

**Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*- a Parable  
Of Love And Anguish**

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Mrs. R. Priya\*

**Abstract**

The name 'Vikram Seth' conjures up the image of an erudite cosmopolite, one who has baffled critics and reader alike as a writer who has epic, yet unpredictable. Seth tries to colour his works with his own experiences. His works, mainly *An Equal Music* (1999) deals with the concept of emotional complexities in love culled from his experience of chamber-music in England. *An Equal Music* is a novel in which Seth explores various themes like love, friendship, loneliness, loss, matrimonial concepts, along with expatriation realisms. It has a melancholic strain running through it that mirrors a corresponding sadness in Seth's mind. Seth's subject matter is almost invariably love, in all its myriad manifestations. He feels that "the characters should ring true to the peoples' lives they portray". Seth's characters are thus chiefly involved in getting on with their lives, and as an artist Seth's primary concern is to portray them indulging in activities that are in a general sense, common to all humanity. Seth also places great emphasis on the redeeming aspects of private life, portraying in his work that happiness and tolerance start from the home. Seth's writings include all the foibles of human behavior, and evident especially in his acute distress at the destruction of humanity by humans. He tends towards realism. *An Equal Music* reiterates the 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. *An Equal Music* thus reiterates Seth's earlier philosophy of the value of such mundane institutions as home and family packed with the theme of love and marriage.

**Introduction**

In Indo-Anglian Literature, Fiction in English has registered a remarkable growth in the recent decades of the post-independent era. 'Indo-Anglian Fiction' is now known as 'Indian Fiction in English' which is the elucidation and illustration of the most intimate awareness of the environment in which it is written. The Indian English novelists

\* Assistant Professor of English, V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, Virudhunagar.

anguish in love like loneliness, love lost, loss, disguise, disappointments and deep heart breaking in the background of music. He has many unique characteristics regarding his literary writings. Seth tries to colour his works with his own experience. Seth's subject matter is almost invariably love, in all its myriad manifestations in *An Equal Music*. The analysis of this novel identifies the nature of the 'movement' or 'growth' of the protagonist, Michael Holme. Michael's relationship with Julia is a significant thing in the novel. Though the focus is on Michael, one can also identify this growth in the heroine Julia McNicholl.

The novel *An Equal Music* has only limited characters and the relationship among them reflects the modern man in the western world. Seth feels that **"the characters should ring true to the peoples' lives they portray"**. Seth's characters are thus chiefly involved in getting on with their lives, and as an artist Seth's primary concern is to portray them indulging in activities that are in a general sense, common to all humanity. Seth also places great emphasis on the redeeming aspects of private life, portraying in his work that happiness and tolerance start from the home. The unifying theme that runs through his work is the plea for human camaraderie's, spanning political national and cultural barriers. Seth's writings include all the foibles of human behavior, and evident especially in his acute distress at the destruction of humanity by humans. He tends towards realism. Seth replaces the part-ironic, part-humorous treatment; he usually accords to love with intensity, almost a compulsion, to explore its more serious side. There is no doubt that Seth has a balanced head on his shoulders when it comes to love. He seems to be telling the reader to take love at its face value, not to imbue it with more importance that it deserves.

One of the notable novels of Seth is *An Equal Music* and at the heart of this novel, it is purely a love story set in the backdrop of Vienna and Venice. Seth as a modern novelist depicts the human love in its mute dimensional forms here. It has brought to the fore a rare emotional sensitivity of undying love. Seth beautifully depicts the emotional complexities in love between a man and his lady love, especially their unrequited love in *An Equal Music*. The characters in this novel torn between their family and love and seeks for redemption. Seth focuses on universal themes like love, sex, marriage, jealousy, betrayed which are relevant in all times and in all place. He shows a variety in his theme of love, a loving relationship between parent and child, man and woman, or man and man. The relationships among the

characters grow, change, break off and reestablish themselves in varying patterns.

Michael's father was a butcher and his mother too, did not have any inclination for music. Michael has a profound interest on music and Mrs. Formby only encouraged him in many ways. The presence of Mrs. Formby supplied the imaginary state of happiness for Michael. Michael faces the oedipal crisis and he regards her as mother-substitute, when his father objects to his decision of learning music after completing school. His father wanted him to study in a university and pursue a career in traditional kind of subjects. Even his mother had felt that Rochdale offered nothing and the only way to escape from this constrained town was to go to a university. Michael's parents had sacrificed a lot to provide him education. But he wanted to play music at Manchester College. He felt that Michael won't be able to support a family. But, Michael faces this situation bravely. He decides to borrow Mrs. Formby's violin and do some jobs to support him. This decision creates a rift between him and his father. His mother too dies. With great difficulty, Michael does manage to earn so that he can live in Manchester and finally gets to convince his father that he was right to a great extent in deciding to become a musician. We find Michael standing firm and elevated.

Michael's life in Vienna has a different face. Michael gets an opportunity to learn music from the illustrious German teacher, Carl Kall. Here, he meets the beautiful, Julia McNicholl, who is studying piano. She turns Michael's life into a different path. Everything is in tune. He enjoys the music he learns from his professor. He also falls in love with Julia who though five years younger than him becomes his best teacher. She develops in him the sensitivity to enjoy art and also to feel more deeply for music. Her gentleness and depth touch brings Michael to the core of his being. But this dream world does not last long. Once again his crisis with authority starts. In his early childhood, Michael had to struggle a lot for nearly seven years but he was able to convince his father that his son had made a mark. But, he had paid a big prize – he lost his mother though he was not responsible for her death. In his later stage, he does find a place in the Maggiore Quartet as second violinist and does attain some fame. When Carl writes to him after ten years, he, too, admits that Michael played well and was sorry for being rough with him. However, the greatest loss once again is of Julia. She never returns to him and he is never able to forget her even for few days in these ten years.

Seth depicts the theme of love in modern times. The relationship gets ruined due to misunderstanding, extreme demands of a lover, obsession, intolerance, rules, fanaticism, political ideas and causes. Seth wants modern man who is so mechanical in his life, to turn his attention towards his love and life with its pure emotions and feelings towards the human relationships. By the keenness of his vision, Seth sees the world as it exists, and it grieves him, but he cannot abandon the world, nor reject it, because he sees men and women essentially as they are: "foolish, but kind, stupid, but human and above all, capable of love". This is the central theme of this novel, *An Equal Music*. Seth's writing is close to the bone: the private and public life of the characters. The writings of Seth focus sharply on individual character and their thoughts and feelings here.

The definition of love in modern times, especially in Seth's writings is different. Seth presents the romantic love as a possible weapon in the battle against the loneliness of life. His manner of presenting the human drama is such that the readers can never quite sympathise with anyone completely. The rejection or fear of emotional commitment shown in the text obviously, not an inevitable consequence of modern life in the modern world. *An Equal Music* belongs characteristically in Seth's repertoire by virtue of it being stunningly different from all his previous work. The backdrop of the novel is the enchanted, romantic world of Vienna and Venice. *An Equal Music* takes a determined look at the darker passions-unhappiness, obsession and addresses difficult issues about love and life in the process. It is a love story which is deeper and more serious, portraying the kind of love that can survive even decade-long separations. On another level, this is a story that explores the strangely obsessive and neurotic life that a professional musician leads.

The book has been written in the first person. Michael Holmes, the narrator describes himself as 'irreparable imprinted with the die of someone else's being'. This someone is Julia Mc Nicholls – his fellow music student in Vienna ten years ago and the one true love of his life. Back then in Vienna, both Michael and Julia were passionately devoted to each other and to their music. 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. Ten years later, where the novel begins Michael is earning his living as a second violinist in a string quartet, the Maggiore. The book's three brief opening paragraphs set the tone of the novel, bringing home to the reader the

loneliness that is Michael's lot in life, a loneliness that is only briefly assuaged by long walks and ruminations.

Seth's *An Equal Music* is the tale of an emotionally volatile musician, Michael Holme and his gradual recovery of the self in one aspect. The narrative deals with Michael's passionate relationship with his music. When the tone of nostalgic sentimentality does not let up, Michael's narrative of personal complexities soon grows tedious. His long winding self-centered professions of loss and heartbreak begin to tire.

Michael's loneliness is emphasized in pathos—including the descriptions in several parts of the book. This isolation is punctuated by accounts of his tormented past, a past which constantly haunts him, making him yearn for answers, for absolution. Into this chaotic world, Julia steps in again inadvertently at first and purposely later. Unable to resist the power of their past they come together again, but this time under the shadow of Julia's marriage and her hearing loss. Ultimately, however the perfection that they achieve in making music together somehow eludes them in their love.

*An Equal Music* is then a reworking of the Greek legend of Euripides and Orpheus. It 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. Love is not the sole theme in the novel and music usurps love's place as the driving force that pulls the reader towards the novel. There is some kind of music on every page; it even insinuates itself into the love story, providing the ethereal framework over which the fragile gossamer threads of the love story are woven.

The music and the love complement each other remarkably well. The delicate unfurling of the relationship between Michael and Julia is bathed in the glow of musical reference to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Bach – virtually all the great masters – because their love has their music making as its foundation, their music serving as a metaphor and possibly as a substitute for their love. For the two principals – Michael and Julia's 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 socially acceptable norms. For Michael, Julia is not only the love of a lifetime – She is the very essence of his craft. The piece he associates with her has never been able to perform after Vienna. Julia in spite of her conflicting loyalties is as powerless as is Michael to resist sinking into the tangled beauty of their love.

The ghost of Vienna is persistent and she too is haunted by the past, although she does make an attempt to get on with her life.

The simplicity with which Seth considers and dismisses the words—adultery and sin—goes a long way in ascertaining the complexity of the relationship between Michael and Julia, where emotions run too deep to be reduced to the tawdriness. In Venice they come full circle, and it is as if the past ten years have never been. Yet, the outside world constantly impinges into their shared circle of bliss, in the form of James, Julia's husband and Luke, her son. When Julia refers to Luke as "my poor baby", the hopelessness of their relationship suddenly dawns on Michael. Trapped between divided loyalties, Julia breaks out in anguish. The bell finally toll for their doomed romance. She realizes that she can never stop loving Michael but accepts that each must tread a different path.

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. Like life itself, the novel resounds with the complex and often painful episode of life's events. But Michael's and Julia's is not the only relationship in the novel. The love story between human and music, instruments and dead composers in which their music is played, are equally gripping and convincing.

With Julia, music is as much of a religion, but other things matter to her as well: her family and her child. When Michael leaves Vienna, she is truly heartbroken but pulls herself together to pick up the pieces of her life. Seth leads us to believe that were it not for her deafness, she would indeed have coped quite well. But with her impeding loss of hearing and owing to the fact that her affair with Michael is an unfinished business, she is drawn to him in an almost hypnotic trance.

Due to the afore mentioned quality, *An Equal Music* is as much a novel about love and music as about certain inner darkness. It has a melancholic stratum that manifests itself in the isolation of the characters, in Michael's obsessions, Julia's deafness, in a lack of common perspectives. Seth is sagaciously wary of sustaining the novel at that intense pitch for all of its 381 pages, yet this novel is not for the faint-hearted, or of those who are afraid to acknowledge their passions.

At the end of the novel, Michael is alone. 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 perceptive has enabled him to come to terms with his past, met 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. Michael had decided to do away with memories of Julia and finally emerged victorious. Both Michael and Julia reach the innermost depth of music in their life. They had acquired the valuable relationship not with the human beings but with the Music. Hereafter, Music will be best relation for both Michael and Julia. In the company of music, Michael forgets his anguish, heart-brokenness, loneliness and Julia forgets his deafness and desperateness. Music is everything for them in their life.

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