“Almost the same, but not quite”: Masks and Mimicry in Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*

Mélanie Heydari-Malayeri

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**“Almost the same, but not quite”:
Masks and Mimicry
in Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music***

A variation on *Great Expectations*, *An Equal Music* (1999) is a tribute to Western classical music. Vikram Seth’s engagement with the grand literary and musical traditions of European culture makes his affiliations and cultural moorings impossible to pinpoint, all the more so since the prose of this chiseled, lyrical narrative is flawlessly clear and transparent. This paper will argue that the apparent cultural homogeneity of *An Equal Music* masks the violence that fissures the text.

Vikram Seth does not succumb to the temptation to repeat himself. Throughout his career, he has been driven by a restless pursuit of diversity. His versatility has taken him on a creative journey through various genres. Skipping from economist to poet, to travel writer, to novelist-in-verse, to librettist, to translator, and to children’s writer, he even tried his hand at biography in *Two Lives* (2005). In contrast to the postmodern blurring of generic categories exemplified by Salman Rushdie’s writing, all Seth’s works exhibit an ostensibly unfashionable sense of form, marking a striking divergence from current expectations of the postcolonial. Indeed Seth seems to view everything he writes as deliberate experiment, embodying all the characteristics of which a given form is capable, and the virtues most appropriate to it. In addition to varying dramatically in form, his books have been marked by diversity of location. A literary nomad, Seth enters the ethos and mental climate of each location (China and Tibet, San Francisco, India, London, Germany...) with considerable ease; his striking mobility from one genre to another and one culture to another defies any classification into conventional categories. Who is hiding behind this author with a thousand faces, this master of masks?

Owing to his rejection of any fixed, permanent posture, Vikram Seth comes across quite literally as an *impostor*. As exemplified by *The Golden Gate* (1986), Seth’s first novel (in verse), which explicitly posits itself as a pastiche of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Seth’s persistent literary experimentation is orchestrated less through pure invention than voracious borrowing. Seth’s systematic use of literary reprise generates widespread uneasiness amongst critics. The moral judgment the term “impostor” conveys is not inappropriate to describe the general devaluation (Duisit) of mimetic practices in the West: as Jean-François Jeandillou underlines in *Esthétique de la mystification*, mimetic modes are all too often associated with the metaphors of robbery, piracy and vampirism.

Why does Seth strive to preserve the European legacy so ostentatiously? While John Thieme has shown in *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing Back to the Canon* that postcolonial responses to Western texts seldom adopt a purely adversarial, combative stance, Seth engages in an ostensibly reverent relationship with the canon. This is emphasized by *The Rivered Earth*, Seth’s last collection of poems, which highlights the rewriting impulse that lies at the core of this protean opus. Though “Shared Ground” and “Seven Elements,” the second and the fourth libretti of *The Rivered Earth*, are solely comprised of “original” creations (not translations), “Shared Ground” almost exclusively consists of pastiches that comply with formal features borrowed from George Herbert’s poems

“Paradise,” “Easter-Wings,” “Hope,” “Love (III),” “Virtue” and “Prayer (I).” *The Rivered Earth* partakes of a musical project that sprang from a fruitful collaboration between Vikram Seth, the composer Alec Roth and the violinist Philippe Honoré: the poems of this volume were written with the awareness that they were meant to be sung. Seth’s passion for music resurfaces in *An Equal Music* (1999), a novel which displays intertextual connections with Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.¹ Many critics have expressed their profound discomfort with this novel: so infused is it with references to the classical European culture – both verbal and aural – that it has often been depicted as downright “Eurocentric” (Mokashi-Punekar 173). *An Equal Music* delineates a violinist’s growth through the wrenching loss, and partial recovery, of his muse and lover. The hallowed tradition of Western classical music is at the core of this realist novel which is mostly set in the center of London and has an all-white English cast. The *raags* and *ghazals* of *A Suitable Boy* are thus replaced with the European classical music circuit of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, and Schubert. These tokens of unequalled art² are the backdrop against which the protagonist’s tribulations – his joys and heartbreaks – are played out. Not unlike Peter Ackroyd in *An English Music* (1992), a novel that relentlessly explores a literary, musical, and cultural canon representative of the “English genius,” Seth glorifies an ultra-conservative musical canon. Susan Hosking lays the emphasis on the narrator’s rejection of “the dissonances of our century” (Seth, *Music* 153) and his perpetuation of Western artistic cultural traditions:

In one way *An Equal Music* is a conservative novel about an English musician whose function is to maintain the great European tradition of music. Michael has no time for modern music. When he is assaulted with a “delirious cacophony” produced by a contemporary Italian composer in Vivaldi’s church, he must exorcise that demon noise with the Largo of Vivaldi’s first Manchester Sonata. Michael’s music is attended by ghosts: the classical composers and those who have enabled Michael to connect with them. Michael’s violin has the potential to carry traditional values and aesthetics forward into the future. (150)

Michael’s vocation is to perpetuate the beauty and the certainties of the past. The novel’s conservatism and resistance to innovation clash with the general association of postcolonial literatures with the subversion of the European heritage. Seth’s distinctiveness appears in the light of Rushdie’s contemporaneous novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), which deals with rock music, revolves around the city of Bombay, and has the dazzling exuberance that characterizes much of Rushdie’s work. As exemplified by Mala Pandurang’s book *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations* (2011), the problem of location, which I shall further develop in the rest of this essay, is the one insistent question that runs throughout current critical appraisals of Seth’s work: where does one place Vikram Seth? Where does he belong and whom does he address? Pandurang states that “*An Equal Music* fits well into the category of an emerging post-struggle ‘global’ literature” (*Locations* 169). This begs an important question: can Seth be considered a postcolonial author other than by virtue of the context in which he writes,

1. The choice of this hypotext is hardly surprising since the immense influence of Victorian fiction on Vikram Seth is amply testified by *A Suitable Boy* which espouses the inflated, luxuriant form of *Middlemarch* and is strewn with references to George Eliot.

2. This axiological judgment resonates within the novel’s very title, since *An Equal Music* sounds so similar to “unequaled music.”

or should he be perceived as the epitome of “global,” “international” literature – like Kazuo Ishiguro, who explicitly claims his place in this category?

Current critiques of Vikram Seth’s writing are often based on the reproach that he does not speak of either diasporic anxiety or the uneasiness of being a cultural transplant; he is berated for evading the politics of his own cultural, historical and political location. In an essay on *An Equal Music* entitled “An Englishman’s Novel?” Anjana Sharma chastises Seth for eschewing the political dimension of literature: “Part of my own anxiety [...] lies in my belief that writing is not an activity that is innocent; that the written word [...] brings within it a degree of responsibility that cannot be dismissed by just talking about his intellectual and artistic abilities” (168). Rohini Mokashi-Punekar underlines the startling disjunction between Seth’s origins and his subject matter: “Seth effaces his Indian identity completely: there seems to be no relation between the author’s name and known facts of his cultural moorings and the theme and characters of the novel peopled by European musicians” (152). Betraying her misinterpretation of Sharma’s article, which actually ends up expressing exactly the same grievance, she adds: “While Sharma perceives that Seth does have complete license to appropriate the areas he does and mould them in ways that suit his sense of novelistic design, however, as a reader who has a specific gender, cultural and historic location, it is difficult to unquestioningly admire Seth’s craft” (173).

All too often, “postcolonial” critics tend to focus on digging up a buried motif or symbol that might reveal the cultural “origin” of the author. However, the problem of the affiliations of a writer like Vikram Seth is too complex to be summed up in simple, adamant dichotomies like home/abroad, inside/outside, and same/other. This essay will show that the generally accepted idea that *An Equal Music* is a smooth, apolitical text is based on a superficial reading of the novel. While *A Suitable Boy* resonates with a gentle serenity – despite the novel’s engagement with political upheaval and sectarian violence, a message of common sense, moderation and restraint, and a depiction of the pleasures of family and conventionality result in irony, comedy, and happy endings – *An Equal Music* is at heart an anxious book that questions the postcolonial author’s relationship to the Victorian norm. Through careful close reading of the text’s poetical specificities, I argue that *An Equal Music* is in fact emblematic of the postcolonial context, insofar as it undermines binary oppositions through the use of “mimicry.”

Unlike the sprawling canvas of *A Suitable Boy*, *An Equal Music* limits its scope to the professional and private world of a violinist: the warmth of the collective has given way to the bitter loneliness of the individual. Vikram Seth’s passion for music and his empathy with the people who create and perform it glow through this first-person narrative, which is told from the perspective of the novel’s central character, Michael Holme. As the centerpiece of the novel, the musical analogy offers a metafictional reflection on literary creation. Through Opus 104, a central motif in the novel, Seth throws into sharp relief the question of literary reprise. As Michael discovers that Beethoven had arranged one of his favorite piano trios (Opus 1, No. 3) into a clarinet string quintet in C Minor (Opus 104), this long-forgotten chamber work becomes the object of a frantic search: Michael becomes obsessed with Opus 104 and is determined to track it down. His search is dramatized within the novel, as Michael finds the piece, only to lose it again, and then recovers it, in an unending pattern of loss and recovery which forms the underpinning fugal structure of *An Equal Music*. The notion of reprise thus moves to

the foreground and becomes a major concern in the novel: "I mean, it's recycling, isn't it, but it's not just recycling," (49) Billy, a member of Michael's London-based Maggiore Quartet, observes. The restrictive formula – "not just recycling" – lends a derogatory connotation to the term; what follows immediately gives us a clue to Seth's understanding of recycling: "[Beethoven] would have had to make a lot of changes – I mean real changes" (49). That these statements operate on a metafictional level is corroborated a few lines further down by a seemingly casual allusion to Dickens: "Harold Moores [a music store] is a Dickensian haven..." (49). It is no coincidence that a reference to Dickens should follow one of the characters' musings on recycling: the text incidentally unveils the grid through which it is to be deciphered and posits itself as a reworking of Dickens's classic.

Seth's variation on *Great Expectations* revolves around a character whose alienation stems from class issues: Michael, the son of a provincial butcher, is acutely aware of the socially privileged connections of the kind of music he plays. Like Pip, Seth's protagonist originates from a working-class town which has long lost its grandeur and moves beyond his disadvantaged background through the generosity of a female benefactor: without harboring spiteful plans in the manner of Miss Havisham, Mrs. Formby nurtures Michael's awe and passion for music and gives him access to a world of high culture. In fact, Michael's strong urge to escape his "philistine" environment reflects the Dickensian protagonist's rejection of his common origins and his yearning for a higher social status. For both characters, moving to London consecrates their ascension up the social ladder. But just like *Great Expectations*, the conclusion of *An Equal Music* traces a moral evolution, as Michael learns to lower his expectations and embrace his humble origins: "What keeps me in London? Why not come back home?" (480), he ponders (Michael's transparent family name, Holme, crystallizes the protagonist's development). Thus, Seth grounds his novel within the Victorian tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.

If the overall structure of *An Equal Music* espouses that of *Great Expectations*, Seth's reprise is by no means neutral: as is suggested by Billy's remark on recycling, strict reproduction is invested with no positive value in the novel. The author stresses the subversive potential of imitation. "The most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker..." the omniscient narrator of *Middlemarch* notes (Eliot 504). This aphorism finds particular resonance in section 4.8 of *An Equal Music* which revolves around one of the rehearsals of the Maggiore Quartet. Helen, who has had too much wine at lunch, yields to a mimetic impulse which turns out to be extremely contagious:

What is odd today, though, is what [Helen] does whenever she has an imitative phrase: she responds with a phrase that is almost a clone of the previous player's. At first this is limited to the sound of it, and this is bothersome enough: Piers stumbles at an arpeggio in staccato triplets, and Helen stumbles at exactly the same point in exactly the same way, as if some goblin had jumped out of him and into her. [...]

Billy's gestures, with so many delectable open Cs, have become even broader, and Helen's imitation has extended towards facial expressions. But now I notice she is doing something even odder. Whenever she has an open string followed by a rest, she takes her hand off the viola.

So fascinated am I by this that I do not notice that I have begun to do the same. But it comes to me as a bit of a shock when I see Piers staring at Helen and me, and beginning, with a broad grin, to raise his hand off the fingerboard too. All of us are playing with

Billy-like abandon on our miniature cellos, making extravagant gesticulations whenever our left hands have nothing better to do. (207-8)

The beginning of the excerpt is marked by various repetitions (“stumbles,” “exactly,” “same”): Seth’s sentences start imitating each other, reflecting the intradiegetic mimetic interferences that lie at the heart of this strange scene. This passage puts forth a metacritical reflection on mimicry, a notion that occupies a crucial place in the close-knit conceptual network of *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha’s seminal book on postcolonial theory. Indeed the phrase “almost a clone” echoes Bhabha’s definition of mimicry: “almost the same, but not quite” (122). Bhabha locates a structural rift within colonialism: colonial discourse is anxious to create a class of natives English “in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 722), and yet it continually objectifies indigenous peoples as “Other” by stressing their racial and statutory difference. Colonial discourse thus works towards its own subversion: disruptive forms of resistance can be enacted using the very weapons that were intended to repress and mold. The disturbing ambivalence of imitation is highlighted in *An Equal Music* by Billy’s resentful reaction. As is revealed by the dialogue that follows the Quartet’s abortive rehearsal, the cellist is under the impression that his colleagues have hatched a plot against him. Significantly, Billy’s actions – even his sneezes! – are described two by two:

Billy’s face becomes redder and redder, and his gestures smaller and smaller. And his playing itself becomes more and more cramped and pinched until, in the middle of a phrase, he sneezes twice and suddenly stops. He gets up, leans his cello against his chair, and starts to loosen the hairs on his bow.

“What’s the matter, Billy?” asks Helen.

“I’ve had enough,” says Billy. He glares at us.

Piers and I both look contrite, but Helen merely looks puzzled. “Enough of what?” she asks.

“You know what,” says Billy. “All of you. When did you plan this?” (208)

This misunderstanding³ as to the value and significance of imitation is crucial, for it dramatizes the fundamental lability of mimicry, which “is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 123). The strength of mimicry lies precisely in its elusive quality: its direction of attack cannot be decided upon in abstraction from the particular social and historical circumstances in which it is performed; consequently, no single meaning can be attached to it. Seth’s recycling of *Great Expectations* offers a reflection on mimicry, a poetics that goes beyond the formal phenomenon of rewriting for it designates a socio-historical situation, a power relationship.

Far from being an apolitical text, as most critics tend to assume, *An Equal Music* problematizes the postcolonial author’s relationship to the Victorian norm. Seth’s variation on Dickens’s classic is in fact an attempt at exorcizing what can be perceived as the petrifying power of the Victorian classic which embodies the canon *par excellence*: “When our students are taught such things as ‘the humanities’ they are almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in our, that is, the only tradition” (Said 21). In the last part of *An Equal Music*, a pun crystallizes the alienating power of the classic. Having left the Maggiore and put his talent to commercial use, Michael recounts a troubling dream that features his dying violin professor, Carl Käll

3. The French word *malentendu* yields apt meanings here, as the novel relates Julia’s suffering from an auto-immune disease of the inner ear.

(the assonance Michael/Carl Käll emphasizes the unsettling ties between the two men). The professor, who is astonishingly gentle at first, suddenly starts vilifying his student – who has once again proven unworthy of the hopes he had pinned upon him – and then simmers down: “‘Very well, then,’ he says sadly. ‘Very well then, indulge the whim of a dying man. Play the dog-food aria again. And with less feeling. We must learn to respect the composer’s intentions’” (456). This peculiar dialogue ends with Michael’s weary reply: “As you say, Herr Professor [...]. But why bother to predecease me?” (456). The verb “predecease” is symptomatic: the noun “predecessor” and the verb “decease” resonate through it, expressing the deadly aura of the precursor.

The protagonist’s strained, love-hate relationship with his music professor deserves closer examination. Though Michael’s relationship with his mentor, which infuses dark panic and engenders nervous breakdowns, is given too much emphasis within the economy of the novel to be simply glossed over, it is rarely commented upon, not unlike the figure in the carpet in Henry James’s novella. *An Equal Music* is thus stripped of a fundamental dimension. Ambivalence is the distinctive feature of Michael’s feelings for the demanding Swedish maestro which are fraught with homosexual undertones: “My link with Carl too began almost like love” (384); and elsewhere: “If I had not met him I would not have brought to life the voice in my hands” (22). The metaphor of the voice and the synecdoche “hands” blur the distinction between music and literature, thus operating on a metafictional level.⁴ Together with Michael’s feeling of gratitude comes a sense of crippling claustrophobia whenever Carl is around. Unable to brook his mentor’s adamant attitude towards his own style of playing, Michael impulsively leaves Vienna and the woman he loves by the same token: “What happened to me so many years ago? Love or no love, I could not continue in that city. I stumbled, my mind jammed, I felt the pressure of every breath” (5). Michael keeps harking back to this feeling of oppression throughout the novel: “When he played I heard a sound so noble – round, warm, unaffected – that I wanted to emulate it, but when I tried his techniques they did violence to my own style. Why could he not permit me to form myself – with guidance, not constraint?” (136). A positive variation on this quote is to be found in the introduction of “Shared Ground,” the second libretto of *The Rivered Earth*. Seth emphasizes the doubts that plagued him when he first considered purchasing George Herbert’s house, highlighting the latent fear of plagiarism inherent in mimetic writing: “After a while, I simply got used to the presence of my tactful host, who never tried to bully me into his philosophy or style” (Seth, *Earth* 53). In contrast to *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* which are characterized by a prevailing lightness of tone, “Shared Ground” explicitly presents literary influence as a potentially dysphoric experience.⁵ Many critics have argued that the darkness that came over Michael and forced the estrangement with Julia is wrapped in too much mystery. Thus, in a book devoted to Vikram Seth’s work, Rohini

4. This synecdoche recurs further in the novel: “These hands move as [Schubert’s] hands moved on paper” (312). The deictic demonstrative adjective “these” and the reference to paper underscore the metafictional purport of the sentence, which actually refers to the very act of writing.

5. Though Seth attempts to play down the “anxiety of influence” (Bloom) Herbert’s ghost instills in him, “Shared Ground” conveys the powerful image of a haunted poet. In the course of a conversation with Alec Roth, recounted in the general introduction to *The Rivered Earth*, Seth stresses the fact that he refused to close “Shared Ground” with a poem by Herbert: “I did refuse you permission to use your setting of Herbert’s poem ‘The Flower’ at the very end of the libretto. I didn’t want a text by me to close with someone else’s words, however much I revered him. What gave you the idea of doing that?” (*Earth* 25). Seth’s outrage resurfaces a few lines further down: “I didn’t mind you adding hope, if that was your vision of things, but not with someone else’s words!” (*Earth* 26).

Mokashi-Punekar states: “But despite the surfeit of repeated explanations, the reason for the first break-up between Julia and Michael seems rather thinly-plotted...” (157). Only if one fails to construe the meaning of Michael’s anxiety, which is inseparable from a yearning for originality, does the protagonist’s behavior appear as ungrounded. The question of originality is inscribed at the core *An Equal Music*. Through the character of Julia, Michael’s beloved, a pianist who is gradually becoming deaf, Seth does not merely describe the pain and irony of a musician’s encroaching deafness; Julia’s tragic fate also lays the emphasis on a compelling conceptual question that underlies the whole novel: how is one to create when one is denied access to the original? In fact, Julia’s deafness seems to function not only as a screen, but also as a passage, as is suggested by the narrator’s comment upon hearing her play the piano: “There is something tender and indefinably strange and searching about her playing, as if she is attending to something *beyond* my hearing” (169) (my emphasis). When Michael asks his lover if there is any advantage whatsoever to being deaf, she avoids answering at first; by deferring Julia’s answer, Seth actually draws the reader’s attention to her words:

When I go to a concert or listen to a recording, all I can get is some general sense of what’s going on. All the subtleties of other people’s playing are lost on me now. So when I come to play something myself, especially something I’ve never heard before, I’m absolutely forced to be original... Not that originality by itself is enough. (32)

Originality by itself may not be enough, but as Derek Attridge stresses in *The Singularity of Literature*, it has been at the heart of Western artistic practice and reception. This question is all the more acute for the postcolonial author who needs to define his origins and assert his originality in a tongue and a space/time in which the boundaries between same and other are problematic. Michael’s relationship to his violin professor is the thematic reflection of the structural phenomenon of rewriting; what is really at stake is the postcolonial author’s ambivalent relation to the canonical center.

Not unlike Naipaul’s protagonist, Ralph Singh, Michael is a “mimic man.”⁶ By virtue of his profession, he is a *performer*. The protagonist’s haunting sense of alienation is expressed in class terms: Michael is tormented by the acute awareness that he is an intruder, a stranger in the socially privileged world of classical music (the fact that he has borrowed his Tononi violin and lives in constant fear that it might be taken away from him enhances this feeling of inadequacy). The protagonist suggests that his sudden departure from Vienna and his attendant break-up with Julia be construed in the light of this complex of inferiority: “Were there three corners to that crisis then? Was it not just teacher and student in a war of wills? [...] Did I feel lessened by this younger woman, just a shade scornful of my ignorance? [...] I never had what she took – takes – for granted” (384). The recurrent metaphor of the screen⁷ could therefore symbolize not only Julia’s growing isolation as her infirmity deteriorates, but also the social chasm that

6. *The Mimic Men* (1967) revolves around a character who suffers from a sense of dislocation. Ralph Singh poses as an Englishman, filling his interior void with the mere appearance of coherence. For Naipaul, mimicry is symptomatic of a historical traumatism: it is the most distressing mark of colonialism.

7. When after years of estrangement, Michael glimpses Julia through the window of a bus, he observes: “She cannot hear me. We are in separate worlds” (52). The motif of the screen recurs throughout the novel: “The two layers of glass between us, like a prison visit by a loved one after many years” (56); “We did not share these hours. We were sealed in separate absorptions.” (130); “I stand with her outside my door. The lift comes. She enters. Her face is framed by the little noughts-and-crosses grid of glass in the outer door. There is a click, and the inner door, smooth steel, slides swiftly across her troubled smile.” (151)

separates the two lovers. Determined to repudiate his working-class, northern England background, Michael yearns to be immersed in London – “[t]he great city, center of the world...” (Naipaul 22) – as is revealed by his first conversation with Julia after their reunion: “‘Except that Vienna is your city, and London is mine.’/ ‘Since when has London been your city?’ Julia smiles./ ‘No, it’s not really,’ I say, then smile back at her. ‘But I’m getting naturalized.’/ ‘Against your will?’/ ‘Not entirely’” (125). The term “naturalized” encapsulates Seth’s transposition: despite Mala Pandurang’s peremptory contention that Seth’s novel “totally rejects the theme of cultural displacement” (*Locations* 168), *An Equal Music* is a story of exile. Though Michael attempts to mask his ex-centricity by choosing to live in the heart of London,⁸ the fact that his vision of the capital is exogenous is repeatedly stressed by the protagonist’s observations which open up fissures in the text: “I became, in effect, a fugitive in London...” (104); “I acquainted myself with London and the facilities of London, but could not have felt less a Londoner” (105). Through the character of Michael, Seth questions the camouflage of his Indian origins in *An Equal Music*, a novel which offers an immaculate example of British English: “As for my own accent: what has become of it? [...] From the start it was drummed into me by my mother that I should ‘talk proper’” (27).

The question of the accent, which is repeatedly stressed in the novel (don’t accents too partake of music?), crystallizes the protagonist’s complex of inferiority. *An Equal Music* underlines the potential violence conveyed by this question which often betrays a desire to assign a fixed place to the Other and classify him/her as a stranger. Only by means of diligent effort has Michael managed to acquire a standard, London accent. When he visits Manchester, his northern accent resurfaces: “‘All our cars are alarmed,’ the girl says in broad Mancunian. [...] Already I can feel a bit of my own accent returning” (78). The same phenomenon occurs in *The Satanic Verses*. On his way to India, Saladin Chamcha – the master of adaptation and disguise – realizes with dismay that his sculpted British accent is being replaced by the Indian accent he had worked hard to overcome. The veneer of integration suddenly cracks: “[...] Saladin, emerging from the dream, found his speech unaccountably metamorphosed into the Bombay lilt he had so diligently (and so long ago!) unmade” (Rushdie 34). Like a false moustache that slips unexpectedly,⁹ the protagonist’s mask falls. Michael has much more in common with Saladin Chamcha than it seems at first glance. In both novels, the accent appears as an *excess* that betrays the speaker, signaling a non-coincidence, a disjunction, a dissonance: “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122).

Numerous metalinguistic observations punctuate the novel, revealing an obsession with linguistic norms. When Michael meets James, Julia’s husband, for the first time, he notes: “[James’s] accent is Bostonian, unconcerned to anglicise itself” (269). This seemingly immaterial comment is crucial: the author’s spelling of “anglicise” – with an [s] rather than a [z], in keeping with Michael’s British origins – reflects his chameleon-like malleability and transforming qualities. While Seth uses a British spelling in *An Equal Music*, his novel in verse *The Golden Gate*, which follows the lives of a group of

8. “All of us except Billy live quite centrally, in or near Bayswater, within walking distance of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens...” (9).

9. To take up Zeenat Vakil’s comparison in *The Satanic Verses*: “You know what you are, I’ll tell you. A deserter is what, more English than your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don’t think it’s so perfect, it slips, baba, like a false moustache” (Rushdie 53).

Californian yuppies, is written in perfect American English. In the course of a conversation with Julia’s son, the question of the variety of English crops up again. The author’s effort to anglicize himself surfaces through Luke’s words: “When Luke and I get to the Round Pond, he says, ‘No, not clockwise, anti-clockwise. Buzby prefers it.’/‘Shouldn’t you Americans say counter-clockwise?’ /‘Yes, I guess so. My Dad said that once. But I’m English here’” (179). Luke’s last statement parallels Phil’s patriotic declaration in *The Golden Gate*: “I’m an American, and I’m glad” (145). Through the deictic “here,” which anchors the utterance in the here and now of enunciation, Luke’s words enhance the fundamental instability of any identity. Though Seth’s writing is all too often simplistically described as “standard” English, it is in fact marked by an underlying reflection on the multiplicity of languages contained within a single language. The proliferation of metalinguistic comments in *An Equal Music* unveils an acute awareness of linguistic norms and consequently, of any deviance from the norm. In a book devoted to “francophone literatures,” Lise Gauvin stresses that the “linguistic over-awareness”¹⁰ characteristic of writers who find themselves at the crossroads of different languages and cultures may reveal itself in two opposite ways, either through a strict adherence to the canonical rules of French or through an irreverent exploration of all the possibilities of the language (256). Like Seth’s beloved Heine,¹¹ whose transparent poetical language represents, according to Adorno, the very opposite of native “at-homeness” in a language, Vikram Seth embodies the first choice. Following the logic suggested in *Two Lives* when the author observes that his German aunt’s sartorial elegance is so very English that it betrays her foreign origins, Seth’s “white prose,”¹² to borrow Barthes’s phrase, reveals the transplanted nature of his writing.

Though *An Equal Music* appears as a cultural bubble, a discrete world cut off from postcolonial issues, it is in fact a deeply political text that collapses the walls between the inside and the outside, the same and the other through the poetics of “mimicry.” While Seth dramatizes the subversive power of imitation, *An Equal Music* is dominated by a sense of alienation: the “anxiety of influence” instilled by the Western canon lies at the core of this magnificent novel.

Mélanie Heydari-Malayeri
Columbia University

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10. My translation. “Surconscience linguistique” (Gauvin 256).

11. Seth pays a vibrant tribute to Heine in *Two Lives*: “But my favourite German poet from the moment I first read him was and still is Heine, clear and deep and unpompous, full of longing and sardonic tenderness and sudden twists of mood” (235). The collection of poems *Mappings* features a translation of one of Heine’s poems (“Sleep and Death”).

12. The adjective “white” recurs in *An Equal Music* with disturbing frequency: “I will sit for a while in this alarmed and centrally-locked white Toyota in the carpark where we once lived and lay a white rose...” (78); “In the middle of it, under an acacia tree full of white blossom, stands the improbable white statue of a bear” (285); “I do the shopping in my white rental car [...]. The cemetery is covered in white [...]. On my mother’s grave I place a white rose” (481) (my emphasis).

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