chain of symbols, rising from an expression of the lower vital in man to a craving for higher and quiter satisfaction. In this way, Seth's irony and humour do not merely keep to realism in justifying a sort of ecological anxiety but also serves as a means of simplifying the experience for suitable caricature to the purpose. It adds an enriching and finishing paradigm to the realism of his portrayal of life.

Vikram Seth uses humour and satire as a corrective measures, to make man aware of his pride, knavishness and selfishness as well as his follies and foibles.

Some of Seth's earlier poems are located in San Francisco. Located right in the epicenter of the San Andreas Fault, the inhabitants of San Francisco are constantly under the threat of physical destruction from earthquakes. Yet this is not the only threat to Seth's protagonists.

The synopsis on the back cover of *The Golden Gate* summarizes the plot as at once a bittersweet love story, a wickedly funny novel of manners, and an unsentimental meditation on morality and the nuclear abyss. Though it is a tale of relationship among Seth's five characters in different combinations, Seth's intention goes much beyond just relating the story of 'a John' and 'a Janet' in the term of love, reconciliation and loss. His California casts exclusive relationship with their pets which include a Siamese cat called Charlemagne and an iguana called Schwarzenegger. This novel begins by depicting John as one such victim of this new trend. John lives a superficial social life, and is isolated from communal contact, "No Family cushions his solitude." He wasn't always so alone/entrepreneurial, double-breasted, / he's changed from what his friends have known/work, and the syndrome of possessions/Leave little time for life's digressions."

In this novel Vikram Seth depicts a range of loves which are possible and acceptable in a modern 'metropolis' evincing unique culture and lifestyle. He satirizes people's attitude to life. In *The Golden Gate*, the characters' attitude to love reveal their attitudes to life.

John has to fight for his happiness and existence, learn about his follies and accept his fate. He is indeed alone in such a world where no one can look up to someone for guidance and for spiritual sustenance. John, the hero of this novel, represents the author's indictment of a capitalist and consumerist life, entrenched on conservative political opinions; he evinces, a rigid inflexibility in understanding another person's point of view. John's existential anguish is accentuated at *The Golden Gate Park*, when he is hit by Frisbee at the thought, "If I died, who'd be sad? who'd weep? who'd be glad?"

In this way, Seth looks satirically through him at the modern life of California. Ironically, it is Phil's sensitivity towards life that had attracted Ed too. And life John, Ed too tries to find solution to his questions. He has been restless and lacks "self-possession" while Phil's problem is he has always been attracted by vulnerable people. John presents the best example 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 relationship as soon as it shows signs of developing into something serious. Clair abandons Phil without a second thought under the feeble pretext of his dominating nature. Almost every major character in the novel suffers from this 'relationship anxiety' and John most of all.

Seth also takes a satirical dig at the dysfunctional family life of American woman. As the traditional homemaker, it is woman 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, and if her quest for freedom and self-satisfaction entails leaving in her wake a trail of broken marriages, broken homes, maladjusted children, then it is a small price to pay. Through Phil's son Paul, 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
 Thinks you're alone. You've got me." "When
 Will you leave me?" Phil, shocked, Stares.

In America, friendship assumes center-stage. As the family system provides no support, it is natural for people to turn to other social groups. Due to minimal parents-child interaction (a byproduct of busy lives), children fulfill their need for affection by bonding with their peers, with whom they spend long hours at school and at play. Gradually, friends replace the warmth lacking in familial ties. This type of relationship is realistically portrayed in *The Golden Gate*.

In *The Golden Gate* Seth effectively presents the relationship that the characters share with their respective pets. Charlemagne, Liz's intensely jealous Siamese cat, is as insecure as John is. Taken is an orphan kitten, he feels threatened by John's intrusion into his territory. Seth says:

How dare John Think-Great Cats above!
 Cohabitation spells immunity?
 That sordid catnip could replace
 His mistress's nightly embrace?
 And how, with cavalier impunity
 Dare he share Liz's bed and, more,
 Lock Charlemagne outside the door?

Charlemagne 'torments' John by making scratches on his trousers, ripping an official report to shreds and even urinating near his head. Liz is compelled to make choice between her lover and her cat. We analyze Phil's reaction to Ed's Iguana, with its parallel in John's dislike of Liz's cat, as a symptom of intolerance. Seth presents the, human animal connection that lies in the battle of conflicting emotions of jealousy and kindness in the parallel world of cats, and reads the problematic inter-cat relationship in terms of questions of class conflict.

Through the depiction of California Seth wanted to show one of the most exotic locations of twentieth century American capitalist culture. California, especially to the urban Indian reader, is a stereotype of modern life. 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. John Brown, the hero of this novel was a computer wizard, who resigned his job and opted out of the 'rat race' he found himself involved in. Phil, Liz and John form the trio of positive characters in the text. Despite his family breaking up and his being an outsider in the most literal sense from the 'Yuppie' culture of California, Phil, the drop-out from society, has built the most cohesive and supportive family group around himself. Surrounded by friends whom he cherishes, he is forever willing to give to himself and to also accept from others, an important lesson for survival.

The central theme of this novel is John's quest for a partner in life. It is the classical material of all comedy-man's hunt for the woman of his choice. The friendship of John with Janet precedes his all quest for adequate material relationship with a woman. Such a drama of human passions has two-fold existence: it is craving for ideal form and values on John's part, but for Ed jilted and divorced by his wife, it ends up merely as turning to another beautiful human body out of these appetite for fulfillment. The story of this novel moves along parallel lines when John is engaged to Liz and Ed meets Chris, Elizabeth's, brother. Seth explores 'gay' aspects of certain quizzical relations that crop up between Ed and Chris. In this way John's anguish and loneliness is universal as symbolized by California Life-John has to fight for his happiness and existence, learn about his follies and accept his fate Janet Hayakawa, a Tapanese immigrant, is single and like John, indulges in her job excessively and plays the drum to assuage her loneliness, 'stress and pleasure', 'toil and leisure' have been coined together to describe Janet's routine.

Seth is critical of today's career oriented woman for whom a successful career comes before anything else. Through the character of Liz, he presents the unfeminine, modern woman. However, conversely she is simple, candid humble and intelligent, the hallmark of the wise and prudent person who can establish the right values for the others to emulate. Her mother is anxious for her "Mrs. Dorati might disparage her children (Liz and Ed and Sue) for proving such a fruitless crew." The words 'fruitless crew' imply the fruitlessness of all her children who are too busy to think of marriage and procreation. Liz's sister, Sue is so captivated by her cello. Her brother, Ed, is a successful professional; But he is not able to resolve his personal contradiction vis-à-vis his Catholic beliefs and his homosexual preferences. Seth's characters are not only the human caricatures but cats and dogs too. These animals enhance the

ironical effect of Seth's ire and condemnation of passion as a whole. The cats, Iguana Schwarzenegger and Cuff and Link are an important extension of the guilt ridden male characters representing their existential anguish. Like Ed, Iguana Schwarzenegger and therefore he feeds on avocado. Liz, the main heroine shares a very special and an unusual relation with her eat, Charlemagne. Charlemagne was a famous writer in 12th century who along with his knights was famous for his heroic exploits and his name implies he is not an uncommon companion. Seth's irony serves as a means of simplifying the experience for suitable caricature to the purpose. It is due to such ease and simplicity of utterance that this fable out of contemporary experience communicated at a primary as well as a more serious level. Seth continues to draw on irony as constituent of a satiric treatment of human greed and selfishness. The humor is also achieved by the use of anticlimax, antithesis, and other figures of speech. Sometimes, Seth creates humor by emphasizing some small insignificant details, as for instance:

.... You need a lover, John I think.
 Someone I'd say, who's fun to be with
 And, of course, vitamin C to eat---
 And choose a richer lens to see with

.....
 The fever of her declamation
 Included her to drum a roll
 With her chopsticks upon her bowl.

Seth's humor is predominantly the humor of situation coupled with the somewhat endearing neuroticism of the characters. Seth's style in *A Suitable Boy* evolves conjuring up a brilliant sense of the comic. When he writes about the Chatterjee's and their circle, it becomes evident. Seth is exhorting the reader to dwell on the comic aspects of everyday life rather than on the tragic aware that reducing one's problems to the playful silliness of Kakoli-couplets will divest them of some of their gravity. Justice Chatterjee has five children: Amit, Meenakshi, Kakoli, Dipankar and Tapan. Seth pokes fun at them and writes, "None of them worked, but each had an occupation." Amit writes poetry. He is 'cheerful and cynical' his glamorous sister Meenakshi is a social butterfly; Dipankar seeks the 'Meaning of life' and spends his time reading the poets Sri Aurbindo, Kakoli is always on the phone with has string of admirers; and Tapan, only twelve or thirteen years old, attends a prestigious boarding school at Jheel. This family has a dog called Cuddles and a cat Pillow and hosts three or four grand parties in the course of the year. Chatterjee live in Calcutta. Calcutta has always been in the vanguard of change in social, cultural, and political sphere. Meenakshi was married to Arun Mehra who was neither a Brahmo, nor of Brahmin stock, nor even a Bengali. Meenakshi would never miss her canasta, a perfect memsahib. She had been unleashed on Arun Mehra, a young man from a conservative society and family. She has illicit relations with Billy Irani. She bought her fortnightly stores-her white flour, her jam and chivers marmalade and Lyle's Golden Syrup from Baboraltery a couple of loaves of bread from a shop in Middleton Row, some salami from a cold store in Free School street, half a dozen bottles off Beck's beer from Shaw brothers. Varun, the brother of Arun Mehra, is the permanent victim because he was a better listener than anyone in his own family Kakoli is attached to the telephone, and monopolizes it shamelessly. She is an Indian Lydia, who had flirted with many society boys till she landed in the lap of Hans. Hans is German and Kakoli's latest companion and fan. Kakoli had loved singing Chopin but now she was accompanying Hans singing, Tapan was the baby sahib of the family. He, like Kakoli, was a composer of doggerels. Mr. Chatterjee and his children often use Bengali clothes and language. Their mansion is a "scene of cordial conflict" Their dog Cuddles is an image for the Chaterjee, "Cuddle was not a hospitable dog. He had been with the Chaterjee family for more than ten years, during which time he had bitten Biswas Babu, several school children . . ."

In this way, Cuddles is an image for the Chatterjees and the Chatterjees, individually, have bitten more people like cuddles. The Chatterjees have employed two cooks, one for Bengali and the other for western food. Mrs. Mehra does not like their hospitality she was afraid lest her daughter Lata should contract this disease, though she enjoyed their company. Seth has depicted the modern upper class society who is inbred by the western culture through the Chaterjees The reader cannot help but be struck by the "indivisibility" of Aruns Mehra's obedient peon who patiently waits for his "brown sahib" in the pouring monsoon rain.

A tentative definition of the humour through characterization in Seth is that it is something we get whenever a character makes us laugh by himself or herself. He or she has been clearly placed before us once for all, and need not do anything in particular, except go on. In *A Suitable Boy* Mr. Mehra is dead and, therefore, is immune to Mrs. Mehra's reports, searches and pleadings. She addresses him by capital letters usually used for God. Take, for instance, her fond remembrance of Mr. Mehra on the wedding day of her daughter Savita, "If he had been here, I could have worn the tissue-patola sari I wore for my own wedding," signed Mrs. Rupa Mehra." Capital letters, 'He', 'His', and 'Him' are used lavishly for late Raghbir Mehra and this produces peals of laughter; for it shows her stupidity, hypocrisy and boorishness her searches for a suitable Boy for her daughter is like a pilgrim's progress. Like pilgrim, she piously, religiously and dutifully devotes her entire time to reach only one goal-the marriage of her daughter. Unlike Thomas Hardy and E.M. Froster, Seth and Jane Austen examine the society of their time by tools of humour. They create humour through characters of instance.

"My dear Mr. Bennett," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

And, switching over to *A Suitable Boy*,

"I know what your hums means, young lady, and I can tell you I will not stand for hums in this matter. I do know what is best . . . Do you think it is easy for me, trying to arrange things for all four of my children without His help."

Both the characters- Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Mehra should be read and enjoyed, and not examined as a pretender to any philosophy or message of life. They are the concretization of some abstractions like stupidity, hypocrisy and pomposity. Mrs. Mehra's invocation of 'Him' at the times of crisis and distress to silence her daughter. Lata is a masterpiece of Seth's fertile humour. Mr. 'He' (for late Raghbir Mehra) takes on fleeting flesh and blood from and that continues to be part of Mrs. Mehra's existence as a comic character in the novel. The advances made by Amit Chatterjee towards Lata were abruptly stopped mid-way by her mother who had instantly taken a dislike for the Chatterjees. Mrs. Mehra says to Lata; "I have no intention of accepting things as they come, said Mrs. Rupa Mehra, the unsavoury vision of scarifying yet another of her children on the altar of the Chatterjees making her flush with indignation" On the other hand, Mrs. Mehra immediately liked Haresh but Lata didn't Lata think that Haresh was shorter than she had expected. When Haresh opened his mouth to speak he had been chewing paan. In fact, paan did not go at all well with to Lata's idea of a Husband.

Seth shows the India of withering idealism, rotting corruption, pestering communal disharmony, parasitical intrigue of politicians, the perpetual fight between the forces of progress and maternity and the forces of tradition and obscurantism. If Mahesh Kapoor is progressive and secular, his cabinet colleague, L.N. Agarwal, is obscurantist and communalist. Agarwal strongly supported the reconstruction of the Shiva Temple and the Muslims resisted it with all vehemence. Mahesh Kapoor, though a Hindu, was well-known for his tolerance towards other religions. We can see the rotting corruption of the immediate post independent India, when the modern netas try every means to notch up licenses. Take for example, the conversation of Maan and Netaji:

After a pause, Netaji said, 'You must have a lot of contacts.'

'Contacts?'

'Yes, contacts, contacts, you know what I mean.'

'But-'

'You should use you your contacts to help us,' said Netaji bluntly. 'I'm sure you could get me a kerosene dealer's license. That should be easy enough for the revenue minister's son.'

Through this conversation Seth digs satire at the withering idealism of the post-independent India, and the vicious greed of the self-styled Netas of the commodity starved country to live lives of luxuries and comforts, at the expense of millions of people living below parity line. This tendency to curry favours with ministers, their progenies, their minions, has increased over the years in India and today no work is done without a nod from a minister or his minion. To the social comedy and political realism of the novel is added the academic skulduggery in higher education Pran Kapoor, as asthmatic university lecturer in English, is determined to get James Joyce on the university syllabus; Professor Misra is resolved on keeping the Irishman out. He loved power and authority. Pran and Prof. Misra represent modernity and tradition, sincerity and authority and pro-changers and anti-changers. Seth wants to show that our academics cease to read and write once they become senior professors or head a department. The selection of Pran for the readership of the university is stoutly blocked by Prof. Misra, in the meeting of the selection committee, on one pretext or another, but one-thing is clear that he does it out of prejudice. It is only the stubborn determination of the external expert and the wrong calculation of MaheshKapoor's probable victory in the election of legislative Assembly by Badri that compels Prof. Misra even at the time of his defeat and he deftly turns his defeat into victory. He assures Pran about his favour. In this way, Seth satirizes brilliantly the academic world of the early fifties.

Seth shows in this novel that political corruption is wedded to the abuse of power. It becomes evident when Rasheed with ten students went to see the Home Minister. He refused to concede their demands, nor did he budge an inch from his stated stance that he would maintain order in the town at any cost. When Rasheed asked him with belligerent look, if he would shoot them if they got out of hand the Home Minister replied that he would prefer not to. He says that it is useless to say, so it will not come to that. At this reply Rasheed says that this is like the days of the British. Mr. Agarwal, like Julius Caesar, can boast, "I am constant as the northern star. Of whose true-fix'd resting quality There is no fellow in the firmament."

Mr. Agarwal can be described as a grain of dirt clogging the Indian political machine. L. N. Agarwal is as good a manipulator and devious as Cecil and Kidwai are. They are corrupt but, parpassu, they are patriots to their finger-tips, also. One need not be a seventeenth century saint or a Gandhian Puritan to know that the road to the celestial city lay through a lusty man.

In this way, in *A Suitable Boy* comedy plays sprightly with satire, poetry with prose, politics with religion, politics with academics, melodrama with realism and boxwallas with shoe makers. The comic world of Mrs. Mehra, the political world of Kapoor, Agarwal and Netaji, the academic world of Pran and Prof. Misra and the poetical and prosaic world of Lata are the Major sources of the creative defining of life in comic-ironic terms by Vikram Seth.

A witty use of sarcasm in a narrative based on heightened passion displays Vikram Seth's unique hold on his subject. An Equal Music is both, intricate and intimate, rich with music, art humour, and emotion. Seth wants to say in his book that everything is mechanical in the present cosmopolitan life. Michael is middle-aged and the everyday struggles for a humble life style hardly allows him to think about a life partner or anything required for a settled life. The lonely life moves on, it is devoid of zest and focus. Michael, undoubtedly is trying to assuage his loneliness through sexual gratification with someone he does not love. Michael goes to London to rise in profession.

Seth sense of humour is remarkable in this novel also. Helen and Piers create humour of various shades. Helen is very careful about her hair's colour and dress. Her hair style changes annually. Billy is another comic character. Helen serves coffee to everyone of them when they are tense. Piers always pokes fun at Billy. He asks Helen about Billy and says:

Piers smiles a sort of left-husband smile, "Billy's only a fledgling. One day twenty years from now, he'll grow into the full mooster, write something gratingly awful for Covent Gorden-if it's still there and wake up as Sir William Cutler."

Helen applied a lot of henna around her hair. Now her hair is giving deep red varnish colour. She is fond of colouring her hair Helen is very careful for everybody. She suggests Michael that he should not take spinach because it would make his eyes look like Pop's. When Michael tells Piers that Mrs. Formby has died and has left her Tonomi for him. Piers says that everyone inherits things except he. He prays that he is really happy with old buddies. He prays that they all die quickly and leave all their money to starving fiddlers. The relationship between the characters and their pets is presented in this novel also. Zsa-Zsa is a sweet cat of Michael's father. She is like a family member. When this cat died, Michael's father is terribly shocked. This inordinate love for animals seemingly compensates of family love.

The writer depicts some incidents of Michael's childhood. These incidents produce moments of humour Michael tell his friend:

On my sixth birthday, while I was playing a game of hide-and-peek with friends, I decided that fridge would make a brilliant hiding place. I put on a couple of sweaters, crawled in and, with a bit of effort, managed to pull the door shut. Just a few seconds in that cramped, dark, freezing place, however, and I was ready to quit. What I had not realized was that once the door had clicked, I wouldn't be able to open it from the inside.

Infrom Heaven Lake Seth has his barbs aimed at the dowry system in India and bride price in China. The open discussion of the dowry system and bride price by the travelling teachers is an example of this acceptance of social norms as 'a fact of life.' Seth also satirizes at the Indian political system where things are just done on paper not in reality. These qualities of goodwill and compassion counter balanced by the obstructive official and the bureaucracy in China; Seth thinks:

What is ironic is that the same obstructive bureaucrat who drove you to tears of frustration about an obscure regulation about or a minor detail on a form may in his private life be so hospitable and generous as to being you to tears of gratitude.

Such type of irony does not lead to bitterness but leads to a serene acceptance.

An analysis of Seth's fiction reveal that is conceived in a spirit of humour coupled with mild but effective irony. This is brought about by the selective facets that Seth points out of his characters. The characters are presented only in vignettes and as they push the story forward, Seth adds a touch of sardonic humour by inserting the authorial voice. Seth's with is razor-sharp and it never crosses the limitation of good taste. The use of animals such as a cat and dog as characters in Seth's narrative provides a chain of symbols, rising from an expression of the lower vital in man to a creative for higher and quieter satisfaction. In this way, Seth's irony and humour do not merely keep to realism in justifying a sort of ecological anxiety but also serves as a means of simplifying the experience for suitable caricature to the purpose. It adds an enriching and finishing paradigm to the realism of his portrayal of life.

References

- i. Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1986), p.6.
- ii. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- iii. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- iv. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- v. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- vi. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- vii. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
- viii. Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 384.
- ix. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- x. *Ibid.*, p. 387.
- xi. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- xii. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 5.
- xiii. Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, op. cit., p. 3.
- xiv. *Ibid.*, p. 482.
- xv. *Ibid.*, p. 617.
- xvi. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III, I, 60-2.
- xvii. Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, op. cit., p. 253.
- xviii. Vikram Seth. *An Equal Music* (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1999), p. 6.
- xix. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- xx. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- xxi. Vikram Seth, *From Heaven Lake* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1983) p. 140.