

RESUSCITATION OF LOVE AND INTERACTION OF MUSICIN VIKRAM SETH'S *AN EQUAL MUSIC*

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Abstract:

This paper attempt to examine reciprocations of music and love in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. This is a novel about music and how the love of music can run like a passion through life. Seth in *An Equal Music* chooses Michael and Julia to carry out the main plot-elusive search for music. The countries Venice and Vienna, the players of the Maggoire Quartet, Mrs. Formby and other characters contribute in carrying out the story in a lively and appealing way: Inquisitiveness and curiosity arises while going through the novel. Michael and Julia are the dynamic characters, who are complex and regular in existence. They can be termed as thematic character also as they bring out the theme of music superior to the theme of love. *An Equal Music* denotes the spirituality of music, its significance and influence in one's life. The title is appropriate as at the end of the novel music is equal to both - Michael and Julia; since Julia's impairment of hearing cuts her off from the music world, is unable to hear the sweet voice of the nightingales but she possesses the power to feel the music. Thus, she is equal to those who can hear and her music is equal to other musicians. It was this passion for music which united both Michael and Julia for some time and its spiritual power helped them to take the correct decisions in their lives. *An Equal Music* also signifies that music is for all the creatures of God.

Keywords: Music, Spirituality, Love, Search, Passion, Musicians

Resuscitation of Love and Interaction of Musicin Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*

Vikram Seth, whose literary music has echoed equally from India Gate to the Golden Gate, belongs to the crop of these bold new writers. He is undeniably a writer among writers, someone who can be called the master craftsman of his generation. He is an erudite cosmopolite who has baffled critics and readers alike as a writer who has epic, yet unpredictable talents. He is able to juggle words with consummate ease, and his pen wields both poetry and prose with equal dexterity. He has made English language his own, unselfconsciously authoring works as diverse as his slim volumes of poetry to the leviathan sized *A Suitable Bay*, and with his trademark transparent style, he has gone a long way towards reinventing the contemporary literary scene.

Literature, in different ages has reflected the basic complexities, anxieties, pain, hatred and pleasure of human beings. One age may pass; yielding place to another but the sentiments remain approximately the same. Poets, novelists, dramatists always endeavour to ennoble man; to help him preserve the basic goodness of mankind, emphasizing that basic humanity must retain itself despite the cloud of unhappiness, darkness and fear enveloping us from time to time. This is the central message of Seth to his readers in *An Equal Music*. Seth celebrates the music of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Bach died in 1750 and Schubert in 1828, Mozart preceded them and Beethoven died just one year before Schubert. The musical range does not step outside these limits. The author has fine knowledge of this music. The invocation of music as suggested in foregoing passages continues till the end of the novel.

An Equal music is the tale of an emotionally volatile musician, Michael Holme, and his gradual recovery of the self. The narrative deals with Michael's passionate relationship with his music; his deeply moving twelve-year-old attachment to his 270-year-old Carlo-Tononi violin; and his intense love for a woman he loses twice over. It is about the resuscitation of a long dead love and the interaction of a group of musicians. In *An Equal Music*, Seth makes an interesting point, his heroine Julia is deaf yet she pursues the career of a musician. Seth assumed the novel as a musical analogy, inspired by Bach, the famous musician in the eighteenth century, and his *Art of Fugue*. Seth points out the deepening sense of frustration, helplessness of these musicians who have to perform according to their audience's choice and expectations in creating music that must be essentially be enthralling, soul stirring and which is able to outclass everything. Nevertheless, the audiences are oblivious and even unmindful of the tremendous pressure and the professional hazards involved in it. The novel delicately and evocatively describes their desire to perform and rise in their profession along with Julia's deafness who with the support of Michael finally finds her destination. Throughout the novel, music in its entire vicissitudes is projected. Symbolically it is the dream of all of them.

An Equal Music has been hailed as the finest novel about music ever written in English. Narrated in the present tense by Michael, the first half of the novel is almost magical, with its melancholic evocations of London's Hyde Park, and its description of bracing Saturday-morning swims in filthy, freezing water of serpentine. For Seth, writing about diverse themes and diverse places is a challenge and attraction in itself. This is a novel about music and how the love of music can run like a passion through life. In the novel he creates a living, breathing world that enchants and grips the readers. It is about the resuscitation of a long dead love and the interaction of a group of musicians. Seth sought the help of friends as well as strangers, string players, composers, repairers and sellers of instruments all those who aid in dissemination of music. *An Equal Music* therefore, is music which has attained perfection and since music is the food of love, it plays a major role in a narrative of love lost and found and finally lost again. The book deals with perfect love, which is marked by balance, harmony, uniformity and tranquillity. Seth's passion for music, his empathy with it and with the people who create and perform it, reflects through his book, making it totally different to anything he has written.

Michael is a complex, somewhat temperamental young man whose birth place Rochdale, in the North of England, was once rich in orchestral and choral music. And, although music was never a part of his own parents' lives, at the age of nine, Michael was taken by Mrs. Formby to a performance of Handel's Messiah. It is here that he emerges himself in music and with borrowed instruments he takes a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Later, he gets an invitation to join a master class at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, and amidst great opposition from his parents, he becomes a professional violinist. Music dominates both their lives, providing a counterpoint for every mood and action. And Seth keenly explores the strange dependence, and independence of the individuals involved in the Maggiore Quartet; the terrible dilemma of a musician who suffers almost total loss of hearing; and the plight of musicians whose precarious income prevents them from ever owning the finest and the most beautiful of instruments and who, like Michael, may lose their much loved but borrowed instruments any time.

The action moves between London, Vienna and Venice but the real life of the novel is the music- music equated with love and emotions. Michael is alone like he was in the beginning, but there is one important difference: his thoughts have reached a resolution and he is no longer troubled. He has learned acceptance and it has brought him serenity. This change in perspective has enabled him to come to terms with his past, made the present bearable, and the future promising. And perhaps most essentially of all, he has realized that to be complete is an advantage, not a necessity. Seth assumed the novel as a musical analogy by Bach, the famous musician in eighteenth century, and his *Art of Fugue*. *Art of Fugue* is essentially violent and vibrant, going on between the centripetal and centrifugal forces. Seth's Western Classical musicians are a part of a quartet comprising a viola player, a cellist, and two violin players.

Michael, the main protagonist in the novel, is one of the violinists. At the opening of the novel Michael is seen bereaved, wretched and listless. Nothing excites him and the sudden parting from Julia, his beloved only enhances the existing loneliness. It has been ten years since Julia and he parted, while at the moment, he was going along with a student, Virginia. There was only lust and no love involved in their relationship. This shows the western civilization as Michael, thirty-seven years old indulges with her, who is barely sixteen. Michael is middle aged and the everyday struggle for a humble life style hardly allows him to think about a life partner or anything required for a settled life. The dreary 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.

An Equal Music is as much a novel about love and music as about a certain inner darkness. It has a melancholic strain that manifests itself in the isolation of the characters, in Michael's obsessions, Julia's deafness, in the lack of common perspectives; even the humour is dark, serving chiefly to make the tragic parts more poignant by contrast, along with the goal of providing "dramatic relief", to borrow a term from Shakespearean criticism, as the story grows almost suffocating sad. There are some brief glances towards colonizing areas in the novel.

Seth rightly points out the deepening sense of frustration, helplessness of these

musicians who have to perform according to their audience's choice and expectations in creating music that must essentially be enthralling, soul stirring and which is able to outclass everything. The author raises certain pertinent questions regarding the harmony of spirit which is so essential to produce sublimity of art. The critic avers that the novel shows intellectual failure of these musicians to obtain perfection of art, but Seth's attempt is at showing that in spite of being a part of their pervasive grim world, their effort at trying to fulfil Bach's dream is in itself a satisfying end for them. Seth in his novel evinces a structure akin to that of *Art of Fugue*, and the quartet players are asked to play this very composition but when Bach had conceived it, then quartet composition did not exist. These players thus take up this uphill task and play the composition using innovations what was Bach's forte, and even succeed. The novel delicately and evocatively describes their desire to perform and rise in their profession along with Julia's deafness who with support of Michael finally finds her destination.

Throughout the novel, music in its entire vicissitudes is projected. Symbolically, it's the realization of the dreams of all of them. Michael wants to possess Julia and Toni and though he loves Julia he is willing to dispense with her and seeks satisfaction for two reasons, firstly, for the fact that he has at last been gifted his favourite Toni, and that Julia has sought recognition professionally in spite of her physical handicap. Thus, the ending does point out to achievements of all. Moreover, the implication of spiritual sustenance is never lost sight of; Seth would repeatedly embark upon its presence, especially in the dismal and melancholic world of the modern, who is forever confronting existential crisis.

The feeling of loneliness and ennui seems to have gripped his entire disposition. The boredom of daily drudgery is reinforced effectively through the repetition on first person, 'I,' in this paragraph and short sentences that could have easily been avoided. This kind of sentence structure accentuates an improper thought structure which goes very well with his internal monologues. The time shift as expressed through the stream of consciousness technique has been evinced in the form of interior monologues and Michael's existential anguish. Michael has been suffering from claustrophobia, since he was nine years old. The phobia gives him a feeling of being closed and suffocated and it engulfs him later also. Perhaps, it has developed in him a fear of being controlled, coerced or intimidated by someone, something that could have resulted in his parting from Carl Kail. Michael knows his limitations; he is not an easy person to get along. He had in him volatility, a sense of resistance, of dark panic, almost brain sickness. At times just before a performance is to take on stage, he gets so tensed that Helen, the cellist, has to give him coffee to relieve him of it. Similarly, there is Billy, the pianist who starts coughing before and after the show and invariably, all these musicians begin to sweat.

Seth imparts an authentic picture of the Western classical musicians along with the insipidness and uncertainty in their lives, in spite of not being a part of it. The quartet players, accustomed to the torn and strife, disagreements and disputes, become the focal issue in the story. The four players have their own likes and dislikes.

Seth has maintained stability in the relationships also. It is seen that Julia feels guilty about her acts of deception. She cannot reconcile to living in a dual world which chafes each other. She admits to her intense love for Michael but decides to forgo her love for her

husband and son. Michael is her past, and she realizes that one cannot live in the past forever. And she finally ends her relationship with Michael. Her choice to opt for her dependable (though unmusical) businessman-husband James over the volatile and moody Michael, and her denunciation of passion for family and social order is one of the thematic preoccupations. Julia chose the stable and dependable James rather than Michael. For Julia, James had stood by her in the worst days when she could hardly recognize herself in the mirror; she saw in his eyes her existence. But in Michael's presence, she becomes restless and uncertain, afraid and guilty. Seth has presented two types of stability in the novel, social and the familial one, and the other mental and internal one. Also stressed again and again is the fact that attachment to love and music also leads to a sense of order and stability though of a different type, and *An Equal Music*, in spite of the individual's sense of loneliness, suggests that.

In *An Equal Music*, Seth takes a conventional romantic plot and renders it new and compelling through the attractive clarity and precision of its prose. One of the most impressive aspects of this novel is the way in which it manages to convey music through Michael's daily drama and battles as a member of a quartet. The reader is thrown into the lives, whims and chemistries of classical musicians. In the book there are several moments when intense discussions on Schumann, and Bach become too tedious for us commoners. The novel has a unique flavour- a strange pungent mingling of wild romance and domestic realism, of cosmic music and local details. The two chief characters are drawn with an unforgettable poetic intensity. *An Equal Music* links an exciting and romantic story to a sober and honest realism- a tragic story that ends with an Aristotelian catharsis for all the players in the drama.

Music and love are thus the two major themes in the novel, which is appropriate, considering that both love and music play on the emotions. It is interesting how Seth weaves the two together to create a canvas on which the passions are so consummately depicted- obsessive love; lives spent trying to recapture perfection. For the two principles- Michael and Julia, music is not merely a vocation, it is their avocation, and it has the strength to tie them to each other beyond the boundaries dictated by social norms, because their love has their music-making as its foundation. For Michael, Julia is not only the love of a life time; she is the very essence of his craft. This is why their love, though evident enough on the purely physical level, vibrates with a touch of transcendence that elevates them above anything sordid and contrives to keep them innocent somehow. Julia in spite of her conflicting loyalties is as powerless as is Michael to resist sinking into the tangled beauty of their love.

But Michael's and Julia's is not only the relationship in the novel. The love between humans and music, instruments, dead composers, even the cities in which their music is played are very interesting. That is why music usurps love's place as central theme. The characters not only love each other for the music they make, but also their passion for and their devotion to their music outlasts their travails and escapades by far. An elderly woman's love for music gives a small-town boy his profession and ultimately, the cherished Tono violin. Michael's relationship with his violin has been realized with a rare insight, not only Michael, but also all the other musicians empathize majorly with their respective instruments.

The unspoken words that surged up in his mind were these:

I love it [the violin] and it loves me. We have grown to love each other. How can a stranger hold and sound what has been in my hands so long? We have been together for twelve years. Its sound is my sound. I can't bear to part with it. (69)

Thus, the love between an instrument is also considered as one of the supreme place in the novel. In the world of music to which Michael belongs, there are such ascending and descending scales, sometimes sharply rising and then ebbing swiftly; personal loss and gain become irrelevant within the lovely, vigorous world of music. It was one such vigorous orchestral concert in which Michael and his group played Bach's *Art of Fugue*'s, that brought Julia to Michael again. It was played with such intensity, such calm, as could not be imagined earlier. While the Orchestra was going on, Michael received a note that he had tuned his lowest string down a tone in order to be able to play it. He did it though it was a source of anxiety to him. The experiences of playing together again and of making love elevate Michael to the height of ecstasy.

Music and love are thus equated finally, implying an end of all anxieties and a peace of mind. Perfect music and perfect love belong to the ideal world and man has to be content with glimpses of the ideal. Michael learns this lesson after he has undergone lots of tensions and anxieties. Sometimes he has almost collapsed out of sorrow; on some occasions, anger and jealousy get the better of other emotions; occasionally, again, he lapses into self-pity. The effect of the novel is thus, like the effect of music that is composed out of a perfect blending of high-pitched tones which are woven together into a whole. Being alert about the form, Seth delineates the nuances of the characters mostly through their expressions. All the characters contribute to the specific tone required by the novel. Piers is a natural musician, much disciplined but not rigid. A homosexual, Piers tries to run a tight ship. Billy is soft with hard centre. Once he gets some idea into his head, it is difficult to dislodge it. Always late for everything, Billy prefers to rehearse than to perform. It is Billy who gives his ticket to Michael, as he has felt that Michael must see the performance by Julia. Helen is a wonderful player who is merged in music. Through the gestures shown by Helen when she feels that Michael is undergoing emotional troubles, Seth is able to draw her sketch, brief and clear. The minor characters too, are tuned in the unique form. Seth's crafty depiction of characters, often through brilliant and witty conversations, charged with pathos, irony and humour, helps to make the structure of the novel perfect.

Seth also acknowledges the crucial importance to the psychic journey which has manifestations in physical journey of his hero. *An Equal Music* concludes with India's concert at the Wigmore Hall. Michael goes to attend it, takes away with him the impregnable impression of the sound of music. The novel is full with musical majestic discoveries and revelations. Seth carries out the story line of *An Equal Music* with great lucidity, tact and decorum, it echoes the view that "a novel is more a way of travelling than a point of arrival, more an invitation to wander than a secure niche, and more akin to the way a man enters and meanders through this world than to an assumed resting place in the afterlife" (John Halperin's *The Theory of the Novel*, 64). Moreover, in a novel in which memory has an

important role to play, the effort to recall the wonderful yet hopeless relationship of love is also located integrally in the heart of the picture of this idyllic yet confounded relationship between music and nature: the song of the nightingale which is pathetically invoked by Michael in his plea to relate to Julia.

The empathy with music and musicians is significant because music is at the very heart of *An Equal Music*. Such is Seth's involvement with music. Commendably, most of the scenes and passages connected with music are convincing. Seth gets it consistently and impressively right. It is true that *An Equal Music* is substantially technical and can therefore be potentially distracting for every non-musically aware reader. In essence, music is what the novel chiefly addresses itself to and those who have been caught in the spell of music will note with widening eyes that Seth is able to call an extraordinary amount of that experience to the page. Thus, the entire novel is enriched with the melody of music.

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