

IQBAL AND SARTRE ON HUMAN FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY

Dr. Latif Hussain Kazmi

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) a renowned poet-philosopher of the East and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a famous existentialist thinker and litterateur of the West, are the two influential thinkers who placed human freedom and creativity at the heart of their value system and dealt with the problem from an existentialist perspective on human life.

Both Jean-Paul Sartre and Muhammad Iqbal occupy a unique place in their respective areas of influence in the modern Western and Eastern philosophical worlds. Sartre is a prominent champion of existential philosophy, while Iqbal's greatness lies in reviving and reconstructing Islamic thought. It would be an interesting study to compare and contrast their positions regarding freedom, an issue that has acquired new dimensions in the context of the present historic situation in which individual's identity and freedom have been threatened by bureaucracy, technology and an all-embracing collectivism. This study becomes all the more interesting in view of their contrasting beliefs —Sartre is a declared atheist, and Iqbal is firmly committed to the Islamic faith —as one of them rejects God in order to safeguard human freedom, while the other reaffirms his faith in God so that man can exercise his freedom fully. Yet both of them are the champions of human freedom. Furthermore, both of them are creative writers of the highest calibre. Sartre is a great fiction writer of our age and Iqbal is universally acclaimed as one of the greatest poets of Indo-Persian tradition in the 20th century.

The similarities and dissimilarities in their philosophical outlooks are equally glaring. There are some areas in which both are in agreement and some in which they disagree. Their difference seems prominent due to Sartre's tackling of the metaphysical notions on an atheistic basis; conversely Iqbal's system of thought is rooted in the intensive faith in God, and his approach is a theistic one. The main question is how far does belief or unbelief in God make a difference in relation to a philosopher's views on freedom. Does it make a fundamental difference or give rise to only secondary and minor differences? Here in the following pages we shall discuss these questions.

Existentialism is a point of departure, insofar as it provides an alternative approach to the understanding and living of life and consequently changes one's entire outlook by creating new attitudes, values and ideals. The central contention of existential philosophy—in the words of Sartre—"existence precedes essence"⁶⁷ is a revolutionary one and shakes the hitherto dominant essentialist philosophy to its foundations. It provides a new conception of man, and a new outlook by making "human existence" the real frame of reference. For Sartre human reality or human subjectivity is the foundation of all thought and action. He says that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and consequently defines himself afterwards.⁶⁸

Iqbal, whose thought is a synthesis of Eastern religious insight into reality and Western intellectualism, has crucial existential insights to offer. He dwells upon certain important existentialist themes without calling himself an existentialist. However, he is not in full agreement with the exponents of the slogan - Sartre's dictum—"existence precedes essence" and its implications. Nevertheless, he emphasises the main themes current in contemporary existentialist philosophy such as:

- (a) Man's existence and his personal involvement;
- (b) Anti-intellectualism and anti-personal functionalization;
- (c) Alienation and authentic existence; and prominent among all
- (d) Freedom and creativity.

These concepts he certainly shares with the continental existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel, Heidegger and more prominently with Sartre. At present, we shall take up the issue of 'freedom and creativity' and expound briefly some common views put forward by the existential exponent Sartre and the Muslim philosopher Iqbal. We shall also compare and contrast Sartre's and Iqbal's approaches to such conceptions as well.

II. THE CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY

The conception of freedom in the philosophy of Iqbal and Sartre is interesting from various angles. The *Weltanschauung* of the two is apparently radically opposed; that is, one is a theist while the other is an atheist.

⁶⁷ Sartre, J.P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, Tr. Philip Mairet, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.), 1970, p. 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Moreover, Sartre's philosophy is the culmination of the anti-intellectualistic tradition of the Western philosophy, particularly representing a revolt against the Platonic-Christian world-outlook, while Iqbal's philosophy is a radical point of departure within the framework of the Eastern thought, particularly the Islamic tradition of philosophy. Despite their different historico-religious backgrounds, there are many common elements in their thought systems on various issues such as man's existence, freedom and creativity, alienation, authenticity, materialism and its various forms etc.

As indicated earlier, existentialism being a philosophy of 'freedom' and 'creativity' is anti-deterministic. The emphasis of the existentialists on personal existence and subjectivity has led to a new stress on man's freedom and responsibility. According to the existentialist thinkers determinism, whether genetic, social or environmental, does not offer adequate explanation of man's inner potentialities and capabilities. The existentialists say that man brings out his unique inner potentialities and creative skill only because of his freedom. Their viewpoint insists that, first of all, man exists in the world and with his utmost freedom creates himself through each of his actions. He is the maker of himself and "by virtue of his freedom, originally creates himself".⁶⁹ Man is the project which possesses subjective life. Apart from this projection of self, nothing exists. The existentialists hold that man fulfils his project only due to his freedom. He is responsible for whatever he does and, in this way, the whole responsibility of his action falls on his own shoulders. Man has considerable freedom within his own being in case he wills to express it. According to Karl Jaspers, the dignity of man is in his freedom:

To see the essence of man in his freedom, however, is to see him in his dignity. All individuals, myself included, are irreplaceable under the same high obligations.⁷⁰

Freedom is a unique quest which lies in working out the demands of one's inner nature and expressing one's genuine or authentic self. Freedom means facing conflicting choices, making decisions and accepting them.

Jean-Paul Sartre alone among all the existentialist thinkers elaborated a systematic and detailed theory of freedom. He approaches the problem from

⁶⁹ Jaspers, K., *Existentialism and Humanism*, (ed.) Hanns E. Fischer & (Tr.) E.B. Ashton, (New York: Russell F. Moore Co. Inc., 1952), p.69.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.69.

the atheistic viewpoint totally denying the existence of God. Man is completely free to do whatever he likes. To him there is no God and hence “everything is permitted”⁷¹. Sartre says:

Nothing will be changed if God does not exist;... and we shall have disposed of God as an out-of-date hypothesis which will die away quietly of itself.⁷²

In case, God does not exist, Sartre points out, there is only one being whose existence comes before its essence and that being is ‘man’. Man is indefinable, because to begin with he is nothing:

Freedom is precisely nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make *itself* instead of *to be* ... for human reality, to be is the choose *oneself*; nothing comes to it either from outside or from within which it can receive or accept Thus, freedom is not *a being*; it is *the being* of man—, i.e. his nothingness of being.⁷³

Human individual will not be anything unless and until he will be what he makes of himself. Hence, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have an idea of it:

For indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism.⁷⁴

Man is not what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, what he chooses and “what he makes of himself”⁷⁵ through freedom, and “that is the first principle of existentialism”⁷⁶. Moreover, freedom, according to Sartre, is the only ground of all values.

On the contrary, regarding freedom and creativity, Iqbal has referred to various Qur’anic verses in his Urdu and Persian poetry and particularly in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* affirming his faith in Allah. In the fourth lecture in the *Reconstruction*, he presents three significant themes from the Qur’^{an} reaffirming the Islamic view of man’s being a Vicegerent

⁷¹ Sartre, J.P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, *op. cit.*, pp.33-4.

⁷² *Ibid.* p.33.

⁷³ Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, (Tr.) Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1957), pp.440-1.

⁷⁴ Sartre, J. P. *Existentialism and Humanism*, *op. cit.*, p.34.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 28.

(*Khalâfah*) of Allah, a chosen entity and a trustee of a free personality which he accepted at his peril.⁷⁷ “The perfect Muslim is, for Iqbal, nothing but the realization of the Qur’anic sentence according to which Adam was ordered to be the *Khalâfah*, the Vicegerent of God on Earth”.⁷⁸

Iqbal argues that man’s freedom and creativity, in the sphere of ethics, must be under the direction of the Highest Good and Absolute Freedom i.e. God. The greatest of all obstacles, says Iqbal, in the upward life of the ego, is Matter or Nature, yet it is not evil, since it enables the latent powers of life to unfold themselves. According to Iqbal, the Ego attains freedom by the removal of all the obstructions in its way. “It is partly free and partly determined; and reaches fuller freedom by approaching the individual who is the most free, termed ‘God’”.⁷⁹

Iqbal points out that it is man’s firm faith in *Taw’Âád* (Unity of God) which makes him believe that this principle is the foundation of every aspect of human life. He says in his *Rumëz i Bekbudî*:

What is it that infuses one breath in a hundred hearts?

It is one of the secrets of faith in Taw’Âád!

Be united and thus make Taw’Âád visible;

Realize its latent meaning in action!

Faith and wisdom and law all spring from it,

It is the source of strength and power and stability!

“There is no god but God” is the capital of our life!

Its bond weaves our scattered thoughts together.⁸⁰

Conversely, Sartre holds that there is no God and man is condemned to freedom:

Everything is permitted (because of the fact that) God does not exist
... One will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a

⁷⁷ Iqbal, M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1944, p. 95.

⁷⁸ Schimmel, A., *Gabriel’s Wing*, E. J. Brill, Leiden (Netherlands), 1963, pp. 111-2.

⁷⁹ Nicholson, R. A., *The Secrets of the Self* (English translation of Iqbal’s *Asrar-i-Khudâ*), MacMillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1920, (Introduction), p. XXI.

⁸⁰ *Divan-â-Iqbal Lâhori* (Persian Collection), Intishâr-i-*Pageh*, Tehrân, Irân, 1361 (Shamsi), pp. 126-6, (Tr. K.G. Saiyidain: *Iqbal’s Educational Philosophy*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1954, pp. 165-6).

given and specific human nature; in other words there is no determinism - man is free, man is freedom.⁸¹

His position is not like that of Iqbal who maintains that man in some spheres of activity is free, and in some other spheres has to follow the Divine Commands. Sartre emphatically asserts in *Being and Nothingness*:

Freedom is not a being; it is *the being* of man - i.e., his nothingness of being. If we start by conceiving of man as plenum, it is absurd to try to find in him afterwards moments or psychic regions in which he would be free Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and for ever free or he is not free at all.⁸²

This is, in fact, the major difference between the approaches of the two thinkers. Sartre's existentialistic outlook is labelled as humanistic because he saves man's freedom at the cost of God. Iqbal's existentialism - if the term may be applied to his approach - is also humanistic despite his firm faith in God, because God in his philosophical *Weltanschauung* does not deprive man of his freedom but rather guarantees it.

However, in spite of some differences, what both the systems have in common is the doctrine of freedom through which human existence can translate its authenticity into actions. For Iqbal, as for Sartre, man is a self-contained centre of activity, self-conscious, creative and self-evolving being. Human self is free in the sense that it is not determined by anything outside it.⁸³ Freedom is its own architect and the very laws governing its mode of operation in the world are of its own making. Above all, according to Iqbal, man is the architect of his own life and is the sole sovereign in the scheme of creation and the undisputed master of his destiny. In this connection Iqbal says in his *Jawād Nāmāh*:

*'O lover of Truth! Be conclusively final like a glittering sword,
Be thy self the destiny of thine own world.'*⁸⁴

According to Sartre freedom reveals itself in dread that compels man to seek refuge in the in-authenticity of existence. To him overcoming dread leads to authentic existence and that is moral, and flight from it is inauthentic and immoral. In Iqbal's philosophy, when one realizes what is freedom, it

⁸¹ Sartre, J. P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, op. cit., pp. 33-4.

⁸² Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 441.

⁸³ Kazmi, S. Latif H., *Philosophy of Iqbal (Iqbal and Existentialism)* A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1997, p. 74.

⁸⁴ *Divān-i Iqbal Lāhorī*, op. cit., p. 411.

seems to be the source of all values. According to him, life of the ego is possible in freedom only:

*Life is reduced to a dried rivulet when it is imprisoned within confines;
In freedom, life embraces boundlessness like an ocean.*⁸⁵

Iqbal maintains that there are only ego-sustaining and ego-dissolving acts.⁸⁶ Freedom sustains the ego, while slavery dissolves it into nothingness. Man's first act of disobedience to God, which caused his expulsion from heaven, was an act of freedom meant to sustain the ego. Escape from freedom, according to Iqbal, is an ego-dissolving act that negates all future for human existence. He asserts that when a person gives up his freedom, he falls down from the high pedestal of human existence, into the state of inauthenticity. Iqbal, in his poems, calls all the acts of the slave devoid of morality; according to him even his prayer is not authentic, because it negates the freedom of ego, it is not a bold "yearning for a response in the awful silence of the universe".⁸⁷ A slave's prayers deepen and thicken this silence. To accept slavery and to remain contented with this state is the death of ego. Real man can only be brought up in the spirit of freedom, while slavery distorts characters, degrades human nature and finally lowers man to the level of beasts.⁸⁸ On the one hand, God refuses to respond to the prostrations of the slaves, and, on the other, the earth refuses to accept the dead body of a slave:

*O the heartless being! Thou hast been a slave in the world;
Because of thy surrender to slavery my heart is burning like bell-fire.
Thy corpse has made my darkness even darker;
Thy corpse has torn into shreds my veil of modesty.
Beware of the corpse of a slave, Beware a hundred times!
O Isrāfāl, O the Creator of the Universe! pure soul, Beware!*⁸⁹

For Iqbal, freedom is the highest religious, social, moral and political value. He gave a philosophical orientation to his attempt to reconstruct the religious ideas according to the historic necessity of his times. Like Sartre,

⁸⁵ *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal* (Urdu Collection), Educational Book House, Muslim University Market, Aligarh, 1992, p. 259.

⁸⁶ Iqbal, M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, op. cit. p. 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.92.

⁸⁸ Akhtar, S. Waheed, *Iqbal in Modern Perspective*, (Aligarh/Calcutta: Naurose Publications), 1986, p. 41.

⁸⁹ *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal*, op. cit., pp. 662-3.

Iqbal accorded the highest position to freedom in the hierarchy of values. No doubt, freedom occupies a similar position in the existentialist philosophy in general, but Iqbal's concept of freedom seems far more comprehensive than that of all the existentialist thinkers including even Sartre. Sartre's views are in conflict with those of Iqbal when he (Sartre) proclaims that there is no God and "we are left without excuse"⁹⁰ and that "man is condemned to be free."⁹¹ Iqbal says that there is *God* — Who is the Most Free and is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The human ego attains highest freedom by removing all the material obstacles in its way, though matter is not a bondage, it rather paves the way for attaining freedom. And attaining supreme freedom does not mean that human *self* or Ego has to annihilate itself for the sake of being absorbed in God. Man remains man and does not lose his *Khudâ* or egohood. The Prophet of Islam, the ideal and the most perfect of all the prophets, has to ask his followers to proclaim: "We bear witness that Muhammad ﷺ is the slave and the messenger of Allah".

It reiterates that man is first of all 'a man' howsoever high a position he may attain. The obedience to Allah ensures the life of human ego and strengthens his *Khudâ*, which is life of freedom. For Iqbal, freedom is not a value or mode of human existence. It is the very life of *Khudâ* (egohood).

Iqbal points out that the purpose of Prophet Muhammad's mission was to infuse freedom, equality and brotherhood among all mankind. He says in his *Rumæz-i Bekhudâ* (The Mysteries of Selflessness):

*Believers all are brothers in his heart,
Freedom the sum and substance of his Flesh.
Impatient with discriminations all.
His soul was pregnant with Equality.
Therefore his sons stand up erect and free
As the tall cypresses, the ancient pledge
In him renewing, Yea, Thou art our Lord.*⁹²

Iqbal seems to be in agreement with Heidegger and Sartre who hold that it is the fact of 'consciousness' which radically distinguishes man from other beings and all other creatures. The issue assumes central importance in the

⁹⁰ Sartre, J. P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, op. cit., p. 34.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 34.

⁹² *Dimæn-i Iqbal Labori*, op. cit., p. 140, (Tr. A.J. Arberry: *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, John Murray, London, 1953, pp. 21-3).

thought system of Iqbal. For Iqbal, the realization of freedom is the core of human consciousness. According to him it is not something static, rigid, given and complete, but it is a dynamic process, and because of freedom it is a self-creative process based on an act of improvisation and rejection of what has been (its bondage). Like Iqbal, both theistic and atheistic versions of the existentialistic philosophy maintain that man is incomplete, indefinable and unpredictable. As Karl Jaspers says:

Nobody can conceive all human potentialities. Man is always capable of doing more and other things than anyone expected. He is incomplete, he cannot be completed, and his future is never sealed. There is no total man, and there never will be one.⁹³

Similarly, atheist Sartre asserts that:

[man] is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.⁹⁴

For Iqbal, human consciousness is the basic and central subject of discussion. According to him, it is only this unique faculty of consciousness which makes man radically distinct from other worldly objects, so that he can participate in the creative act of God. Here Iqbal differs from Sartre, according to whom there is no other creator but only human individual. He says that God is the Supreme Creator (*Khalq*) of everything and man with his consciousness and other capabilities participates in the creative act of Allah. Iqbal says:

Man, therefore, in whom egohood has reached its relative perfection, occupies a genuine place in heart of the Divine creative energy and thus possesses a much higher degree of reality than things around him. Of all the creations of God, he alone is capable of 'consciously participating' in the creative life of the Maker.⁹⁵

According to Iqbal, this universe is a Divine creation but it is not a complete act of creation. In the light of the Qur'an, this universe is liable to develop further:

The process of creation is still going on, and man too takes his share in it, in as much as he helps to bring order into at least a

⁹³ Jaspers, K., *Existentialism and Humanism*, op. cit. p. 72.

⁹⁴ Sartre, J. P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, op. cit., p. 28.

⁹⁵ Iqbal, M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, op. cit. p. 72.

portion of the chaos. The Qur'an indicates the possibility of other Creators than God.⁹⁶

He again, puts it more unambiguously in the following verses:

The universe is still incomplete perhaps,

*For one may respond to an ever-recurring command of
'Be! and it became.'*⁹⁷

There are other worlds unseen,

*And the essence of existence is not yet void!*⁹⁸

It is man, in view of Iqbal, who is destined to complete the process of creation. In a long poem *S«qâ N«mah*, he writes:

Every one of the them waiting for thy conquest,

For the unbridled play of thy thought and action.

The object of the passage of time is but one;

*To reveal to thee the possibilities of thy ego!*⁹⁹

According to Iqbal, man creates his own world and ideals as he likes. If the present or given world does not provide any meaning and importance to human existence, it should be destroyed and reshaped according to the human needs and aspirations. In the poem *Zindagâ* (Life) he says:

Burn up this borrowed earth and sky,

*An raise a world of your own from the ashes.*¹⁰⁰

Again, in this connection, he emphatically asserts in his *Zarb-i- Kalâm*:

Only he overcomes the revolution of Time,

Who creates an eternal life with every breath.

Iqbal lays great stress on man's creative activity and refers to the Qur'«n, which expressly mentions creators besides Allah. For instance, one of the following verses of the Qur'«n indicates: 'Blessed is God, the best of those who create.'¹⁰¹

Such a reference to the Qur'«n indicates how Iqbal conceives the act of human 'creativity'. One will not find in Sartre or other atheistic existentialists this view of human creativity. And it is in this unique interpretation of

⁹⁶ Nicholson, R.A., *The Secrets of the Self* (Introduction) p.XVIII.

⁹⁷ *Kulliy«t-i Iqb«l*, *op. cit.* p. 320.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 420.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 420.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 260.

¹⁰¹ *Al-Qur'an*, (English Translation from *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* by Marmaduke Pickthall, Taj Company, Delhi, 1983), Ch. XXIII: 14.

human freedom and creativity that Iqbal goes beyond existentialist philosophy and surpasses its conception of freedom.

This comparative study undertaken by us needs further elaboration by comparing and contrasting various philosophers having divergent ontological, political, ethical, social and psychological world-outlooks; and views regarding the nature of human being and his capacity for *freedom* and *creativity*. We feel that such a study is indispensable in the contemporary situation, which threatens to deprive human individual of his *freedom* and endeavours to submerge all differences within an all-embracing materialism and technocracy, wrongly called pan-humanism, a modern atheistic version of pantheism. Iqbal revolted against the Sufis' pantheism just as Kierkegaard developed a powerful critique of conventional Christianity; while Sartre's revolt has been against the modern pan-physicalism. Both Sartre and Iqbal revolted with a view to affirm and assert the right of individual beings to freedom, for without freedom human existence becomes absurd and meaningless.