

Love and Music: A Study of Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*

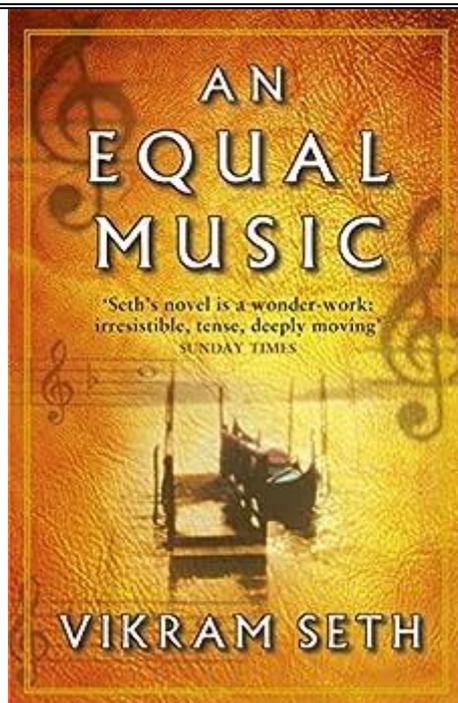
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Abstract

The third-generation's Indian writings in English have enlightened the literature with its quality and vividness. The third-generation writers have concentrated their themes around sociological, diaspora elements, feminine subjects, science and technologies, explorative writings, and much more. Love is the major theme of these writers. Vikram Seth is one of the important third generation Indian writers in English. His novel *An Equal Music* received the 1999 Crossword Book Award for Fiction.

The story revolves around Michael, a professional violinist, and his love, Julia, a pianist. As the novel is not only about the love between Michael and Julia but also about the profession of Musician, it has been well received by musical fans, and appreciated for the accuracy of Vikram Seth's descriptions of music. It throws lights on Michael Holme's love for Music. Seth handles the theme of love and music very skillfully in the novel. This paper attempts to analyse how Seth has depicted Michael Holme's love for music, his attachment and affinity towards his friends and his love for Julia in *An Equal Music*.

Keywords: *An Equal Music*, Music, love, loneliness, profession, musicology

The third generation's Indian writings in English have enlightened the literature with its quality and vividness. Truly, it represented the culture, history and all the variants necessary for the enrichment of literature worldwide. The third-generation writers have concentrated their themes around sociological, diaspora elements, feminine subjects, science and technologies, explorative writings, and much more. Love is the major theme of these writers. The new Indian writings, published in between 1980s and 1990s, has ushered in a literary renaissance in the third generation Indian Writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Anitha Desai.

Vikram Seth is one of the most celebrated Indian English Writer. He has been in the field of writing for more than three decades and is regarded as one of the most influential of the modern era. His literary corpus includes *The Golden Gate* (1986), *A Suitable Boy* (1993), and *An Equal Music* (1999). 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) and *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1992), his children's book consisting of ten stories about animals.

Seth's *An Equal Music* tells the story of Michael Holme, a professional violinist, and his lover, Julia McNicholl, a pianist. The novel is not only about the love between Michael and Julia but also about the profession of Musicians. Seth handles the theme of love very skillfully in the novel. His depiction of Michael Holme's love for music, his attachment and affinity towards his friends and his love for Julia is really authentic and praiseworthy. The novel touches the hearts of the readers making them think about love.

According to Ajana Sharma, Seth's novel was brilliant in many ways, not the least of which was its grafting onto the twin ramparts of the European tradition—its verbal and aural writings of the thirsty life the protagonists suggest. She further viewed, “Seth tells the story of a young man’s growth and maturation- the loss and partial recovery, Pip-like, of his lost love, and the loss, and more certain recovery of his artistic self” (165)

Music is the strongest component in Seth’s *An Equal Music*. It acts like superglue holding the story and characters together, and Seth offers the readers a peek into the works of Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and Hayden, offering a unique glimpse into the world of music. Music has been a recurrent theme of Seth’s work. Though many writers have spoken about music in their works, they have not talked about its relationship with literature. 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 a literary study is newly cognizant of musicology” (4).

The novel has been written in the first person. Michael Holme, the narrator describes how he cannot forget the woman he used to love. She is Julia McNicholl – his fellow music student in Vienna, both Michael and Julia were passionately devoted to each other and to their music. They found that their music complemented each other very well and formed a trio with another musician. But owing to an irreconcilable war of wills with their stern teacher, Karl Call, Michael, who was nervy and strong headed left Vienna and unintentionally, Julia. By the time he recovers from the traumas he suffered two months has elapsed, and Julia, hurt beyond redemption, is lost forever.

The novel begins ten years later, and Michael is earning his living as a second violinist in a string quartet, the Maggiore. He feels lonely and spends his days listlessly, with only music providing an emotional effect and meaning to his life. Michael’s loneliness is emphasized in pathos-including descriptions in several parts of the book. Into this chaotic world Julia steps in again, inadvertently at first when Michael spots her in a London bus, but fails to track her down, and purposely later, when she goes backstage after a Maggiore performance at Wigmore Hall, they, after initial hesitation, successfully re-establish their contact.

Unable to resist the power of their past they come together again, but this time under the shadow of Julia's marriage and her loss of hearing. Their love, which apparently never died, is rekindled. She accompanies Michael to Vienna as a pianist. Then they go to Venice.

Everything seems possible. But Julia is in dilemma because she is torn between her old love and her family since she has a husband, a seven-year-old son, and a dog to look after. Ultimately, however, the perfection that they achieve in making music tighter somehow eludes them in their love. Working on music and making love become one of the important themes of the novel. Seth emphasizes this when he describes how Michael and Julia after making love are able to work together on music, "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).

This story *An Equal Music* is a reworking of the Greek legend of Eurydice and Orpheus. In it, Eurydice dies of snakebite in their wedding day. Orpheus, the greatest musician in the world, refuses to accept her death and descends to the underworld, where he sings persuasively that Hades allows him to take back his bride, only to lose her again due to lingering doubt and weakness. *An Equal Music* reiterates this parable of love lost and almost regained by the power of music, the desperate bid to revive a dead romance against all odds, the subsequent anguish of heartbreak, and the agonies of accepting loss.

Seth is a master at capturing the mind of the reader who is totally involved in the intriguing lives of Michael and Julia. Their relationship is revived but is not heading anywhere. At last Julia decides in favour of her family and leaves Michael. At the end of the novel, Michael is left alone in a wretched state of mind. Two powerful passions, the one for music and the other for love get 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. When one reads the novel, she/he feels 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.

The ardour and consuming fire of failure in human love-affair are doused and made bearable by the divine, sublimating nature of celestial music. Happiness or grief ceases to

matter in such a soul string ambience. The protagonist gets salvation from the obsession of physical love from Julia by listening to her enthralling soul searing and liberating music. This unearthly, transcendental horizon of experience is summed up by him thus: “There is no forced gravitas in her playing. It is a beauty beyond imagining-clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase across phrase, phrase echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending Art of fugue. It is An Equal Music” (389).

The narrative voice is Seth’s biggest strength, always self-conscious and completely transparent. The themes and issues are consistently presented with a consistent level of creative objectivity. Seth’s three novels are virtuoso works of art and, for serious literature, extremely successful with the reader’s public, and have been translated into dozens of languages. Each of his novels is very distinct from the others. He used simple at the same time appreciable language, enjoys by every readers.

This novel is a sort of paean sung in adoration of music and love that lies beyond the realm of physical temporal existence. Seth conveys a message that art – be it music, poetry, or fiction – is as great, as deep, as true, as important as love, and can be as redeeming.

Works Cited

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