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## **Human Relationship a Musical Engagement in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music***

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### **Abstract**

Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* embarks on a musical discourse. The focus on the human relationship is structured artistically around the influences of European classical music. The narrative grows in the form of a classic bildungsroman as Michael the main protagonist overcomes life's complications and grows psychologically and morally in the world of music. This paper focuses on striking balance in a relationship created within the coordinated group activities of Quartet Maggiore where music serves as social cement in bringing both Michael and Julia together. The relationship thrives within the fine strands of European Classical music and the background of the English class system. Here the novel takes a turn towards the Marxist element of class interests and struggles manifested in music. Michael struggles to rise in the realm of Chamber music by combating the norms of the high society against the odds of his humble and inferior background. The Class forces impact his relationship with his teacher Carl Kall and consequently he is separated from Julia. Gloomy and disconnected he finds a respite within Quartet. Rediscovery of Julia rekindles his love and passion but Julia being married the moral echoes once again led them to part their ways. In an increasingly internalised narrative

music becomes the agent of redemption for both Michael and Julia. The novel displays transition and coping with change through the element of music where both Michael and Julia reconcile and are redeemed in their mutual relationship.

**Key words:** Human relationship, European Classical music, Class system, Marxism,

**Reconciliation**

If music be the food of love, play on.

-William Shakespeare

Musical themes in literature have evolved through aesthetic concerns and beliefs. Both music and literature are fundamentally temporal in nature. Music therefore artistically affects the story and the plot in terms of time and space. Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* is structured around the similar line of thought. The focus is on the human relationship structured under the influence of melody and music. The narrative grows in the form of a classic bildungsroman affecting the growth of characters through experiences and engagements. Music seeps into the separation and coming together of both Michael and Julia transforming their lives quite like the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. An anxious hero Orpheus even after resuming his love through music loses Eurydice in the end.

Seth's earlier work *A Suitable Boy* was embedded in the fine strands of Indian Classical music. His *An Equal Music* on the same note turned towards the fineness of European Classical music and goes on to position him in the venue of Diaspora. The narrative addresses the music and the

musicians in the intricacies of Quartet functioning. The theme of equality and the striking of balance in a relationship become evident in the title which Seth has apparently taken from one of the sermon's of John Donne. He uses the structuralism approach to present a passionate story of love that kindles within the intricate and living world of music and art. He uncovers the human-world through an intricate observation and analysis of Quartet in the novel.

In an increasingly internalised narrative, the novel showcases the retrospective engagements of Michael Holme, the main protagonist and a second Violinist in the quartet, with the gracefully beautiful Julia, the main pianist in the quartet. The dyad of Michael and Julia structures music as a “ubiquitous companion to people’s everyday lives” (Schafer, Sedlmeier, 1). The novel is written in first person narrative from the point of view of Michael which points at his overwhelming loneliness and melancholia. It is born of his nostalgic emotions for music and nagging thoughts of Julia.

It has been argued long enough about music that “sound was one of the most effective ways to coordinate cohesive group activities, reinforce social bonds.....being able to communicate shades of emotional meaning by the melodic character (prosody) of the emitted sounds” (Panksepp and Bernatzky, 139). Music in *The Equal Music* is symbolic of harmony. It functions as social cement in bringing both Michael and Julia together in the ‘Quartet’ and become the basis of both professional and personal relationship. The powerful force of music consumed Michael completely that he became a musician much against the wishes of his parents. The novel portrays transition both in Michael’s occupation and in his relationship with Julia. Music helps him to cope up with the life’s transitions and provide a means of escape.



It is a journey full of learning, growth and maturation where he tries to cope with loss and become content with partial recovery. Merriam in his book *The Anthropology of Music* proposes about ten social functions of music of which music as a means of emotional expression and communication fall in line with the character of Michael. A musician at core his melodic emotions triumph over physical passions when he tries to seek the patronage of the maestro and teacher Carl Kall. But his aspirations fall apart on Kall's comment and forecast about Michael's failure. Assuming it to be Kall's class-driven psyche, Michael is moved by the seriousness of his gesture and in turn his self-willed ways affects his otherwise an endearingly blessed relationship with Julia. He was unstoppable and could not be mollified by Julia who tries all her effort to save their relationship. Michael in all these moments portrays the looseness of emotions through unpredictable mood swings. Music functions socially throughout the narrative in bringing together of Michael and Julia spatially and falling apart of their ties emotionally.

Within the background of the English class system, the plot projects the struggles of Michael to rise in the realm of European classical music by combating the norms of high class against his own inferior and humble background. The plot projects the Marxist element of Class interests and struggles with Michael from a bourgeois class struggles to climb up the class ladder of music. Richard Gray points at the preference for easy listening to be symbolic of lower classes and the otherwise of the upper class. The novel clearly delineates the class divide on the basis of music. Michael after his break up with Julia moves to London but finds it hard to deal with the imperatives of wealth and opulence of the city. The humble and rustic pattern of his background impedes him to find an entry into the high culture of European classical music. It is as if "class filters" into the various genres of music (Veenstra 134-159). Gray suggests, it is one's choice of



music that divulge one's position in social hierarchy for instance, the world of Chamber music in *The Equal Music* and "genres like Opera and Classical music have long been the preserve of the elite.....most enjoyed by the upper class"(Gray). Veenstra in his theory goes on to say that the higher class "adopt these qualities by virtue of their locations in relationally defined social spaces of capitals within which social classes are potentially made manifest" (139-159). He also says that the higher up "try to outflank the middle class" who "seek to adopt their aspects by appropriating their low brow culture and so forth" (134-159). Michael's longing wish to become a musician gets granted by his fairy god mother, Mrs Formby, a rich heiress of the upper strata who in the tradition of a patroness gifts him, her own priceless violin, Tononi Circa and help him accomplish his dream of a quartet musician.

It is the hard and strenuous life of London that makes him feel alone and desperate. The narrative spread spatially across years presents a decade long parting of Michael from Julia. During his separation Michael is mostly disconnected socially, in deep melancholy and anguished existentially. Even in the distressed times he remains fervently connected to music and the members of the quartet and his students. It is, as if he lives and survives through music. In the midst of a confounded mindset he becomes involved in a sensual relationship with his own student Virginie, sixteen years his junior. The association enables him expressive emotionally and communicative socially and proactive in terms of music as suggested and proposed in Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* about the social functions of music. Music can serve the purpose for emotional expression and make a person communicative socially. But in Michael's connection with Virginie, he is apparently guided by passion and carnal desires to feel the human connectedness. Nevertheless it is the melodic function that creates the social tie. These social



functions are quite naturally exhibited in the functioning of the musical quartet ‘Maggiore’ at multiple levels in the novel. Michael feels of himself and Maggiore:

“A strange, composite being we are, not ourselves anymore but the Maggiore, composed of so many disjunct parts..... all to produce these complex vibrations that jog the inner ear and through them the gray mass that says: joy, love, sorrow, beauty” (Seth, 86).

The plot symbolises the socio-economic equation in which the art of music is composed, performed and received. The plot derives its significance through the functioning of the quartet in its entirety. Michael’s ardent love for Julia and his obsession for Tononi, the violin and his desperate endeavours to strike a balance and harmony between the two that mark the flow of events in the story.

There is a subtle movement of the plot from disturbance to calmness, from imbalance to harmony amidst cultural hybridism. A tenacious centre-periphery relationship can be observed in Michael-Carl Kall association that brings the novel in the light of a post-colonial text. Music in the manifestation of colonizer-colonized places Carl at the centre of this relationship and Michael, under a humble social grouping therefore comes to lie at the periphery. Kall’s obstinately presiding ways to influence people makes Michael to resist him creating an immense pressure and conflict in their understandings. Kall’s assertive objection to Michael’s performance of Chamber music and being callously insensitive towards the problem in his third finger during the play compelled Michael to rebel against him and leave Vienna and Julia. The plot in this context appears postcolonial under European imperialism with music as an enforcing influence.



The novel makes a turning point when Michael rediscovers Julia through the mechanism of fate after a decade long separation. The theme of transition seeps in the form of Julia transformed into a married, domestic woman from a gracefully artistic pianist. As the narrative moves towards the rekindling of affections between Michael and Julia it also brings about the revival of her musical aspirations. According to Panskepp and Bernatzky's theory about social bonding through group activities fostered by sound and music, the social bonds of Michael and Julia are reinforced through their musical interactions. Their holistic love echoes once again to produce and play music. This allows the theme of musical companionship to reiterate in the structure particularly when Julia joins the quartet as a pianist and prepares to perform at a concert in Vienna, the place where Michael and Julia first met and embarked on their melodic trails in the abundance of togetherness.

However, Seth being a moralist at core dissuades the progress of the relationship on a passionate note. The passions are denounced for the sake of morality with Julia's trust in the institution of family and faith in marital vows she decides to choose marriage over love. Once again Michael is rendered lonely and his agony evinced in an increasingly internalised narrative. But the musical pattern of the novel becomes an agent of redemption for him. It helps soothe his anxieties and reconcile with the adversaries as the narrative moves towards harmony. Music has been observed to be "effective in reducing anxiety and depression" and serves as a therapy for people with generalised anxiety disorder (Gutierrez, 24). Michael is able get over his anxieties this time as he realises that his true chords lie with music. Maggiore quartet becomes a messiah and provides a lasting companionship when Julia exits from his life the second time.



It seems that Seth has contrived a practically focused and a realistically mundane approach above love in the novel. Therefore, it so appears that the first family of Michael is music and Maggiore and Julia comes next to it. But even with Julia the evenness of this relationship rests on the line of music. Any effort on her part to look beyond music causes a great pain and distress by the sinful and adulterous nature involved in it and makes their coming together again as abhorrently meaningless. Seth pins upon the scheme of music to create a sense of morality and to make art a source of purity and transcendence. He has used this technique in the novel to sane his characters against all odds. The infirmed Julia with her growing deafness and affliction and despite her deep fondness for Michael decides to give up on him for the sake of moral redemption and dedicates her life to music.

Seth's preference for morality enables his characters to negate passion and embrace virtue. The novel portrays the balance and equality of a human relationship at the helm of music. The note of reconciliation is firmly established in Michael's feelings of intense calm and happiness. His feelings in one of his introspective moods justify that "Within a minute I have forgotten all resentment, all rights and pleasures due to me. They are irrelevant within this lovely vigorous music" (Seth, 79). Both Michael and Julia are not only able to find music as a means of escape but also it helps them cope consciously with life's transition. Seth triumphs as they are equalled through music.



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