

# The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre

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**Abstract:** This article examines the existentialist conception of man, as presented in the philosophical and literary works of Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre, drawing attention to both their similarities and differences. The analysis reveals how both thinkers address human existence, abstraction, freedom, alienation, identity formation and authenticity, reflecting their respective theistic and atheistic ideologies. Iqbal's concept of man, based on his idea of "*Khudi*" (selfhood), emphasises self-realisation, creativity, and the development of individuality in line with divine principles, focusing a dynamic vision of human potential and spiritual evolution. Sartre's view of man, however, centred on the idea that "existence precedes essence," defines man as devoid of any inherent essence or divine guidance, encouraging to create meaning and identity through the freedom of actions and choices. Despite originating from distinct metaphysical traditions, the two perspectives share a common concern with the existential challenges of self-discovery and the pursuit of meaning in a complex and contradictory world.

**Keywords:** Iqbal, Sartre, Existentialism, Man, Islam, Atheism

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**Abstrak:** Makalah ini mengkaji konsep eksistensialis manusia, seperti yang dibentangkan dalam karya falsafah dan sastera Muhammad Iqbal dan Jean-Paul Sartre. Ia memberi perhatian kepada persamaan dan perbezaan di antara dua pemikir tersebut. Analisis mendedahkan bagaimana kedua-dua pemikir menangani isu kewujudan manusia, abstraksi, kebebasan, pengasingan, pembentukan identiti dan keaslian, sekaligus mencerminkan ideologi teistik dan ateistik masing-masing. Konsep Iqbal tentang manusia, berdasarkan ideanya tentang “*Khudi*” (keperibadian), menekankan kesedaran diri, kreativiti, dan perkembangan keperibadian selaras dengan prinsip Ilahi, memfokuskan visi dinamik potensi manusia dan evolusi rohani. Pandangan Sartre tentang manusia, bagaimanapun, tertumpu pada idea bahawa ‘kewujudan mendahului intipati,’ mentakrifkan manusia sebagai tidak mempunyai sebarang intipati yang wujud atau bimbingan Ilahi, menggalakkan untuk mencipta makna dan identiti sendiri melalui kebebasan tindakan dan pilihan. Walaupun berasal daripada tradisi metafizik yang berbeza, kedua-dua perspektif berkongsi kebimbangan bersama dengan cabaran eksistensial penemuan diri dan mengejar makna dalam dunia yang kompleks dan bercanggah.

**Kata Kunci:** Iqbal, Sartre, Eksistensialisme, Manusia, Islam, Ateisme

## Introduction

The question “who is man?” holds great significance in both religion and literature, but this existential inquiry contradicts religious beliefs, raising issues about the existence of God, the nature of faith, and the possibility of meaning in a universe that lacks divine purpose. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witness the rise of existentialism as a provocative literary and philosophical movement in Germany and France, advocating “man’s absolute freedom and responsibility,” focusing on “human frailty and insecurity,” and aiming to establish alternative ways of life and change man’s entire system of beliefs and goals. Gradually, this “man-centred and individualistic” philosophical viewpoint gains popularity across Europe and other regions, creating new values, attitudes, and ideals through a strong belief in the supremacy of existence and placing importance on man’s subjective experience and personal engagement (Kazmi, 1995, pp. 49–50). Following this approach, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), a leading French philosopher and writer of the 20th century, champions atheistic existentialism, challenging the previously dominant essentialist philosophical notion of a predefined, unchanging human nature and proposing a new outlook

on mankind. Similarly, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), an influential South Asian Muslim philosopher, poet, and political thinker, widely known for inspiring the Pakistan Movement, also rejects the rigidity of traditional metaphysical essentialism, which conceptualises human nature as static and eternal, but seeks to reconstruct Islamic thought by integrating existential concerns within a theistic context. This study examines the works of Iqbal and Sartre, as both have had a significant influence on contemporary readers in the East and West through their notable contributions to philosophy and literature, particularly in addressing universal human concerns.

This article is developed into three main sections. The first section of this article will discuss existentialism in both Western and Muslim thought to understand how diverse intellectual traditions respond to the core aspects of the human condition. It will then undertake a critical discussion on the existential foundations of self-creation in Sartre's concept of man, alongside the Islamic theological basis of Iqbal's existential conception of the human being as a vicegerent. By examining two opposing philosophical foundations, this study investigates how each thinker addresses issues of identity, freedom, consciousness, alienation, and the responsibility of existence. Finally, a comparative evaluation is conducted based on Sartre's secular humanism and Iqbal's *Tawhidic* worldview, critically assessing the implications of their respective ideas in the context of modern existential challenges related to self-discovery in a distracted and consumer-driven society, followed by a conclusion.

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

Extensive research has been conducted on existentialism, and many experts and researchers have explored the concept of man from various perspectives. Although Sartre's and Iqbal's existential thoughts have individually received attention, comparative studies between them remain notably limited. Among these writings, Latif Hussain Kazmi's *Philosophy of Iqbal: Iqbal and Existentialism* (1997) is an important scholarly resource in cross-cultural philosophical discourse, which examines how Iqbal's ideas engage with and differs from the existentialist philosophies of scholars like Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Gabriel Marcel, particularly focusing on existentialist themes such as freedom, creativity, and self-realisation. Kazmi's other book, *Iqbal and Sartre on Human Freedom and Creativity* (2009), analyses how

both thinkers, despite differing metaphysical commitments, centre their philosophies on human freedom and creative self-realisation. Another study by Safaat Ariful Hudda and Abdul Najib titled “Human Being dalam Diskursus Eksistensialisme Barat dan Islam” (2021) compares Sartre and Iqbal with Marcel and Mulla Sadra, highlighting a key contrast between Western rational-emotional and Islamic spiritual-prophetic conceptions of the human being. Elvira Purnamasari’s article titled “Kebebasan Manusia dalam Filsafat Eksistensialisme” (2017) identifies a philosophical meeting point between Sartre’s atheistic and Iqbal’s theistic worldviews through their existential affirmations of human freedom. Existing comparative studies of Sartre and Iqbal only touch on a few recurring existential themes, offering limited analysis of their conceptions of man, particularly in relation to their responses to the problem of abstraction and the crisis of modernity. This study aims to bring to the forefront the issue of how both thinkers define ‘man’ in relation to the existential challenges of self-discovery and the formation of human identity, particularly through their distinct understandings of self-creation and vicegerency, at a time when contemporary identity is increasingly eroded by mass culture and consumerism.

This article employs a qualitative methodology, relying on a library-based research approach to examine concepts, theories, and findings relevant to the research issue. The primary sources used in this study include Muhammad Iqbal’s *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, selected poems from his various collections, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s works such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *Existentialism and Humanism* (1970), as well as the novels *Nausea* (1938), *The Age of Reason* (1945), *The Reprieve* (1945), *Troubled Sleep* (1949), and *No Exit* (1944). The analysis adopts Alparslan Açıkgenç’s comparative methodology, as presented in his book *Being and Existence in Şadrā and Heidegger: A Comparative Ontology* (1993), which analyses Mulla Şadra (an Islamic philosopher) and Martin Heidegger (a Western existentialist), as an effective model for interpreting Iqbal’s Islamic perspective alongside Sartre’s secular existentialism. Drawing inspiration from Açıkgenç’s approach to cross-philosophical comparison, this study examines Iqbal’s concept of *Khudi* (selfhood) in relation to Sartre’s notion that “existence precedes essence,” exploring Islamic existentialism in parallel with secular humanism, preserving the philosophical integrity of both Islamic and Western traditions.

### **Existentialism in the Perspectives of Western and Muslim Thinkers**

Existentialism in the Western philosophical tradition arose in response to the challenges of modern life, during a time of major social and intellectual change, such as the decline of religion and the disruption caused by war and industrialisation, emphasising that humans must define their own purpose through their subjective experiences. This philosophical movement is particularly viewed as a reaction against the deterministic tendencies of Hegelian idealism, which places the individual as an inevitable part of a rational, preordained historical and metaphysical process, where 'Spirit' occupies the central position and man reflects its essence. Hegelian philosophy views the historical process as a rational and self-developing journey toward absolute knowledge, where individuals find meaning through the roles they play within this universal narrative (Olson, 1962). While Hegel undermines the individual by neglecting personal experience, freedom, and responsibility, existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre argue that these elements are essential to self-determination and identity.

Kierkegaard's existential philosophy emphasises the need for personal belief and subjective understanding, suggesting a turn away from logic toward faith, and exploring the emotional challenges that come with living authentically. Nietzsche, a more radical existentialist, challenges traditional morality and the belief in objective truth, claiming that "God is dead," a declaration that reflects the existential crisis of meaning in a post-religious world. He encourages individuals to overcome nihilism by creating their own values and living with courage and self-overcoming, an ideal embodied in the concept of the *Übermensch* (Overman). Sartre views authenticity as the recognition of human freedom and the commitment to act in alignment with self-created values, despite the absurd and alienating conditions of existence. Heidegger, though not always classified as an existentialist, made significant contributions to existential philosophy through his concept of being. His book *Being and Time*, describes human existence (*Dasein*) as being-toward-death, emphasising awareness of mortality as central to authentic living. Western existentialism is marked by its secular, sometimes atheistic stance, focusing on the individual's responsibility to create meaning in an indifferent or absurd reality (Ibrarullah &

Inamullah, 2022, pp.65-67). Each philosopher, in their respective existentialist approach, emphasises the concept of individualism, such as Kierkegaard through a profound faith in God, Nietzsche through a rejection of religious norms, and Sartre through the assertion of absolute freedom and self-creation, giving importance to the individual over any universal spirit or collective meaning.

During the 20th century, Muslim thinkers explore Western philosophical ideas, particularly existential and Hegelian philosophies, reinterpreting them through the theistic principles of Islamic metaphysics. Despite their critical stance on the secular foundations of these philosophies, these thinkers engage existential ideas within an Islamic context, emphasising that true freedom and meaning arise from closeness to God, not existential emptiness. Ali Shariati, a prominent Iranian intellectual deeply influenced by both existentialist philosophy and Islamic mysticism, rejects Marxist and Hegelian determinism, emphasising the central role of free will, self-awareness, and moral responsibility in his Islamic existential thought. Shariati highlights the significance of historical consciousness, inner transformation, and ethical struggle as essential components of the individual's role in society and spiritual development (Kanaaneh, 2021). Said Nursî views the spiritual crisis of modern man as an existential challenge, rather than a merely social or philosophical issue, as it requires a return to faith, self-purification, and inner growth, strengthening the relationship with God and leading a spiritual life that rises above modern superficiality (Zahratana, 2023). In addressing existential themes in their Islamic reformist thoughts, Shariati links self-awareness to freedom and social justice, while Nursî emphasises faith and the inner journey toward God as a response to modern spiritual challenges. Iqbal, as an existentialist thinker, highlights *khudi* (selfhood) as a dynamic force, viewing humans as co-creators with God and responsible for their own spiritual and moral development (Haryati, 2013). Similarly, al-Faruqî, challenging the impersonal and abstract metaphysics of Western philosophy, advocates for a form of existentialism within Islam that places God and the personal self at its core.

Alparslan Açıkgenç does not identify as an existentialist in the Western sense, but his inquiry into 'existence' and 'being' demonstrates a strong engagement with existentialist thought. In comparing Mullā Şadrā and Martin Heidegger, Açıkgenç highlights how Şadrā views

existence as the fundamental reality, from which all beings originate from a single, unified existence. Heidegger, likewise, centres his philosophy on Being, particularly in relation to Dasein, which refers to human existence as being-in-the-world. Açıkgenç criticises the disintegrated nature of modern knowledge, advocates for a unified Islamic epistemology, and addresses existential questions through a theistic framework that emphasises the role of divine insight in the search for meaning.

### **The Existential Foundations of Self-Creation in Sartre's Conception of Man**

Sartre's existentialist philosophy, grounded in atheism and phenomenology, defines the human being by prioritising 'existence' as the foundational principle of life, viewing the self as the primary source of philosophical meaning. He argues that the abstraction of human nature is a misleading metaphysical concept, as it imposes a fixed identity on individuals based on universal concepts such as innate reason or divine essence. For him, this essentialist perception of man promotes self-deception and the avoidance of responsibility, through undermining individuals' capacity and freedom to define themselves and their roles. Consequently, he proposes a non-essentialist conception of humanity, asserting that identity emerges from existential freedom rather than from a predetermined essence. Sartre's view of the human condition is rooted in existentialist themes that emphasise freedom, responsibility, consciousness, alienation, authenticity, and the rejection of any preordained human nature, compelling individuals to define their own existence. For Sartre, the act of self-creation is not merely a philosophical ideal but an existential obligation in a universe devoid of inherent meaning or direction.

According to Sartre, 'existence' is the fundamental starting point of man's life, which precedes all notions of essence or divine intention, granting humans freedom and obligation to create their own being. In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1970), he presents a conception of man, reserving the term "existence" for humans alone, denying the presence of God and any predestined essence, and emphasising self-consciousness and freedom as distinct attributes that set humans apart from all other beings (Blackham, 1959, p. 162). He views human life as a conflict between subjective freedom and objective limitation,



blending lived experience with the external dimensions of reality. His *Being and Nothingness* (1957) describes man through an ontological dualism between 'being-in-itself' (*en-soi*) and 'being-for-itself' (*pour-soi*), revealing the existential paradox of two modes "authenticity and alienation," where being "is what it is not and is not what it is." From Sartre's atheistic perspective, the conflict between authenticity and alienation is an inescapable, enduring, and unresolved characteristic of human existence that constitutes the initial stage of freedom.

Freedom, in Sartre's existentialist idea of man, is a complex reality of life that simultaneously serves as an empowering foundation for self-creation and a source of existential dread, as it comes with the responsibility to shape one's own life. Sartre, in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946), defines man as the only truly free being, possessing absolute freedom and generating the source of all values, asserting that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Freedom, in his view, is "an inescapable condition of human existence," that gives rise to feelings of anxiety, anguish, and a sense of condemnation for one's own actions and choices (Campbell, 1977). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1957), therefore compares 'freedom' with 'nothingness,' arguing that "human reality is free, but it is not enough," as freedom grants individuals the power to choose the meaning and purpose of their lives, while also imposing a profound existential burden. At the same time, he acknowledges that despite the anxiety associated with freedom, this burden of responsibility enables individuals to express their "greater creativity and a more authentic mode of existence." He therefore emphasises "the necessity of self-awareness and the moral courage to live in accordance with one's true self and values" (Sartre, 1957, p.440). According to Desan (1954), "Sartre's freedom is something absolute; He rejects all determinism whatsoever, even under its mitigated form as imperialism of the passions. Consequently, he presents us with a freedom more acute than, possibly, has been seen in two thousand years of philosophy" (p.107).

Sartre contends that human 'consciousness' is the primary source of freedom, generating both self-awareness and the realisation that humans are free from any externally imposed essence. He conceptualises 'consciousness' not merely as a 'passive state of awareness' but as an active capacity for 'free choice, critical reflection, and the creation of new possibilities for humans.' This implies that "consciousness is not a



static substance, but a self-driven, evolving activity, dynamic in nature and always oriented toward the future” (Akinbode, 2023, pp. 17–18). The quality of consciousness, as Sartre claims, depends on its capacity to transcend the present moment and imagine possibilities that do not yet exist. He views consciousness as a process that enables one to look into the future, recall the past, and be aware of things that are not physically present. For Sartre, this sense of incompleteness and the continual striving toward unrealised possibilities distinguish human beings from other forms of being and compel individuals to confront their alienation, actively constructing their own realities through the freedom of self-creation (Schrift, 2006).

In Sartre’s view, ‘bad faith’ represents a self-deceptive state in which individuals avoid facing the existential anxiety and responsibility that are inseparable from human life. This detachment from practical reality serves as an ideological mechanism of social control, restricting the ability of individuals to think and act autonomously (Giordano, 2021). Sartre argues that these self-imposed limits and inauthentic choices are an existential failure to realise the fundamental freedom and responsibility that constitute authentic human existence. Sartre’s novel *The Age of Reason* (1947) focuses on the existential conflict between freedom and responsibility through the character of Mathieu, portraying the anxiety of self-definition in a world without inherent values. The novel reflects Sartre’s atheist belief that true freedom requires personal choice, moral responsibility, and the courage to live without external justification. In Sartre’s self-creation process, living without external justification is a precondition of absolute freedom, where individuals create their own meaning without guidance from God or universal truths, but this freedom also leads to spiritual disconnection and alienation.

Alienation, according to Sartre, is not an impediment to identity formation, but a necessary precondition for radical freedom of choice and moral responsibility for authentic self-creation without external guidance. In his view, alienation is rooted in human consciousness, arising from the existential gap between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, a state of ‘nothingness’ that isolates the self from the world and functions as a negating force. He perceives alienation as the result of a confrontation between the existential challenge of self-definition and the realisation of the absurdity of existence (Giordano, 2021). Sartre’s novel *Nausea* (1938) portrays alienation as central to Roquentin’s experience,

manifesting in his detachment from reality and culminating in a strong emotional reaction to the absurdity of life. In line with Sartre's atheism, this moment of existential clarity enables the protagonist to create meaning independently (Mirkhan, 2022, p.915). From the same secular perspective, in *The Age of Reason* (1945), Sartre explores alienation as a psychological and moral condition. Through the character of Mathieu, alienation emerges not as despair, but as the space where self-definition and moral responsibility take shape in the absence of external values.

Death, in Sartre's existentialist view, is an undeniable and final reality in man's life that holds no inherent meaning, which generates profound anxiety and alienation; but the awareness of death forces individuals to make authentic choices within finite limits. Rejecting the notion of an afterlife, he asserts that "death is the destruction of his possible and is itself outside of his possible," which contrasts with Heidegger's view, who considered death as one of man's possibilities (Iwuagwu, 2019, p. 357). In *Being and Nothingness* (1957), he acknowledges that man is subject to the domination of death, driven by the anxiety of dying. He identifies a close connection between the human experience of guilt, finitude, and alienation, elements that create a profound tension in human existence. Thus, Sartre's authentic being perceives this inevitable external event as the absolute end of existence, freedom, and consciousness, considering the awareness of death (finitude) valuable.

In essence, Sartre's concept of authenticity or 'authentic being' is rooted in the imperative to live sincerely with oneself amid the absence of predetermined meaning. For him, the ultimate goal of human existence is to achieve alienation from oneself, God, the natural world, and society. He views human existence as the result of chance or accident, asserting that life has no inherent purpose and is burdened with the responsibility that arises from inevitable anxiety. In his quest for self-discovery, the journey toward 'authentic being' begins with the realisation of nothingness. This recognition leads to freedom, which paradoxically opens the door to 'bad faith,' as individuals may attempt to escape the burden of choice. This avoidance affects the nature of consciousness and creates the conditions for its own existence, through which individuals shape their lives. Sartre's process of becoming a true human prepares individuals for a meaningful existence, emphasising the necessity of experiencing suffering, abandonment, and despair in the pursuit of an authentic life. By confronting suffering, despair,

and nothingness, Sartre ultimately offers a perspective that is not fundamentally negative or hopeless.

### **The Islamic Theological Foundations of Iqbal's Existentialist Conception of Man as Vicegerent**

Iqbal's existentialist response to Muslim philosophical and Sufi traditions offers a critical and constructive approach, emphasising individual freedom, creativity, and self-realisation. His major philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), presents an existentialist rethinking of Islamic belief, wherein faith is rooted in subjective experience and responsibility rather than theoretical or abstract religious concepts, which resonates with Kierkegaard's existential perception. He asserts that the essence of the divine cannot be understood through reason or logic alone, it becomes known through a personal, emotional, and experiential relationship with God. Thus, he challenges the passive nature of classical abstraction in the philosophies of Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi, whose metaphysical ideas, deeply influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian thought, tend to obscure the dynamic, intuitive, and ethical dimensions of human existence by giving importance to essence over existence, reason over intuition, and universals over particulars.

Iqbal was initially influenced by the ideas of Ibn Arabi, the famous Sufi philosopher recognised for his pantheistic beliefs, but he gradually distanced himself from some of the more traditional aspects of Sufi metaphysical thought. He offers a critical analysis of Ibn Arabi's thought, especially his notion of *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), which offers a vision of reality that is too abstract, mystical, and detached from the subjective consciousness and individual experience he seeks to affirm. He challenges aspects of the Sufi concept of 'fanā' (annihilation of the self) as it led to a state of spiritual passivity, focusing on ego negation and constraining both personal will and creative expression (Dar, 1944). Iqbal's reinterpretation of Sufi metaphysical concepts, through an existentialist lens, provides a holistic philosophical conception of human existence, integrating Islamic spirituality with modern existentialist discourse.

Iqbal's concept of man as vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth combines the Islamic view of man as presented in the *Qur'an* with existential concerns such as freedom, selfhood, and responsibility, forming a theocentric

vision that distinguishes his thought from the secular existentialism of thinkers like Sartre. His perspective is rooted in the *Qur'anic* verse: "Indeed, I will place a vicegerent upon the earth" (*Qur'an* 2:30), which signifies man's divine accountability, moral responsibility, and creative potential. Iqbal reframes existential themes like suffering, struggle, and anxiety, not as signs of absurdity, but as essential components of spiritual and moral development which resonates with the Islamic concept of *jihād al-nafs* (struggle of the self), viewing life as a continuous journey to reach a higher moral and spiritual excellence.

In contrast to Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence," Iqbal's existential thought is centred on the idea of '*khudi*,' where a continuous process of self-creation and self-affirmation shapes the individual's essence. Despite the traditional connotations of '*khudi*' as vanity, pomp, and arrogance in Urdu and Persian literature, Iqbal redefines it to represent the self-affirmative soul, emphasising the consciousness of one's ego, self-assertion, and the divine connection between creation and the Creator, ultimately leading to self-realisation. Iqbal contends that '*khudi*' can only be refined through the achievement of these specific objectives, which in turn restores the divine greatness, grandeur, and dignity in humanity. He characterises '*khudi*' as an emotional unity and a luminous element of conscience that illuminates human thoughts and inspirations, regarding it as an eternal reality that unifies scattered and boundless mental states (Ramli, 2016, pp. 102-105). Iqbal's concept of *khudi* reinterprets the Sufi idea of *fanā* as a transformative process, where the self is strengthened and aligned with the Divine, not erased. By identifying God with the inner self and comparing it to the Qur'anic concept of *rūh* (soul), he highlights the limits of reason and science in understanding spiritual realities. In this regard, he emphasises 'intuition' and 'religious experience' as important means for gaining authentic knowledge of faith and existence (Bilgrami, 1966). In *Asrar-i-Khudi* and *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi*, Iqbal explores the self or ego's significant role from various perspectives, in shaping reality, emphasising that self-awareness and personal growth lead to a more meaningful existence. As in *Asrar-i-Khudi*, he states:

"In as much as the life of the universe comes from the power  
of the self,  
Life is in proportion to this power.  
When the drop of water gets self's lesson by heart,

It makes its worthless existence a pearl.  
 The form of existence is an effect of the Self,  
 Whatever thou seest is a secret of the Self.”  
 (Trans. Reynold A. Nicholson)

In Iqbal's philosophy, the self (or ego) is a powerful, creative, and dynamic force that manifests its essence through active involvement, as man's existential journey reveals the significance and distinctiveness of the human self. In *Bāl-i-Jibrīl*, particularly in the poem “Sāqī Nāma,” Iqbal emphasises *khudi* as a supremely valuable and significant essence of human individuality and uniqueness, owing to its potential to transcend the material world and connect with higher, spiritual realities. He states:

“Since time's beginning it was struggling to emerge,  
 And finally emerged in the dust that is man.  
 It is in your heart that the Self has its abode,  
 As the sky is reflected in the pupil of the eye.”  
 (Trans. M. Hadi Hussain)

For Iqbal, the ego is the core of man's identity and conduct, responsible for revealing the true nature of the self through action, judgment, and inner coherence, integrating all experiences. The presence of this true self, as real and existent, is perceived at pivotal moments through intuition as a source of immediate and self-sufficient awareness, which is further realised through existential action and persistent struggle (Malook, 2024). Thus, self-awareness, in his view, is “foundational to self-actualisation,” as a conscious relationship with the inner self enables individuals to access deeper capacities, determining “behavioural growth, identity formation, and self-empowerment.” Iqbal argues that the development of self-consciousness is manifested through “the essence of the self,” inspired by “creativity and inner longing (soz),” contributing to meaningful living and forming behavioural uniqueness. In this progression of individuality, Iqbal asserts that “human emotions can act as obstacles to self-definition and the pursuit of personal goals, often imposing a negative influence on one's personality and success” (Noor, 2020, pp. 29-33).

In conceptualising man, Iqbal reinterprets the doctrine of *tawhīd* (God's oneness) as an active force rather than a passive belief, linking divine unity to the human potential for self-realisation, freedom, and accountability. For him, this understanding of *tawhīd* liberates

individuals from being defined by social, historical, and other external constructs, empowering them to shape their own destiny in relation to the Divine. Thus, freedom, in his view, is real but limited, which is neither a free divine gift nor an imposed burden on man's existence. Rather, it is a matter of personal choice, and an achievement attained through creative struggle, which gradually leads to the Ultimate Ego, or God, who alone possesses complete freedom. Similarly, true 'Self' or 'individuality,' as Iqbal argues, is not an inherent attribute for man, but the result of a 'constant striving' to develop the highest level of 'creativity' and inner 'freedom' and understanding the basic reality or purpose of human 'existence.' Iqbal refutes Sartre's notion of absolute freedom and self-derived value, proposing that true human freedom is realised through a divine relationship, not through isolation of the self since God is the ultimate source of meaning and value.

Iqbal's concept of alienation is not like that of atheist Sartre, although they share a common view that alienation or detachment from the world and external circumstances is required for a creative individual. Iqbal views man's alienated state as a transformative distancing that enables self-discovery and reconnection with God through spiritual awakening and moral growth. He identifies that man's alienation from divine connection is the major impediment to the development of his true self, as it restricts the inner potential to attain immortality (the glory of the ego) and freedom (ultimate destination of the ego) (Hassan, 1978, pp. 208-211). Since Iqbal's understanding of alienation is theocentric and spiritually grounded, his early poems "*Shikwah*" (The Complaint) and "*Jawab-i-Shikwah*" (Answer to the Complaint), present alienation because of man's refusal to engage with the Supreme Reality (God), the external world, and his inner self. By addressing human alienation on both religious and social levels, he focuses it as a form of complain to God, to highlight the spiritual stagnation of man's existential state of being-in-the-world, a condition that Sartre defines as man's inauthentic mode of existence.

Unlike Sartre, for whom death represents the definitive conclusion of existence, a final limitation and negation of the self, Iqbal holds a radically different view. Iqbal perceives death not as an end but as a transition to another mode of existence or a higher state, considering it an integral part of the self's evolutionary journey toward self-realisation and divine union. This process requires transcending the limitations

of the physical world and attaining spiritual maturity. He affirms the immortality of the self (or ego), asserting that the self continues its journey after the body's death in a different form. As articulated in *Bang-i-Dara* (The Call of the Marching Bell): "While the eve of life is the beginning of an eternal life / Death is nothing but the revival of the lust for life / It is a dream that conveys the message of awakening."

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that Iqbal's conception of man highlights humans as God's appointed representatives (*khalifah*), emphasising that this role is not merely symbolic but involves active engagement in the spiritual and material development of both the self and society. He frames vicegerency as a dynamic process through which individuals strive to realise their innate potential and contribute to a greater cosmic order. Within this spiritual journey, he views man's self-realisation as essential, with '*fanā*,' the surrender or annihilation of the ego, being a necessary step in purifying the self and achieving deeper closeness to God. For Iqbal, purification (*tazkiyah*) is a deeply spiritual process involving moral and intellectual refinement, achieved through faith, prayer, and reflection, enabling the self to fulfil its role as God's vicegerent on Earth. His concept of perfection aligns with the Islamic notion of *Insān al-Kāmil*, where human perfection is realised through deepening one's relationship with God and engaging in divine creativity and moral agency (Dar, 2013). In Sartre's secular humanism, the concept of divine vicegerency is absent, as he emphasises human autonomy and self-determined purpose, representing 'self-annihilation' as a rejection of fixed identities imposed by external authority and a breaking free from social labels and expectations. Sartre focuses on self-creation in a godless universe, whereas Iqbal sees self-realisation as something achieved through spiritual growth and drawing closer to God.

### **Sartre's Secular Humanism and Iqbal's *Tawhidic* Worldview: Reassessing Modern Identity of Man**

Modernity, with its emphasis on reason, secularism, science, and individualism, led to the erosion of traditional metaphysical foundations, such as belief in God, the soul, and ultimate purpose. This epistemological and existential shift gave rise to a profound crisis of meaning, which Sartre and Iqbal addressed through their contrasting visions, one grounded in atheistic freedom, the other in divine selfhood.



Their respective viewpoints provide a profound understanding of how individuals today respond to absurdity, alienation, and identity crises to seek meaning and self-definition through their freedom of choice in the face of modern existential uncertainty.

Sartre addresses the disillusionment of modern individuals who, in the absence of religious and moral absolutes, are confronted with a world shaped by secularism, individualism, and consumerism, often resulting in a profound sense of disorientation and meaninglessness. Some of his most notable works that explore this theme include the novels *Nausea*, *The Age of Reason*, *The Reprieve*, and *Troubled Sleep*. Sartre's play *No Exit* expresses the existential disillusionment of modern life through its renowned quote, "Hell is other people," highlighting the anguish of being unable to escape others' perceptions and expectations. Sartre frames this existential crisis not as something to avoid, but as a challenge to be faced, not by withdrawing, but through absolute, self-defining freedom. He interprets human life as an ever-developing journey of self-creation, where freedom is not a light privilege but a serious demand for moral responsibility, challenging the modern notion of freedom as effortless autonomy (Giordano, 2021).

Unlike Sartre, who promotes humanism without religion, Iqbal presents an Islamic alternative that reconnects man with the divine, offering a spiritual path for today's humanity. He believes that even though modern life makes people feel empty or disconnected, they can overcome this crisis by discovering their true self, called *khudi*, and by reconnecting with the divine purpose of life. In *Zarb-i-Kalim*, he presents a critical view of modern man, who possesses scientific 'power' but lacks true 'vision.' His poetic message calls for the reawakening of a deeper sense of individuality (selfhood) through relentless action and struggle, aiming to rediscover hidden potential and possibilities, ultimately to find one's true self, connect with God, and attain freedom and immortality. His *tawhidic* vision of man focuses '*khudi*' or 'selfhood' as the core foundation of human life, rather than viewing 'human existence' as the sole basis, affirming that "man is the chosen of God" serving as His representative and trustee in the universe (Malook, 2024).

In the context of contemporary man, who is often eroded by the forces of mass culture and consumerism, Sartre argues that the fundamental challenge of modern existence is the acceptance of radical

freedom and responsibility through which one can confront existential anxiety and strive to live authentically. In his view, mass culture, shaped by consumer capitalism, encourages individuals to adopt self-deceptive behaviours, valuing social acceptance over personal authenticity, which reinforces collective myths of success and desirability that people feel pressured to follow. Thus, contemporary humans tend to avoid the responsibility that comes with freedom by conforming to fixed roles, ideologies, or religious beliefs. Sartre characterises this behaviour as a betrayal of the self, labelling it 'bad faith,' which involves denying one's freedom and responsibility through self-deception (Zheng, 2002). Mathieu Delarue, in *The Age of Reason*, is a portrait of modern man, embodying Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' by denying his own freedom and responsibility. Delarue's avoidance of moral responsibility in his lover Marcelle's abortion, along with his refusal to confront the moral and emotional consequences of his actions, reveals an inner conflict and dilemma that is common among contemporary individuals. However, over time, Delarue becomes gradually aware that the exclusion of emotional and moral concerns in favour of pure rationalism ultimately leads to existential emptiness and inner dissatisfaction. Sartre advocates for resisting the passive conformity imposed by modern social and cultural structures, urging individuals to take responsibility for their choices and create meaning through authentic action (Campbell, 1977). In *Nausea*, Antoine Roquentin, a solitary historian, does not escape his existential anxiety but instead begins to embrace it, contemplating the creation of meaning through art, specifically writing a novel, as a way to affirm life. Roquentin's transformation from despair to the potential for self-authenticity reflects his psychological and philosophical shift.

Much like Sartre, Iqbal encourages modern individuals to rise above passive submission to the norms imposed by contemporary society, but he emphasises the necessity of achieving self-realisation and spiritual awakening. He condemns the superficiality of consumerism and mass culture, calling for a life that is driven by purpose, authenticity, and inner strength. He encourages individuals to rediscover their true selves (*khudi*), stressing the importance of taking responsibility for their personal and spiritual growth and shaping their destinies through meaningful, authentic actions (Hassan, 1978). His *Zarb-i-Kalim* (The Rod of Moses), a collection of political and philosophical poems, promotes self-empowerment and advocates resistance to the oppressive

forces of modern society. Rejecting passive submission to social norms, he champions a bold and purposeful reinvention of self and society, grounded in spiritual insight and moral strength. His long poem "*Saqi Namah*" (The Book of the Cupbearer) passionately calls for a spiritual renaissance within the Muslim World. Here, Iqbal denounces the pervasive materialism of contemporary society, calling for a return to true meaning through faith, self-discipline, and spiritual values. In *Payam-i-Mashriq* (The Message of the East), Iqbal responds to Western materialism by upholding the spiritual legacy of the East, suggesting individuals to reject social pressures and pursue their true purpose through self-awareness and spiritual enlightenment (Kazmi, 1995).

In Sartre's philosophy, with the loss of religion, tradition, and absolute truths as guiding forces in modern life, individuals are left with absolute freedom to create their own identity and meaning without external guidance. He views freedom as a responsibility that simultaneously generates existential anxiety, alienation, and a sense of lacking inherent meaning. In *Nausea*, through the character of Antoine Roquentin, Sartre demonstrates how the inescapable responsibility of absolute freedom, and the lack of universal truths lead to deep existential anxiety and alienation in modern individuals. Roquentin's personal lived experiences lead him to the realisation that existence is absurd and devoid of inherent meaning which forces him to confront the raw 'being' of the world around him, leaving him overwhelmed with a sense of nausea. In *Being and Nothingness*, the phrase "condemned to be free" highlights Sartre's belief that although humans have the freedom to choose and define themselves, this freedom is burdened with responsibility. This viewpoint reminds modern individuals of their existential responsibility, drawing attention to both aspects of absolute freedom (Campbell, 1977).

In contrast to Sartre's view of freedom, Iqbal, in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, presents the freedom of man not as something granted externally, but as a spiritual achievement, attained through persistent, creative struggle that strengthens the self and guides it toward the 'Ultimate Ego' (God). While Sartre's secular humanism defines freedom as a source of existential anxiety and alienation, obliging individuals to determine their own meaning and be solely accountable, Iqbal's *tawhidic* worldview elevates freedom as a journey toward divine-centred self-realisation. He argues that, since the human ego is only

partially free and partially determined, man cannot be completely free or the sole source of all values. For him, freedom is a means to realise one's inherent potential and to effect change in the universe, particularly within the social and moral domains. He contends that humans possess the adaptive capacity to overcome obstacles and an ascending spirit that allows them to rise from one stage to another, ultimately becoming "self-conscious participants in God's creative activity," which enables them to become "co-workers with God" as well (Bahroni, 2013, p. 91). Thus, in the poem *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (The Secrets of Selflessness), he shifts the focus from individual self-realisation (*Khudi*) to the role of the individual within the community (Ummah) and in service to God's greater creative purpose. This poem reflects Iqbal's vision of an active, creative man, who is not just obedient to God, but collaborating with Him in manifesting justice, beauty, and spiritual purpose in the world.

Sartre identifies that modern people are challenged to live authentically and bear the full responsibility for their freedom. In *The Age of Reason*, he reveals how modern man, influenced by scientific rationalism and mechanised society, loses his true identity and becomes part of an impersonal system, leading to existential suffering and a crisis of freedom. In this novel, Mathieu Delarue, a philosophy professor in Paris, faces struggles with the burden of personal responsibility, the fear of commitment, and the desire to escape social roles, such as teacher, lover, and citizen. This internal conflict leads him to feel increasingly alienated, as he perceives himself becoming nothing more than a cog in society's machinery. Through the character of Delarue, Sartre depicts the modern individual as trapped in a consumer-driven society, influenced by mass culture and advertising that promotes false ideals, manipulates desires, and alienates people from their true selves. He portrays consumer culture as an extension of self-alienation, where identity is shaped by material consumption rather than personal experience or insight. Sartre emphasises the existential crisis of modern man, showing how the pursuit of social approval leads to the loss of authenticity and the sacrifice of freedom (Zheng, 2002).

Unlike Sartre's focus on the loss of authenticity through social pressures, Iqbal argues that true freedom and authenticity emerge from an inner journey, where individuals reconnect with their "*khudi*" (selfhood) and cultivate a strong sense of will and purpose. He contends that the pursuit of social approval does not undermine authenticity if it is

guided by inner strength, self-awareness, and a commitment to spiritual growth. Iqbal's poem "*Shauq-e-Kamil*" ("The Desire for Perfection") from *Bang-e-Dara* (The Call of the Marching Bell), conveys his idea that "will" is empty and lifeless without the guiding forces of action, wisdom, and desire, asserting the importance of a creative, internal force that drives human existence. He highlights the need for 'self-assessment' and 'self-control' in *Asrar-e-Khudi* (The Secrets of the Self) as essential prerequisites for contemporary individuals to effectively pursue their objectives in a universe where spiritual grounding and inner purpose are often overshadowed by materialism and external distractions (Kazmi, 1995, p. 26). Iqbal focuses on self-awareness as a necessary step in overcoming existential confusion, encouraging individuals to explore their inner selves and uncover the true spiritual motivations that awaken the will and guide their existence.

## Conclusion

Although Iqbal and Sartre disagree on some fundamental issues, particularly regarding belief in God and the concept of selfhood, they share comparable views on human existence from both social and individual perspectives. This commonality emerges from the fact that both thinkers experience the same historical context and face similar existential challenges. Despite being influenced by contrasting cultural and philosophical traditions, both incorporate the Socratic idea of 'Know Thyself' into their existentialist views, emphasising self-knowledge as essential for authentic living and encouraging individuals to engage in self-discovery to find meaning and purpose in life.

Iqbal conceptualises humans as *khalīfah*, divinely appointed representatives with the responsibility for spiritual growth, moral duty, and self-realisation through closeness to God. He views the Holy Prophet as the embodiment of the Perfect Man and rejects mystical ideas that erase human individuality. Iqbal argues against any approach that promotes self-annihilation or separation from the universe, emphasising that humans serve as a link between God and universe. Iqbal challenges humanism for its atheistic ideology, rejecting materialism for its tendency to 'dehumanise' and 'inauthenticate' human existence, and places the 'Ultimate Ego' (God) at the core of his existential philosophy, which clashes with Sartre's anti-essentialist approach. Iqbal defines the authentic man by contrasting the *Mu'min* (True Believer, Authentic Man,

or Good Man) and *Kafir* (unbeliever or inauthentic human) through their fundamental attitude toward the life of action or ego-activity, rather than theological considerations. Hence, Iqbal's philosophical identity cannot be labelled as existentialist, even though he offers significant existential insights.

Sartre, however, rejects divine purpose of man, viewing human existence as the result of chance or accident, where individuals are absolutely free and accountable for establishing their own values and meaning to live authentically. Though he acknowledges life's difficulties, at the same time, he emphasises courage, commitment, and personal integrity in the face of an indifferent or absurd world. This view offers empowerment rather than despair, and thus Sartre's existentialist conception of man should not be seen as negative or hopeless, despite being commonly misunderstood as promoting despair or depression. However, Sartre's secular humanism focuses on authenticity born from confronting nothingness, freedom, and the anxiety of existence, whereas Iqbal's *tawhidic* worldview highlights the spiritual growth of man toward *Insān al-Kāmil* through discipline, self-awareness, and divine connection. Despite their different metaphysical commitments, both thinkers address the central existential idea that the human condition demands active engagement, self-realisation, and moral responsibility.

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