



Rhythmic Parallelism And The Timbre of Being: Unveiling The Vocal Grain in Vikram Seth's '*An Equal Music*'

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Abstract

This paper examines the novel's exploration of art as it is one of the means of expression and also a place for love, loss, artistic commitment, personal longing, and the psychological burden of unresolved relationships. '*An Equal Music*' is a novel about the diaspora that explores the themes of music, memory and human feelings through the narrative of Michael Holme, a skilled violinist who is tormented by the memory of his lost love. There is an unexpected reunion between Michael and Julia, a skilled pianist who left him years ago. Michael was emotionally shattered as he truly treasured her. The novel portrays music not merely as an art form but as an emotional language of the soul. The novel depicts music as an emotional language of spirit as well as a form of art. Seth draws comparisons between Julia and the prodigious composer Ludwig van Beethoven in order to emphasize and discuss the tragedy of artistic suffering and transcendence. The novel is interpreted through Roland Barthes's idea of the "Grain of the Voice," as it reveals how true music endures beyond sound while existing in memory, body, and emotional vibration.

Keywords: Musical Identity, Emotional Isolation, Memory, The Grain of the Voice,
Emotional Isolation, Artistic Suffering

Vikram Seth is a well-known Indian novelist, poet, and essayist recognized for his impressive versatility and skill in storytelling. His works are from various genres that are a mixture of lyrical sensitivity and careful craftsmanship. Seth gained international fame with *A Suitable Boy*, a significant realist novel praised for its depth and cultural insight. Another notable work is *An Equal Music*, where his deep understanding of Western classical music influences a powerful emotional story. Seth's writing shows elegance, emotional depth, and structural ambition. In poetry, fiction, and travel writing, he continues to demonstrate a unique ability to explore human relationships clearly and compassionately.

'An Equal Music' by Vikram Seth delves into the inner life of Michael Holme, a violinist whose life is influenced by music, memories, and a lingering sense of longing.

The story is set in London's urban rhythm which becomes a subtle counterpart to Michael's inner turbulence. It is inherently a love story that tackles challenging questions about love and life while taking a determined look at the darker passions like obsession and misery. The narrator, Michael Holme, characterizes himself as "*irreparably imprinted with the die of someone else's being.*"

Julia McNicholl, his fellow music student in Vienna ten years ago and the one true love of his life. Owing to an irreconcilable war of wills with his stern teacher, Karl Call, Michael leaves Vienna, and unintentionally, Julia. By the time he recovers, two months have elapsed, and Julia, hurt beyond redemption, is lost to him forever. Now the second violinist in a string quartet, Michael spends his days listlessly, with only music providing an emotional anchor and in effect, any meaning to his life. His loneliness is emphasized in several pathos-inducing descriptions and is punctuated by accounts of his tormented past, haunting him, making him yearn for answers, for absolution.

Into this chaotic world, Julia steps in again, inadvertently at first, and purposely later, when she goes backstage after a performance. They reunite because they are unable to resist a reminder of their past, but this time under the shadow of Julia's marriage and her hearing loss. However, for a brief wonderful moment when they flee to Venice, everything seems conceivable. Ultimately, however, the perfection that they achieve in making music together somehow eludes them in their love.

Seth intricately weaves musical structure into the narrative form, using motifs of repetition, harmony, and silence to reflect the characters' inner conflicts. Julia's gradual hearing loss adds a poignant dimension to the story, raising questions about identity, disability, and the limits of artistic expression. Julia's music embodies — the grain as her music carries her inner silence, inner life, longing and her fear. Julia's music is felt rather than played. Rowland Barthes idea of grain communicates what language cannot, is seen as Michael constantly seeks intimacy, vulnerability, and the emotional truth in her music.

Considering that both love and music play on emotions, it makes sense that the two main themes of the novel are music and love. It's intriguing how Seth combines the two to produce a painting that so perfectly captures the passions. For the two principal characters – Michael and Julia, 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 social norms, because their love has their music-making as its foundation.

For Michael, Julia is not only the love of a lifetime, she is the very essence of his craft. Michael describes Julia as “*She taught me to enjoy art, she improved my German enormously, she even taught things about music through her playing*” (‘*An Equal Music*’81) This is why their love, though evident enough on the purely physical level, vibrates with a touch of transcendence that elevates them above anything sordid and contrives to keep them innocent somehow. Julia, in

spite of her conflicting loyalties, is as powerless as is Michael to resist sinking into the tangled beauty of their love.

With gratitude he thinks, *"I loved Mrs Formby. She woke me to the Joy of music"* (350). Schubert is ugly, but kissable nonetheless, for the music he has made. Originally, his poor condition did not allow him to buy or rent any personal musical instrument. So, she lent her Tononi to Michael, generously, for years together. He grew more attached with Tononi and became one with it. *"I love it and it loves me. We have grown to know each other. How can a stranger hold and sound what has been in my hands so long? We have been together for twelve years. Its sound is my sound. I can't bear to part with it ('An Equal Music'69)"*. At this point both Michael and the instrument become one with each other. Michael's relationship with his violin has been realized with a rare insight, and not only Michael, but also all the other musicians empathize majorly with their respective instruments.

Michael is anxious about the ownership of Tononi and the impending separation from it. The very thought itself torments him. He thinks, *"...it could be taken from me and lie unplayed, unloved, unspeaking in a cupboard for years...What has happened in the last two hundred and seventy years? Whose hands will follow mine"* ('An Equal Music'56). It is as if getting separated from a life-long friend. It shows his real love for music and the Tononi that he got from Formby. Once, their teacher Karl Call criticises the way Michael plays music and gives him more corrections. So, he feels insulted and decides to quit the course. Julia tries to persuade him not to take such a foolish decision. But, he leaves Vienna forever disconnecting contacts with Julia. Now it has been ten years since the fatal incident. But, the lost love haunts him often.

"Was I in error? Was I unseeing? Where was the balance of pain between the two of us? What I lost there I have never come near to retrieving" ('An Equal Music'5) These lines questions

show superego-driven guilt, where he evaluates his past actions harshly. Michael's inner monologue can be interpreted through psychoanalytic theory where guilt, repression, selfblame, and unresolved trauma are reflected. Michael is judging himself for the breakup with Julia and for how he handled their relationship. His ego tries to balance the reality of the situation, but the superego demands moral clarity and self-punishment. The conflict produces psychic tension and emotional pain. Michael tries to forget his past with Julia, but instead of fading, it returns more intensely. The pain becomes repressed memory resurfacing. His questions show that he cannot move on because his unconscious keeps bringing back the unresolved trauma. This is Sigmund Freud's idea that unresolved emotional experiences return as intrusions into consciousness. Julia becomes an idealized figure in Michael's unconscious that leads to a sense of permanent incompleteness within him.

Though Michael's teacher Carl was one of the reasons for his present misery, he admires the teacher's depth of knowledge in music. He painfully recalls the teacher scolded him. "*It would be better to remain in a land without music than to have music like that*" ('An Equal Music'55). Such intolerable words come out him because of his uncompromising love for music. He thinks of his teacher as "*Carl Kall, the old man, the stubborn magician, brutal and full of suffocating energy, did not, unaided, drive me from Vienna. It was as much my younger self, unyielding, unwilling to exchange a mentor for a dictator...*" ('An Equal Music'18). Michael acknowledges the role of the teacher in shaping his music and personality. Earlier in the novel, Michael projected his guilt, insecurity, and failures onto Carl, blaming him for emotional turmoil and career difficulties.

"*If I had not met him I would not have brought to life the voice in my hands... I would not have met Julia. I would not have lost Julia. I would not be adrift. How can I hate Carl anymore?*", he gracefully acknowledges ('An Equal Music'18). Carl may have caused pain, but he also

brought music, love, and important experiences into Michael's life. Michael recognizes that Carl is a part of everything that shaped him, despite the fact that he is emotionally lost. In the past, Karl trusted his student more.

"I know I have not built the kind of career he envisaged for me, but I am making music I love" (*An Equal Music*'55). These lines show that Carl encouraged him to have a brilliant and prestigious career. But Michael on the other hand performs the music that moves him, and finds emotional and artistic satisfaction in it. Michael also admired his teacher's greatness, *"...someone whose playing went deeper and farther than his virtuosity, whose music conveyed nobility of spirit in every phrase"* (*An Equal Music*'82). At the same time, the relationship between Carl and Michael is more than a bond between a teacher and taught. Later, Carl writes a letter to him after witnessing a concert and wishes him to sustain the spirit of music.

It is music that binds them in spite of the differences.

These memories change his personality altogether and he becomes weak at heart. *"When I am alone, I am sick with memory"* (*An Equal Music*'50). This phrase suggests that those repressed memories return violently when he's alone. This reflects the Psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud explains painful emotions that are buried or repressed eventually resurface. Julia is not just a person he loved but she represents a lost part of his emotional and musical self-identity. So whenever he is alone, all those memories return and overwhelm him. His devotion to his art is distilled out of the nobility of his soul. On discovering Beethoven's opus 104, he tells us, in anticipation of musical ecstasy, *"Late tonight, after the rehearsal, I'll come home, light a candle, lie down on my duvet, and sink into the quintet"* (*An Equal Music*'40).

Nearly after ten years, Michael happens to see Julia in a bus in London. Though she does not recognize him at that time, he manages to give his phone number. This incident kindles the love that was buried in his heart. After a few days, she visits Michael in his flat and they revive their love. The love for music that brings them together as he says "*I have been so hungry to speak of music and to play it all with someone who understand me as I was before I - before all these changes in my life*" (*An Equal Music* '137).

Their passion for music leads to physical intimacy also. When Michael tells her in a reassuring manner "*I'm not going to lose you again*", she replies, "*Michael, I'm not here to be gained*" (*An Equal Music* '110). She reveals that she is already married and got a child. In spite of his fact, he longs to be with her. He confesses he is always in between, never completely present, never completely absent through these lines, "*I'm just semi-attached. Or semi-detached; comes to the same thing*" (*An Equal Music* '128) The thread of music binds them in spite of the impossibility of having a healthy relationship.

The relationship that existed between Michael and Julia was more than love; it was music. Even during his difficult times, he remembers "*She taught me to enjoy art, she improved my German enormously, she even taught me bridge...She showed me things about music simply through her playing; the joy I got from making music with her, alone or in our trio, was as great as the joy between which the quartet has given me..*" (*An Equal Music* '81). Music was the first point of attraction Beethoven's theme "Opus. When the relationship is revived, Michael gifts her a CD of before 104", they music that they played together as students ten years. It symbolically conveys that both of them have reinvented their passion for music and love for each other.

Michael plays an important role in reviving her career in music. She is affected by an Auto-immune disease. Consequently, she is losing her hearing gradually. At the beginning, he is not

aware of her difficulty. Michael notices that when he speaks, she concentrates on his mouth. *"She does not want me to speak, nor does she speak herself, but her eyes are on my face as if to catch every expression of mine"* (*An Equal Music* '137).

A powerful parallelism between Ludwig Van Beethoven and Julia McNicholl can be seen from this novel. One of the strongest parallels between Ludwig van Beethoven and Julia is the central tragedy of deafness. Beethoven, the legendary composer, lost his hearing at the height of his creative powers. The hearing loss was a cruel irony for a musician whose life depended entirely on sound. Similarly, Julia, a trained pianist with extraordinary sensitivity to music, is diagnosed with a degenerative hearing condition that threatens not only her career but also her identity. For both figures, music is not merely a profession; it is the language through which they connect to life itself. Deafness, therefore, becomes not just a physical disability but an existential crisis.

Beethoven was one of the history's greatest composers whose hearing loss began during 1798. He was one of the history's greatest composers who was gone deaf in his later part of life. His hearing loss brought intense emotional suffering but also pushed him to deeper creativity. On the other hand, Julia is a gifted pianist whose hearing is slowly diminishing. This loss is heart breaking for Julia.

However, Beethoven and Julia both react to this loss with great bravery. After turning completely deaf, Beethoven continued to write some of his best compositions, such as the Ninth Symphony. Julia also does not abandon music immediately. She shifts her engagement with music inward, relying on memory, touch, and emotional resonance rather than pure sound. This resistance against silence becomes a profound statement of the human spirit's ability to endure suffering without surrendering meaning. Vikram Seth uses Julia's deafness to echo

Beethoven's legendary ordeal, making her a character of a living symbol of artistic resilience and tragedy.

Julia takes a decision of leaving Michael but he was not able to accept the fact immediately. He keeps going to her place and tries to revive the relationship. Once, she tells him, *"I don't want to see you. I don't. I really don't. I'll breakdown if I do. If you love me that's not what you'd want. And if you don't love me, just go and get on with your life"* ('An Equal Music' 353). This sentence is loaded with meaning. It conveys powerfully that whether he loves her or not, he is expected not to disturb her again for the sake of both of them. Michael also proves himself as a matured person and vows not to disturb her life. Julia also develops as a solo musician toward the novel's end. "The concert by the deaf pianist" is the name of the concert that Michael had the opportunity to attend.

Roland Barthes's theory of Grain of the Voice refers to the texture, physicality and emotional rawness in music. The element goes beyond technique and even beyond written words. The part where the body and the music meets produces a deeply personal, almost intimate sound. Grain communicates what language cannot. Julia's hearing intensifies the idea of grain. Her music becomes increasingly shaped by touch, memory and instinct. Michael is drawn to the music that Julia creates. He is also drawn by the emotional world he feels and the grain that she can merely produce. Grain as her music carries her inner silence, fear, longing and inner life. Julia describes her hearing loss as to be emotional, passionate and transcendent.

Julia resembles Beethoven as she continues to play after her hearing fades. She clings to her music for emotional grounding and a sense to self. She begins to rely on her inner hearing and memory. Julia has a unique Grain of the Voice as her music gains emotional depth and fragility, Beethoven and Julia change and transform people through their music and not simply with who they are. Hearing loss has become a metaphor for broken connection in the novel.

Beethoven's piano sonatas combine suffering and beauty whereas Julia's music are fragile and slips into silence. Julia and Beethoven show how beauty and pain are inseparable in the world of music.

Conclusion

The novel, '*An Equal Music*' by Vikram Seth shows that while music may fade from hearing, it never fades from the soul. Seth through the novel affirms that art is born from absence as much as from presence through the grain of Julia's silent music, through Michael's haunted psyche, and through the eternal echo of Beethoven's legendary ordeal. Seth transforms loss into lasting resonance, making '*An Equal Music*' not merely a novel about music, but a meditation on the enduring voice of human emotion. Love may fail, bodies may weaken, and sound may disappear—but memory, desire, and music continue to vibrate beyond silence.

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