Freedom, Absurdity, and Ethical Reconstruction: Iqbal in Dialogue with Sartre, Camus, and Kafka

Dr. Khurram Ellahi Khan
Assistant Professor, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics; PhD Management Science and HRM

Muhammad Abdullah
Communications and Advocacy Coordinator, Association for Social Development; M.Phil. Development Studies

Dr. Shaheer Ellahi Khan
Associate Professor / Head of BSPH Department, Health Services Academy; PhD Anthropology
Corresponding Author: * Muhammad Abdullah abdullah_mughal@live.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the modern human condition through the lens of existentialist thought and the philosophical poetry of Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Sartre, Camus, and Kafka articulate the crises of freedom, absurdity, and alienation that define contemporary existence, revealing a world where meaning is fragile and human agency is constrained. Iqbal, however, accepts the incompleteness and paradox of existence while reconstructing agency as ethical co-creation within an unfinished universe. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how Iqbal transforms freedom from a burden into a responsibility, offering a framework in which human action itself constitutes meaning. By juxtaposing Western existentialist diagnosis with Iqbal's constructive philosophy, this paper highlights a path from despair toward purposeful engagement, positioning the human being as an active participant in shaping reality. The study contributes to comparative philosophy by providing a novel lens to understand modern existential challenges and the potential for human agency.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Modern Human Condition, Agency, Freedom, Incompleteness, Iqbal, Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Ethical Co-Creation*

INTRODUCTION

Crisis of Meaning in Modernity

The modern human condition is increasingly characterized by a profound crisis of meaning. Traditional metaphysical frameworks that once provided coherence to human existence—religious certainties, teleological worldviews, and stable moral orders—have gradually eroded under the pressures of scientific rationalism, industrialization, and socio-political fragmentation (Weber, 2001; Taylor, 2007). As a result, the modern individual finds oneself situated in a world that functions efficiently yet signifies poorly.

This erosion of metaphysical certainty has led to a fragmentation of the self. The human subject is no longer experienced as a unified moral agent but as a divided being—caught between competing roles, accelerated demands, and conflicting value systems. Identity is increasingly shaped by utility, performance, and social function rather than by any enduring conception of purpose (Arendt, 1958; Bauman, 2000). The self, instead of being cultivated, is often managed.

Compounding this crisis is the transformation of time itself. Modernity has not merely accelerated life; it has altered the experience of duration. Time is felt as pressure rather than possibility—long hours producing exhaustion, and short days yielding little existential fulfillment. This temporal compression

intensifies anxiety and deepens the sense of existential fatigue, leaving the modern individual suspended between urgency and emptiness (Rosa, 2013).

Together, these conditions form the background against which the philosophical problem of existence emerges with renewed urgency: How is meaning possible in a world that no longer guarantees it?

Existentialism as a Response, Not a Doctrine

Existentialism emerges within this historical and philosophical context not as a systematic doctrine, but as a response to the lived realities of alienation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Rather than offering a unified metaphysical system, existentialist thought approaches human existence as a problem to be confronted rather than resolved (Sartre, 2007). Its philosophical strength lies in its diagnostic capacity— its ability to articulate the structures of human anxiety, freedom, and abandonment without recourse to comforting illusions.

A defining feature of existentialism is its reliance on literary forms as vehicles of philosophical insight. Novels, plays, and narratives function not as illustrations of theory, but as primary sites of philosophical reflection. Through characters, situations, and symbolic worlds, existentialist thinkers expose the tensions inherent in human existence: freedom experienced as burden, meaning pursued in an indifferent universe, and identity reduced to social or functional roles (Camus, 2005; Kafka, 2009).

In this sense, existentialism operates less as a prescriptive philosophy and more as an interpretive lens— one that reveals the fragility of human meaning under modern conditions. It does not deny human freedom, but it places that freedom in a context stripped of guarantees, thereby forcing the individual to confront existence in its raw, unmediated form (Camus, 2005)

Aim and Scope of the Study

The present study examines this existential diagnosis through a close textual analysis of selected works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. These thinkers are chosen not merely for their historical association with existentialism, but for the distinct ways in which their literary and philosophical texts articulate key dimensions of modern human existence: radical freedom, absurdity, and dehumanization through utility. Their characters do not theorize existence; they live it under conditions of constraint, ambiguity, and loss.

While existentialist thought offers a powerful description of the modern condition, this study argues that it reaches a philosophical impasse when confronted with the question of reconstruction. The analysis therefore introduces the philosophical poetry of Allama Muhammad Iqbal as a critical intervention within the same existential terrain. Iqbal is not approached as a theological alternative, but as a thinker who accepts the conditions of incompleteness, struggle, and uncertainty, while reconfiguring human agency through the concept of responsibility and co-creation (Iqbal, 2012).

The central question guiding this study is: Can the existential diagnosis of modern human life be extended beyond despair and revolt toward a framework that restores agency without denying suffering?
The thesis advanced here is that while Sartre, Camus, and Kafka compellingly diagnose the fractures of modern existence, Iqbal reconstructs the human condition by transforming freedom into ethical responsibility and positioning the human being as an active participant in an unfinished universe.

EXISTENTIALISM AS TEXTUAL DIAGNOSIS OF HUMAN THROWNNESS

Sartre: Freedom as Sentence

Jean-Paul Sartre articulates human freedom as both inescapable and burdensome. He famously asserts:

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism*).

This statement captures the paradoxical core of Sartrean thought: freedom is imposed upon the individual, rather than chosen. It is a sentence rather than a gift, an ontological condition that defines human existence in a world without pre-given essence.

Sartre develops this idea further in *Being and Nothingness*, emphasizing that the human self is fundamentally nothingness:

"Consciousness is a being whose being is conscious of itself" (*Being and Nothingness*).

Because consciousness is defined by what it is not, it is perpetually incomplete, always projecting itself toward possibilities that do not yet exist. The human being cannot rest in preordained identity or social role; one must constantly create oneself.

This burden is vividly illustrated in Sartre's *No Exit*, where three characters find themselves trapped in a room for eternity. The torment is not physical confinement, but the relentless exposure to each other's judgment and their own choices. In this scenario, Sartre dramatizes the existential condition: human freedom entails responsibility that cannot be deferred or avoided. Each character's identity is contingent upon their actions and the perception of others, showing how freedom becomes simultaneously sovereign and isolating.

In Sartre's universe, anxiety (*angoisse*) is a natural outcome of this radical freedom. It arises when the individual confronts the absence of external justification:

"We are our choices" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism*).

Every action, whether moral or trivial, defines the self and proposes a model of humanity. This perpetual demand to act and define oneself, without guidance from pre-existing essences or values, exposes the individual to both existential vertigo and moral pressure.

Sartre's existentialism thus performs a diagnostic function: it reveals the structural condition of modern human life—freedom without orientation, responsibility without support, and the self perpetually incomplete. Yet, this radical freedom also produces limits: it can exhaust rather than empower, leaving the individual burdened by endless choice and isolated from sources of meaning. It is within this tension—between sovereignty and solitude—that the philosophical need for intervention or reconstruction arises.

Camus: The Absurd and the Cage of Values

Albert Camus explores human existence under conditions of absurdity, emphasizing the tension between our desire for meaning and the universe's indifference. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he declares:

"The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

Here, Camus identifies the fundamental existential problem: humans seek coherence, purpose, and order, yet the world offers none. Unlike Sartre, who emphasizes radical freedom as the primary condition, Camus highlights the limits of human autonomy imposed by the absurd. Human action is always constrained by the mismatch between desire and reality.

This tension is vividly dramatized in *The Stranger*, where Meursault's life reflects a profound detachment from conventional moral and social frameworks. When confronted with the death of his mother, he responds without expected emotional expression:

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know."

Meursault's indifference illustrates how societal values—rituals, morality, and judgment—impose artificial cages on the individual. Though he is technically free, the structure of human society and its moral expectations create a subtle but powerful confinement. In Camus' terms, freedom exists only within a conditioned horizon; humans are "caged" by the very values they seek to uphold or rebel against.

In facing the absurd, Camus does not advocate despair. Instead, he proposes revolt as a conscious response:

"The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*)

Revolt acknowledges the impossibility of ultimate reconciliation with the universe but affirms the human capacity to act authentically within imposed limits. Yet, this revolt remains grounded in recognition of constraint. Unlike Sartre, whose characters are burdened by unbounded freedom, Camus' characters are burdened by the inescapable gap between values and reality.

Thus, Camus' existentialism diagnoses the paradoxical condition of modern life: humans are free yet caged, capable of revolt yet constrained by social and ontological absurdity. This diagnostic framework complements Sartre's emphasis on freedom but shifts the focus from the internal weight of choice to the external tension between human desire and the universe's indifference. Both thinkers, however, illuminate the existential isolation and the challenge of forging meaning, setting the stage for Iqbal's later intervention, which seeks to restore agency without denying human limitation.

Kafka: Utility, Alienation, and Self-Erasure

Franz Kafka presents a vision of human existence defined by alienation, bureaucratic constraint, and the reduction of the self to utility. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka illustrates this existential condition through the character of Gregor Samsa, who awakens transformed into a giant insect:

"When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."

This literal metamorphosis is both grotesque and symbolic: Gregor's human identity is subordinated entirely to his function as provider for his family. His utility defines his existence, and the loss of his productive capacity immediately diminishes his value in the eyes of those around him. Through this scenario, Kafka dramatizes the existential condition in which human worth is externally imposed and contingent upon usefulness rather than intrinsic dignity.

In Kafka's world, alienation is structural and relational. Gregor's isolation is compounded by the family's reaction:

"He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions."

The grotesque physical transformation parallels the psychological and social estrangement he experiences. Human beings, Kafka suggests, are often trapped between their own desires and socially imposed roles, with identity constantly negotiable and precarious. The individual is both trapped and expendable; survival depends not on moral or philosophical virtue, but on meeting external expectations of function.

Kafka also emphasizes the self-erasure that accompanies the demand for utility. Gregor's internal reflections reveal a willingness to surrender his own needs and desires:

"He thought back on his family with emotion and love. The thoughts of his family sustained him, and he could only survive in their service."

This illustrates how existential pressure to perform can lead to the dissolution of the self, a theme that resonates across Kafka's work, including *The Trial* and *The Castle*. In these narratives, protagonists navigate opaque bureaucracies where rules are arbitrary, authority is inscrutable, and personal agency is constantly undermined. The human being is reduced to a role or function, alienated from both society and self.

Kafka's existentialism diagnoses the pathological side of modern existence: alienation, dependence on external validation, and the internalization of utility as a measure of worth. Unlike Sartre, whose freedom is burdensome, and Camus, whose revolt is constrained by absurdity, Kafka exposes the erosion of agency itself. His work lays bare a world in which human identity is expendable, and the individual is almost entirely at the mercy of social and systemic forces**.**

Comparative Analysis: Freedom, Constraint, and Utility

Having examined Sartre, Camus, and Kafka individually, it becomes possible to analyze the shared and divergent structures of existential diagnosis across their works.

Sartre's philosophy frames human existence around the principle that:

"Man is condemned to be free" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism*).

Freedom is both inescapable and morally burdensome. Human beings are not only thrust into existence but are entirely responsible for defining themselves. As one scholar notes, "Sartre's freedom is not a liberating gift but a perpetual ethical obligation, where inaction is itself a choice with consequences" (Flynn, 2006). In Sartre's ontology, existence indeed precedes essence, and the individual is compelled to navigate life without any preordained structure, creating both opportunity and anxiety.

Camus, by contrast, highlights the cage of values within which modern humans operate. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, he shows that humans are aware of their imprisonment within socially and morally constructed systems, yet they desire liberation:

"The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

Here, human beings are not only free but also constrained—bound by the limits of social expectations, moral codes, and the intrinsic absurdity of existence. As Dufresne (2013) emphasizes, Camus portrays freedom as conditional and reactive, always negotiated against the rigidity of external frameworks.

Kafka, in turn, presents a world where utility governs existential worth. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's value is measured by his usefulness; his personal identity can be entirely sacrificed without apparent moral consequence:

"He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions."

Kafka's narratives illustrate a systemic and social alienation in which human existence is subordinated to roles, function, and external evaluation. As Sokel (2002) observes, "Kafka's work exposes the human

subject as expendable, caught in a bureaucratic and moral system that evaluates existence through performance rather than intrinsic being."

Comparatively, these three thinkers highlight different facets of modern human limitation:

Thinker	Core Condition	Mode of Constraint	Human Response
Sartre	Radical freedom	Self-imposed, ontological	Ethical responsibility, anxiety
Camus	Absurdity	Social & metaphysical cage	Revolt, conscious acceptance
Kafka	Utility & alienation	Bureaucratic/social systems	Adaptation, self-erasure

Together, they illustrate the limits of existential diagnosis: Sartre illuminates the burden of freedom, Camus exposes the tension between desire and social absurdity, and Kafka dramatizes the subsumption of the individual to external utility. Each diagnosis is powerful but ends in an impasse, where human agency is either overburdened, constrained, or eroded. Secondary literature confirms this convergence: as Solomon (2006) argues, "20th-century existentialism repeatedly documents the human struggle for agency under conditions of freedom, absurdity, and instrumentalization, yet rarely proposes a framework for reconstructive action."

It is precisely within this impasse that Iqbal's philosophical intervention becomes significant: the existential predicament is acknowledged but not left unresolved. Iqbal preserves the realities of human limitation while proposing a co-creative engagement with existence, which will be explored in the subsequent sections.

THE EXISTENTIAL IMPASSE: WHERE DIAGNOSIS REACHES ITS LIMIT

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Sartre, Camus, and Kafka collectively diagnose the structural and experiential challenges of modern human life. Each thinker illuminates a different facet of existential limitation: radical freedom (Sartre), absurdity and social constraint (Camus), and alienation through utility (Kafka). While each approach compellingly portrays human struggle, they also share a fundamental limitation: they describe human existence without offering a framework for reconstructive agency.

Sartre's notion of being *condemned to be free* positions freedom as an inescapable burden. While this ontological freedom grants the individual the power to self-create, it simultaneously imposes endless responsibility, often producing anxiety that can paralyze action (Flynn, 2006). Camus, in exposing the absurdity of human desire within constraining social and metaphysical systems, demonstrates that revolt is possible but always provisional, limited by the persistent tension between human expectation and cosmic indifference (Dufresne, 2013). Kafka dramatizes the erosion of selfhood under utility-driven social systems, showing how external evaluation can subsume personal identity and reduce human agency to performative function (Sokel, 2002).

Taken together, these existential frameworks converge on a critical insight: human beings are either overburdened, constrained, or erased, leaving the modern individual exposed to despair, alienation, or self-negation. As Solomon (2006) notes, twentieth-century existentialism "consistently documents the struggle for agency under extreme conditions but offers few resources for enduring reconstruction."

It is within this philosophical impasse that Allama Iqbal's intervention becomes significant. Iqbal does not deny the reality of hardship or incompleteness; rather, he reconfigures the human condition by introducing the idea of co-creation and purposeful engagement. In his poetry, he emphasizes that the universe is not fixed and that human agency can shape destiny:

سیکائنات   ابھی   ناتمام   ہے شا   ید
کہ   آرہی ہے صداے مادم کن   فی   یکین

Here, Iqbal acknowledges the provisional nature of existence while highlighting the human role in filling the gaps of creation. Unlike the existentialist figures, who confront limitations either as burden (Sartre), absurdity (Camus), or alienation (Kafka), Iqbal presents the human being as an active co-creator, capable of transforming limitation into purposeful action:

یہ شت   خناک یہ سرر، یہ وسعت   افلا   ک
کرم ہے یا کہ ستم، تیری لذتِ ابداع

Through this lens, freedom is not only an imposed condition or a source of anxiety; it becomes ethical and creative responsibility, enabling the human being to engage with incompleteness without succumbing to despair. Iqbal's framework addresses the ontological gaps highlighted by existentialism while situating human agency within a cosmic and ethical horizon, offering a "why" to bear the existential "how" of life.

Secondary scholarship supports this reading. As Alam (2010) argues, Iqbal's philosophy "transforms existential finitude into a constructive vision, emphasizing selfhood, responsibility, and creative engagement as antidotes to despair." Similarly, Malik (2015) notes that Iqbal's co-creative human is both aware of limitation and empowered to act, offering a distinct philosophical resolution absent in Western existentialist thought.

In sum, the existential impasse diagnosed by Sartre, Camus, and Kafka—freedom without orientation, revolt without possibility of reconciliation, utility without identity—is **not resolved** by description alone. Iqbal's intervention provides the reconstructive dimension, demonstrating how the human being can navigate limitation, bear suffering, and participate actively in the unfinished cosmos.

IQBAL AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF EXISTENTIAL CONDITIONS

An Open World Without Refuge: Anxiety, Freedom, and the Absence of Shelter

Iqbal begins not with consolation but with a sober acknowledgment of the existential structure of the modern world. In the following verse, he presents a universe that is radically open yet profoundly unsettling:

کوئی گوشہ فراغت نہیں اس کھلی   فضا   میں
یہ جہاں عجب جہاں ہے، نہ قفس نہ آشیانہ

This imagery describes a paradoxical condition: a world without visible confinement (*qafas*), yet also without shelter (*aashiyaana*). Freedom here does not translate into rest or security; rather, it produces a state of continuous exposure. The absence of both cage and home situates the human being in a condition of permanent unrest, where existence unfolds without guaranteed refuge.
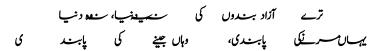
This vision closely aligns with Beckett's existential landscapes, particularly in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, where characters inhabit open, undefined spaces that offer neither escape nor belonging. Beckett's figures are not imprisoned by walls; they are trapped by openness itself—condemned to wait, to endure, to persist without destination. As Esslin observes in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, this spatial openness intensifies existential anxiety rather than relieving it.

From a Sartrean perspective, this verse reflects the ontological condition of radical freedom. Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* that human beings are "abandoned" in a world without pre-given meaning. Freedom, stripped of metaphysical guarantees, becomes a burden rather than a privilege. Iqbal's "open sky" mirrors this abandonment: existence is not constrained by external authority, yet it offers no inherent structure of rest or fulfillment.

Camus' notion of the absurd further sharpens this reading. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the human condition as one in which the desire for coherence confronts an indifferent universe. Iqbal's world—neither prison nor home—captures precisely this tension. The universe does not actively oppress the human being, yet it refuses to accommodate human longing for stability or repose. The result is not despair alone, but existential fatigue.

Kafka's contribution to this diagnosis lies in the experience of placelessness. In *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Kafka's protagonists move through systems and spaces that are open yet inaccessible, visible yet uninhabitable. There is no clear boundary of exclusion, but neither is there inclusion. Iqbal's verse resonates with this condition: a world that offers movement without arrival, presence without belonging.

This existential openness culminates in a deeper paradox, which Iqbal articulates explicitly in the following verse:

تِرے آزاد بندوں کی نہ یہ دنیا، نہ وہ دنیا

یہاں مرنے کی پابندی، وہاں جینے کی پابندی

Here, Iqbal introduces the contradiction at the heart of human existence: the human being is described as *azaad* (free), yet bound by the ultimate limits of life and death. In the temporal world, death is inevitable; beyond it, life is inaccessible. Freedom thus operates within absolute constraints, producing a condition that is neither fully autonomous nor fully determined.

This paradox echoes Heidegger's concept of Being-toward-death in *Being and Time*, where human existence is defined by its finitude. Death is not merely an event at the end of life; it structures existence from within, shaping anxiety, urgency, and meaning. Iqbal's formulation similarly acknowledges that human freedom unfolds under the shadow of unavoidable limitation.

Hannah Arendt's reflections in *The Human Condition* further illuminate this tension. She notes that modernity has intensified human agency while simultaneously exposing its fragility. The human being acts, creates, and intervenes in the world, yet remains unable to control the fundamental conditions of birth and death. Iqbal's verse captures this contradiction without attempting to dissolve it.

Importantly, at this stage, Iqbal does not yet reconstruct the human condition. He does not offer consolation, transcendence, or ethical resolution. Instead, he stands with the existentialists in accepting the structural anxiety of existence: a world without shelter, freedom without sovereignty, life bounded by death.

This acceptance is crucial. It establishes that Iqbal's philosophy does not emerge from denial of existential suffering but from its full recognition. Only after acknowledging this paradoxical condition—open yet exhausting, free yet constrained—does Iqbal begin to reimagine human agency. That movement, however, belongs to the next stage of the argument.

From Paradox to Co-Presence: Reconfiguring Human Agency

Having accepted the existential condition of openness, anxiety, and finitude, Iqbal advances the argument by placing **two consciousnesses in direct relation**: the Creator and the human being. This move marks a

decisive departure from Western existentialism, which largely situates the human subject in isolation—abandoned, absurd, or bureaucratically erased.

Iqbal articulates this confrontation in the following verse:

میرا ہے تیرا آسماں انجم، ہیں رو کجا گر
میرا ہے تیرا جہاں ہو، کیو لِجہاں منکرِ مجھے

At first glance, the verse appears to express theological submission. However, philosophically, it performs a far more complex operation. Iqbal is not dissolving responsibility; he is redefining its location. By juxtaposing divine ownership with human concern, he stages an encounter between two agencies, not one dominant will and one passive subject.

This dialogical structure sharply contrasts with Sartre's ontology, where the absence of God renders the human being "abandoned" and solely responsible for meaning (*Being and Nothingness*). Sartrean freedom is unilateral: the human stands alone before an indifferent universe. Iqbal, by contrast, introduces a shared horizon of concern, where creation is neither wholly divine nor wholly human, but relational.

This perspective also diverges from Camus' framework. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus insists that the universe is silent to human questioning. Revolt, therefore, remains tragically one-sided: the human asserts meaning in a cosmos that never responds. Iqbal's verse refuses this silence. The universe is not mute; it is unfinished, and its incompleteness invites engagement rather than revolt.

The shift becomes more explicit in the following verse:

بیتا بی کی شب و روز تجھے ہو نَیعطا
سیا بی یا ہے حنا کی تو کہ یِنہ خبر

Here, Iqbal identifies restlessness (*beitabi*) as a defining feature of human existence. Unlike existentialists who interpret anxiety as evidence of absurdity or abandonment, Iqbal treats restlessness as ontological potential. The ambiguity between *khaki* (earthbound) and *seemabi* (mercurial) suggests that the human being cannot be fixed within a single category of nature.

This destabilization of essence echoes existentialist critiques of essentialism—particularly Sartre's claim that existence precedes essence. However, Iqbal simplifies and radicalizes the insight: the question is not *what* the human being is, but what the human being is capable of becoming. Restlessness is not a symptom to be endured; it is the engine of agency.

Philosophically, this move resonates with Hannah Arendt's concept of *natality* in *The Human Condition*, where the capacity to begin anew defines human action. It also aligns with Charles Taylor's argument in *Sources of the Self* that modern identity is constituted through orientation toward higher purposes rather than mere self-assertion. Iqbal anticipates both positions, grounding becoming not in rebellion but in creative responsibility.

The complexity of this agency is acknowledged—rather than denied—in the following verse:

وجہ د دِل گئ چیر تیز نگاہِ سری گا ہ
مسیں تو ہا ت میرے گئ رہ کے الجھ گا ہ

Here, Iqbal explicitly accepts the fallibility of human agency. The human capacity to penetrate the "heart of existence" alternates with moments of confusion and illusion. This oscillation is crucial: agency is neither omnipotent nor illusory. It is situated, vulnerable, and yet indispensable.

This acknowledgment prevents Iqbal's philosophy from collapsing into naïve optimism or theological determinism. Unlike Kafka's protagonists—whose confusion leads to paralysis or erasure—Iqbal's human being remains active even in error. Mistakes do not negate agency; they are constitutive of it.

At this point, Iqbal makes his most decisive philosophical move: human agency is not assigned the task of giving meaning to a pre-existing stage; human agency itself is the meaning. This stands in sharp contrast to existentialism, where meaning is something constructed *against* the backdrop of absurdity or absence. For Iqbal, agency is not compensatory—it is ontological.

In this sense, Iqbal does not reject existentialism; he completes its unfinished logic. Where Sartre leaves the human burdened by freedom, Camus confines revolt within absurdity, and Kafka depicts agency dissolving under systems, Iqbal repositions agency as the very purpose of an unfinished universe.

Reconstruction of Existentialism: Co-Creation, Action, and Ethical Freedom

The existential condition, once fully acknowledged, demands more than diagnosis. If the universe is open, restless, and unfinished—as existentialism persuasively demonstrates—then the decisive philosophical question becomes not *whether* meaning exists, but how agency is to be exercised within incompleteness. It is at this juncture that Iqbal advances a reconstruction rather than a rebuttal of existential thought.

Iqbal's reconstruction begins with an ontological claim that reframes the very structure of existence:

شا يد ہے ناتمام ا بھی کائنا ت سبیہ
یکن فی کن دماد مسدائے ہے رہی آ کہ

This verse does not merely assert cosmic openness; it redefines incompleteness as intentional. Unlike Camus' absurd universe—which is complete in its indifference—or Kafka's closed bureaucratic worlds that endlessly defer resolution, Iqbal's universe is unfinished by design. Creation is not a concluded act but an ongoing process. Becoming, rather than being, is the dominant mode of existence.

Philosophically, this position diverges from Sartre's claim that meaning must be produced ex nihilo by an abandoned human subject. Iqbal does not situate the human being in a void of metaphysical absence; instead, he situates human agency within a dynamic, unfolding reality. The universe invites participation rather than revolt, contribution rather than resignation. In this sense, Iqbal transforms existential openness from a source of anxiety into a field of responsibility.

This responsibility is activated through human intervention, articulated not as passive submission but as existential passion:

مسیں ذات حسریم شو ر ے شو ق نوا ے میری
مسیں صفا ت کدۂ بت الاما ں ہا ئے غلعنلہ

Here, human agency is no longer silent or marginal. The *nawā-e-shauq*—the voice of longing—does not merely echo within the human interior; it disturbs the very order of being. Unlike Beckett's characters, whose voices circle endlessly without consequence, Iqbal's human voice generates movement, friction, and transformation.

This verse signals a decisive philosophical shift. Meaning is not imposed upon existence as a compensatory act, nor is it awaited through hope deferred. Rather, human striving itself becomes an ontological force. The human being does not stand outside the cosmos attempting to interpret it; the human participates within it, shaping its trajectory through action and commitment.

The reconstruction reaches its conceptual core in Iqbal's formulation of co-creation:

ہا تھ کا مومن بندۂ کا ،اللہ ہے ہا تھ

سا زکا رکشا ،کا رآفرین ،کا روغالب

This verse dismantles the existential isolation that defines much of twentieth-century philosophy. Against Sartre's insistence on absolute human solitude and Camus' insistence on heroic but futile revolt, Iqbal proposes co-agency. The human hand does not replace the divine hand, nor does it dissolve into it. Instead, action emerges from their conjunction.

Freedom, in this framework, is neither a sentence nor a burden alone. It is ethical capacity—the ability to act in alignment with a larger creative process. Responsibility is no longer merely the weight of choice; it becomes the means through which the unfinished universe moves forward. In this sense, Iqbal offers a resolution to the existential paradox without denying its difficulty: human beings are free, but their freedom finds meaning through creative responsibility rather than arbitrary self-assertion.

The reconstructed human type—formed through this synthesis of finitude and transcendence—is articulated in the closing verse:

صفا ت مو لا بندۂبہاد، نور ی وحنا کی

نیاز بے دلِ کا اس عنی، ۓجہاں دو ہر

This verse provides the anthropological culmination of Iqbal's philosophy. The human being remains *khaki*—finite, embodied, vulnerable—yet also *noori*, capable of reflecting higher attributes through ethical action. Detachment here does not imply withdrawal from the world; rather, it signifies freedom from domination by it. The human being is engaged without being enslaved, active without being consumed.

In contrast to Kafka's erased subject, Camus' perpetually revolting hero, or Sartre's burdened self-creator, Iqbal's human stands as a responsible participant in an unfinished cosmos. Meaning is not discovered, nor invented in isolation—it is enacted. Agency does not merely respond to the conditions of existence; it is the condition through which existence acquires direction.

Thus, Iqbal does not reject existentialism; he completes its unfinished trajectory. Where existentialism ends in exposure, revolt, or exhaustion, Iqbal advances toward reconstruction—affirming that to act, to create, and to carry responsibility within an incomplete universe is not merely a human task, but the very purpose of existence itself.

CONCLUSION: FROM EXISTENTIAL DIAGNOSIS TO ETHICAL RECONSTRUCTION

This study set out to examine the modern human condition as articulated by existentialist thought and to explore whether the existential diagnosis of alienation, freedom, and meaninglessness can be extended beyond description toward reconstruction. Through a close textual analysis of Sartre, Camus, and Kafka, the paper demonstrated that existentialism provides a powerful and honest account of modern human fragility, yet reaches a philosophical limit when confronted with the question of sustained agency.

Sartre presents freedom as an inescapable condition—one that grants responsibility without orientation. Camus exposes the tension between human longing and cosmic indifference, allowing revolt but denying reconciliation. Kafka reveals how modern systems reduce human beings to utility, erasing agency through bureaucratic logic. Together, these thinkers map the contours of modern despair with precision. They diagnose the condition of existence, but do not reconstruct it.

It is at this precise limit that Allama Muhammad Iqbal enters the conversation—not as a theologian offering metaphysical consolation, but as a philosopher of becoming, agency, and incompleteness. Iqbal accepts the existential premises of finitude, anxiety, restlessness, and openness. His poetry does not deny the absence of shelter, the paradox of freedom, or the instability of human identity. Instead, it radicalizes these conditions by reframing incompleteness as ontological opportunity rather than existential failure.

Central to Iqbal's philosophical intervention is the claim that the universe itself is unfinished and that human agency is not tasked with discovering meaning, but constitutes meaning through action. In contrast to existentialist isolation, Iqbal introduces co-agency—an ethical participation in an unfolding reality. Freedom, in this framework, is not merely the burden of choice but the capacity for responsible creation. Meaning is neither imposed nor invented; it is enacted.

This reconstruction allows Iqbal to resolve a tension that remains unresolved in existentialism: how freedom can remain authentic without collapsing into despair, revolt, or erasure. By situating agency within an unfinished cosmos, Iqbal offers a philosophical model in which responsibility replaces paralysis, engagement replaces alienation, and action replaces waiting. The human being is neither abandoned nor absorbed, but positioned as a necessary participant in the movement of existence itself.

The contribution of this study lies in presenting Iqbal as a distinct philosophical voice who neither imitates nor negates existentialism, but completes its unfinished trajectory. By reading Iqbal alongside Sartre, Camus, and Kafka through rigorous textual analysis rather than theological framing, this paper demonstrates that existential thought need not culminate in despair. It can, instead, open toward ethical reconstruction—without denying suffering, uncertainty, or finitude.

In an age marked by accelerated time, fragmented identity, and pervasive exhaustion, Iqbal's philosophy offers a renewed understanding of dignity rooted not in certainty or transcendence, but in responsible agency within incompleteness. The modern human crisis, this study suggests, is not a lack of freedom, but a lack of orientation. Iqbal provides not a system, but a direction—one capable of sustaining the weight of existence without fleeing from it.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study is limited in scope by its focus on selected texts and representative figures within existentialism and Iqbal's poetic philosophy. While Sartre, Camus, and Kafka provide a strong framework for diagnosing modern existential conditions, the exclusion of other existential thinkers—such as Heidegger, Marcel, or Simone de Beauvoir—means that alternative formulations of agency and freedom remain unexplored.

Additionally, the paper privileges close textual analysis over historical contextualization. While this approach allows for philosophical depth and conceptual clarity, it does not fully address the socio-political conditions that shaped these thinkers' works. Future research may fruitfully situate Iqbal's philosophy within broader debates on modernity, coloniality, and postcolonial subjectivity.

Further studies could also extend this comparative framework into applied domains such as ethics, political theory, or environmental philosophy, examining how Iqbal's conception of co-creation might inform contemporary debates on responsibility, justice, and collective action. Finally, comparative

engagement between Iqbal and non-Western philosophical traditions confronting modernity could deepen the global relevance of existential reconstruction.

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