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Iqbal and Sartre on Human Freedom and Creativity

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I. INTRODUCTION

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 an 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 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'¹ 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.²

Iqbāl, 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 Iqbāl. We shall also compare and contrast Sartre's and Iqbāl's approaches to such conceptions as well.

II. THE CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY

The conception of freedom in the philosophy of Iqbāl 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. 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 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 view-point 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 this freedom, originally creates himself'.³ Man is the project which possesses subjective life. Apart from this projection of self, nothing exists. The existentialists hold that man fulfills 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.⁴

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 the atheistic viewpoint totally denying the existence of God. Man is completely free to do whatever he likes. To him in case there is no God and hence 'everything is permitted'.⁵ Sartre says:

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Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers, forthwith, that he is without excuse.⁶

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.⁷

The 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 if 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—man is free, man *is* freedom.⁸

It is an important point to note that Sartre's atheism is somewhat different from that of the followers of a certain type of secular moralism and French radicalism. His disbelief in the existence of God is actuated by specific reasons. Accordingly, Sartre points out that the existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position. He thinks that the '*anguish*' or '*despair*' does not occur due to one's attitude of unbelief as the Christians think, but in reality, the despair of the existentialists is something different and has its own reasons. They hold that neither belief nor unbelief would solve man's problem because he finds himself again and again surrounded in new situations. Man is left alone without excuse. He is condemned to be free:

Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God.⁹

Sartre does not include religious elements in his existentialism because he argues that there are different existing delineations of specific aspects of human nature (whether religious or secular) and all are based exclusively upon theological concepts. One of them, for example, is the belief that 'God had created man in His own image'. Such theological concepts are not tenable according to Sartre, as George F. Kneller rightly remarks:

There is no God for Sartre; more precisely, Sartre hypothesizes no God; for him, god is not necessary. One cannot argue morals if presuppositions are in essence theological. The basis of any argument must lie in understanding man's inherent freedom; for man is not simply born free; he is 'condemned to be free'.¹⁰

In his existential philosophy Sartre has used various terms (like authenticity, dread, anguish, abandonment, facticity, responsibility etc.) to explain his conception of freedom. At present we shall discuss only two out of these namely '*anguish*' and '*facticity*'. Of all the existentialists Sartre has most stressed the anguish of freedom. According to him 'when a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind',¹¹ and, in such a moment that man cannot escape from the sense of this complete and profound responsibility. If he shows no such anxiety over it, he is certainly trying to disguise his anguish. The anguish of freedom is really anguish over the fact that one *must* choose:

The anguish of freedom arises only with the realization that one must always decide for oneself and that efforts to shift the burden of responsibility upon others are necessarily self-defeating. Not to choose is also to choose, for even if we deliver our power of decision to others, we are still responsible for having done so. It is always the individual who decides that others will choose for him. At times he may dull the awareness of his original and inalienable responsibility, but he can never wholly suppress that awareness.¹²

By the sense of '*facticity*' Sartre means the For-itself's necessary connection with the In-itself (i.e. with the world and its own past). In simple words it is what allows us to say that the For-itself *is* or *exists*. In this way the '*facticity*' of freedom is the fact that *freedom is not able not to be free*. We cannot change our past history for it is what *it is*. It constitutes a part of what Sartre calls our '*facticity*'. Thus, our past is a part of our facticity which is, in other words, our being as an itself. Our future, on the other

hand, is absolutely open, completely undetermined either by our past self or by the external world. From this Sartre comes to this conclusion that it is only through the For-itself or consciousness that the future comes into being.

Sartre discusses freedom and facticity with reference to their 'situational setting'. A human being is always surrounded in a 'situation'. Man's place, his past, his environment, his fellow man and his death—all have been discussed by Sartre in order to make us understand this 'being-in-situation' which characterizes the *For-itself* in so far as it is responsible for its manner of being without being the foundation of its being.¹³ In the following words of his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre, referring to Heidegger, describes what is, in reality, the facticity of freedom:

In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom, ... thrown into freedom or as Heidegger says, 'abandoned'. And we can see this abandonment has no other origin than the very existence of freedom. If, therefore, freedom is defined as the escape from the given, from fact, then there is a *fact* of escape from fact. This is the facticity of freedom.¹⁴

Man is not what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, what he chooses and 'what he makes of himself'¹⁵ through freedom, and 'that is the first principle of existentialism'.¹⁶ Moreover, freedom, according to Sartre, is the only ground of all values.

On the contrary, regarding freedom and creativity, Iqbāl 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 (God). In the fourth lecture in *Reconstruction*, he presents three significant themes from the Qur'ān reaffirming the Islamic view of man's being a Vicegerent (*Khalīfah*) of Allah, a chosen entity and a trustee of a free personality which he accepted at *his peril*.¹⁷ 'The perfect Muslim is, for Iqbāl, nothing but the realization of the Qur'anic sentence according to which Adam was ordered to be the *Khalīfa*, the Vicegerent of God on earth.'¹⁸

Iqbāl 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 Iqbāl, 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 Iqbāl, 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 most free, termed "God".¹⁹

Iqbāl points out that it is man's firm faith in *Tawhīd* (Unity of God) which makes him to believe that this principle is the foundation of every aspect of human life. He says in his *Rumūz-i Bēkhūdī*:

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

It is one of the secrets of faith in *Tawhīd*!

Be United and thus make *Tawhīd* 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!

Its power exalts the nature of man

And makes him an entirely new being!

Fear and doubt die out; *action* becomes alive!

The eye can look into the heart of the Universe!

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

Its bond weaves our scattered thoughts together.²⁰

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 given and specific human nature; in other words there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom.²¹

His position is not like that of Iqbāl 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 forever free or he is not free at all.²²

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. Iqbāl'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 Iqbāl, 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.²³ 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 Iqbāl, 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 Iqbāl says in his *Jāvid Nāmah*:

O lover of Truth! Be conclusively final like a glittering sword,
Be thy self the destiny of thine own world.²⁴

According to Sartre freedom reveals itself in dread that compels man to seek refuge in the inauthenticity of existence. To him overcoming dread leads to authentic existence and that is moral, and flight from it is inauthentic and immoral. In Iqbāl's philosophy, when one realizes what is freedom, it 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.²⁵

Iqbāl maintains that there are only ego-sustaining and ego-dissolving acts.²⁶ 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 Iqbāl, 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. Iqbāl, 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'.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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
hell-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 *Isrāfil*, O the Creator of the Universe! pure soul, Beware!²⁹

For Iqbāl, 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, Iqbāl 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 Iqbāl'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 Iqbāl when he (Sartre) proclaims that there is *no God* and 'we are left without excuse'³⁰ and that 'man is condemned to be free.'³¹ Iqbāl 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 *Khūdī* 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 Muḥammad(S) 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 *Khūdī*, which is life of freedom. For Iqbal freedom is not a value or mode of human existence. It is the very life of *Khūdī* (egohood).

Iqbāl points out that the purpose of Prophet Muḥammad's mission was to infuse freedom, equality and brotherhood among all mankind. He says in his *Rumūz-i Bēkhūdī (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'.³²

Iqbāl 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 thought system of Iqbāl. For Iqbāl 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 Iqbāl, 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.³³

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.³⁴

For Iqbāl, 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 Iqbāl differs from Sartre, according to whom there is no other creator but only human individual. He says that God is the Supreme Creator (*Khāliq*) of everything and man with his consciousness and other capabilities participates in the creative act of *Allah*. Iqbāl 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.³⁵

According to Iqbāl, this universe is a Divine creation but it is not a complete act of creation. In the light of the Qur'ān 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 portion of the chaos. The Qur'ān indicates the possibility of other Creators than God.³⁶

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.'³⁷

There are other worlds unseen And the essence of existence is not yet void!³⁸

It is man, in the view of Iqbāl, who is destined to complete the process of creation. In a long poem *Sāqī Nāmāh*, he writes:

Every one of 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!³⁹

According to Iqbāl, 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 *Zindgī (Life)* he says:

Burn up this borrowed earth and sky,
And raise a world of your owns from the ashes.⁴⁰

Again, in this connection, he emphatically asserts in his *Zerb-i Kalīm*:

Only he overcomes the revolution of Time,
Who creates an eternal life with every breath.

Iqbāl lays great stress on man's creative activity and refers to the Qur'ān, which expressly mentions creators besides *Allah*. For instance, one of the following verses of the Holy Book (Qur'ān) indicates:

Blessed is God, the best of those who create.⁴¹

Such a reference to the Qur'ān indicates how Iqbāl 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 human freedom and creativity that Iqbāl 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 the human individual of his *freedom* and endeavours to submerge all differences within an all-embracing physicalism and technocracy, wrongly called pan-humanism, a modern atheistic version of pantheism. Iqbāl 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 revolted with a view to affirm and assert the right of individual beings to freedom, for without freedom human existence becomes absurd and meaningless.

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