

UNDERSTANDING THE UNHEARD ACOUSTICS: A SYMBOLIC CASE STUDY OF VIKRAM SETH'S AN EQUAL MUSIC

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Abstract

Vikram Seth is an arty pretension of Indian Writing in English who has marked himself in different genres like novels, poetry, travel narratives, children's literature and biographies. Some of his notable works are *A Suitable Boy*, *The Golden Gate*, *An Equal Music*, which describes his artistic manifestos. *An Equal music* (1999) deals with love and romance in a very acoustic manner. Seth depicts a beautiful story of two musicians who falls in love apart from the place and success. The couple fights the ordeals that are haunted by their past and irrespective of all they confront their love to each other. And the brilliance use of the poetic and evocative writing makes it more mesmerizing. While Seth adores the complexities of love in the meanwhile, he also discusses the adherence towards self through symbolic overtones. This paper will discuss the unheard notes of acoustic interpretations that Seth tries to explore in-between experiencing love for self and other. So, the chief idea that the paper deals with is to find the true self in the crowded canvas of multi- imposing personalities and to establish the self.

Keywords: love, self, multi-imposing personalities, music, symbolic

1. INTRODUCTION

An Equal Music (1999) is a novel by Vikram Seth depicting the lives of musicians. It discusses the story of a man named Michael, a violinist who passionately loves Julia. The story sets in Vienna where Michael who was then there a student falls in love with Julia but fails to commit and part his way away for his supercilious ambition. But Michael fails to adjust and sag along the memories of his relationship with Julia. They reconnected after ten years, although the reunion was delayed due to Julia's marriage and the fact that she had a kid. After their coincidental visits, Michael and Julia relived their past, and Julia was convinced by Michael to join him on a 10-day trip to Venice. Meanwhile the characteristic love resurfaces between them they were meant to be drifted apart with respect to time. The temperament of the context is quite complex that Vikram Seth wanted to explain through the acoustics. The speech is important to express that's-what Seth tries to justify in *An Equal Music*. The constant need of being listened and understood is quite important for an individual. The constant need of being in contact to a near one is a trait in the character of Michael. So, when he left Venice and Julia 10 years ago for his aspirations, he cannot come to the terms of being alone. So, he had a physical inclination towards his first student and he shares himself with her in a fear of being left out. Through his characters, Seth's beliefs and works convey a lot of challenges and confrontations. He also admits that he enjoys his diverse, imaginary places and themes succumbing to reality, acing to his theories, "I know from an editor's point of view or a publisher's point of view it's easier to slot me into a particular niche. But I know that I

would be bored unless I wrote a book that in some sense was a challenge. And this might mean I vary the form by writing a poem or a play or a novel. Or set the stories in different countries or write in the first person as opposed to the third or in the present tense as opposed to the past or a very long novel as opposed to a short one". (Mohanty. 248)

Vikram Seth is a potent figure of modern Indian Writing in English with his ideologies of love, realization and sense of belonging. His main thematic works surrounded by music, travel, family, marriage and work environment. His three major novels *A Suitable Boy*, *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music* picture the social context with respect to individual attributes. His aesthetics also showcases his personal thoughts and equations about Diaspora and love. According to Seth love is a chivalry and courtship more than a romantic aftermath. His idea of love is more of an individual's self-realization and self-retrospection than an amalgamation of two different individuals. His idea is deliberately showcased in his works to make the characters realize their true potent self through love. In Seth's novels all the characters are rebellious and are in a constant search voicing themselves. His thought on marriage is that it should not a person from aspiring like that of Julia's husband. Because when Julia meets Michael for the second time Julia tells him that she is married but when he asked her about her wedding ring, she answer that, "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 music." (AEM 107) But marriage is not about bondage which leads to illicit affairs, marriage should indulge both the person's loyalty to the relationship than of a single person. It is essential to understand the loyalties of a person as it leads to many unseen scenarios as that of Julia's.

Namita Gokhale on viewing Vikram Seth's works commented that, "a writer about human beings, not as a peddler of Indian exotica . . . deeply rooted in his specific Indian identity, Vikram Seth is yet a citizen of the world in the best sense . . . His genius should be evaluated in his control over his material, and in creating a credible world-in-itself which he can co-habit and explore" (Prasad. 183).

The voice is very much important to Seth as it expresses the self. Similarly on the other hand listening is as important to him because it helps to understand a person's thoughts. But the voice and the power of hearing is both lost in *An Equal Music*. Michael loses his calmness and behaves like an animal as he does not frame his words and cannot convey himself even through his music as he fails to keep his hand perfect on *Art of Fugue*. On the contrary Julia suffers from an auto immune disease in her inner ear which will result in her complete deafness so she learns to conceal her deafness by lip-reading and hearing aid. When Michael comes to know about Julia's condition, he tried to sympathize her and tried to rebuild their long-lost love. But by then things have changed and Julia was married and have had a seven-year-old son, Luke.

Seth's works not only illustrate the themes of love and marriage, but also the importance of recognizing a positive component of culture in the face of racial connotations. Seth's protagonists meet their love in all three stories, but they are forced to let it go owing to social obligations. However, while on their quest for love, the characters come across their lost selves, which leads them to live a life of contentment, despite their disastrous attempts at love. His writings are compressed with emotions that flow high on the mount of excitement because the characters aren't sure what they want to do, and the twists and turns entice the reader to read more for a better understanding.

Here in this novel Seth has depicted that the voice Michael and Julia both encompasses music. So even Julia was on the verge of her deafness she plays piano by her memory and imagination as well as by observing other musician along her and by their instrumental movements to her music was "Music is the heart of my life. For me, of all people, to be betrayed by my ears was unbearable". (150)

She is presented as a strong character by Seth, as she was heartbroken and deserted by Michael; she does not let her grief ruin her whereas she became a fine pianist and devoted herself to her family and music. She comes up with the support of her husband James and child Luke until she again met Michael. Her deafness again disrupts her like when she falls back into an affair with Michael "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) Julia is portrayed by Seth as a psychologically scarred woman, but she overcomes the trauma with the help of her family and her husband, who helped her overcome her anxiety of coming out and

reintroduced her to the piano. Her suffering as a musician makes her trauma more poignant and touching to the audience than Michael's. Michael's character is also a traumatic one but his nervous breakdowns made him a faulty and misguided soul. So, both the characters Julia and Michael responded to the situations very differently and adjusted accordingly. Julia accepts her transient happiness because she came to know about the durability of her relationship with Michael and cannot come to the terms of living with him as she sees the impossibility of it, "dual world which chafe with each other" (168). The loss of identity is very evident in the novel and Seth has characterized by using the power of music. But the fall of music and voice is denoted as the loss of a character's identity. The traumas that both Julia and Michael suffer are symbolized as the crisis of their lost identity. The voice is very prominent in the novel because many a times Michael behaves like an animal and his behavior also changes accordingly. According to Edward Said the state of exile is considered as an envious one where an individual loses its true self and the decisions taken are more erratic "Exile is a jealous state." (Said, 141) The reason behind his animalistic behavior is because he lacks words and he cannot have the power of speech so this kind of erratic behavior of his showcases the powerlessness of an individual when it loses its speech. When Michele's wish was not accepted by Julia, he attacks Julia both physically and verbally showing his disapproval towards her obedience which is a clear representation of his animalistic behavior "My tongue is as brutal as my teeth. She stares at me and cries out- a horrible sound of rage and hurt and disbelief and violation – then covers her face with her hands and her hair. I try to touch her. She slaps my hand away." (376)

The element of absence of voice or not able to express one own-self is a chief aspect of diasporic study which helps the character to connect to its root so that it can achieve the subsistence of its true identity.

"Does the agent know?" I ask.

"Yes. But he thinks it could be disastrous if it got to be common knowledge in the musical world. If I can manage to play well enough, what does it matter?"

"That's true," I say. "But how long can something like this be kept hidden?" (AEM, 236-237)

Amidst all the facts both Michael and Julia try to hide their disabilities from the band which symbolically Michael considered as a family. He even hides it from his band which was an integral part of his life because he knew if Pier gets to know about the fact that Julia was disable, he would have never allowed her to play in the band:

"Could you fax me?" asks Julia. "The phone ruins my concentration when I'm practicing- which is much of the time these days."

"Don't you have an answering machine?" asks Piers.

"A fax would be better," says Julia with a calm nod, and gives him her number. (AME, 251)

Hiding truth is a way to cope in the society because the social norms are so harsh that it does not allow people to stand upright with their disabilities. The society still treats the distorted as the 'other'. Being the 'other' in a society

based on custom and tradition is unacceptable. So, to mingle in the society as one, one tries to hide its true self from its own self and the people. To which Jessica Rees in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* also commented that, "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 92)

So, the acceptance of the otherness is the main aim of Seth in this novel. Both the characters Julia and Michael seek for serenity and a world of their own but fail to compile due to the silent acoustic. The way they present their music is a call out to their inner self and inner voice. The music is a way of their escape from their society. So, when Michael suffers from nervous breakdowns on stage symbolizes as the fall of his vocalizing.

Michael's and Julia's relationship is not only the thematic subject that Seth projects in the novel the chief focus of his to make people understand the unheard acoustics stories of love between an individual with the instruments it plays, the music it adheres and the forgotten existence of dead composers. It also depicts the love for the place and the memories that it carries from composing and compiling a musical piece, it is the process that Seth focuses on. So, the passion and devotion are very essential because it's the only way to escape from the exile. Thus, Seth's *An Equal Music* is considered as an intimate and cherished tale of the unheard acoustics. To which N. SharadaIyer also commented that Seth's novel "is a gripping and profound meditation on love, music and the irrevocability of time." (Iyer 132)

2. CONCLUSION

In the author's note that appears at the end of the novel, Seth describes the idea of music from his point of view as "Music to me is dearer even 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." Thus, it describes the importance of music in Seth's existence. The character of Michael is an indirect representation of his own self and his urge for Toni and his string quartet is a representation of the need of voicing. Also, according to the article in the journal *Andalusian, Gypsy, and Class Identity in the Contemporary Flamenco Complex*, Peter Manuel reviewed that music is "not merely a passive reflection of broader socio-cultural phenomena that shape" but it can also create an "important role (...) in expressing and, to a considerable extent, helping to shape modern Andalusian identity" (p. 48)

The importance of being heard and the vocalizing is very essential in this new world of the modernism. The unheard and unnoticed is always oppressed and does suffer from disabilities as the characters in Seth's novel go through. The trauma of being left out is noxious and deadly causing a lot of distress. Thus, it is the inharmonious uproar which creates chaos but the marks the existence of an individual which it seeks for.

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