

An Equal Music as a Realistic Novel

Bio of the Author

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This paper deals with the elements of realism in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. Realism is a term briefly used in modern criticisms and is abundantly found in modern literary works. It concentrates mainly on the inner life of a character and mainly these characters are from middle class. Realism portrays the thoughts of common people and it examines the everyday life and common characters, who struggle with moral questions and social expectations. Realistic novels deal with the common place, everyday details, actions and small problems of ordinary people.

The term realism is widely accepted according to need and time. Realism in literature and the visual art is used to describe a variety of approach in which actual depiction of reality is the aim. Each of these involves a contrast between human thought or imagination and an external reality independent of mind. Even though realism is not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated. It is rather a way of describing certain methods and attitudes, and the descriptions, quite naturally, have varied in the ordinary exchange and development of experience.

An Equal Music is unusual for the dedication with which it raises questions about the meaning of the classical music and its performance in Europe in late twentieth century. It evokes the subjective and affective experience of playing and listening music. It also can be read as a reflection on how man can live on earth on constant relation with nature and inner situations of human life. Through his wonderful realistic portrayal of life, Seth gained worldwide recognition, appreciation and criticism. Seth is the master of his craft who provides more emphasis to the restorative power of music, nature and love. In simple words, this novel is a tragedy of tragedies for a musician and it's portrayed in the most realistic manner.

Even the title is relevant, *An Equal Music*, it provides a thought in the mind of reader that what's equal to music or to what music is equalised with. And this also gives us an idea that

this novel has something to do with music and when we start to read this work and analyse the major characters like Michael Holmes and Julia then we will understand that this title is having much significance as this is the story of these musicians. An extra ordinary story of love between a violinist and a pianist, and both of them consider music as their soul. And a natural title can always drag the attention of a reader and he will be automatically attracted to that work.

Novels typically begin by raising some question in the reader's mind that immediately compels them to follow the plot of clues that will unravel the mystery or clarify the puzzle. Dramatic opening always contribute much to the determining factor of a novel and *An Equal Music* is having a wonderful beginning.

“Yesterday as I walked back across the park I paused at a fork in the footpath. I had the sense that someone had paused behind me. I walked on. The sound of footsteps followed along the gravel. They were unhurried: they appeared to keep pace with me. Then they up their mind, speeded up, and overtook me. They belonged to a man in a thick black overcoat, quite tall – about my height – a young man from his gait and attitude, though I did not see his face. His sense of hurry was now evident. After a while, unwilling so soon to cross the blinding Bayswater Road, I paused again, this time by the bridle path. Now I heard the faint sound of hooves. This time, however, they were not embodied. I looked to left, to right. There was nothing” (Seth 3).

Clearly such mysteries cannot be solved too quickly or the story would be over. So although a realistic narrative must appear to be structured upon the forward progression of historical time, the hermeneutic code must continually frustrate these expectations and invent delaying tactics, lay false clues and set snares for the reader. It is only at the conclusion of the reading that the reader can look back and make the sense of the whole pattern of events. But when we read this novel we will recognise that this dramatic opening has no relevance in this novel, it's just used to give a character introduction to Michael Holmes and his inner human situation. And his student Virginie with whom he makes love, depicts a clear picture of his character through her conversation with him. Virginie says that “You're so boring. If you're so boring on Friday night, I can't imagine what you'll be like on Monday” (Seth 19). Frankness of this character adds to the realistic portrayal of life in this literary work.

Self – centeredness is a major part of ordinary man’s identity. They always think about themselves even when they consider others, for a common man most priority goes to him and his living.

“I often think how lucky I am to have what many musicians do not – a roof above my head that I can call my own. Even if the mortgage weighs on me, it is better than paying rent. I was fortunate to find my flat when I did – and in the dreadful condition that I did. Its three small, ceiling-sloped rooms, for all their quirks of water and heat, are a refuge of light that I could never afford to buy in today’s market. I love the view. There is no one above me, so I hear no stomping overhead, and at this height even the sound of traffic is muted” (Seth 24).

Many critics have come to see the human desire to impose meaning on the chaos of existence as the impulse underlying the ubiquity of narrative all times and places. It is the strong desire for order which keeps us turning the pages, hurrying on the resolution of all mystery and confusions promised at the conclusion of the tale. For this reason the detective story is often seen as the narrative of narratives in that it is the genre which reveals most explicitly the quest for truth impelling all fiction. That desire for truth produces our belief in truth. And the same happens when Michael meets Julia in a London bus after ten long years. His emotions and feelings for her are expressed within those seconds of a chance sighting on a London bus, “Julia looks at me, her eyes opening wide in what? astonishment? dismay? recognition? I must look wild – my face red – my eyes filled with tears – my fists still clenched – I am a decade older – the lights will change any second” (Seth 41). And part one of the novel ends with the questions arises in Michael’s mind when Julia disappeared “What could I read in her eyes? Puzzlement – alarm – pity? Could I read love? In that woman’s eyes could I read love?” (Seth 44).

Michael is having an ordinary father-son relation with his father but when Seth gives references about father he tries to be more realistic, after his mother’s death Auntie Joan takes care of his father and he is deeply concerned about Michael. “My father sits with Zsa-Zsa on his lap and dozes off. He has been feeling a bit under the weather the last couple of days. Our plan to go to Owd Betts has been shelved till after Christmas. He doesn’t feel up to going to church this evening either” (Seth 62). And Michael is more attached with music and he gives more priority to music in his life. “Some of my aunt’s Christmas pudding. Weeks in preparation, seconds in consumption. Rather like music” (Seth 66).

Although the narrative appears to construct a forward linear movement, it simultaneously inscribes a reverse projection backwards. The effect of teasing the reader with delayed enlightenment is to strengthen the belief that truth does exist and will prevail however difficult the passage towards it proves to be. Through such a flash back technique the character remembers his past, through his memories and here Michael gives a vital role for his love, Julia and he is frustrated with her memories. Realism is three dimensional – an independent life, characters and human relationships. It opposes the destruction of the completeness of human personality and of the objective typicality of men and such situations through an excessive cult of the momentary mood. The major problem of realism is the satisfactory presentation of the complete human personality. And real life characters are not perfect so writer will try to depict the character as an ordinary man with defects.

“I had slept with other women before, and she had had a boyfriend once, but I was her first love, as she was mine. Nor have I ever been in love since. But then I have never fallen out of love with her – with her, I suppose, as she then was, or as I grew afterwards to realise or imagine she had been. What is she now, who is she now? Am I such inane fidelity fixated on someone who could have utterly changed (but could she have? could she really have changed so much?), who could have grown to hate me for leaving her, who could have forgotten me or leaned deliberately to expunge me from her mind. How many seconds or weeks after seeing me on that bus did I survive in her thoughts?” (Seth 83).

And Julia reveals the fact that she is married to James Hansen and they have a child named Luke, and this news makes Michael uncomfortable because he is not ready to lose her or sacrifice her for anyone even when he is aware that he is the one who left her before ten long years in Vienna. So he is self- restricted when he talks to her and its not possible in a true deep love.

“She senses I don’t want to talk about him, and moves to other matters. We touch on subjects carefully, one by one, as if they might suddenly rear up and strike: casual acquaintances, the likelihood of the storm letting up soon, the decor. I learn that Maria, after her string of artsy boyfriends, is now married to a good solid burgher” (Seth 107).

Literature is saturated with social and moral humanistic problems and the expectation for a realistic creation of types in contrast to the trends in which the biological being of man, the physiological aspects of self-preservation and procreation are dominant. And when Julia comes

to meet Michael in his flat she says that “Eight thirty. Michael, I can’t just drop Luke at school and then come and see you. I can’t. It would be too – I don’t know – too dismal” (Seth 119). Her conscience is questioned as the mother of Luke. In this case if the writer depicts any other aspect of life with his creative mind then it may divert from realism and lead to other type. So the scope for imagination is quite less.

“As I help her on with her coat, I feel an almost irresistible urge to hold her, to kiss her. But I can read that this is just what she fears. I must keep to the innocent rules of these visits, so filled with anxiety for her. Even the intimacy of music is not guiltless. The record in her hand reminds me of our trio, and she is so close I can hear her breathe” (Seth 134).

Thus, in the very acts of perception and communication, this practical interaction of what is personally seen, interpreted and organized and what can be socially recognized known and formed is richly and subtly manifested. Reality is continually established by common efforts and art is one of the highest forms of this process. Through an innocent conversation of Luke and Michael, Luke reveals an important matter and it is “That’s because Mom finds it hard to hear me. She’s deaf...Oops!” (Seth 142). And it’s difficult for a reader to accept a deaf heroine but sometimes it happens in real life, we may not be able to find a Miss. Perfect woman. And here the heroine, Julia is deaf and she is having an extra marital affair with Michael. Even though its love for them, it is not socially acceptable.

And Virginie reacts worsely when she knows Michael’s relation with Julia, she can’t place Julia but she is aware that Michael is avoiding her due to his relation with some other woman. She is much younger than Michael but she had true feelings for him which is more than the pleasure of physical relations.

“I am behaving dreadfully and I know it. But I have no room to manoeuvre. I never thought I was using her when I was with her. It was an arrangement I thought she was content with. But now I can see us becoming strangers, thinking of each other less and less as the weeks pass, and with time drifting entirely out of each other’s lives. Poor Virginie, I say to myself, and feel ashamed even as I think the thought. I hope she finds someone unlike me: unexacting, happy of spirit and, most of all, not irreparably imprinted with the die of someone else’s being” (Seth 165).

In realistic novels, the society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studies, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. “She is still

fond of the small graspable pleasures of life. One of these is the view from the buses, and we ride them sometimes, sitting upstairs on opposite sides of the aisle” (Seth 169). Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms. We attend with our whole senses to every aspect of the general life, yet the centre of value is always in the individual human person-not in an isolated person, but the many persons who depict the reality of life. The realist novel needs a genuine community: a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship – work of friendship or family but many interlocking kinds. As realism is nothing but a reaction against the romantic excess consolidate the position of it in literature in general and in fiction in particular. Even Michael is not having an appreciable opinion about his relation with Julia as she is a wife and a mother. But he is not ready to reveal that to Julia and this is an extravagant possessiveness of an individual, here even though he is aware that his relation with her is immoral or illegal he is not ready to give up or to discuss that with her in the fear that he will lose her.

“What is it like for her? How can she sustain these visits to me while being wife and mother at home? Since she believes in trust, I see her pain, and yet I dare not probe for fear that it will spill that world into our own. I don’t ask her, nor does she tell me whether she has been to church these last two weeks, and if so what thoughts passed through her mind” (Seth 169).

Not only Michael and Julia but all other characters are having much significance, and this is conveyed to the reader by Michael, when he provides an idea about the members of the quartet to Julia when she asks him about them.

“Piers tries to run a tight ship. Billy has his own ideas about things. Once he gets something to his head it’s difficult to dislodge it. And Helen, well, she’s wonderful player but she’s quite distractible. By the way, you’ll be happy to know that Billy’s always late for everything, so you’ll have company. Oh, and also, Billy prefers to rehearse than to perform, or so he says” (Seth 186).

And Julia is going to play with Michael’s quartet but it’s difficult for a musician to play with others when she’s deaf and in an unexpected situation Michael reveals this secret to Piers and later to Helen and Billy, this is such a situation where Michael feels that his trust is tested. At the same time he wants to be faithful to both his love and to his music, and he tries his best to keep his loyalty to both of them. But this helps Julia in a many ways because his quartet

members were ready to give support to her even when they don't have any sympathy for her unlike Michael. Julia is really religious while Michael is not much interested in such matters and when Julia asks him about reading Donne, he replies that "I like his language. I mull over his ideas. I don't care about his scriptural arguments... I can never understand why people make such a fuss about the God thing," (Seth 189). Michael's picture about God is clearly expressed through this simple dialogue.

The way of narration contributes much to the realistic aspect of a work. And *An Equal Music* is a first – person narrative where the narrator speaks as 'I' and he is the protagonist of the story and this may give a feel to the reader that this work is autobiographically attached to the reader, where voice of truth and symbolic code for attaining truth effect are wonderfully attained by the writer through his marvellous description of matters.

"While her fingers draw music from the keys, her eyes move from Piers to Billy with the alertness of someone reading from the page. Their fingers, their bows, their bows, their breaths give her her cues. At the beginning, where all the double bass could have uttered would have been a low continuous undemarcated growl, this is what she would have had to do anyway. But elsewhere I can see how much harder she has to work in its absence. And the visual cues that she would have got from the fingers of the bass player... but it is pointless to speculate about all this, when I feel that I am on a tightrope over a chasm listening to a bird rising from below and singing high above me, higher and higher: an odd image for a piece named after a fish" (Seth 193).

Interior monologues of Michael is reserved for that species of stream of consciousness which undertakes to present the reader the course and rhythm of consciousness precisely as it occurs in a character's mind. The interior monologue in its radical form, is sometimes described as the exact presentation process of consciousness; but because sense perceptions, mental images, feelings, and some aspects of thought itself are nonverbal, it is clear that the author can present these elements only by converting them into some sort of verbal equivalent. Much of this conversion is a matter of narrative conventions rather than of unedited, point-for-point reproduction, and each author put his or her own imprint on the interior monologues that are attributed to characters in the narrative. And Michael is totally confused when Julia asks him to have lunch with her family.

“All of them: man, wife, child, dog. From my high lair I view the world. I will say yes, of course; and try to feign, as best as I can, the calm I do not feel. Those whom she loves must not be hurt. But I know I am no good at this: if I had my way I would not go at all. I would find some, some sleight of time or work to put things off. But I have not seen her for so long. If it is a risk, it is one that has been made for me, one on which my grasp, like it or not, has close. I write back, ill at ease, to say I will be pleased to come” (Seth 208).

But it was hard for Michael to spare time with the man who is his love’s husband and their son, he leaves from their at the earliest like an ordinary man who is distressed with his love which is about to lose even when he is sure that he has not gained her permanently. And Julia goes for a musical trip with Michael and his quartet in Venice, the place which gave them love and took it back. Now they are going to that land again to regain what they lost. And there when they meet their old friend Maria and she openly expresses her gladness for not being deaf Michael was upset “At first I am too shocked to speak. Then, just as I am about to say something to Maria, I think better of it. If Julia doesn’t know what was said, why should I attack the remark and in effect force it upon her?” (Seth 246). Through his language and style, Seth depicts that love is something more than physical relation for Michael “Though we are alone, we do not kiss; we are almost shy. The journey is everything it could be. The day grows warm, and I am like a torpid bee” (Seth 253).

Realism is that art that tries its maximum to depict life as it is, common class people without the mask of status and maturity act as a major part of such realistic novels and they are always happy with even the minute things they have and here Michael is happy with the days that he got with Julia in Venice.

“Yet here we walk, anonymous, hand in hand. That citron scent emerges with the half fresh, half brackish odour of the city. I ask her if she is hungry, and she says no. How about a drink? Yes. A glass of prosecco at a bar. She is restless, and suggests a place on the Guidecca. I am happy to be led on land, and even happier to be carried away by water” (Seth 264).

And these lines interpret the innocence in the pleasure of an ordinary man but later Michael indecently looks into the personal life of Julia by reading a fax addressed to her husband, without her permission and he excuses it by saying “It is a private communication, but my shameless eyes, greedy for anything I can learn about her compel me on” (Seth 290). He was ashamed and expresses his feelings through a simple interior monologue “I feel like a thief

who has entered a house to find in it goods stolen from his own” (Seth 291). But the worse tragedy appears when he reveals this through a cruel dialogue with his brutal tongue after making love with her. “Poor Jimbo: I wonder what he’ll make of them when he meets you at Heathrow. Do you think he’ll bring the Benetton bear along, or will it be past his bedtime?” (Seth 292). And a small break up occurs between them on this matter of trust but later it’s compensated and finally Michael invents the equal music “There is no forced gravitas in her playing. It is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase across phrase, phrase echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending “Art of Fugue”. It is an equal Music” (Seth 380).

Throughout *An Equal Music* we could find the elements of realism in case of its style, narration, language, dialogues and characters. Art is appreciable and acceptable when it stands along with life and act as a mirror to life. Whole novel deals with Michael and his feelings for his love Julia and for his soul music. It also interprets the relation between a musician and his instrument, an individual and nature, and how love plays a role to keep these both in touch. Michael and Julia are not a perfect hero and heroine as expected in a literary work, Michael is not a good looking young man and he is not even a one-woman-man where as Julia is deaf musician , who is having a relation with Michael even when she is a wife and a mother. And the end is not as expected in a happy ending novel; they are not joined but he is happy to leave her in much safer hands and to be left alone with an equal music. A reader will be much attracted to the realistic style of this novel, as it avoids artificiality, and treats human relations and emotions not in a heroic and sentimental manner but with an elegant ordinary way.

Realism is an aesthetic mode, which broke with the classical demands of art to show life as it is. The work of realist art tends to eschew the elevated subject matter in favour of the average, common place, middle class and their struggle with the mean varieties of everyday existence and these are the typical subject matters of realism. Seth appreciably succeeded, in portraying the life of two musicians named Michael and Julia with accurate elements of realism in *An Equal Music*. The attempt to render life as it is, to use language as a kind of maintaining mirror of or a perfectly transparent window to the real is filled with contradictions. Realism in this simplified sense must assume as a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and signified. Language in realistic novel must enter into transparency through an appeal to our ideologically constructed sense of the real. The reader should be addressed in such a realistic manner where he feels the work exactly resembles as the reality.

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