



A Critical Analysis of Vikram Sethi 's *an Equal Music*

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Ian Equal Music is a novel written by an Indian with nothing Indian in it, and set in England with English characters. Moreover, it deals with characters intense love and loss that causes loneliness and psychotic existence in their life. Music, love and loss are thus major facets of the young generation depicted in the novel. It is appropriate because both love and music play on the emotions. By putting music back into the people who perform it, we know the young characters through their hopes, quarrels, ambitions, love, professional contacts they have to make with agents, critics, instrument makers and players. Characters reflect their flaws, restlessness and inertia. They see in themselves volatility, a sense of resistance, roughness, impulsiveness, even at times of dark panic, almost brainsickness. Feeling of betrayal, guilt, of despair and depression is also there and their inability to swallow their sense of self. Young character's Hypersensitivity is their reaction to the failed pursuit. Indeed, everything is mechanical in t. The plot concerns the life of a string quartet, based in a fairly exclusive part of London and among people who earn their living and base their lives around playing, teaching and performing classical music. Those who do not understand music at this level may wonder if the novel's somewhat rarified backdrop would put it out of their reach. I am a musical ignoramus, but I didn't find my lack of knowledge to be a problem. Once the reader gets into the rhythm, the technical details become less important than the heady brew of politics and emotion that goes with them. For example, the exact make-up of the quartet's repertoire matters to Billy Cutler, one of the quartet's cellists. We don't need to know exactly why, just that consistency and flow are important to him in a way that they aren't to his colleagues. *An equal music* focuses on music and passion, draped in European settings. Much of the story takes place in London, though Vienna and Venice become central as well. Through the eyes of the Musicians, the reader sees these tours as holy pilgrimages. The novel resonates with Seth's precise details from the musical history of the cities to the large Campri sign on the isle of Lido, across Vienna from Venice to London. The novel examines the impact of Western classical Music on the lives and hopes and fears and final, desperate choices of its European protagonists. As viewed by Anjana Sharma

Seth's novel was stunning by many accounts, not the least of which was its grafting of the twin bulwark of the European tradition-its verbal and aural inscriptions onto the life of its thirsty something 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).

The novel's concentration on an elite circle of musicians, playing elite music for people like themselves might be deemed pretentious but for several important factors. For one there is Michael, Seth's first person narrator and the quartet's second violinist. Michael is to some extent an outsider. He is not a Londoner by birth, nor is he of a musical background. He grew up in Rochdale, the son of a small businessman and has had to work against his parents' prejudice as well as that of the more privileged people he encounters in musical circles. His confidence in himself and his abilities is always undercut by his sense that he doesn't quite belong, as well as his knowledge that nor does he fit in back in Rochdale either. This sense of displacement echoes back to the themes Seth explored in *A Suitable Boy*, albeit in a very different way.

The fragility of Michael's situation is symbolised by two very important figures. One of them is his Tonomi violin, which is owned, ironically enough, by a Rochdale connection, the wonderful Mrs Formby. The other is Julia McNicoll, who Michael abandoned when they were both music students in Vienna. Much of the narrative is concerned with Michael's perception of these two relationships and the parallels between them. It soon becomes apparent that Michael's feelings of tenderness and his fear of loss are bound up with both Julia and the Tonomi. In addition, Julia is not merely a cipher for Michael's frustrated passion, but a character in her own right, with a secret that threatens to throw her and everyone around her completely off their axis.

Another factor which keeps the narrative grounded is the presence of humour. Much of this concerns Piers, the quartet's brilliant, very intense first violinist. Piers has the habit of getting into very deep relationships with unsuitable men. His romances throw the dynamics of the quartet completely off-balance and make him impossible to live or work with. He is also, amusingly, protective of certain works, for example Schubert's Trout Quintet. Those who are not fond of the Trout (as I am not) will find Pier's fixation with it even funnier than his poor taste in men.

An Equal Music published in 1999 received considerable attention and interest from literary critics and academicians as his previous novels *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* established him as a writer par excellence. An Equal Music as the title suggests is a story of love and loss set against the background of music. It is a novel of moderate size consisting 381 pages as compared to the epic dimensions of the previous novel, *A Suitable Boy*. An Equal Music is a tale of an emotionally volatile musician. Seth explains that the idea of writing a novel about a musician and concerns germinated from a visual image of a musician. Walking across a park on a very wet day, Seth and his companion Philippe Honore see someone staring at his own image in the water of the Serpentine river in Hyde Park. As they wonder about the man, Philippe suggested that he might be a musician, and thereby the idea for the novel took root.(Vidyasagar:

1999). Seth dedicates the book *An Equal Music* to his friend Philippe Honore, as the idea occurred to him in the companionship of this man. The novel is story of a musician, Micheal Holden and his emotional attachment to Julia and his violin. Vikram Seth has succeeded in creating a living, breathing world of music and the narrative enchants and grips the reader. Seth remarks at the end of the novel, in the author's note: "Music to me is deeper than speech. When I realized that I would be writing about it, I was gripped with anxiety. Only slowly did I reconcile myself to the thought of it." Even in his earlier books, Seth refers to the theme of music. In *The Golden Gate*, there are references to both pop and western classical music. In *A Suitable Boy* also, he talks about the ragas and the ghazal performances by Saeeda Begum. Seth himself studied the khayal under Padit Amarnath during his short visits to India. The classical Indian music and the vocal music influenced him in writing about music in his novel. In *An Equal Music* he deals with the European classical music of Bach, Beethoven, Haydn and Schubert. The *Spectator* reviews the novel "Where *An Equal Music* pleases most is in the ravishing refinements of its technique, its sure placing of scenes and the unerring truth of its portrayal of a small enclosed social world...A virtuoso performance." *An Equal Music* really establishes Seth as the master of rendering his poetic craft in the form and situation of his story. His mastery of technical and literary devices enabled him to be ranked among the notable writers of the time. He captures the every details related to the world, he is dealing with. He makes enough research before plunging himself into that world. In the author's note at the end of *An Equal Music* he acknowledges the contribution of all those musicians whom he met and interviewed. His research in the respective field helps him in portraying true to life picture and events.

Narrative Technique: In *An Equal Music* Seth adopts the first person narrative mode, in contrast to the omniscient mode that he adopted in the novels. Seth explains why he chose to write in this mode. Firstly he understood that it was "notoriously difficult" to write about an acceptable art form in an expository way, and therefore the only way to get into music through words was to describe the thoughts of someone actually a musician himself. Secondly, an idea of telling an intense love story in the first person held a greater appeal to him. (Kohli:1999:13). The device of the narrative helps the author to view the world of music from the eye of a musician. It the voice of the protagonist. There is a distance and nearness to the writer. As a tale of intense and passionate love, the voice of the person who has experienced the joy and agony of love suits the purpose. As the hero himself is narrating, the issue of authenticity of feeling does not enter the mind of the reader at any point. His narration gives voice to his agony and his passionately imaginative mind paved the way to his emotions. It is only by surrounding himself in the emotional extravagance of sensations, he could play at all. He is thirty-seven year old and is a second violinist in an English quartet, named Maggiore. Michael also teaches violin to a few music students. The reader enter into the world of Michael's life from the daily routines of teaching, solitary practices and rehearsals and his getting the fleeting glimpse of Julia, whom he had loved and lost in Vienna and has been unable to find again. Michael's search for Julia, their meetings and parting are all woven in the story. At the same, the story of other musicians of the quartet, Maggiore has also been given space. The plight of the musicians whose precarious income prevents them from

buying the finest and most beautiful instrument of their choice and requirement is also portrayed in the novel. The reader is also thrown into the lives, whims and chemistries of classical musicians. The protagonist, Michael is drenched in love and longing narrates the story of his past and present in the voice of a broken hearted lover. In the story of this passionate lover music plays an important role. The lines of the narrator and even other characters have music in them. As compared to the narrative techniques of the earlier novels, *An Equal Music* is different. The voice of the author in previous works provided Seth an opportunity to display his wit, humor, satire and gentle mocking of the characters, whereas in *An Equal Music*, as the hero himself is narrating the events, this quality of wit and humor is lacking. However, the device of the first person narrative has enabled the writer to explore and expand the theme from the point of view of a musician. The Title: The title of the book is derived from John Donne's sermon describing life after death. A passage from the sermon in which Donne describes the entry of the redeemed Christian soul into heaven sets the epigraph of the novel : "And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence but one equal music, no fear nor hope, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity". John Carry suggests that Donne's phrase of leave taking yields apt meaning as it brings out the balance between the four instruments that the quartet aims at, and the sound of unheard music in Julia's head matching the sound of her playing (1993:13). Donne is speaking of an equal music as a metaphor for perfect peace, harmony and balance to be attained in the heavenly realm. Seth in the novel *An Equal Music* presents the story of Micheal's love for music, his love and loss of his lady love Julia and his attachment for Tonani, his violin. However the separation from his favorite violin does not take place, as Mrs. Fromby, a true lover of music leave this valuable instrument in the right hands

The plot line moves round Michael's passionate relationship with music and his intense love for Julia. His 12-year old attachment to his 270 year old Tanoni violin and his longing for the woman, whom he lost twice, frames the central theme of the novel. Seth has also dealt with the world of music and musician, while retelling the story of love and attachment as a literary craftsman. His love for the strange and unfamiliar is apparent in the character of the hero, Michael. He belongs to a northern working class family. His father was a butcher and Michael returns to the small town of Rochdale on three different occasions. His desire to escape his past is largely due to his childhood experiences. At the age of nine when he gets an opportunity to see a concert by "the small and ailing Barbiolli", Michael decides to be a musician. The problems that he encountered on the path of his goal to be a part of the world of music are all described with a fine blending of pathos and irony. Michael has to live with the guilt of his mother letting down. He fails to fulfill his obligations as a son to the family. He is determined to cut off links with the "distressed and constrained town". Seth's love for the western classical music enables him to take the readers in the world of music. The consummate performance of Schubert's Trout and the quartet's use of first contrapunctus of Bach's Art of Fugue for an encore all have been portrayed with extensive detailing. He has presented all musical technicalities in a lucid

descriptive manner. However, all these are not comprehensible to a reader who is not familiar with fugues, adagios and allegros. Julia whom Michael loved passionately as a student in Vienna enters the story towards the end of part two. Michael is not able to make himself free from the memories of his relationship with Julia. Their reunion takes place after ten years and at the time when Julia is married and has a son. Michael and Julia get to re-live the past and Julia is persuaded by Michael to join him for ten days in Venice. Michael comes to know about Julia's deafness from her seven year old son, Luke. Julia, the pianist is suffering from the auto-immune disease of the inner ear. She is gradually going deaf and lip reading and a concealed hearing aid will continue to help her. She still plays piano, but that playing is from her memory and imagination as well as her power to watch other players movements. She also describes the psychological trauma she passed through and her husband's tremendous support which helped her to come out of the state and got her to play again. Her agony as a musician makes it more touchy and poignant when she says; "Music is the heart of my life. For me, of all people, to be betrayed by my ears was unbearable" (150). The character of Julia is portrayed by the novelist leaves a memorable impression of a strong willed lady on the mind of the reader. When Michael deserts her, she was heartbroken, but she does not allow her grief to control her passion for both life and music. She develops her career as a pianist, devotes herself to her child and learns to love James, her husband. And when she discovers that she is gradually losing her power to hear and becoming deaf, she faces the challenge with courage and determination. When Julia meets Michael again, her deafness has began to disrupt her life. At this very sensitive juncture of her life she falls back into an affair with him, as she had been "so hungry to speak of music- and to play it with someone who understand me as I was before I- before all these changes in my life"(137). They respond quite differently to this new situation. Julia accepts the transient happiness the relationship gives her but at the same quickly sees the impossibility of it. She cannot come to terms with living in "dual world which chafe with each other"(168). Seth's attitude towards his characters is always sympathetic and in presenting Michael's attachment to an inanimate object Seth has revealed his humanitarian attitude. However, from the first mention of his attachment to this violin, reader knows that Michael will not be separated from his Tanoni. The novel derives considerable warmth and personality from its sense of place. Rochdale has been mentioned and there are scenes there that draw a powerful contrast with London's musical circles. There are also beautiful interludes in Vienna and Venice, where Michael's relationship with Julia is thrown into stark and complicated relief. However, *An Equal Music* is very much a London novel, with scenes in the West End, the area in and around Kensington and Hyde Park and at the Wigmore Hall. As a portrait of character, *An Equal Music* works beautifully. It is a depiction of character, informed by two apparently different passions, neither of which could exist without the other. A first reading suggests it; a second confirms it.

In *An Equal Music* Seth has created a living, breathing world that enchants and grips the readers and as a love-epic of Michael and Julia, it depicts the concepts of romance, love, and marriage thoroughly. Seth has presented them as music students, lost deep in love but fall apart before their love could bear any fruit. They meet again after ten years' parting and they establish

physical relationship despite of Julia's being married to James. But sexuality is acceptable neither to Seth nor to society. So, Seth has made her to recognise the value of marriage and to return back to her loving, caring, helpful, and understanding husband renouncing her passionate love for Michael who later goes to call girls to have solace. Seth has made the two lovers realise that they cannot resume their earlier intimacy because of the existing facts of life. In response to Jay Curry and Michele Denis's question, was it a conscious decision to make *An Equal Music* as a complete departure from *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth says, "I don't try to do something new each time, it's just that I don't flee from it if it happens to be new. In this particular case the idea seized me. It was the opposite of something I would have decided for myself. I didn't want to write about music..." (January Magazine, June 1999). Seth is also good in medical science as he has the knowledge and understanding of the problems of deafness and neurosis or nervous breakdown. "Throughout the novel Seth demonstrates that Julia's deafness does not remove her from wider human nature and prevent her feeling the intensities of human emotions against the stereotypes which imply that disability somehow renders a person impervious" (Rees: Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, November 1999)

References:

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