

Killing Time: A Modern Epidemic and Iqbal's Therapoetic Reflections for the Ummah

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Abstract

As industrialization gradually effaced the organic meaning of time from the human consciousness and modern life became smeared with coal tar, Bergson's, a 19th-century French philosopher, Theory of Duration shone through like daylight. Inspired by which, Allama Muhammad Iqbal presented his reflections on time while adhering to the Qur'anic wisdom. This paper attempted to explore the inseparable bond between Creativity, Imagination and Time in light of Iqbal's poem *Al Waqt e Saif* (Time is a Sword) to answer the question as follows: What is the fundamental cause behind existential dread and how to protect ourselves from falling into the illusion of life's futility? These questions were kept at the centre of the research as a guide for the *Ummah*, which is getting far removed from its essence being stuck in the quagmire of boredom, decadence, futility etc. To make the reader aware and to prove how misunderstanding or mistreating time generates existential diseases, the author chose certain Western literary texts (since literature has a great impact on the development of a cultural mindset) of the 19th and 20th centuries, namely *Flowers of Evil*, the *Wasteland*, *Existentialism* and *Humanism*, *The Caretaker*, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, and *Hard Times* and analysed each concisely and comparatively. The research concluded with creative action being the sole solution for battling existential dread and the overwhelming illusion of nothingness. Relying on temporary loopholes such as meagre forms of entertainment or worshipping materiality and one's self only results in never-ending claustrophobia.

Keywords: Creativity, Iqbal's philosophy of time, existential literature, imagination and faith, boredom, literary modernism, time

Learn the mystery of Time from the words "I have a time with God." (Al Waqt e Saif, Allama Muhammad Iqbal R.A)

Since the concept of time has been coloured with various cultural beliefs and practices since the inception of mankind, it is essential for us, as believers, to hold on to the wisdom behind time's existence that is explicated in the Holy Quran for a clear outlook.

The Quran introduces us to two types or aspects of time: Real-time and clock time. "A day of your Lord is like a thousand years of what you count" (The Holy Quran, 22:47). This verse tells that Allah exists in *pure time*, a time altogether different from humanly-perceived time.

On the other hand, Allah says in Surah *Al-Asr* verse 2, "Truly mankind is in loss". Indeed, the loss is attached to clock time perpetually. But those who strive to do good (be creative) and advise others to remain patient in times of adversity save themselves from spiritual decay in this world and total failure in the Hereafter.

At a time when the nature of time was of great debate in the Western world, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, did not remain behind. Under the Islamic lens, he recorded his musings on the intriguing subject in both his prose and poetry that served as a 'sword' of awakening in the downtrodden Muslim population of the subcontinent.

To trace the major event that resulted in a rapid alteration of time in modern consciousness, it is significant to mention that time became reduced to clocks and calendars as the industrial revolution surfaced in Europe and the United States (18th-19th Century). The mechanization of labour resulted in a distorted sense of time. The unceasing motion of the conveyor belts serialised time to an unprecedented degree. In short, time was being controlled and treated as a mere instrument to ensure work efficiency and since then, Man has been finding it difficult to move past the illusion of *Serial time*. 'Modern and most-modern times most is the focus on the present, the "now" of the "transient, the fleeting and the contingent", and, in the case of *Capitalist time*, on the future—rather than the past' (Kane, 2020, p.96).

Rising boredom, anxiety, alienation existential angst, and decadence are some of the offshoots of the Industrial Revolution that contribute to the now-stunted growth of the Muslim world, which has strayed far away from its roots in the wake of Western slavery appearing in various forms.

Considering boredom,

Doehlemann drew a distinction between this long-standing situational boredom and its newer intellectual cousin, "existential boredom", the type that goes to the very core of post-Enlightenment modernity (incidentally, the verb "to bore" didn't arrive in English until the second half of the 18th century). It refers to the endless despondency resulting from the death of God, the Romantic search for personal meaning, and the metaphysical encounter with nothingness over which legions of writers from Flaubert to Ballard have wept buckets of ink...

Although existential boredom is not tied to a temporary situation, such as a wearisome domestic chore, it is no less the fruit of circumstance, insofar as it stems from a certain degree of wealth and leisure. (Anthony, 2011, pp. 6-7)

Having said that, this paper aims to delve into Iqbal's conception of time that acts as a binding force for the Muslim Ummah, stressing the need to reignite Islamic fervour in the domain of creativity that once produced a Golden Age.

In the age of advancement where creativity is hyped yet at the same time reduced to commercialization and an instrument for instant gratification, it has become all the more necessary to educate the masses, especially youth, to build a strong fortress against foreign interference and ideals in a journey so sacred. This is achieved by answering the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between time, imagination and creativity?
2. How to overcome the existential dread prevalent in society?

It is important to mention that Iqbal's organic bifurcation of *Self* and *Time* and his emphasis on *Real Time* makes him distinct from all other thinkers whose acceptance of the

latter is either insufficient or does not pave the way to personalistic theism as per Bausani (1954), which is, indeed, a major lacuna in their overall perception of *Time*. For example, 'In Iqbal's opinion, Bergson's fallacy is to make too clear-cut a distinction between the *elan vital* and spatializing rational thinking'. 'He claims that if we deny all teleological character to the *elan vital* the final result will be chaos' (Bausani, 1954, p. 161).

On the other hand, Charalampos Mainemalis (2002) suggests that

Creativity is related to timelessness at least as much as it is related to time and that timelessness emerges when attention is withdrawn from the self. The notion of linear and cyclical time collapses in the continuously unfolding present moment. (p. 227-228)

Although this very statement agrees with Iqbal's notion of *Pure Duration* (Real Time or timelessness) which he adopted from Bergson, it does not take into account the *Appreciative Self* and its harmonious union with the *Efficient Self*. In the state of *Pure Duration*, serial time is not collapsed, rather it is reconstructed.

A sufficient amount of literature has been published on Iqbal's concept of *Time* and *Creativity*, yet his proposed ideas have not been utilized to analyse modern and postmodern literary texts to expose the dearth of creativity and imagination that leads to chaos and fragmentation. Considering this, this paper positions *Al Waqt e Saif* (Time is a Sword, a selection from *Asrar i Khudi* at the centre of focus). Also, the author has produced the following easy-to-comprehend definitions after synthesising the major aspects of Iqbal's vision that are used throughout the analysis:

1. An attempt made to attain momentary freedom from spatialized time is Creativity
2. Time is the best and only opportunity to create a communion with God
3. Imagination, linked with intuition, acts as an instrument in collecting wisdom from creative communion.
4. Boredom is nothing but an excuse for not reaching out to the Self.

To comprehend the gist of Atheistic existentialism, one of the two major types of Existentialism, and to expose its absurdity, it is of prime importance to begin the analysis by dissecting Sartre's defensive essay, 'Existentialism is a Humanism' that will aid in analysing the other chosen text.

Terms

Existentialism: A philosophical expression of anxiety that asserts that there are no secure foundations for meaning and morality, no deep reasons that make sense of the human predicament. (Eds. Caruso and Duke, 2017, p. 9)

Elan Vital: A creative principle held by Bergson to be immanent in all organisms and responsible for the evolution

Legacy of Modernity: A large collection of clocks and various time machines all showing slightly different times—and the development of a consciousness which has become accustomed to keeping an eye on them all (Kane, 2020, p. 95)

Research Method

As literature of any epoch has a considerable impact on its society and vice versa, the researcher found it best to select popular literary texts, belonging to the 19th and 20th centuries for building her thesis. The texts, characteristic of modernist themes, were juxtaposed and analysed in light of Iqbal's quintessential work on time to highlight the common dearth of creativity and to trace the evolving social and individual mindset that abused time by either viewing it as an evil opponent and showing the desire to escape from its fetters or choosing inaction to descend into the self-constructed pit of life's meaninglessness. Specifically, Iqbal's poem *Time is a Sword* was chosen to explore the modern wasteland comprising literature of decadence and excuse, unheroic narratives releasing the putrid smell of defeat, excess and hopelessness.

Atheistic Existentialism Versus Creative Action

To begin with, when Sartre calls himself 'a representative' (Kaufman, 1960, p. 290) of *Atheistic Existentialism* in his lecture *Existentialism a Humanism*, he automatically situates himself outside of existence, of *Time*, for God is *Time*. Time is God's creativity. Since God exists and manifests His creativity both in *Linear Time* and *Real Time*, denying or disregarding the significance of His existence is equivalent to denying one's existence, no matter what attributes one employs to justify its nature. Existence is dependent upon Time. Also, with existence comes the compulsion of acting. The need for action is greatly emphasised by Sartre, just like Iqbal. He labels his doctrine as a *doctrine of action* in the same lecture.

However, Sartre's concept of action is mechanical and is therefore oriented towards materialism, and that contradicts himself when he says, 'Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world' (Kaufman, 1960, p. 303) since no 'transcendent or objective values' (Odesanmi, 2008, p. 85) are attached to them that could transport the actor beyond the Efficient Self. Actions suspended in serial time and that too devoid of a hint of confidence and hope in terms of their outcomes, stand in stark contrast to Iqbal's notion of constant action, whose ultimate desire is to 'seek the end of what has no end' (Ed. Mir, 2000, p. 4). Additionally, for Sartre, freedom is a burden on Man's shoulders. Such a burden leads to creativity that can hardly offer Man an awareness of himself. Higher-order creativity is an attempt to reach the apex of self-realisation, or self-actualisation as accentuated by Iqbal, by which Man's 'being becomes brighter than the brightest morning' (Afzaal, 2009).

On the contrary, we do not come across this extremely positive role of creativity in Sartre's philosophy, for actions, another term for existentialist creativity, become null and void being trapped in the facade of the world of inter-subjectivity (Kaufman, 2016, p. 303), where 'Man (unaware of his original essence) is the future of Man' (Kaufman, 2016, p. 295). Hence Man, while roleplaying the absurd role of a decision-maker and an identifier of his own and others' reality, instead of gaining insight about the Self through momentary transcendence, further diminishes the already 'dull-edged sword' (*Khudi Ka Sirre Nihan*, 2023). Time is a Sword that purifies the Self so that it can behold the reflection of the Absolute.

Hollywood Heroism Versus Creative Action

While further exposing the issues in Sartre's philosophy, it is important to highlight that his idea of synthesis of the Self diverges from Iqbal's perspective of a harmonious union between the Appreciative Self and the Efficient Self. Sartre seeks a unity of the experiences of the Self to experience an immediate sense of the Self, 'but as soon as the Self attempts to be aware of itself as a unity, it escapes this unity by the very fact that it is aware of it...and this very escape of the self from itself brings-to-be that very nothing...the self can be in its own presence' (Catalano, 1985, p. 99). This irony unearths the root cause of isolation and meaninglessness that encompass the Existentialists: the Self grounded in subjectivity and not considering the other Self (the Absolute). Indeed, the Existentialists mar the sanctity of Time by wasting it as they fruitlessly essay to make choices to self-construct their essence for a so-called arbitrary world. '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'. (Kazmi, 2009, pg 230)

Enslaved by absolute freedom, existentialists tend to suffer from boredom as they lack conviction in a binding force that could render meaning and substance to their actions. However, this existential boredom becomes fourfold in James Thurber's 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty', a 20th-century short story published in 1939, which revolves around a middle-aged daydreamer named Walter Mitty who, in pursuit of his own identity, ridiculously attempts at heroism, in fact, mere Hollywood heroism. The external world for him is a symbol of monotony where there is no room left for exercising heroism or living a life of one's own choice. The repeated '*ta pocketa pocketa*' paints society as a network of machines. But Mitty is a failure when it comes to physical labour. He cannot perform basic tasks like 'taking his car chains off' or parking his car in the right lane. Concerning this, the criticism received from society irks him to the extent that he sins by seeking 'freedom from mortality itself, from death' (Cheatham, 1990, p. 605) by secluding himself in his third-rate dreamworld. More than the criticism, it is his dangerous assumptions that isolate him from his surroundings, from responsibility, and from himself. He shifts his real-life responsibilities to the inner world, where he plays different roles to cover up his anxiety due to ineptitude and to consider himself a heroic figure. He runs away from the drudgery of serial time and ends up in a series of incomplete daydreams that provide him with little solace. Also, he is not creative enough to overcome the existential crisis. In his daydreams, he merely imitates snippets from Hollywood movies and comic books to feed himself with deception. The very desire to seek a loophole to exit the external world, no matter how illusory it is, is completely discouraged by Iqbal. In *Al Waqt e Saif*, when he says 'the rotations of the heavens are worth watching/and worth knowing are the alternations of day and night' (Afzaal, 2009), he acknowledges the importance of serial time although he soon shifts his attention towards Real Time. Serial time offers Man a space for the gradual construction of Self, and one cannot transcend its fetters until one embraces it in the truest sense of the word. Iqbal's views derive power from his balanced approach. He detests a life of resignation and escapism. Mitty's escapism, then, is a result of his lack of understanding of Time. Since he is unable to understand Time, he remains far from exercising meta-creativity (self-actualisation), let alone creativity. Not to forget his underdeveloped imagination that contributes to nothing but a meagre form of entertainment. Although active in his fantasy world, he cannot let go of the slavery of the Efficient Self as his derived

daydreams symbolise pulp fiction. Therefore, we can confidently claim that he is neither intellectual nor original. Now the question remains what type of heroism does Mitty exercise?

A personal hero “asserts himself out of defiance of his own weakness, who tries to be a god unto himself, the master of his fate, a self-created man. He will not be merely the pawn of others, of society; he will not be a passive sufferer. He will plunge into life” (Becker, 1973, p. 84). Considering the aforementioned definition, unfortunately, Mitty, though involved in creating a universe of his own, does not even qualify as a personal hero because a self-created man stays away from imitation as per Emerson’s notion of self-reliance, for him, ‘imitation is suicide’. Also, Emerson hoisted the flag of freedom and individuality, but he urges us to see “one-ness in the universe, a connectivity in all things” (Geldard, 2011, p. 9). That experience of oneness is only possible in a state of inner transcendence.

Having said that, let us shed some light on Mitty's extreme individuality and the consequent mental disintegration. Mitty, at the end of the story, confronts a mental breakdown as he stands 'motionless and erect' before the 'faceless firing squad'. Such an event occurs because of the effacement of the fine line between the real world and the external world. Although Mitty's demonstration of subjectivity is different from that of Sartre's philosophy (Sartre's is oriented towards humanism, whereas Mitty's attitude towards society is antipathetic), he shares some similarities with the atheistic existentialists: he, as previously mentioned, transcends death which suggests that he is fearless, faithless and unconcerned about the existence of God. His creative journey, a rather imitative journey, is wholly singular; 'he ain't afraid of Hell'. Where Sartre speaks for the manifestation of actions in the external world, Mitty acts in the dream world and that too poorly. He is not a victim of boredom; rather, he is its supporter. He supports boredom by not unleashing the hidden potentials of his ego; he constantly lowers its worth just for the sake of killing time. Thus, both outer-world creativity (as accentuated by Sartre) and apparent dream-world creativity prove to be nugatory. Mitty's eternal now is deprived of the unity of the selves and therefore leads to absurd fragmentation.

Lack of Self-Knowledge and Curse of Dependency Versus Creative Action

More interesting to study is an absurd play, *The Caretaker*, by Harold Pinter, in which a deceiving tramp named Davies is expected to act as a mediator by the younger brother Mick who wants to reach out to his elder brother Aston. Both Mick and Aston, due to their inability to communicate with each other, offer Davies the job of caretaker to achieve some sort of order in the claustrophobic house. It is Aston’s sympathy that invites Davies to their house in the first place. Davies, however, symbolises time: ‘an old robber’ who constantly tries to steal away the silent bond between the brothers by plotting against them. Aston simply wants Davies to ‘look after the place..polish the bells’, but Davies sounds disinterested.

Despite Aston’s continual efforts to convince Davies to stay with him, he fails to build a convivial relationship with him. There is no limit to Davies’s materialistic demands. From ‘shoes’ to ‘smoking jacket’, Aston offers Davies whatever he asks for. His complaining nature is upsetting for both the brothers, yet their absolute dependency on Davies (time) is what further keeps them from creativity and knowledge of themselves. Davies is an emblem of worldly time, for he has no ‘real name’. Having faith in such a man is but an exercise in futility,

which characterises the modern man. As per Iqbal, one who owns the sword of Real-Time 'transcends both hope and fear' (Afzaal, 2009). But we know that the brothers are always arrested in the thoughts of the future since the present is completely meaningless and corrupted. Instead of exploiting Davies (the deceptive bridge) to achieve their material and meagre goals, they could have used the sacred sword whose 'single stroke' makes 'water gush forth from the rock and the ocean to part to offer a path' (2009).

Dandyism and Apathy Versus Creative Action

Now, let us consider the poem '*Au Lecteur (To the Reader)*' by Baudelaire which was published in 1857. The poem is an introduction to his *Fleurs du Mal (Flowers of Evil)* and encompasses the main theme of the collection: Ennui. 'Ennui is personified as a figure smoking a hookah, which is a symbol of ease and luxury, whilst dreaming of a stage, probably of a renowned life, but the tears in his eyes show his regret in living a complacent life and not having the strength to change it' (Gomes, 2013, p.7).

Baudelaire, being a dandy, favours the idea of living life no matter how sinful. For him, mere aestheticism is enough to battle nothingness (Ennui). Nothingness 'is only most foul and false! Though making no grand gestures, nor great cries, /He willingly would devastate the earth /And in one yawning swallow all the world'. His usage of such harsh words to describe boredom, the state of inaction and apathy depicts his belief in absolute freedom that gives life to ceaseless action, as discussed by Sartre in his lecture. By far, it is ascertained that nothingness is inversely proportional to self-actualization and that Serial Time or material world is a gift from God where individuals are given room to exercise their free will for a higher purpose. However, Baudelaire, by declaring nothingness as an inevitable fate of all mankind, banishes himself, at least, out of the sphere of creativity. He writes,

'You know him, Reader, that refined monster,
You! Hypocrite reader — my fellow, — my brother!'

Dandy presents himself as a work of art. In other words, he displays himself to the world, and his sole focus is on his physical appearance.

He can only be sure of his own existence by finding it in the expression of others' faces. Other people are his mirror. A mirror that quickly becomes obscured, it's true, since the human capacity for attention is limited. It must be ceaselessly stimulated, spurred on by..he compels others to create him while denying their values. He plays at life because he is unable to live it. (Camus, 1951, p. 48)

This description of a dandy brings into the picture the motivation behind Baudelaire's works and lifestyle. Not only this, but it also elaborates on the dilemma of the existentialists, existing outside of Time and Creativity and feeding on Boredom and Nothingness.

At this point, it has become necessary to refer to the first section of *The Wasteland* by T.S Eliot, who alludes to the following line of Baudelaire's at the end of *The Burial*:

You! Hypocrite reader — my fellow, — my brother!

On the one hand, Baudelaire emphasises the inevitability of nothingness as mentioned

above. On the other hand, Eliot fixes his focus on the inevitability of war, of death that 'had undone so many' (Eliot, 1922, p. 2).

Decadence Versus Creative Action

Eliot commences his poem by painting a cruel picture of 'April' and how graveyards fill in hope of the arrival of spring. Indeed, the very beginning of the poem vilifies the sanctity of Time. Nothing 'sprouts' from the 'corpse that was planted last year in the garden' because 1) War leaves Man with death, chaos and confusion 2) Man, suspended in the presence of linear time, becomes self-centred and wallows in boredom. Eliot structures his poem in such a way that past and present commingle with one another, leading to inner and outer fragmentation. His overwhelming nostalgia and excessive brooding on the glory of the past deprive him of the experience of the eternal now. Once 'Sweet Thames' has lost its charm and luxurious aura; now, it has been ruined by 'oil and tar'. 'The inhabitants of this London know only 'a heap of broken images..'. At the end of the poem, Eliot says, 'London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down'. Note that the London Bridge symbolises Linear Time that has been abused by Modern European Man; it collapses with the collapse of Western civilization.

Stunted Imagination Versus Creative Action

In Dickens's *Hard Times*, Sissy Jupe's imagination (rather Fancy) remains unripe because of the industrial city of Coketown ('a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage') where 'Facts' are worshipped and 'wondering' is forbidden, and the only form of entertainment provided to the mechanic inhabitants is by Jupe's father who works for a circus, where the audience enjoy bread and ale. Having said that, the circus then becomes a symbol of 'spoiled' and 'stunted' imagination. 'The braying of the music suggests that no matter how praiseworthy their intentions, the circus people are unable to give a very adequate expression of imagination in this unsympathetic world' (Higbie, 1988, p. 93). Such a weak form of imagination is similar to Walter Mitty's third-rate dreamworld bringing us to the same conclusion: Imagination is much more than a source of entertainment or escapism. If its aim is not to transcend the Efficient Self, it continues to be a slave of spurious existence and cannot rise above its circumstances. However, Sissy is the only humane character in the novel (a girl who becomes a source of salvation for other characters) whose 'unclear' 'faith' is closely related to imagination according to Higbie. Here, I will contend against Higbie's demarcation of Imagination and Faith, for he puts them against each other as two separate entities in the same article. He says,

Imagination lacks the seriousness of faith. In both the cases the mind envisions an ideal, but faith is able to accept that ideal as if it were real, whereas when we imagine we know it is not real..the reason why our reason remains at least partly detached from what is imagined and does not take it too seriously (96).

If 'replacing imagination with faith' is Dickens' intention, it is nothing but an error in his worldview that has not been refined by the holistic understanding of Man's creative journey. Iqbal, contrastingly, enhances the traditional Islamic notion and role of Imagination by placing intuition at the top of the hierarchy of existence. Unlike Romantics and traditional Islamic philosophers, he 'saw in imagination the significance of intuition (love) in creating an

intense love for Allah (S.W.T) in the internal self of Man' (Ramli, 2011, pp. 8-9). So, it has been made clear that the divide between imagination and faith is a product of a lack of intuitive experience and knowledge. Imagination is the wing that makes our intuitive journey possible. Since Reason is linked with Intuition and Imagination with Intuition, it is not possible for Reason to remain detached from Imagination. Considering this, it is only intuition that can provide a life of contentment to both Louisa (Gradgrind's daughter) and Sissy as they turn a new page after experiencing the tragic events.

عشق کی اک جست نے طے کر دیا قصہ تمام
اس زمین و آسمان کو بے کراں سمجھا تھا میں

(Iqbal, 2002, p. 394)

One leap by Love ended all the pother,
I fondly imagined, the earth and sky were boundless

Conclusion

The aforementioned verse by Allama Muhammad Iqbal R.A brings the paper to a close in which his ambition for Creative Action reaches a crescendo, an action that differs from the action produced by 'man who himself is the heart and centre of his transcendence (his transcendence is restricted to the 'human universe'). Reiterating Iqbal's beliefs, creativity is all about delving temporarily into the Appreciative Self (a hub of Divine knowledge and energy) to provide nourishment to the efficient self so that it can gradually and limitlessly construct itself for qualifying itself as a vicegerent of God. Additionally, since the Self is no object, reaching out to it through a rational approach is equal to slavery. And Man has not been created to abide by codes of slavery; his free spirit finds the home in the Divine.

Existential crisis, as delineated by the textual analysis of the primary texts, is a result of indifference or negligence towards the dialectical relation between Serial time and Real Time and Efficient Self and Appreciative Self. To make sense of life, one should exercise creativity and avail the freedom bestowed on him through self-actualization.

باغِ بہشت سے مجھے حکم سفر دیا تھا کیوں
کارِ جہاں دراز ہے، اب مرا انتظار کر

Why did You order me to quit the Garden of Eden-
Now there is much to be done here- so just wait for me!
(Gaisuay Tabdar Ko, n.d)

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