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MUSIC AND CULTURAL ETHOS IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF VIKRAM SETH, NAMITHA DEVIDAYAL, NEELUM GOUR, MEERA SHIVSHANKAR; A THEMATICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the representation of music as a cultural archive in four contemporary novels: **An Equal Music** by Vikram Seth, **The Music Room** by Namita Devidayal, **Requiem in Raga Janki** by Neelum Saran Gour, and **Raagamalika** by Meera Shivakumar.

The paper argues that music in these texts functions not merely as aesthetic background but as a powerful cultural metaphor that shapes identity, memory, and emotional experience. The research talks about the various genres of music like Indian and western. **Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*** reflects the ethos of late twentieth-century, European urban alienation and artistic individualism. This story blends love and identity.

Namitha Devidayals's *The Music Room* foregrounds the hierarchical and devotional dimensions of the Indian guru–shishya tradition. Namitha herself was a disciple of Kishori Amonkar who is a famous Hindustani singer. In ***Requiem in Raga Janki*** **by** Neelum Gour, music becomes a repository of partition memory, mourning, and cultural rupture. Neelum Gour portrays the biography of the real life Hindustani classical singer Janki Bai Illahabadi's tragic music journey, whereas **Meera Shivashankar's *Raagamalika*** explores Carnatic music as a site of gendered negotiation between tradition and modernity. It's an anthology of 18 short stories based on 18 carnatic ragas.

Through a comparative cultural analysis, the study demonstrates that music operates as a transnational language that preserves collective memory, articulates trauma, and negotiates subjectivity across diverse cultural contexts. By situating these texts within frameworks of cultural materialism, memory studies, and postcolonial theory, the paper highlights how musical aesthetics intersect with power, history, and identity formation. Ultimately, the research proposes that contemporary fiction reimagines music as a living cultural ethos that bridges personal emotion and collective history.

Key words: Music genres, autobiographical, tradition and modernity, cultural ethos.

Introduction.

Music has a divine and mesmerizing power. Music is one of the oldest and most universal forms of human expression, transcending linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. It functions not merely as a form of entertainment but as a profound medium for conveying emotions, ideas, and cultural values. Music plays a significant role in shaping human experience by reflecting social, spiritual and emotional aspects. Literature and music have long been interconnected disciplines, each enriching the other through shared emotional and cultural expressions. In Indian English literature, music is not merely an artistic element but a powerful medium that reflects cultural identity, tradition, and social values. Many writers have used musical themes to explore deeper human experiences and cultural ethos.

Contemporary Indian English writers such as **Vikram Seth, Namita Devidayal**, **Neelum Saran Gour, and Meera Shivshankar** have significantly engaged with musical themes in their works. The intersection of literature and music has long been a profound area of scholarly inquiry, as both art forms serve as powerful medium for human expression and cultural preservation. In the realm of Indian English Literature, music is rarely a mere backdrop; it often functions as a living character, a spiritual

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journey, or a repository of tradition. This research analyses the thematic study on music and cultural ethos of these selected works.

Music, in the works of these four writers, transcends its auditory nature to become a reflection of the "Cultural Ethos"—the fundamental spirit and beliefs of a community. **Vikram Seth**'s ***An Equal Music***, bridges the gap between Western classical discipline and the universal language of longing. **Namitha Devidayal**'s ***The Music Room*****,** provides an evocative look into the *Guru-Shishya* parampara and the vanishing world of Hindustani classical music. Similarly, **Neelum Saran Gour**, in ***Requiem in Raga Janaki***, portrays the life of a distinguished Hindustani classical singer, presenting a biographical narrative in which music serves as a vehicle of cultural memory and artistic tradition. In contrast, **Meera Shivshankar**, through ***Ragamalika,*** blends Carnatic ragas with her characters, where music becomes a medium to express human emotions and cultural continuity.

This paper seeks to address this gap by conducting a thematic study of selected works by these authors, Analyses how music functions as a narrative and cultural device. It argues that music in these texts is integral to the construction of cultural identity, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity while enriching the literary narrative. Although these works richly incorporate musical themes, there is a lack of focused scholarly analysis on how music operates as a representation of cultural ethos across these texts. Existing studies tend to examine these works individually, without exploring their thematic connections in terms of music and culture.

Research Objectives.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the intersection of musical aesthetics and cultural ethos within the selected narratives of Vikram Seth, Namita Devidayal, Neelum Saran Gour, and Meera Shivashankar. The study seeks to analyse how music transcends its role as an art form to become a powerful vehicle for expressing social hierarchies, gendered spaces, and the tension between tradition and modernity. By examining Seth's focus on Western classical obsession alongside the Hindustani classical traditions in the works of Devidayal and Gour, the research aims to identify the "syncretic" (merged) cultural identities formed through musical practice. Furthermore, the study will explore the psychological and emotional landscapes of the characters in Shivashankar's and Seth's works, specifically looking at how specific ragas or compositions mirror internal human conflicts. Ultimately, this thematic study intends to map the shift from the traditional *Guru-Shishya* or *Kotha* cultures to a more globalized, contemporary musical identity, thereby filling the gap in comparative literary studies of musical narratives in Indian English fiction.

Research Questions:

Review of Literature:

a) **Primary Sources:**

1. **Original Texts under Study**

b) **Secondary Sources: Critical Perspectives**

1. Musical Lineage and Spiritual Ethos

Scholarship on Namita Devidayal (*The Music Room*) and Neelum Saran Gour (*Requiem in Raga Janki*) highlights the Guru-Shishya parampara and the "Kotha" culture. Critics note that these works transcend biography, portraying Indian Classical Music as a sacred oral tradition and a repository of historical memory.

2. Western vs. Eastern Musicality

Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* is frequently analyzed for its depiction of Western Classical Music. Unlike the spiritual focus of Indian texts, Seth's work explores music as a "passionate obsession" and a technical discipline, representing a European cultural ethos of individual longing and lost love.

3. Raga as an Emotional Framework

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In the works of Meera Shivasankar, literature serves as a vessel for *Rasa* (emotion). Research indicates her stories use specific Ragas to mirror the internal psychological states of characters, effectively "translating" sound into soul-searching prose.

4. Synthesis: Music as Cultural Identity

The collective literature suggests that for these authors, music is not just a theme but a **cultural bridge**. Whether it is the secular, syncretic world of Gour or the globalized setting of Seth, music serves as a tool to define identity and resist the erasure of tradition in a modern world.

The intersection of music and literature has been a significant area of scholarly inquiry, with critics emphasizing the role of music as a medium of emotional and cultural expression. Studies on Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* highlight its exploration of Western classical music and themes of love, memory, and artistic identity. Similarly, critical works on Namita Devidayal's *The Music Room* focus on the guru–shishya tradition and the cultural dimensions of Hindustani classical music. Research on Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* examines the relationship between music, memory, and historical trauma, particularly in the context of Partition. In contrast, Meera Shivshankar's *Ragamalika* has been studied for its portrayal of Carnatic music and its engagement with gender and cultural identity.

Research Gaps

There is limited research have done on this specific combination of texts and themes. While existing studies have focused on individual texts and musical themes, there is a lack of comprehensive comparative research that analyses music as a representation of cultural ethos across the selected works. lack of a **comparative synthesis** across these four specific authors and their divergent musical traditions.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the role of music as a representation of cultural ethos in selected works of contemporary Indian English literature. The research is based on a literary study, involving close reading and textual analysis of the selected texts, namely *An Equal Music*, *The Music Room*, *Requiem in Raga Janki*, and *Ragamalika*. **A thematic method** is employed to analyse key themes such as music, emotion, identity, memory, and cultural values in the selected works. This approach helps in understanding how music functions as an important narrative element and contributes to the development of characters and themes. The study also uses a **comparative approach** to examine similarities and differences in the treatment of musical elements across the works of Vikram Seth, Namita Devidayal, Neelum Saran Gour, and Meera Shivshankar.

Data Collection:

The data for the study is collected **from primary sources,** which include the selected literary texts, and secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and critical essays. The analysis is interpretative in nature and aims to explore how music operates as both a cultural and narrative device in the selected works.

Findings/Results

The present study reveals that music plays a significant role as a narrative and cultural element in the selected works of contemporary Indian English literature. It is observed that music is not merely used as a background element, but functions as a powerful medium to express human emotions, identity, and cultural values.

The analysis shows that in the works of Vikram Seth, music reflects themes of love, loss, and artistic identity, particularly through the representation of Western classical traditions. In contrast, Namita Devidayal's work highlights the cultural ethos of the guru–shishya tradition, emphasizing discipline, devotion, and hierarchical relationships in Hindustani classical music.

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Further, the study finds that Neelum Saran Gour portrays music as a repository of memory and trauma, especially in relation to historical experiences such as Partition, where music becomes a means of preserving cultural identity. Similarly, Meera Shivshankar presents music as a medium to express gender, tradition, and modernity through Carnatic ragas.

Overall, the findings indicate that music functions as a **cultural bridge** that connects personal emotions with collective history. It also reveals that music acts as a unifying element across diverse cultural contexts, reflecting both continuity and change in cultural traditions. Thus, the study establishes that music is a significant tool for representing cultural ethos in contemporary Indian English literature.

Conclusion:

Music and cultural ethos is rare combination in Indian literature. The present study highlights the deep and inseparable relationship between music and literature as reflected in the selected works. The analysis reveals that music is not merely an artistic element but a narrative tool that shapes characters, emotions, and cultural ethos. Both works demonstrate how ragas carry symbolic meanings and connect deeply with human feelings such as love, loss, devotion, and nostalgia.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes that literature enriched with musical elements offers a multi-sensory experience, allowing readers to engage not only intellectually but also emotionally. These texts also preserve and reflect Indian classical traditions, thereby contributing to cultural continuity.

The primary contribution of this thesis is the creation of a comparative framework that bridges the gap between Western and Indian (Hindustani and Carnatic) musical scholarship in English literature. By analyzing these four diverse authors under a single thematic umbrella, the study has moved the academic conversation from "musical technicality" to "musical sociology," proving that the language of melody is inseparable from the language of social identity.

In conclusion, the integration of music and literature in these works creates a unique aesthetic experience, where sound and story merge to express the complexities of human life. This study opens scope for further research in interdisciplinary areas combining literature, music, and cultural studies.

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