

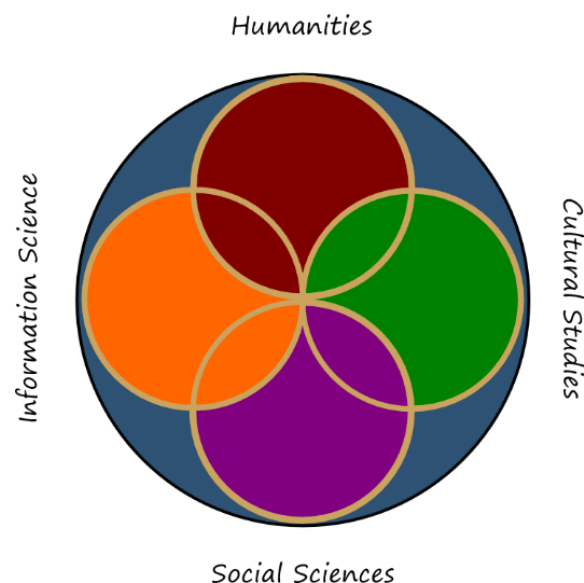
Registered, Indexed &
Refereed / Peer-Reviewed Online
International Journal

ISSN 2454-1974

Volume 2
Issue 4
February 2019

THE RUBRICS

Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies



Chief Editor
Dr. Ganesh Vaykos



Published by
Magnus Publishing & Distributors
Parbhani 431 401. MS India.
www.therubrics.in



THE RUBRICS

Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Volume 2 Issue 4 SI - February 2019

www.therubrics.in

ISSN 2454-1974



Negotiating Cultural Authenticity Through Musical Performance: Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and Postcolonial Aesthetic Theory

Mamta K. Jonipelliwar

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Baliram Patil College, Kinwat, Maharashtra.

ABSTRACT

This study interrogates Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* as a self-reflexive negotiation between the pull of cultural authenticity and the aspiration toward artistic universality, situating the text within the contingent horizons of postcolonial aesthetics. By concentrating on the novel's treatment of the European string quartet discipline, I contend that Seth refines rather than resolves the antagonism between situated identity and transcultural appropriation, exemplifying the doubly-accented agency that Homi Bhabha names mimicry and hybridity. Michael Holme, the violinist-narrator, is at once engrossed in the Viennese repertoire and shadowed by the spectre of Indian nationality. This dual consciousness discloses the fault line on which postcolonial cultural policy commonly falters. I engage Bhabha, Said, and Spivak in dialogue with emergent research on sonic postcolonialism, and I show that Seth's narrative methods—alternating intrusive focalization, fragmentary temporality, and quasi-symphonic paralogy—counterbalance the symphonic grandiosity they describe. The result is a luminous refusal of both colonial nostalgia and uncritical cosmopolitanism, staging an art that, like its protagonist, plays within the breach.

Keywords: *postcolonial aesthetics, cultural authenticity, musical performance, artistic universalism, Vikram Seth, cultural hybridity*

Negotiating Cultural Authenticity Through Musical Performance: Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and Postcolonial Aesthetic Theory

Mamta K. Jonipelliwar

Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999) offers scholars of postcolonial narrative a distinctive object of inquiry, since it scrutinises exclusively the precincts of Western classical performance while emanating from one of India's foremost postcolonial writers. The novel traces Michael Holme, second violin of the Maggiore Quartet, as he obsessively re-visits memories of the cellist Julia McNicholl, the action unfolding amid a sequential meditation on the chamber canon from Bach through Schubert. This apparent surrender to European cultural traditions, however, invites reconsideration of authenticity, the plural self, and the limits of postcolonial aesthetics itself. The debate over the tension between cultural authenticity and artistic universalism has remained a cornerstone of postcolonial inquiry. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* first revealed how Western artistic forms may circulate as vehicles of imperial power. However, scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have further disputed the strict opposition by accentuating mimicry, hybridity, and the agency of the colonised voice (Said 78; Bhabha 122; Spivak 45). Seth's fiction, however, inhabits the borderline of these dialectics: it neither repudiates Western cultural codes nor submits to them, yet moves through their interior with a deliberate, performance-oriented ambivalence.

This paper argues that Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* engages the tensions between cultural authenticity and artistic universalism through narrative strategies that resonate with the polyphonic textures of the classical music it reverently depicts. The text does not surrender to a Western aesthetic imperialism; instead, it performs what I call "performative authenticity," a modality of cultural articulation that secures the quality of authenticity not by indexing fixed cultural tokens but by the integrity and depth of artistic engagement itself. Such a *démarche* complicates the binaries of appropriation and preservation, inviting readers to reappraise the novel's intercultural labour as a concert of aesthetic and ethical listening.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Discussions of postcolonial aesthetics and cultural authenticity occupy a well-charted corridor of literary criticism. *The Empire Writes Back*, by

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, offers the generative insight that postcolonial authors oscillate between indigenous cultural practices and imperial narrative conventions (Ashcroft 156). This heuristic, though, has undergone sustained reappraisal. Critics have demonstrated that it tends to acclaim overtly oppositional strategies while sidelining subtler, iterative forms of cultural re-composition. Consequently, recent scholarship has urged a shift toward scenes of hybrid creativity that cannot be reduced to anticolonial rejection or celebratory incorporation, thus preparing the ground for a nuanced study of Seth's recombinant yet singular polyphony. Bhabha's notion of mimicry articulates a subtle apparatus through which Vikram Seth interrogates musical and national identity in *An Equal Music*. The colonial practice of imitation, Bhabha observes, produces a "nearly identical but not-quite identical" reproduction that, in its tiny deviations, imperils its authority (Bhabha 89). This formulation elucidates Seth's engagement with Western musical heritage, which stands as literary mimicry that, in striving for absolute stylistic fidelity, allows fissures through which its authority may be contested.

Critical reflection on authenticity has, in the past decade, unmoored earlier essentialisms in postcolonial thought. Brouillette, in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, argues that current postcolonial authors glide between the literary marketplace's appetite for unitary cultural narratives and their own constitutive, kaleidoscopic identifications (Brouillette 34). Echoing this, Huggan, in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, charts the commodification of postcolonial difference, demonstrating how a publishing regime simultaneously solicits and constrains the performance of cultural otherness (Huggan 78). In the field of music and postcolonial analysis, scholars such as Kofi Agawu and Philip Bohlman have traced how Western tonal and formal idioms have been selectively internalised and remixed within postcolonial societies (Agawu 45; Bohlman 123). Their studies imply that the contrastive categories of Western and non-Western traditions have been themselves governed by colonial logics, which in turn conceal the more granular, non-linear circuits of mutual invention and hybridisation.

Jacques Rancière's aesthetic theory offers a complementary lens for contextualising Seth's oeuvre. His idea of the "distribution of the sensible" posits that aesthetic regimes can subtly recalibrate which sounds and sights are accorded perceptible status in any historical-cultural field (Rancière 67). Viewed through this lens, Seth's scrupulous focus on the technologies and routines of performance serves as a quiet re-distribution of the sensible, rendering the previously occluded toil and refinement that sustains artistic appearance newly audible and visible.

Cultural Performance and Authenticity in *An Equal Music*

Seth's investigation of musical performance in *An Equal Music* illustrates how authenticity is forged through disciplined labour rather than genealogical privilege. Michael Holme, the central figure, is marked as an outsider to the cultural elite he navigates. The narrator remarks that Michael hails from Rochdale, "a world unreachably different" from Julia's Oxford family, "where art and literature and music are absorbed without effort or explanation" (Seth 81). The class-based gulf, in turn, distantly echoes the metropolitan-peripheral dynamic of the colonial encounter. Seth's narrative does not portray Michael solely as the outsider bent on overcoming exclusion; instead, the text insists that musical mastery can traverse social divisions via committed practice and emotional investment. The relationship he cultivates with the Tononi violin, which stands as the novel's emblem, renders the process of cultural absorption à la performance. Michael's avowal—"I love it and it loves me. We have grown to know each other"—implies that the quality of authenticity in the arts arises from minute, reciprocal investment, not from the heritage of the performer (Seth 69).

The novel's meticulous account of rehearsal routines continues to elaborate on the thematic exposition of authenticity. The Maggiore Quartet's pre-concert preparations document the way musical authenticity is achieved through a sustained communal effort rather than the solitary sparkle of genius. Quartet members are obliged to "accommodate each other and reach mutual agreement," entering a continual circuit of negotiation that, as Sanders and Sawabe observe, reflexively mirrors the larger cultural negotiations that animate postcolonial spaces (71). By foregrounding the primacy of collective rehearsal, the text unsettles the Romantic fantasy of authenticity as a spontaneous and unitary possession of individual artists or entire cultures. Seth's treatment of musical pedagogy further complicates the conventional hierarchy of teacher and learner as well as the metropolitan-peripheral knowledge divide. Michael's fraught rapport with his Viennese mentor Carl Käll exposes the latent violence in pedagogical relations that impose the Western musical canon as a universal standard. Carl's "assertive objection to Michael's performance of chamber music" registers a refusal to countenance the learner's subjectivity. At the same time, his "callously insensitive" disregard for Michael's physical impairments compounds the immense pressure and conflict. This disciplinary force is, pointedly, the echo of colonial pedagogical regimes that endeavoured to recast colonial subjects so that they might inhabit metropolitan conventions of culture and civility. The narrative also gestures toward more egalitarian modalities of cultural transmission. Michael's mentoring of the student Virginie illustrates how expertise can circulate asymmetrically, momentarily suspending conventional hierarchies of

pedagogical authority. The novel's architecture refracts this pedagogical dynamic: it instructs readers in the vocabularies of classical music from Michael's viewpoint while simultaneously corroding the certainty that viewpoint would seem to confer.

The Politics of Musical Universalism

An Equal Music interrogates the belief in classical music's universal address. The multinational ensemble of English, Austrian, French, and American figures could be read as evidence for music's capacity to traverse cultural borders. However, Seth's narrative gradually enfoldes the exclusions and stratifications that dim this ostensible universality. Class difference receives constant attention, revealing how economic and social forms of capital secure entry to the canon. The statement rehearses the insight of Bourdieu: cultural knowledge itself is a form of capital that reproduces the distinctions it appears to dissolve (Bourdieu 89). Mrs. Formby's patronage—most conspicuously her gift of the Tononi violin—maps the transaction of cultural entry, exposing the degree to which passage into elite musical worlds remains hostage to the discretion of benevolent gatekeepers. The narrative further articulates the gendered traces embedded within the musical sphere. Julia's selection as pianist—instead of a string-instrument role—mirrors the entrenched belief systems that historically confined women to instruments that offered less public visibility and authority. Her encroaching deafness amplifies the metaphor, standing in for the sustained cultural practice that marginalises specific auditory and vocal frequencies from the arena of conversation. Julia's determined acquisition of lip-reading and sign-language skills, an effort to plunge into the world of music, embodies the surplus effort demanded of those marked as peripheral interlocutors. Seth, in turn, proposes musical practice as a potential crucible for subverting such hierarchies. The quartet's periodically shared sensations, in which "all grievances are forgotten in the creation of music," provide tentative instances of a collective relationality that gestures beyond the logic of stratification (Sanders and Sawabe 73). Such instances resist the label of mere flight from the institutional world and instead function as prefigurative exercises, fleeting windows through which the structure of more equalised social relations can, for a moment, be rehearsed.

The narrative's attention to interpretative agency and to improvisation contests the binary divide that usually polarises authentic from inauthentic performance. In Michael's and Julia's rehearsals of the canonical canon, repetition is ceaselessly braided with newly inflected choices, assuring that their execution bears the traces of continual re-invention. The emphasis upon interpretative modulation indicates that all cultural activities are imbued with

a transformative surplus, thereby destabilising the presumptive certainties that accompany the ideal of unaltered cultural transmission.

Postcolonial Aesthetics and Literary Form

In *An Equal Music*, Vikram Seth deploys formal strategies that can be read as postcolonial aesthetic practices operating through rather than in opposition to Western literary inheritance. The novel is organised, almost mimetically, upon musical paradigms, especially the contrapuntal fugue, evident in the text's interweaving thematic lines. Such formal echo can be identified as a species of "structural authenticity," in which authenticity is attained less through a given thematic repertoire than through innovative reconfiguration of inherited formal properties. The novel's pervasive musical metaphors generate what Anna Hartwiger designates as "synesthetic narrative," whereby the sequential deployment of language invokes aural experience as if through the medium of sight (Hartwiger 134). Seth's painstaking evocation of musical performance obliges the reader to animate the text aurally, thus producing a literary performance that both parallels and resists the illicity of the concert hall. Memory and deliberate recurrence, moreover, are inscribed through formal rhythmicity. Michael's compulsive retrieval of Julia's image replicates the cyclical insistence of classical codas, while the narrative's closing symmetry, which repeats a nearly identical aural performance at its terminus, delivers the reader to a site of final consonance. Such structures suggest that postcolonial critique may, of its agency, not forego dominant formal inheritance, but rather transform and re-release it into a new, reflexive temporality. Seth's inaugural voice layers formal intricacy upon his subject matter. By deploying a first-person avatar, he confines readers to Michael's perceptual scheme while subtly revealing its deficiencies. The result, to borrow Linda Hutcheon's term, is a "complicitous critique": critique exercised from within the prevailing cultural form itself (Hutcheon 67). Michael's status as an unreliable witness obliges readers to engage in the interpretive labour his consciousness so conspicuously evades, a labour that, in the manner of a live performer, requires active and concerted participation from its audience.

The text's intertextual network—its voluminous citational interplay with Western classical composers and specific works—performs a postcolonial aesthetic function. The references do not merely serve as a store of cultural capital; instead, following Julia Kristeva, they stage an "intertextual dialogue," a transaction in which the texts encounter, alter, and ultimately mature one another (Kristeva 78). Seth's rigorous labour upon the Western canon reconfigures the narrative itself while recalibrating readers' relations to the musical inheritance that the canon represents.

Music as Cultural Translation

Music, in Seth's scheme, becomes a form of cultural translation. *An Equal Music* is thus intelligible as the translation of a musical event into literary form, a procedure repeatedly articulated by Homi Bhabha and the postcolonial tradition. However, the permutation is neither seamless nor final. The fissures and insufficiencies that inhere within the translational act expose the irreducible tension of cultural difference as well as the surprising sympathies that lie beneath it. Seth's effort to inscribe musical experience within prose illustrates the "untranslatability" that Benjamin identifies in certain cultural artefacts (Benjamin 89). Throughout the novel, the impossibility of transferring sonority to the spoken word announces itself again and again; Michael's admission that "music to me is dearer even than speech" (Seth 101) becomes the pivot upon which silence and phrase must tragically turn. Such candid renunciations invite readers to inhabit the interval that language cannot close, provoking imaginative sound within the hush that remains. Seth's novel also practices cultural translation at the sentence level. When the text confronts Bach's fugues, he contrives period-laden, recursively bracketed clauses that simulate the fugal subject's unfoldment; in passing to the late Romantic composers, the rhythm slackens, and the measures swell into flowing cadences akin to the surging crescendos that weight the Romantic piano. This formal recalibration insists that translation is not confined to lexical transfer but is a metonymic engagement with the underlying pulse of the source.

The Question of Cultural Appropriation

The interplay of musical and verbal meaning further complicates the dialectic of specificity and universality. The trope of music as a "universal language" is deflated when Michael's readings of the canon, however erudite, are shown to spring from a distinctive orbit of biography, intimacy, and cultural position. Each nodal experience of the repertoire, even the most elevated, is refracted through the prism of local codes; thus, the repertoire that theatrically declares itself exterior to culture is quietly, in every hearing, conscripted back into the very framework it appeared to transcend.

The question of cultural appropriation in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* becomes particularly vexing for postcolonial inquiry precisely because the novel participates in the celebration of Western classical music from the position of an Indian author. Opponents of such a reading might conclude a straightforward instance of appropriation, yet the novel's imaginative craft subverts that conclusion by implicating the very machinery of cultural circulation that the critique seeks to formalise. A pressing weakness in the appropriation rubric is its reliance on fixed notions of cultural ownership—an assumption that postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha and Dipesh

Chakrabarty have repeatedly unsettled. James Clifford's seminal insight, repeated in *Routes*, is that cultures are porous and transactionally constituted: they form, dissolve, and re-form through circulation rather than from closed, stable origins (Clifford 45). Within this frame, Seth's musical evocations appear less as unilateral borrowing than as a node in the circulation that formative Indian musicians, colonial travellers, and hybrid later generations have long enacted.

The case is further complicated by Seth's meticulous attention to the protocols of Western performance. He treats, with an almost ethnographic authority, matters of bowing pressure, the chemistry of the artist's breath, and the lightning flash of memory that haunts the solo stage. Such attention foregrounds the bodily and affective tangibility of musical practice, so that the writer's relation to the form resembles that of a reproaching disciple rather than that of a distant tourist. This combination of detail and affective investment destabilises the conventional polarity of insider and outsider, inviting the reader to consider multiple, overlapping registers of belonging within a single artistic sentence.

Implications for Postcolonial Aesthetic Theory

The narrative's exploration of cultural authenticity thus shifts the burden of proof from the artist to the very category of cultural belonging, preventing the easy categorisation of the text as appropriative. Instead of asserting genuine ties to the Western musical tradition, the prose foregrounds the discursive construction of belonging itself. Michael's estrangement, poignantly rendered, reasserts itself at moments of musical radiance and moments of solitary practice. His musical identity hovers between temporary belonging and intractable outsiderhood, generating an ongoing performance of belonging that carries anxiety and self-doubt. The candid rendering of this unstable position invites readers to ponder authority not as given inheritance but as reflexive negotiation within power-laden histories.

These narrative choices invite, and indeed require, theoretical rethinking within postcolonial aesthetics. The text, first of all, severs the analytic reliance on strict authentic/in-authentic antinomies. Michael's gradual cultivation of a musical condition that feels "equal" to his interlocutors, yet is wholly arrived at by imitation and repetition, posits authenticity not as a gift of ancestry but as a skilful, affect-laden performance. Second, the novel destabilises models of aesthetics that posit outright resistance as a precondition of postcolonial art. By engaging Western forms in decades of practice, Michael illuminates the insistent exclusions of Western ideology while simultaneously exposing the tradition's latent possibilities for transnational, and even redemptive, renewal. The narrative thus argues that postcolonial aesthetics

need not repel imperial inheritance but can, under certain agonistic yet loving conditions, animate it toward unforeseen humanities.

The novel's formal experimentation opens pathways for contemporary postcolonial literary writing. Through the translation of musical temporality and texture into narrative voice, Seth devises blended modalities that resist easy classification as either literature or music. This indeterminate space invites readers and critics to imagine aesthetic relations that neither discipline could independently generate. The text's handling of cultural universalism complicates debates over aesthetic value. By disavowing simplistic claims to cultural neutrality that conceal specific hegemonic interests, the narrative simultaneously gestures towards a cosmopolitan aesthetic rooted in recognition rather than conquest. Such a stance opens, rather than closes, the space for shared responsiveness across difference.

Conclusion

Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* exemplifies postcolonial reflection on aesthetic theory through a finely calibrated handling of cultural authenticity and the promise of universality. Instead of a binary affirmation or rejection of Western artistic forms, the novel shows how postcolonial writing can engage dominant traditions in ways that rearticulate their terms. Through a meticulous portrayal of Western classical music performance practice, Seth exposes the exclusions embedded in universalist discourse while also illustrating the conditions under which genuinely transcultural experience may arise. His formal transposition of musical temporality into prose generates new hybrid modalities that broaden the expressive horizons of both literature and music. The most salient point conveyed by *An Equal Music* is that postcolonial authenticity may be realised less through the assertion of culturally specific indices than through the depth of artistic engagement. Michael Holme, as a non-native participant in the European classical music world, affirms that prolonged, devoted practice can foster a form of belonging that defies entrenched cultural divides. The implications of this interpretation extend well beyond the novel itself. Postcolonial criticism, in consequence, may require recalibrated methodologies that interrogate cultural appropriation and authenticity with finer discriminations, highlighting the inescapably hybrid character of present-day cultural production. Such methodologies can illuminate—rather than merely catalogue—artistic practices that negotiate the very cultural forms they critique, thereby generating novel domains in which critique and creativity coalesce.

An Equal Music finally indicates that postcolonial aesthetics are not confined to subverting imperial legacies or recuperating suppressed cultures; they may, conversely, productively engage the entirety of the global cultural

repertoire. This realisation enlarges our conception of postcolonial literature itself, gesturing toward expansive new itineraries for both imaginative production and critical reflection. In an era of heightened transnational connectivity, postcolonial communities are persistently challenged to redefine cultural selfhood. Within this nexus, Seth's narrative functions as a clarifying instance for interrogating cultural authenticity alongside the prerogatives of universal artistic form. The text's finely calibrated mediations invite the conclusion that the emergent postcolonial aesthetic must resist both isolationist anti-globalism and naive universalism, instead cultivating dialogic exchange that is both dialogically calibrated and ethically grounded. Seth's work further signals the continuing vitality of postcolonial aesthetic inquiry by refusing to evacuate the sphere of aesthetic value from questions of power and history. Instead, the narrative compels an analytical reconsideration of cultural production's situated dynamics, thereby displacing reductive binaries of appropriation and purity. Such a path suggests that future inquiries must remain vigilant to the sedimentations of colonial pasts while acknowledging the tactical, if uneven, possibilities of cross-cultural negotiation.

References

- Agawu, Kofi. *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. Routledge, 2003.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2002.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 69–82.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bohlman, Philip V. *Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe*. Routledge, 2010.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Brouillette, Sarah. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Giftlin Iyadurai, J. "Music, The Language of Love in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 241–243.

- Hartwiger, Anna. "Synesthetic Narrative: Music and Literature in Contemporary Fiction." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2008, pp. 128–145.
- Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, 2001.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, 2004.
- Said Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993.
- Sanders, Jon Barry, and Yuko Sawabe. "The Ministrations of Music: The Sublimation of Passion in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*." *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2003, pp. 63–108.
- Seth, Vikram. *An Equal Music*. Broadway Books, 1999.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia University Press, 2010.