

Predicaments of Contemporary Art and Iqbal's Aesthetic Metaphysics

Jamil Asghar*
Khurram Shahzad**

Abstract

Great poets, artists and writers have always been evoking a feel of transcendence and an urge for transformation in humans, and thereby alleviating a ubiquitous sense of anguish and unremitting stasis which has been a nightmare for mankind. This study critiques some of the trends in the contemporary art which sometimes tend to celebrate despondency, anguish and even 'nothingness'. The researchers show how our media-saturated and trend-obsessed art forms have a considerable presence of what some of the critics have called non-art or pseudo art. It is against this backdrop that the researchers have proposed Iqbal's aesthetic metaphysics as an antidote to the elements of hollow cynicism and nihilistic depreciation which are being foregrounded in art with an unprecedented seriousness and frequency. If art is to lead mankind to a radically creative process of becoming, it must be rooted in 'something' instead of 'nothing' and here comes the paramount necessity to confront the overly relativistic and skeptic attitudes which are gaining greater visibility in the contemporary world of art.

Keywords: Iqbal, art, postmodernity, meaning, banality, existence

Living in an Age of Existential Crisis

Through the ages, great poets, philosophers, writers and artists have been bestowing meaning, value and significance on everyday human existence through their imagination and exceptional talent. Whatever they produced has been empowering human soul in its fight against all that is ignoble and ungodly. This empowered human soul has been termed as the locus of gnosis (*irfan*) and ecstasy (*wajd*) by a large number of philosophers and among them includes Imam Al-Ghazzali, a celebrated Muslim philosopher. (Spevack, Aaron & Gulen, 2011). However, a considerable part of the contemporary art seems to be lacking in and dismissive of much of this gnostic and ecstatic dimension. It was during the late 20th century that Alvin B. Kernan, a Professor of Humanities at Princeton University, expressed this concern in his influential book

*Director, Department of Translation & Interpretation, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

Email: jamilasgharjami@gmail.com

**Assistant Professor of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

Email: kslecturer@yahoo.com

The Death of Literature that literature is nearing its demise. To him, the 20th century presented a crisis of confidence to literature which involved a radical questioning of its values. Professor Kernan also discusses what he calls “literature’s demise” and the factors which contributed to it. In fact, Professor Kernan is not alone in his worry. Such perceptive critics as E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom also share his apprehensions as they explore the growing cultural illiteracy of the contemporary post-industrial societies. Allan Bloom has related literature’s demise to an overly technological revolution which is transforming a print culture to an electronic culture. This transformation is replacing the authority of the printed word with the authority of media simulations, cyber semiotics, and virtual realities. Professor Kernan takes an alarmed look at the situations in which children routinely watch television six to eight hours a day and cannot read (1992).

Even before Kernan, Hirsche and Bloom, we hear Baudrillard warn “art is no longer anything more than a kind of meta-language for banality” (Pawlett, 2007, p. 87). Today one feels more compelled to agree with Baudrillard. The contemporary world of art and literature seems to have fallen into a crisis which has long term and serious implications not only for the fate of art itself but also that of our post-industrial civilization. The contemporary art with its minimalist and quasi-dadaist tendencies faces the challenge not just to art as such but also to our aesthetic sensibilities (Nelkin & Suzanne, 2004). It is not uncommon to come across strands of emptiness and indifference running through the postmodern literary and philosophical narratives. Instead of hope, fulfilment and inspiration, one increasingly finds indifference, horror, sensuality and a somewhat mock seriousness.

Aesthetically, this minimalist and quasi-dadaist orientation can be traced back to such philosophical vogues as reductionism and relativism which have been robustly governing our notions of art and literature for quite some time. Stephen Hicks, a Canadian-American philosopher and Professor of Art at Rockford University describes this predicament and places the blame on the postmodern aesthetic notions:

To the extent that it [postmodern aesthetics] played the reductive elimination game, it found that nothing uniquely artistic survived elimination. Art became nothing. In the 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg was often quoted as saying, “Artists are no better than filing clerks.” And Andy Warhol found his usual smirking way to announce the end when asked what he thought art was anymore: “Art? —Oh, that’s a man’s name (2004, p. 3).

To Professor Hick, there have been assiduous and systematic efforts which are responsible for turning art into what he calls non-art or sometimes anti-art. Of late, the sublimity and reverence which once considered to be so integral to the very constitution

of art has been mocked at by some of the leading 20th century artists (Sefler, 1974). One wonders how art could have landed into such disrepute. However, for those who are aware of the trends and philosophies which eventually led to the formulation of the contemporary aesthetics, there is nothing surprising at all. Contemporary art acquired trendiness from an absurd and existentialist universe and it inherited a whole lot of positivist discontents from reductionism. Similarly, it sought to bank upon the antirealism of Thomas Kuhn and deconstruction of Derrida (Hicks, 2004).

Moreover, the contemporary art, literature and philosophy are not known to have the elements of astonishment and reverence—two qualities which have traditionally been associated with all great art. Great *art astonishes* by embodying what is apparently impossible but to overcome the impossible, an incredibly great effort on the part of the artist is needed (Flam & Deutch, 2003). However, once the art lost ability to astonish, it also ceased to command reverence. This is what various writers have called the loss of the Sacred (Bruckhardt, 2014). Some people find it ‘denuded’, i.e., devoid of artistic content as such and Manfred Stanley expressed it in one of the most characteristic ways:

It is by now a Sunday-supplement commonplace that the [post]modernization of the world is accompanied by a spiritual malaise that has come to be called alienation. At its most fundamental level, the diagnosis of alienation is based on the view that modernization forces upon us a world, although baptized as real by science, is denuded of all humanly recognizable qualities; beauty and ugliness, love and hate, passion and fulfillment, salvation and damnation (see Kenney, 2015, p. 229).

This ‘denuded’ nature of contemporary art deprives it of the ability to have some lasting impression on the mind of the beholder. A critical assessment of the many contemporary art forms will indicate a deep-rooted postmodern cynicism which, in turn, reflects a very real crisis in the theory and practice of contemporary aesthetics. Timothy Bewes, a professor of English at Brown University, makes the point in his influential book *Cynicism and Postmodernity*:

The cynic is the typical ‘contemporary’ character, a figure alienated both from society and from his or her own subjectivity. ‘Cynicism’ is a concept mobilized by politicians, critics, and commentators as a synonym for postmodernism; this is a cultural relationship in which both terms function primarily as instruments of political rhetoric (1997, p. 183).

The contemporary cynicism, to Bewes, is weighed down with theories and paralyzed by contradictions, tautologies and extrapolations. With reference to literature, these developments have at times led to a self-referentiality and a discursive closure

(Lash, 2016). One can also detect elements of apathy and indifference which find their definitive expression in Samuel Beckett who compellingly summed up this in *Waiting for Godot* as Estragon proclaims: “Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes. It’s awful” (Beckett, 1952, p. 49).

Lastly, a great deal of contemporary art is about *nothing* or more appropriately about *nothing else* except itself. True, art has a content autonomy of its own but at the same time it must have some content relatable to life as well. An utterly self-referential art serves to entail a self-enclosed and self-serving discourse in which meanings are constituted and exchanged among themselves only. Nevertheless, if art has to have some meaning it must be *about* something—all interpretations and hermeneutic implications are contingent on some sort of semantic content (Sipe & Sylvia, 2010). This nothingness of art, so to speak, is coupled with a kind of nihilism which characterizes it at a very deep level:

Nihilism pervades art. Marcel Duchamp, who created the Dada movement, suggested that anything can be art. Many average people, who aren’t schooled in art history, will tell you that abstract art is about nothing. Much of the current art is about “nothing.” Installation art and conceptual art is about nothing at all. And many in today’s art community still believe that anything can be art (Hood, 2011, p. 9).

To illustrate this banality of art, the following examples are presented for the consideration of the readers. Look at these lines by Bruce Andrews (1996, p. 49):

Heart’s tackle pulse
shears shapeless
digest enflamed voluntaries
whet on tumble force from here
to already here cuts off
circumstances, less inside
come off it insist which
clone is original night
eyelets steeping the cheeks.

These lines are an apt example of the vanity and narrative absurdity which we come across in modern literature. It plays down expression leaving the reader in a state of utter confusion. The poet is deliberately incorporating random thoughts, observations and even nonsense. There is no sense of purpose or any kind of coherence or development. Another interesting thing is the title of the poem itself which is self-consciously revolting: “Facts are Stupid Things”. Let us look at one more such example:

...May

I propose the codicil-ready cables?
Like slips gassing in the night.
Chorus of automatic exclusions.
Don't give me no label as long as I
am able. Search & displace, curse
& disgrace. Suppose you suppose,
circumstances remonstrating. . .

These are the last lines of the poem “Thinking I Think I Think” by Charles Bernstein (1998, p. 109). These lines also defy a coherent reading as there is neither an organized structure of meaning nor an experiential poetic unity. The reader is likely to be dumbfounded by such riddling remarks as “Search & displace, curse & disgrace”. The same streak of banality and weariness characterizes the visual art forms. Look at this painting by Nina Beier.



Figure 1: Nina Beier (2017)

In this image, one finds random museum pedestals capped by car seat headrests. Purportedly, Beier’s work seek to invert the interrelations between objects as representatives of various social taxonomies and their equivalent values. They also seek to create a vacillation between the two and an uncertainty that makes this relation itself central. However, the fact remains that the kind of art Beier stands for is light years from the sublimity and grandeur which is so central to traditional art. It is born of a sense of weariness and fatigue. It deadens our spirits by closing down the doors to hope and existential healing.

Beier is the foremost example of the banality and the weariness of art which we are confronting in our age. In her art, we come across anthropomorphized objects with indecent exposures of hips, vaginas, buttocks, etc. Fetishized motifs are to be found everywhere which point to the vulgar violence of globalization.

Another artist whose work illustrates this weariness and banality is Brad Troemel (2011) and here is an image by him – an opened pack of Marlboro Blend.



Figure 2: Brad Troemel (2011)

It is an interesting case of elevating memes to the stature of art. Adrian Chen flatteringly says of him: “His work is a jab at the rigid rules of the art world and an experiment in what art might look like if those rules didn’t exist” (2015, p. 34). But the kind of rules Troemel’s works seek to “break” are precisely the age-old and time-honoured conventions and principles of art. Maybe the artist is exposing the sickness and the pretensions of the society but what he fails to see is the kind of art he is producing is just adding to that sickness and pretense. This is an interesting case of shooting one malaise by making use of another.

Iqbal’s Optimism: The Striking of an Optimistic Note

In order to combat these insidious effects of the contemporary anti-art tendencies, Iqbal’s philosophy of art can be exceptionally helpful and enlightening. The very sublimity and purposive grandeur of art which is being vigorously denied and denounced by the contemporary art forms (see Bernstein, 2001), can find new life if Iqbal’s theories are taken seriously. Iqbal continuing and even advancing the tradition of such renowned writers as Plato, Virgil, Thomas Aquinas, Rumi, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Coleridge propounds that art is an innate human phenomenon that unambiguously predates the formation of cultures and societies (Schimmel, 1985). To Iqbal, art is not a mere epiphenomenon superadded to our animalistic and instinctual nature. Rather, it is the very locus of our creative cognition and imaginative superabundance.

At the same time, unlike the contemporary art theorists, Iqbal takes art as divine gift which operates via human subjective agency and through its redemptive vitality and artistic vigor performs a liberating role. A truly great art has the potential to pierce through the trance of our monotonous and banal existence. Here Iqbal treads the paths of such great masters of art as Schiller and Hegel—two prominent German figures which are quite close to Iqbal’s aesthetics given the latter’s deep affiliation with the

German romantic tradition. Therefore, Iqbal, in line with Hegel and Schiller, believes that great art is a synthesis of the spiritual and the sensual.

According to Hegel as well Iqbal, great art educates, not in an overly didactic manner but in certain other more appealing ways, i.e., by curbing desire, softening rudeness and lifting humans out of their particularities. Besides, art uplifts crude consciousness by mitigating the brutalizing power of immediate passions. When great art depicts human passions, it seeks to mediate them and thereby allows us to reflect upon them (Faila 2000).

To Iqbal, art which fails to measure up to this responsibility is a false art and it leads not to liberation and enlightenment, but to frustration and muddle (Richard, 2010). Against this false art, it is Iqbal's gnostic metaphysics which stands as a necessary bulwark. Against the dull and drab dimensions of our contemporary aesthetics, Iqbal has to offer beauty, sublimity and divinity (Mir, 2006).

Moreover, Iqbal almost everywhere examines the notion of beauty and it is in his aesthetic metaphysics that we discern a highly philosophized and perceptive treatment of art. A higher artistry is always coupled with an accomplished philosophizing in his verse. Iqbal's artistic taste along with his aesthetic expressiveness has no match in the literary tradition he speaks from (Majeed 1996). But just beauty is not enough to enrich art. Along with beauty, art should also have astonishment and it is this synthesis of beauty and astonishment which offers the promise of hope to the present day inverted notions of art. In Iqbal's poetics, beauty and astonishment are the result of an imagination whose workings do not stop with the last frontier of our material universe. Iqbal effectively sums up this boundlessness in the following lines:

ستاروں سے آگے جہاں اور بھی ہیں
ابھی عشق کے امتحان اور بھی ہیں

Beyond the stars lie more Universes,

More reckonings of Love still remain (Iqbal, 1996, p. 15).

This daringly boundless vision of Iqbal betokens a revolt against the finitude imposed upon our senses and imagination by the material universe. This revolt requires a detailed treatment.

The Finitude of the World and the Majesty of Art

An urge to traverse the galaxies and stars in search of new realms of existence bestows a cosmic grandeur and universal significance on Iqbal's aesthetics. Traversing galaxies and discovering new realms of existence (*jahan*), is as much exhilarating as perilous. However, in the final analysis, exhilaration takes over the peril and the pilgrim's progress is rewarded. Therefore, the aesthetic and gnostic experience enshrined in Iqbal's art is not wholly telluric or mundane which has to be ruled by the

goddess of gravity. It is unbounded and immensely grand. It is because of this that Iqbal's aesthetics can neither be confined to the so-called representational theories of art nor the expressive theories. When we take into account his aesthetics, both of these two mainstream theories prove insufficient.

Though Iqbal loves beauty and eulogizes its immensity and lure, he is not a passive aesthete who is instinctively dotted on Nature. In his poetry, we find a radically different view of Nature—a view which is considerably at variance with the Romantic concept of Nature or the concept of conventional aesthetes. Unlike the Romantic conceptualizations, it is not Nature, but the Personhood and the Self (*khudi*) of the artist which is the locus of Beauty. Nature itself is not enough either to actualize or express the beauty of art (Jalalizade, 1995). Therefore, a true artist is heaven-directed and his art is never earth-bound, i.e., not enslaved by the charms and looks of that mistress of countless artists—Nature:

خاکی ہوں مگر خاک سے رکھتا نہیں پیوند

From earth I am but am not riveted to earth (Iqbal, 1996, p. 156).

It is because of this that Iqbal as an artist is not a 'Naturalist'. He loves Nature, eulogizes its beauty and gives it ample space in his verse but he, by no means, is a naturalist in any evolutionary or Darwinian sense. Instead he urges the artists to liberate art from the shackles of nature:

فطرت کی غلامی سے کر آزاد بنر کو

Liberate art from the bondage of Nature (Iqbal, 1996, p. 76).

Moreover, in a somewhat Platonic sense, Iqbal maintains also the illusory nature of the world which Plato termed as a shadow and an appearance of the Real World:

وہی جہاں ہے ترا جسے تو کرے پیدا
یہ سنگ و خشت نہیں جو تری نگاہ میں ہے

Only a universe wrought by you is truly yours,

Not this world of stones and bricks which you avidly behold (Iqbal, 1996, p. 194).

However, to conflate Iqbal's idea of art with Plato's is to fall into a gross error. The chief concern of the Greek masters was to settle the issue as to whether art could embody and communicate knowledge and truth. Plato answers this question in negative, but Aristotle gives a positive answer. To Plato, art is far removed from reality. With regard to the status of art, Iqbal is closer to Aristotle than Plato. Iqbal does not agree with Plato when the latter conceives art as a mere replica and imitation (Lodge, 1953). To Iqbal, an artist true to his salt does not just imitate; instead, he ventures into exploring

the creative possibilities of human consciousness and the new epiphanies of beauty. This creativity and newness can put even Nature to shame:

دریا متلاطم ہوں تری موج گہر سے
شرمندہ ہو فطرت ترے اعجازِ ہنر سے

May your surging current stir the rivers!

May the wonders of your art blush Nature! (Iqbal, 1996, p. 104).

It is because of this that Iqbal does not fully subscribe to the mimetic theories of art which have their origin in Platonism. To Iqbal, art is not just mimetic, rather it has a creative role to play. In the Aristotelian vein, Iqbal maintains that the real art does not just represent Nature; rather, it has the ability to improve upon Nature in a thousand ways:

اں ہنر مندے کہ ہر فطرت فزود
راز خودرا ہر نگاہ ما کشود
آفریند کائنات دیگرے
قلب رابخشد حیات دیگرے

The accomplished master who ameliorates Nature,

Only discloses his own mysteries to our glance;

He fashions a new universe,

And bestows new life on our existence (Iqbal, 1996, p. 175).

Such an accomplished master is not detached from the object of his observation and creativity; rather, he is inextricably linked with it. Detachment may create a false sense of neutrality or objectivity but this kind of neutrality or objectivity can only lead to the privileging of representation over the sensuous reality (Zakai, 2015). Detachment means distance and distance entails indifference.

The Sublimity of Art and its Relevance to Life

To Iqbal, an artist is not a mere spectator who looks at Nature and registers its beauties and wonders reflexively or even consciously. Rather the beauty of any work of art owes as much to the inventive imagination of the artist as to the actual object in Nature itself. Therefore, an artist communicates the beauty of his vision in a constructive and innovative way

تو قدر خویش ندانی بہا ز تو گیرد
وگرنہ لعل درخشنده پارہ سنگ است

You do not know your worth; you give value to it.

Or else a splendid ruby is but a piece of stone (Iqbal, 1996, p. 143).

However, it is not enough that an artist should improve upon Nature by means of his vigorous creativity and inventiveness. It is also important for this beauty to

become a dynamic and transformative force which could initiate a revolution in our thoughts and actions. That is the only way art could ennoble us and cure us of our instinctual hedonism and petty sensuality (Frith & Horne, 2016). Unless the beauty of art is transformed into a purposive action, art is just an abstract theorization isolated from the actual challenges and opportunities of our life:

فطرت کو خرد کے روبرو کر

تسخیر مقام رنگ و بو کر

بے ذوق نہیں اگرچہ فطرت

جو اس سے نہ ہو سکا، وہ تو کر

Bring Nature face to face with Reason

Conquer the realms of color and smell

Nature is not blind to beauty

But you are to accomplish what it failed to achieve (Iqbal, 1996, p. 196).

In this regard, Iqbal calls for what William Wordsworth termed as *Vision Splendid*—an extraordinary insight with the help of which the deeper mysteries of Being and Nature are laid bare. This is how he puts it:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie

Thy soul's immensity;

Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep

Thy heritage, thou eye among the blind,

That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,

Haunted forever by the eternal mind,—

Mighty prophet! Seer blest!

On whom those truths do rest (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 187).

But Wordsworth's unswerving pursuit of Truth as an artist was mocked at by the later writers and poets who lost their faith in any version of reality and pushed art into the realm of despondency and forlorn hope. One such prophet of doom whose thinking was largely the outcome of the twentieth-century existential aesthetics was Harold Pinter who once made an extremely characteristic pronouncement: There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false" (cited in Billington, 2009, p. 184).

It is in sharp contrast to all that which the great masters of art has always upheld. Artists like Iqbal, Wordsworth and Tolstoy, to mention a few, always interrogated such cavalier connotations of art with non-art, of truth with untruth and of real with unreal. These poets and artists have also been struggling to strengthen human nature (*fitrah*) in its crusade against banality and alienation of human existence. However, it requires an

extraordinarily accomplished insight on the part of the artist in order to be triumphant in this crusade. It is this insight which turns a poet into a seer and an activist (Conway, 2014).

In this way, the activism of an artist is rooted in the miraculous and transformative nature of the struggle which goes into the making of art. Once art is produced with this miraculous and transformative determination it becomes the surest foundation of hope and fulfilment. Therefore, the miracle of art (*mojza-e-fun*) owes its manifestation to nothing less than the blood of the artist:

معجزہ فن کی ہے خونِ جگر سے نمود

Art owes its manifestation to heart's blood (Iqbal, 1996, p. 118).

Another problem is the existential weariness which sometimes characterizes the contemporary art forms and quashes the very notion of hope and meaning. This is also a corollary of the loss of reverence and astonishment as has been discussed above. In contrast, Iqbal's universe of art is a universe abounding with astonishment and reverence. We find beauty, love, passion and fulfilment as well as censure, damnation and reproach all existing side by side in his aesthetic metaphysics. Even damnation has an elegance to it. The poem *Gabriel and Iblis* is a befitting example of this theme of damnation albeit with a grace of its own. Gabriel asks his one-time friend Iblis whether the latter can still mend his ways and be redeemed in the eyes of God. Iblis first discounts any such possibility and then responds with a defiant eloquence:

بے مری جرات سے مشتِ خاک میں ذوقِ نمود
میرے فتنے جامہ عقل و خرد کا تار و پُو
دیکھتا ہے تو فقط ساحل سے رزمِ خیر و شر
کون طوفان کے طمانچے کہا رہا ہے، میں کہ تو؟
خضر بھی بے دست و پا، الیاس بھی بے دست و پا
میرے طوفانِ یم بہ یم، دریا بہ دریا، جو بہ جو
گر کبھی خلوت میسر ہو تو پوچھ اللہ سے
قصہ آدم کو رنگیں کر گیا کس کا لہو؟
میں کھٹکتا ہوں دل یزاد میں کانٹے کی طرح
تو فقط اللہ ہو، اللہ ہو، اللہ ہو

It is my gallantry which gives this handful of dust an urge to manifest

It is my devilry which weaves the garment which reason wears

You only behold the battle of good and evil from the shore

But who braves the knocks of the typhoon? You or I?

Khizr is powerless, so is Ilyas,

The storms I stirred rage in oceans, rivers, brooks.

If ever you are in solitude with God, ask him:

*Whose blood it was which bestowed color on the tale of Adam and Eve
I rankle in God's heart like a thorn
And you? Just chanting: 'He is God', 'He is God', 'He is God'* (Iqbal, 1996, p. 172).

Anyone who reads this diatribe of Satan cannot fail to notice the grandeur and dignity of that arch-rival of God and man. However, this is a kind of grandeur which is essentially smitten with the certainty of defeatism. This grace animates the entire poetic discourse of Iqbal. Similarly, his optimism and gospel of hope have another feature, i.e., the relation between art on the one hand and self-expression and identity on the other hand. In Iqbal's aesthetics, the world which art brings to us is always replete with expressive properties and we are made to witness such events as victories, defeats, separations, reunions, battles, conflicts, all swathed in all too human feeling. Iqbal thinks of art not just as something which is emotionally and spontaneously accessible but also as something which is rationally and humanly relatable.

A world utterly obfuscated to reason can be anything but a world of art. Therefore, the version of optimism upheld by Iqbal is as much rational as emotional and human. A cursory glance at the landscape of contemporary art would bring out its crisis of expression and identity. A considerable part of fiction written today presents the persona of the protagonists as little more than series of unrelatable and unrecoverable experiential fragments which eventually degenerate into schizophrenia, incoherence and even madness (Asghar, 2014). Despair and desolation reign supreme and any hope of restoring the characters to wellbeing, sanity and wholeness remains doomed (Lang & Danto, 1984)

Redeeming the Contemporary Aesthetics

It is not just the pervasive desolation which gives an avowedly pessimistic coloration to our present art forms; the fragmented and highly atomistic nature of art is also responsible for this pessimism and desolation (Morgner, 2016). In contrast to the atomistic nature of the contemporary art, Iqbal presents a holistic and inclusive notion of art in which art and life go together along with all the other crucial components of our existential complexities and mysteries. On this count, Iqbal agrees with Plotinus who maintained:

Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts; and only a whole; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details; it cannot be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout" (cited in Anton, 1967, p. 97).

This holistic and inclusive notion gives birth to an artistic vision which, in turn, brings about grandeur and sublimity. The grandeur is born of the colossal edifice of our

existence, whereas the sublimity results from a remarkable symmetry found in this edifice. This grandeur and sublimity is succinctly expressed in his famous poem *Lala-e-Sehra* (“The Tulip of the Desert”):

یہ گنبدِ مینائی، یہ عالمِ تنہائی
مجھ کو تو ڈراتی ہے اس دشت کی پنہائی
بھٹکا ہوا راہی میں، بھٹکا ہوا راہی تو
منزل ہے کہاں تیری اے لالہ صحرائی
خالی ہے کلیموں سے یہ کوہ و کمر ورنہ
توشعلہ سینائی، میں شعلہ سینائی

This grand arch, this world of solitude,

The depth of the cosmos overawes me.

A lost traveler is me, a lost traveler are you,

Where is your destination? O Tulip of Desert!

No Moses treads these mountains, these valleys,

Or else I am a spark divine, you are a spark divine (Iqbal, 1996, p. 159).

It is also pertinent to mention here that modern art employs extremely deranged versions of language. There seems to exist a systematic and deliberate distortion of expression in contemporary art, be it a painting, a drama or a novella. Contemporary art, as a norm, employs highly fractured language which tends to destabilize the syntax (Kallendorf, 2010). The vogue of discontinuities and intertextualities which was set off by the proponents of the *Stream of Consciousness* appears to have found its fulfilment in some of the contemporary art forms (Robert, 2017). Therefore, at present, what seems paramount for any art form is a will on the part of the artist to cut across the curtains of mumbo-jumbo and work out more viable modes of expression. Here also Iqbal's aesthetic metaphysics gets relevant. The message of hope expounded by him is couched in a language which is bursting with expressive properties. It is, however, only possible if the expression of art emanates from the deepest recesses of a sincere imagination:

دل سے جو بات نکلتی ہے اثر رکھتی ہے
پر نہیں، طاقت پرواز مگر رکھتی ہے

An expression originating from heart has its effect,

Wingless though it is, it has power to soar (Iqbal, 1996, p. 87).

Another notable feature of Iqbal's hope-awakening aesthetics is the link between art and the individual consciousness. Art, to him, has the extraordinary ability of testifying to the viability of the individual consciousness. Hence the relation between art and individual consciousness is dialectical—the individual consciousness generates art and art, in turn, bears witness to the veracity of this individual consciousness. The

individual consciousness, true to its salt, has an added advantage of a transcendent experience which it, by definition, possesses (Kainer, 1984).

Similarly, we learn from Iqbal that all great art is, in the final analysis, rooted in the ultimate mystery of life and thought. This mystery is enshrined in a metaphysical and existential vision which largely underpins Iqbal's aesthetics. Our existential mystery is situated at the interface of art, life and thought, and in Iqbal we find a delicate intersection of these notions. He is a poet who happens to be a philosopher of the first rank and, at the same time, he is a philosopher who happens to be a poet of the first rank. Here we are reminded of S. T. Coleridge's statement: "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher" (Coleridge, 1936, p. 94). It is this philosophical and poetical vision of Iqbal which gives birth to his aesthetics and it is this aesthetics which could heal our wounded sensibilities (Lochhead & Auner, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has contended that Iqbal's aesthetic metaphysics is considerably valuable for ridding the contemporary art forms of much of their banality, boredom and a celebrated meaninglessness. All through human history, great poets, artists and writers have been bestowing meanings and value on human existence through their creative imagination and talent. However, the 20th century presented a crisis of confidence to literature which entailed a radical questioning of its basic assumptions and values. Such literary figures as Professor Kernan, Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch explored the growing cultural illiteracy of the contemporary post-industrial societies and expressed serious apprehensions about the future of literature. The authority of the printed word was considered to be taken over by media simulations, cyber semiotics, and virtual realities. Minimalist and quasi-dadaist tendencies found their ways in a wide range of art forms and at times strands of emptiness and indifference were found running through the postmodern literary and philosophical narratives.

It is against this backdrop that the present study has been conceptualized and it seeks to re-assert the value of Iqbal's aesthetic metaphysics to respond to the existential predicament of contemporary art. The researchers have worked out those aspects of Iqbal's poetic discourse which have the potential to enlighten and inform the present day theories of art and literature. Iqbal has been presented as an heir to long standing tradition featuring such literary giants as Plato, Ghazzali, Aquinas, Rumi, Goethe, Coleridge, and Tolstoy. The researchers have maintained that the very nobility and sublimity of art which, at times, seems to be denounced by the contemporary critics can find new life if Iqbal's philosophy of art gets foregrounded in or aesthetic theorizations.

Synthesizing the spiritual with the sensual, Iqbal presents a version of art which is enlightening, transformative and uplifting.

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