

**LOVE AS A MEANS OF REDEMPTION OF A MAN IN THE NOVELS OF
VIKRAM SETH**

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The objective of this paper is to present Vikram Seth's deep insight and understanding of social issue of love and its effects on the life of a man for the redemption of his life. For this purpose all the three novels of Vikram Seth — *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, *An Equal Music* have been taken into consideration. All the novels of Vikram Seth are set in three different countries — America, India, and Europe and deal with the issue of love and its power in changing the direction a person's life. Love is a universal phenomena and it has nothing to do with any nation and society. It is present everywhere in any form. This research paper attempts to analyse the power of love over the life of persons as: John, Maan, Kabir, Haresh, and Michael. Love is presented as an important factor in the life of a person.

Love is “a strong feeling of affection for somebody that you are sexually attracted to” (Hornby 913). Love is an emotion of strong affection and personal attachment. The word ‘love’ refers to a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes, ranging from genetic pleasure to intense interpersonal attraction. It may also refers to the passionate desire and intimacy of romantic love, to the sexual love of *eros*, to the emotional closeness of familial love, or to the platonic love that defines friendship, to the profound oneness or devotion of religious love. Love is less sexual and more emotionally intimate form of romantic attachment. Psychologist Robert Sternberg formulated a triangular theory of love and argued that love has three different components: intimacy (psychological feelings of closeness), commitment (the sustaining of a relationship), and passion (physical arousal). Intimacy is shown in friendships and romantic love affairs, commitment is the expectation that the relationship is permanent, and passion is related to sexual attraction. The traditional psychology views love as being a combination of companionate and passionate love. Passionate love is intense longing, and is often accompanied by physiological arousal as shortness of breath, rapid heart rate but companionate love is affection and is not accompanied by physiological arousal.

Helen Fisher, a leading expert in the topic of love, divides the experience of love into three overlapping stages: lust, attraction, and attachment. Lust is initial feeling of sexual desire, attraction is a romantic desire for a special person for mating and these stages are considered temporary but third stage called attachment is long-term relationship lasting for many years and even decades. Fisher concludes that “Love is a natural drive as hunger” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_\(love\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_(love))). C.S. Lewis treats love under four categories based on four Greek words as: affection (*storge*), friendship (*philia*), eros (*eros*), and charity (*agape*). *Storge* is affection of parents for their children, *philia* is love between friends, *eros* means being in love and it is based on erotic bond, *agape* is love for God and it is unconditional love that serves regardless of changing circumstances. Love is a kind of immeasurable or

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fathomless ocean in which a person drowns or merges fully. It is selfless give and take and a beautiful gift of God to human beings on this earth.

Vikram Seth is world famous for his social realism and in his novels he has presented three distinct societies — American, Indian, and European. Literature is the mirror of society and it depicts the incidents those are happening in the prevailing society. In the same way the theme of a novel is woven around the members of the society, their mentalities, attitudes, thinking, customs, traditions and the description of any society or its family is incomplete without the description of social issues as romance and love.

“Love is the medium by means of which man can redeem his life” (Gupta 49). In the novel *The Golden Gate* Love casts the same effect on the life of John and it is Janet’s love for him that helps him in his redemption. There is a great power in love and it can lead a person from wrong to right path, to the peak of success, happiness and satisfaction. This is the outcome of Janet’s true and selfless love for John. Janet and John were in love with each other during their college time but they found it restriction or check on the freedom of their carefree life, so they decide to lead their life independently in their own ways. They had agreed to “part and shelter their friendship from all passion” (Punekar 87) as they had seen passion as a force of destruction. Later, when John feels alone in this world Janet suggests him to advertise to find a lover and as a result of advertisement John gets attracted towards Liz. Love develops between John and Liz very soon of their first meeting but it proves short-lived, as it was based on temporary stages of love — lust and attraction, not on attachment. There was lack of faith or trust in their love which is considered the foundation of love and besides it, Liz finds John dominating and over-demanding. The love of Liz and John shakes into pieces, as Liz marries with Phil within few days of her break-up with John and John again remains alone in his life and goes to cute chicks to kill his loneliness and boredom.

Seth, the patient moral teacher, gives John another chance to revive his love relation with Janet which had ignited six years ago in Janet’s heart. Janet gets worried about John and her love for John rekindles when she comes to know about John’s visiting to the bars for cute chicks and she brings him out of the clutches of bar-girls. In Janet’s love John forgets the betrayal of Liz and enjoys loving and soothing company of Janet. Love is not a feeling at all, “but rather is commitment to, and adherence to, loving actions towards another, oneself, or many others, over a sustain duration” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>). But when the love between John and Janet was advancing to the pinnacle, God wished otherwise and John loses Janet in an accident without expressing their love to each other. After her death John becomes insane and feels Janet’s presence around him all the time and sees her in his dreams. He is “lonely, isolated, alienated and lost” (Jayabharthi 149). There is no one to console him except the imaginary voice of died Janet. This emptiness and void leads him towards nothing but emptiness and alienation. Though John is left alone after Janet’s untimely and unexpected death, yet her unspoken or unexpressed love for John casts a redeeming effect on John and changes his life altogether. He remains lost in the memory of his beloved Janet and does not visit call girls to have solace and company in his loneliness. John finds him surrounded with the memories, dreams, and voices of Janet. He decides to live with the memories of Janet and denies Liz’s offer to be her son’s godfather. It is Janet’s unselfish, true, and ever-lasing love that inspires John to lead his life alone. It is the later love of Janet for John not the selfish, sexual, transient love of Liz that redeems John’s life. After enjoying Janet’s love and losing her accidentally, John realizes the real

meaning and value of true love in man's life. He finds it as a means of redemption, as his life also changes after falling in love with Janet. He becomes a mature person and does not try to have another girl to get love but decides to lead his life with the unforgettable memories of his beloved Janet. Seth seems to suggest that it is balanced friendship and affection which can prove to be more long-lasting and John's later relationship with Janet proves this. So, it is true, selfless, undemanding love of Janet that becomes the cause of redemption of John not the passionate, physical, transient, and sexual love of Liz. The love of Liz only causes John anguish, desertion, loneliness and leads him to the dirty pit of the call girls and leaves him alone to pine forever. Janet's love makes John to face the realities of the world and to put his feet firmly on the real world. It brings him out of the illusionary world of passionate and sexual love of Liz.

As John is redeemed by true love of Janet in *The Golden Gate*, in the same way, in *A Suitable Boy*, Maan is transformed because of his passionate love for a courtesan Saeeda Bai. Maan, younger son of Mahesh Kapoor, feels attracted by Saeeda Bai's charm and beauty and falls in love with her passionately without thinking about her religion, age, and social standard. Maan remains lost in the passionate and sexual love of Saeeda Bai despite of being arranged to a sober girl from Banaras. He feels unable to bear the separation from his beloved. He pines for her while living in Rudhia where he has gone to learn Urdu to understand her art. Even in prison he feels a burning desire to see her. On the other hand, though Saeeda Bai is a prostitute and it is her profession to entertain people in their distress but she does not feel liking for anyone than Maan. She becomes jealous when she sees Maan kissing Bibbo, her maid. She experiences the pangs of separation from Maan and realizes that she is in love with him. But their passionate love for each other has done nothing good for them.

A scene of misunderstanding and struggle occurs between Saeeda Bai and Maan and Firoz gets a fatal wound on his stomach. Maan has to visit the prison for his crime of stabbing Firoz very badly. Maan's mother could not bear this great shock of her son's going to the prison and passes away due to a severe attack. The untimely and sudden death of his mother changes Maan's way of thinking and he realizes for the best the futility of passionate and sex-oriented love of Saeeda Bai. A sudden change comes in Maan after returning from the prison, as he does not think or want to see Saeeda Bai and acts as a sensible and mature person. He realises that he has to lose his mother because of his immoral passion for Saeeda Bai. He becomes responsible and mature and never visits Saeeda Bai again.

Love is a medium of renunciation and redemption of a character is proved true here. Maan proves himself a sensible and mature man and frees himself from the clutches of Saeeda Bai. He blames his passionate love for Saeeda Bai for the premature death of his mother. Maan is transformed by remorse; "he renounces his passion for Saeeda Bai and bears the guilt of his mother's premature death with a sorrow but profound maturity" (Sinha 68). It seems that Maan learns a lesson through the hard way and unbearable suffering and from a frivolous and irresponsible character he becomes a sober, mature, and understanding person. Maan learns a lot from his failure in love and such a failure is necessary for the redemption and renunciation of a character. Maan is changed from a criminal to a hermit type of person. He controls his mind and heart and escapes himself from the trap of charming Saeeda Bai and sets his feet firmly on the land of reality.

In *A Suitable Boy* not only Maan has been redeemed by the power of love but love has redeeming effects on the life of Kabir and Haresh also. Lata and Kabir both are passionately in

love with each other. But religion proves an obstacle in the flowering of their love, as Lata belongs to a rigid Hindu family and Kabir belongs to a Muslim community. Seth does not allow these characters to accomplish their plan to get their love at any cost because Seth knows very well that their love could not be permissible in Indian society of 1952. Though Lata prefers Haresh for marriage rejecting her passionate love for Kabir but her love for Kabir has changed the life of Kabir, as he becomes more sensible and mature person. Lata falls passionately in love with Kabir and asks him to take her away from the restrictions of religion and caste and where they can live together. But as a sensible man Kabir does nothing amoral and asks her to wait for him for two more years so that he could fulfil his aim of life. Besides it, when Kabir comes to know about Lata's decision of going to be married with Haresh, he does nothing that might go against the reputation of her family as well as his own family. He treats like a sensible and mature man and accepts what the God has decided for him. He does not try to get what seems him out of reach and even does not pine for what he could not get. It seems that love of Lata for Kabir has redeemed his life and brought maturity and sensibility in him.

Love also redeems the life of Haresh. Simran and Haresh are deeply in love with each other since their college time. But religion stands as an obstacle in the path of their love, as Simran belongs to a Sikh community and Haresh belongs to a Hindu family. Simran's parents do not approve their relationship and the loving couple has to lose any hope of flowering of their love. The love of Simran for Haresh brings maturity in him. When Haresh feels that Simran is out of his reach he leaves any hope of getting her and accepts his fate happily. He does nothing amoral or illegal to get Simran that could destroy the reputation of their families. Love of Simran brings him maturity and sensibility in Haresh and he selects Lata as his would be wife, forgetting his love for Simran. He tries to forget his love for Simran and to lead his life with Lata happily. Though Seth's characters remains lost in the world of dreams, fantasy and imagination for some time but at last they reside in the world of reality and acts as a mature and sensible person. This transformation comes in his characters because of their being in love. Their passionate love becomes the cause of this redemption and their changed behaviour. It is love that brings maturity and a sense of responsibility in his characters.

All the novels of Vikram Seth are centred on the theme of love and love plays an important part in the redemption of characters. In the novel *An Equal Music* love proves a means of redemption for Michael. Michael and Julia were music students of Karl Call in Vienna. They feel attracted towards each other very soon of their first meeting and fall deeply in love. But they get separated because Michael had a row with Karl Call. As a result of that row Michael leaves Vienna as well as Julia and comes to London. Though Michael realizes his mistake and the wrong decision taken in haste but it is no use crying over spilt milk. Michael tries his best to re-establish his relationship with Julia and writes letters and tries to phone her but all his efforts go in vain. He remains frustrated and empty handed.

It may be coincidence, fate, the wish of God or whatever but Michael gets a chance to re-establish their love-relationship. Michael sees Julia in an opposite bus for fleeting moments after ten years of their unbearable separation. Michael becomes astonished seeing Julia in London after ten years of separation and tries to contact her but all his efforts prove in vain again. Though he hires a cab to reach to Julia but she had gone before Michael reached there. The almighty God has given them another chance to rekindle their love and made them to meet at Wigmore Hall where Michael was playing his violin and Julia was also present there. When Julia

sees Michael there she gets excited and goes to meet and praise Michael for his performance. Meeting after ten years seems a kind of miracle and their old love for each other rekindles again though its flames were not extinguished earlier. The meetings between Julia and Michael start again and they establish physical relationship despite of Julia's being married to James and having a seven years old son. Julia enjoys Michael's love and company for some time but very soon she realises her treachery and disloyalty to her loving and caring husband. She finds herself unable to reside in dual worlds — the world of Michael as a lover and the world of James as a wife and asks Michael to be just friends. But Michael could not digest her demand of being just friends, as he loves Julia passionately and was not ready to lose her again. Julia was resolute in her demand and Michael has to accept it.

Once Michael gets a chance to hear Julia's music at Wigmore Hall and enjoying Julia's music there, he feels satisfaction, it brings him maturity, a better sense of understanding, and he decides not to think or pine for what has lost and cannot be regained and enables himself to struggle in the world without Julia. Though Michael is left alone as he was in the beginning but there comes a great difference in his nature and thinking power. He becomes somewhat mature, sensible, hermit type of person who accepts everything willingly what comes in his way. "His thoughts have reached a resolution and he is no longer troubled. He has learned acceptance and it has brought him serenity" (Gupta 93-94). Michael decides to do away with memories of Julia and finally emerges victorious. Julia's love and music bring Michael maturity and stability in his life. It changes the direction of his life and he does not aspire to get what seems him out of reach. He establishes his feet firmly on the land of reality and does not fly in the world of fantasy and dreams with the wings of imagination. Seth seems to advocate his philosophy that "a level headed commitment is more enduring than youth's dreams of passion" (Gupta 64).

Seth is a moral teacher and immorality is not acceptable to him, so he makes his characters to check their illicit relationships without going much further and makes them to reside in the world of reality. Seth has made his character to undergo a change because of the effects of their love. Though Michael and Julia establish physical relationship despite of Julia's being married but very soon they correct their mistake and accept what God has decided for them. Listening Julia's music at Wigmore Hall, Michael has a feeling of contentment and he feels, "Music, such music, is a sufficient gift ... It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music — not too much, or the soul could sustain it — from time to time" (Seth, *An Equal Music* 381).

In short we can say that Vikram Seth believes in the great power of love and he has proved that love is great. It can change the life of any person to the right direction. It can change a person into a saint from a culprit. Love makes a man more sensible, mature, and responsible person. In all the three novels Seth has described about the redeeming power of love and it is only love that has changed the life of John, Maan, Kabir, Haresh, and Michael and made them to take right decisions at the right time. Love has become the means of redemption and renunciation of their life. Seth has created the world of love — "a world not clouded by unrealistic dreams, and firmly entrenched in the reality of life" (Gupta 66). All the loves depicted in the novels of Vikram Seth, except the love of John and Janet, are sex-oriented, physical, or based on lust and attraction and bond to wither very soon but the love of John and Janet proves ever-lasting and it is related to internal beauty not the external, transient beauty and charm. It resides and flourishes in the heart of John even after the death of Janet. It is the true love in real sense. On the other

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hand, other lovers described in these novels as: Maan, Kabir, Haresh, and Michael go ahead to live their life without their beloveds. Maan forgets Saeeda Bai, Kabir does nothing to get Lata, Haresh forgets Simran and marries to Lata and Michael goes ahead to lead his life without Julia. But on the same time it is also true that their love redeems their lives and brings maturity and a sense of responsibility in them.

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