



LITERARY MUSIC IN THE NOVEL OF VIKRAM SETH “AN EQUAL MUSIC”

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Abstract:

Interdisciplinary research in literature and music has expanded rapidly in recent years and is now also attracting a significant number of readers. Music is found in every known culture, past and present, varying widely between times and places. “An Equal Music” by Vikram Seth is a classic in every sense of the word. It is a novel of passionate individuals who are dedicated to music. Vikram Seth is one of the most significant Indian novelists of today. In his novel “An Equal Music” is a beautiful blending of human passionate love with musical atmosphere, fully charged with the fire of emotion. Seth’s shows the combination of music and literature in An Equal Music.

Keywords: Vikram Seth, An Equal Music, Classical Music, Culture.

Introduction

Vikram Seth is a famous English writer. He is a prominent librettist, travel writer, novelist, poet, children’s writer, biographer and memoirist. He connects music and literature in his famous work “An Equal Music”. He is one of the most towering writers in Indian writing in English today. With the complexity and depth of his work and his significant achievement in prose as well as verse, Seth has proved as a master of English language. His many themes and concerns, from land ceiling in Post-Independence India to Western Classical Music and relationships, all cast in formally perfect prose or poetry. This has gained him a formidable reputation as a stylist & a perfectionist. Vikram Seth was born on 20th June 1952 in Calcutta [now Kolkata], West Bengal, India. His family lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar [near Kolkata], Patna, near Danapur and London. His father Premnath [Prem] Seth was an executive with the Bata India Limited, a shoe company who had migrated post-partition India from West Punjab in Pakistan. His mother, Leila Seth, was trained in law in London. Subsequently, she became the first woman judge on the Delhi High Court as well as the first woman to become Chief Justice of a State High Court at Simla. Seth’s younger brother, Shantam, led Buddhist meditational tours. His younger sister, Aradhana, is a film maker married to an Austrian diplomat, who worked on Deepa Mehta’s movie Earth and Fire.

Literary Achievement

Vikram Seth’s prodigious literary career has encompassed several books of poetry, a travelogue, a verse novel, an epic novel, modernist fiction and a memoir-cum biography. Each book is set in a different cultural landscape and breaks new grounds in terms of form and genre. Every new book of Seth creates a fresh departure in form and theme. It is perhaps not surprising that though he is described in more and more reviews as the finest living writer in English, there is no canon or category that can accommodate him, or any critical formulation through which he can be studied.

His novels are *The Golden Gate* (1986), *A Suitable Boy* (1993), *An Equal Music* (1999) and upcoming novel *A Suitable Girl*. His poetry includes *Mappings* (1980), *From Heaven Lake* (1983), *The Humble Administrator’s Garden* (1985), *All You Who Sleep Tonight: Poems* (1990) and *Three Chinese Poets* (1992). His children’s book, *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1992) consists of ten stories about animals.

Vikram Seth created history in more than one way. He is the first Indian English novelist to write a novel titled *The Golden Gate* [1986] in verse, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1988. *The Golden Gate*, a novel set in San Francisco of the 1980’s provided a stepping stone into fiction.

Vikram Seth is the first Indian English novelist to get a fabulous amount of rupees two crores as advance for his epoch-making novel *A Suitable Boy* [1993]. He has received the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and WH Smith Literary Award for *A Suitable Boy* in 1994. Seth’s third novel, *An Equal Music* [AEM], a novel set in London with Western Classical music as its backdrop. The novel was awarded EMMA [BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award] in 2001. This novel focuses on the lives of classical musicians and their music cannot but seem a daring venture and risk. While writing the novel Vikram Seth sat in on quartet rehearsals, understood details of music, musical instruments, sales, events, halls, tours, took lessons for six weeks in lip-reading to get into the character of his deaf heroine and the subject of the novel. The novel is a first-person narrative, in the present tense, of sensitive and volatile violinist and Seth attempts with fine delicacy to convey the effect of music through words.



Vikram Seth's third novel *An Equal Music* is the tale of an emotionally volatile musician Michael Holme and his gradual recovery of the self. The backdrop of the novel is the enchanted, romantic world of contemporary London, Vienna and Venice and the subject is Western Europe's supreme cultural achievement: classical music. Brilliantly interweaving the themes of loss, longing and power of music, Vikram Seth has created a deeply moving story about the strands of excitement that run through all our lives. The book is about the unspeakable pain of violinist. *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth is a classic in every sense of the world. An exceptional novel is often woven out of the lives of exceptional people. It is a novel of musicians who dedicated their life to music. Music has been presented in this novel as a noble addiction. Michael and Julia are musicians. The book centres on two gifted musicians: Michael Holme and Julia McNicholl. As Michael works on a Beethoven piece for the Maggiore Quartet, he grows increasingly preoccupied with recollections of his student days in Vienna where he met Julia. When the two are re-united by chance in London, their relationship is re-kindled. One of the most impressive aspects of this novel is the way in which it manages to convey music through language. While Seth is modest about his musical abilities, the fact that he was commissioned to write a libretto for the English National Opera in 1994 suggests he is no novice.

'An Equal Music' is a tour de force of poetic, impassioned writing. It is an unforgettable tale of love lost and nearly regained. It is a story of the force of love, its magical spell over the heart and its forceful impact over the mind. It is a poignant saga of love and lovelorn lovers torn apart by circumstances and how a strange quirk of fate sees them come together again. The common strand that connects the lover is their passionate love for music. It is a love story blended with the strokes of a Mozart piano, synced with a Bach Harmonica and a Schubert violin. It is a treat for the connoisseur and the laity, the lover and the ignorant, the classes and the masses.

Love for Music 'An Equal Music' is the tale of their love for music, their passion for each other, and the strange quirk of fate which draws them closer only to sever them forever. Writing about Music Beauty of the book lies, in its simple yet poetic writing style. Vikram comes across as a writer at home with the sonnets of Bach to the symphonies of Mozart to the tunes of Schubert. His knowledge and wonderful usage of musical pieces and its blend with the theme of the story is a joyous experience. The book shines where other attempts have failed, the deeper implications dialogues and confrontations between Michael, the lover and his beloved Julia is a treat. Consider this at their second meeting. Julia tells Michael she is married. When he asks why she doesn't wear a wedding ring, she answers. 'I don't know. It distracts me. It distracts me when I play the piano. I look at it and I can't concentrate on the music'. Wow now do I need to say more on this, if Michael is longing for her, so is she, and what better way to express this than the subtle ways just narrated. Both are the sources of inspiration for each other, music to them are incomplete without the other, this is love at its best.

Music is the strongest element in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. It acts like a glue holding the story and characters together, and Seth offers the readers a peek in to the works of Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and Hayden, offering a unique glimpse into the world of chamber music. The interpersonal dynamics of the Quartet that influence their performance, their approach and method of rehearsing are also clearly pictured. Throughout the novel we find the novelist sharing an intimacy with music and identifying himself with the characters. Music and Love co-exist in the novel. The protagonist's dilemma in choosing one over the other is portrayed. Loneliness as the only companion the life of a music composer has been beautifully conveyed. The elaborate process of music-making also finds a place in the novel.

Literature is the only branch of studies that can deal with any other branch of studies. Various themes have been dealt in Literature, ranging from romance to horror to mystery to science fiction any many more through the different ages. Music has been to the soul for ages, and it too has a long history. But the relationship between music and Literature is rarely dealt with. Many have spoken about music in their works, but not about the relationship. Vikram Seth has dealt with the topic in detail, as he himself is a musician trained in classical music. Stephen Benson in his *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* brings about the relationship between the discourse of music and literature. He states that, "musicology is newly attentive to literature and literary studies is newly cognizant of musicology" (4).

Michael has a less laborious pursuit to obtain a rare Beethoven Quintet that he did in search of a Mozart Divertimento: Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; Why hope not to grieve? 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 not sustain it- from time to time. (380)

Making music and making love become one of the important themes of the novel. The love story with its traditional structure of meetings, partings, heartbreaks, promises and betrayals is beautifully intertwined with the theme of music in the novel. Vikram Seth emphasizes this when he describes how Michael and Julia after making love are able to work together on music,



One morning, after making love, we tried making music together. It did not go well; we were both too nervous. Later in the week we gave it another try, and were taken aback by how naturally, how responsively – to each other, to the music – we were playing (80).

Music – Making is an important phase before it comes out as a form of music. Music is soothing to the ear, but it is made up to that perfect state through the elaborate process of music – making. Music for Seth is the result of a concerted effort; of the senses and the musculature when the musician plays, of the musician and the audience, and of the two musicians together. The novel *An Equal Music* expounds the art of music – making and is substantially technical for music lovers. *An Equal music* provides an in – deep look into the non – glamorous side to music – making. Michael sums it up: “Years of training, long hours, pathetic pay – and being no good for anything else – and having no chance in what you play – you could feel trapped even if you loved it once” (7).

An Equal Music is a lucid and ambitious attempt to capture the mysteries and sufferings experienced by those in the field of music, through the form of prose. Seth’s novel examines the impact of western classical music on the lives and hopes and fears and final, desperate choices of its European protagonists. Music has been presented in this novel as a noble addiction. Seth highlights the problem of being a professional musician. The problems highlighted in the book are those that are faced in real life- the cost of instruments, the irregular income, the creative tensions of playing in a group and the diminishing likelihood that anyone from a poorer background will ever be able to train as a musician with all the expenses involved. The love, love regained and love lost in the novel also affect the emotion of the individual. Michael was desperately in love with Julia, but unfortunately, he had to leave her and loneliness becomes his only companion. This is evident in the words of Michael, “Life settles into bearable aloneness” (56).

The instrument each member plays must be suited to his or her temperament. Thus, Piers, abrasive, demanding, the leader in the group, makes a classic first violinist. Helen, who provides the viola’s supporting role, is constantly pouring oil on troubled waters; Billy, genial, brilliant, selfless, eager to please, is the group’s cellist, “light and profound; the base of our harmony, the rock on which we rest.” (10)

Seth’s language of music can convey every minutiae of the art form. The love story pales in comparison. Moving as Julia’s meeting with Michael after the performance at Wigmore Hall, it cannot compare with the sublimity of the music that has preceded it, particularly of the arresting encore, the first contrapuntist of Bach’s “Art of Fugue”. Music and love are inseparable and make a natural corollary in the events unfolded in the novel. The world of music is all embracing. The English, the Viennese, the Venetian, the French and the American characters engaged in the common pursuit of love of music meet, perform and feel together. The life so envisioned in the novel is global, music, therefore, is a potently unifying a binding force.

The two powerful passions, the one for music and the other for romance gets intricately blended in the novel. Seth tries to work out as to how music can form the theme of a novel and connect not only individuals but also their souls. Michael’s life has very little room for anything else other than music. He seems to share his fascination for music with Seth, his creator. Michael teaches music to Virginia, who confesses her love to him but in reality, does not leave any impression on his consciousness as Julia does. The narrative deals with Michael’s passionate relationship with his music, his deeply moving twelve-year-old attachment to his two seventy-year-old Carlo Tonomi Violin. In “*An Equal Music*”, with the magical world of Beethoven and Bach as background, Seth weaves an impassioned tale of Heartache, longing and the power of music. Music is part of Michael’s life. It gives relief to a man when he was in the midst of difficulties. So, when we read the novel, we feel the presence of music in its each and every line. Music unites Julia and Michael. The rhythm of their romance makes the novel more musical.

Conclusion: Seth’s greatest achievement is the narrative voice, which is always self-effacing and utterly transparent. Themes and issues are presented with a steady consistency of imaginative objectivity. His three novels have been virtuoso performances and for serious literature immensely successful with the reading public, and translated in many languages. Each novel has been very different from the others and has taken an older literary form in unexpected new dimensions. He writes the novel in the Omniscient. It is as though the reader is looking through windows into the family relationships and the mental and emotional attitudes of the individual characters. Seth’s characters are defined not so much through a description of their consciousness, self-expressive or views of themselves. But through their relationship with others and other’s view of them. His characters in the novels crave the basic human desires.

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