

The Theme of Existentialism in Vikram Seth's An Equal Music

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Published in 1999, *An Equal Music* belongs characteristically to Vikram Seth's repertoire by virtue of it being stunningly different from all his previous works. All of Seth's novels are one-offs and this one too is no exception. The backdrop of the novel is the enchanted, romantic world of Vienna and Venice, and the subject is western Europe's supreme cultural achievement: classical music. This novel examines the impact of western classical music on the lives and hopes and fears and final, desperate choices of its European protagonist. "Seth's novel was stunning by many accounts, not the least of which was its grafting of the twin bulwark of the European tradition—its verbal and aural inscriptions onto the life of its thirty something protagonists," suggests Anjana Sharma, a critic. She continues, "Seth tells the story of a young man's growth and maturation—the loss and partial recovery of his lost love, and the loss, and the more certain recovery of his artistic self."¹

The paper deals with the theme of existentialism in the novel, *An Equal Music*. The term 'Existentialism' emphasizes the idea that an individual is in control of his own actions. Existentialism is a philosophical theory that stresses the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of will. In the novel, Michael, the protagonist is a professional musician who leads an obsessive and neurotic life and describes himself as "irreparably imprinted with the die of someone else's being."² This someone is Julia and the one true love of his life. Michael is an existential hero whose present condition is the outcome of his deeds. Back then in Vienna, both Michael and Julia were passionately devoted to each other and to their music. They found that their music complemented each other's very well and found a trio with another musician. But owing to an irreconcilable war of wills with their stern teacher, Karl C`a`ll, Michael who was nery and strong

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headed, left Vienna and unintentionally, Julia. By the time he recovered from his distress two months had elapsed, and Julia, hurt beyond redemption, was lost to him forever.

The character of Michael is a dominant portrayal of Vikram Seth's central concern with existentialism, a philosophy that views each person as an isolated being who is cast into an alien universe and conceives the world as possessing no inherent human truth, value or no meaning. As an Existential hero, Michael is in control of his actions or deeds and his identity is measured by the outcome of his deeds in which only work is given priority to the exclusion of family and friends. Michael is separated from his family and his beloved Julia because of his neurotic behavior as well as preference to his career but his segregation from Julia makes Michael more isolated than before. An existential critic states in this reference – "Each individual assumes responsibility for his life through the act of choosing between two alternatives."³ Michael too makes a choice out of two sets of alternatives that stand before him-career over family and love, artificiality over nature. It is this very choice that becomes the predicament of his life. As a result, he becomes alienated from everything surrounded him. Alienation is crucial to existentialism because an alienated individual is much more able to see his surroundings.

Ten years later, where the novel begins, Michael is earning his living in a string quartet, the Maggiore. Michael spends his days listlessly in memory of his beloved Julia, with only music providing an emotional anchor and in effect, any meaning to his life. The opening of the book sets the tone of the novel, bringing home to the reader a loneliness that is only briefly assuaged by long walks and ruminations, a loneliness that clearly attracts Michael to the dark water the wind is blowing at him: "The branches are bare, the sky tonight a milky violet. It is not quiet here, but it is peaceful. The wind ruffles the black water towards me..."⁴

Michael's loneliness is emphasized in pathos-inducing descriptions in several parts of the book. For instance, when a Salesgirl tells Michael that he is a happy man, Michael tells the reader, "I stared at her with such incredulity that she looked down."⁵ This isolation is punctuated by accounts of his tormented past, a past which constantly haunts him, making him yearn for answers, for absolution. His dark brooding consciousness is reflected in his thoughts when he murmurs at pains to unburden his travails and disillusionment with the city of

London:—"London unsettles me—even from such a height. There is no clear countryside to view. But it is not Vienna. It is not Venice. It is not for that matter, hometown in the north in clear reach of moors."6

Michael goes to London to rise in profession. London, the essential urban cosmopolitan evinces the existential issue of desperate unhappy people struggling for existence. He is alone and it has been ten years since Julia and he parted. At the moment, he is going along with the student, Virginie. There is only lust and no love involved. Undecidedly, without being guided by passion or reason, Michael, thirty seven years old, indulges with his student who is barely sixteen. He cannot fathom why he continues to cater to this unequal relationship. He reflects:

"Every time I sleep here. I wonder that what I am doing with my time and hers.....she wants it to, and I go along with it, through lust and loneliness suppose; and laziness and lack of focus."7

Through his resistance and disinclination of an urban cosmopolitan society, London, the problem of existentialism is reiterated and it irrevocably brings to mind the decadent western civilization that T.S. Eliot, in his great masterpiece, *The Waste Land* had sketched. Some very unforgettable images come alive. There is the description where-

"A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet."8

The protagonist in the poem surveys London as an unreal city and the crowd moving over London bridge appear as spiritually dead people of the *Waste Land* going for their daily round of routine life. Indeed everything is mechanical in the present cosmopolitan life. There is hardly any alternative left than to let things happen as they come. Michael too is part of such a crowd whose dreary life appears to move on, devoid of zest and focus. He undoubtedly, tries to assuage his loneliness through sexual gratification with someone he does not love since sex appears a viable commodity in the absence of love in modern times. Michael is also a part of the modern society who is gripped by feeling of loneliness and ennui on account of which his way of thought appears erratic and meandering.

Michael is solely responsible for his present condition. In this context, Sartre, An existential critic comments – "Man makes himself."9 His melancholic consciousness is the consequence of his

deeds which is reflected in his dejected personality. He himself realizes the dark side of his own personality with surprising clarity. "A volatility, a sense of resistance, of skepticism, roughness, impulsiveness, even at times, of dark panic, almost brainsickness." 10

In a nut shell, it is observed that through the theory of existentialism, Michael's character is analyzed truly. It is existentialism that makes Michael realized his milieu and gradually, Michael finds solace from his isolation in playing the music which transforms his thoughts. Consequently, Michael as an existential hero, is alone like he was in the beginning, but there is one important difference: his thoughts have reached a resolution and he is no longer troubled. He has learned acceptance and it has brought him serenity. This change in perspective has enabled him to come to terms with the past, make the present bearable and the future promising. And most essentially of all, he has realized that to be complete is an advantage, not a necessity.

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