

Time in Literature: A study of Shakespeare and Dr. Iqbal

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Abstract

There are several scientific and philosophical concepts of the universe whose epistemology has not yet been defined successfully. Although, the stalwarts, philosophers, scientists, and anthropologists, who since times immemorial, have tried their best to unlock the knots that are embedded in these Metaphysical concepts like true nature of “Time”. The concept has also become a subject of discourse for writers of literature in its diverse fields like poetry and prose. The present study will concentrate on the poetic side and will analyze the verse of two great literary figures viz William Shakespeare and Sir Muhammad Iqbal, who like that of the scientists and anthropologists had made tireless effort to reveal the mystery of time concept and have pondered over the subject-matter in the literary field.

Key words: - Absolute Time, Absolute Space, Dimensions of Time, Human Consciousness and Impact of Time.

Introduction

Time has been the subject of discourse from the ancient Greek civilisation and we find a threadbare converse on the theme relating to the metaphysical and transcendental world. The main questions put forward that have been discussed are:

1. Exactly what is time?
2. What is it made of?
3. Does time have a beginning and an end?
4. Is it a straight line or a circle?

So far as the concept of time is concerned, the ancient Greek philosopher namely Plato identified time with the period of motion of the heavenly bodies (Weinert 9). While as in the 4th Century BCE, Aristotle has said that change and time are intimately related, he explains time in terms of change and not vice versa. In other words Aristotle views time as a kind of number which is further explained as time is a number of change with respect to the before and after (Bardon 53). The theme has been further the subject of discourse in the 5th century AD St Augustine of Hippo has given two accounts of time viz “Time as a creation of God” (Augustine 241-42) and

“Time is a phenomena of human conscious”(Augustine 246-51). After a long lull, the concept of time has taken another dimension when in the 14th century AD, the French mathematician Nicole Oresme had tried to explain the concept of time on a mathematical and scientific basis. He asserts that no two celestial motions are actually commensurable, and so there is no such basic time interval of which the day, month and year are all exact integer multiples. (Grant 67-77).

However in the sixteenth century in Nicholas Copernicus has revolutionized the existing stereotype concept as authenticated by the church (Pope) and declared that the earth is not stationary. In the mean time Giordano Bruno doctrine of eternal vicissitude within an infinite universe underlined the relativity of the individual life process in both time and space (Gatti 143). Likewise Copernicus, the famous scientist Galileo Galilee has openly challenged the church (Pope) and with the invention of telescope, he tried to prove the concept that the earth is not stationary. But he had to bow before church and on standing up he said, “E pur si muove” which means “And yet it moves”.

Apart from the said philosophers and scientists, it was Sir Isac Newton who tried to explain the metaphysical concept like true nature of time when he spoke of absolute space and absolute time about the properties of the universe in “Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica” According to Newton, absolute time and space respectively are independent aspects of objective reality . He further says:

Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external, and by another name is called duration: relative, apparent and common time, is some sensible and external (whether accurate or unequal) measure of duration by the means of motion, which is commonly used instead of true time ... Absolute space, in its own nature, without regard to anything external, remains always similar and immovable. Relative space is some movable dimension or measure of the absolute spaces; which our senses determine by its position to bodies: and which is vulgarly taken for in movable space... (Heller 56)

According to Newton, absolute time exists independently of any perceiver and progresses at a consistent pace throughout the universe. Unlike relative time, Newton believed absolute time was imperceptible and could only be understood mathematically. According to him, humans are only capable of perceiving relative time, which is a measurement of perceivable objects in motion (like the Moon or Sun). From these movements, we infer the passage of time. Immovable space ... Absolute motion is the translation of a body from one absolute place into another: and relative motion, the translation from one relative place into another... (Schreuder 48)

Later on it was Albert Einstein, who revolutionised the existing thought of time as propounded by Newton and others. He was the first scientist who gave the “theory of relativity” and connected the concept of time with space. He elaborated by giving the concept of 4 dimensional idea. Einstein in his most popular “theory of relativity” has delved deep to the study the nature of universe and space time relationship.

In recent times much has been written on the subject as the science fiction about the concept of “time” in the book *Time Machine* by H G Wells. The book gives us the concept of “time travel”. The questions which has been discussed in the book are that is it possible to cross the barriers of “tense time”, that is can a man travel to past or future and comprehend the events which have happened in past or can he jump into the future and predict what is going to happen in future? How far is the possibility of transcending the barriers of time? The fact is that it is only the man, the supreme creature on the earth, who is time conscious. The man is prisoner of time. Time consciousness has made the man to ascertain purpose of the life. Paulo Coeluo in his novel *The Alchemist* quotes a character, a shepherded boy saying, “ yes, their days were all the same, with the seemingly endless hours between sunrise and dusk..... they were content with just food and water, and in exchange, they generously gave their wool, their company, and one in a while their meat” (Coeluo 6-7) .

Talking in the light of religious scriptures and going through the “Divine Revelations”; we get confronted with an interesting discussion over such metaphysical and transcendental concepts in thought provoking manner. In the Holey Quran there are several verses which deal with the concept of time and the creation of the universe as in verse no 54 of surah Al- Araf which can be translated as,“ Surely your lord is none other than Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then ascended His throne; who caused the night to cover the day and then day swiftly pursues the night; who created the sun and the moon and the stars making them all subservient to His commands...” on another occasion in the surrah Al- Taha verse no 15 of the holy Quran explains the idea as , “ The hour of resurrection is coming. I have willed to keep the time of its coming hidden so that everyone may be recompensed in accordance with his effort.”Going through the Ahadith, we have a beautiful often quoted Hadith (6181-82) of Al-Bukhari Latasabu dahr... Meaning thereby, don’t vilify time, time is God.

Time in Literature

Interestingly so, the poets of varied languages have also in their poetry this way or that way, referred to time concept and discussed its impact on the human race. The said concept has remained theme of English poetry as well as in the most prominent poet John Milton in his poem “On time”. Moreover, the romantic poet Lord Byron in his poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” writes about the impossibility of defining time as, “Yet Time,

who changes all, had altered him In soul and aspect as in age; years steal Fire from the mind as vigour from the limb And life's enchanted cup but sparkles near the brim" (Aikin 197). Besides, Charles Cowden Clarke in his sonnet "the course of time" wrote, "No! no arresting the vast wheel of time, That round and round still turns with onward might, Stern, dragging thousands to the dreaded night Of an unknown hereafter" (Mills 91).

Walt Whitman's poem *Leaves of Grass* (1855), particularly the idea that time is a continuous flow and that past, present and future cannot be considered as separate and distinct, and also that time is a kind of perfect entity: "A word of the faith that never balks, Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time absolutely. It alone is without flaw, it alone rounds and completes all, that mystic baffling wonder alone completes all" (Hans 43).

T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1935) includes an extended rumination on the nature of time, including the well-known lines, "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present all time is unredeemable" (Sarker 126).

In addition to these renowned literary figures, there is a chunk of writers who have directly or indirectly tried to explain the concept of time. They are Rabindranath Tagore, Thomas Love Peacock, Robert Service, J.R.R. Tolkien, W.H. Auden, Henry Austin Dobson, and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Concept of Time in Shakespearean Sonnets

Like that of the scientists and philosophers who have tried to explain the metaphysical concept of time, William Shakespeare also put his efforts to elucidate the said concept in his poetry. Throughout his sonnets, he seems to be in a great struggle to conquer time. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare has used time as a character in his poetry and it has been observed that 'Time' is the prominent theme in his sonnets. It has been said that Shakespeare used time more than seventy times in his sonnets. In sonnet 2 the concept of time is explained by a comparison with winter that demolishes the beauty of both nature and human beings. For further understanding of the ravages of time, wrinkles on the forehead are compared with the furrows of the field. In other words the poet lays stress on the physical and psychological change which is the impression of time. In the next sonnet same though is expressed in more detailed manner and poet seems occupied with the ravages of time and wants to conquer the effect that time lays upon the beauty of a man. The poem is addressed to his friend and poet tells him that there isn't any powerful agency which can hold the beauty and can defeat the demolishing power of time. Moreover, the concept of time is personified by the poet by different names as in sonnet 5, it is referred to a "tyrant" and poet laments for the destructive effects over the youth's beauty. He puts the statement as:

Those hours that with gentle work did frame
the lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,
Will play the tyrants to the very same
and that unfair which fairly doth excel:
For never-resting time leads summer on
To hideous winter and confounds him there (Paul 44)

In his most popular sonnet 12, poet wants to explain the impression of time in the form of day and night and the changing of colour of the hair from black to white. He further states that it is the destructive power of time that trees seem barren after shedding their leaves. To explain the uncontrollable power of time, it is described as “Bloody Tyrant” as in sonnet 16 and is personified as “Swift footed” in the sonnet 19. According to Shakespeare time is the agency that robs the beauty of a man as in the sonnet 18. The same thought is repeated in the sonnet 19 in which poet pictures time with help of the animal imageries and comments on Time's normal effects on nature. In the sonnet time is presented as the devouring agency and its effect has been explained through the imagery of the fictitious bird named phoenix which lived long but couldn't saved himself from the ravages of time and burn to death. Time according to Shakespeare brings everything into existence but also destroys it with the passing minutes and time is armed with a scythe which mows down everything in a relentless manner. In the first quatrain of the sonnet 60 Shakespeare says that the minutes replace one another like waves on the pebbled shore and each taking the place of that which came before it in a regular sequence. In the second quatrain, he tells the story of a human life from birth to death and compares it with the sun, ocean, and noon by the words ‘Nativity’, ‘the main of light’, ‘crown of maturity, and ‘crooked eclipses’. He states it as:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight...
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow: (Paul 170)

The devastating character of time is also explained by William Shakespeare in the sonnet 65 in which he claims that nothing withstands time's ravages. According to him the hardest substances like brass or stones and the vast

earth and sea— all have to submit before time. Poet depicts time as an enemy to the beauty which is something delicate like a flower and can't resist the assaults of time. Moreover, Shakespeare's narrator in the sonnet wants to surpass time which is presented as "swift foot", and preserve his friend's beauty which would be a miracle indeed. Finally in the last couplet the poet suggests that his verse is the only thing that can withstand time's decay and will provide immortality to the beauty of his friend as in the lines:

Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright. (Paul 181)

It is worth to mention here that Shakespeare metaphorically relates the concepts old age and death with time. In sonnet 73 poet focuses on his anxiety over growing old and also expresses the theme of devastating nature of time as in previous sonnets. The poem provides the detailed description of life and its passing years in a sad tune. In other words we can say that this sonnet is an obituary of the poet written by the poet himself. Here in the sonnet life is compared with the seasons of the year. As in autumn trees shed their leaves and become naked then earth looks pensive similarly when life approaches to old age and the charm of the youth dies away. In next sonnet 75, poet continues his obsessive concern with his own death. The poem is addressed to his friend Earl of Southampton and poet asserts that his friend nourished his thoughts as food nourishes the living being and keeps alive. Shakespeare narrator seems almost satiated with his friends company, and sometimes he yearns for the friends company. But sometimes poet becomes suspicious with regard to the safety of his friend from ravages of time and he brilliantly used the phrase "filching age" which means the age when time can steal the beauty of his friend. The same thought regarding time is also expressed in sonnet 104 in which the poet diverts our attention to the inevitable deprecation of time.

Therefore, from the above discussed sonnets it is obvious that Shakespeare depicts time as the powerful entity which couldn't be defeated by the human beings excluding the true love which can conquer the ravages of time.

Time defined by Dr. Iqbal

Dr. Iqbal, as a thinker and philosopher has in his poetry tried to analyse those concepts which were related to the basic purpose of life. He tried to find the answer of those questions which were directly associated with metaphysical world. He has in detailed discussed creation of Adam, Revolt of Satan, and Repentance of Adam after committing the first sin. Creation of the universe and its purpose thereof is one of the basic foundations of his philosophy of "Khudi" Iqbal does not subscribe to the view of static Universe. He advocates that there is not

finality of destination for a man. His famous Persian lines signify that a man must move on and on and any sorts of monotony will ultimate result in his spiritual death. He puts the idea as:

Zi sharar sitarah joyam

Zi sitarah Aftabay

Saray manzilay na daram

Ki bimiram az qarayay

Iqbal sees the dynamic nature of universe and says that the “Caravan of being” does not stop any where as in the line, “Thaharta nahi carvanay wajud/ Ki hr lahzah hi taza shani wajud.” The spirit according to Dr. Iqbal is in perpetual restlessness when he says, “Ye Kainat Abhi Na-Tamam Hai Shaid /Ke Aa Rahi Hai Damadam Sada’ay ‘Kun Fayakon. (This universe, perhaps, is yet incomplete, for I hear repeated sounds of "Be, And It Was.”)

P.N. Pushup has rightly remarked in his compiled book by Prof. A. A. Suroor with the title *Modernity and Iqbal* “... the scintillating world of colour and fragrance signifies for him standing challenge to explore the inexhaustible potential of the worlds beyond the star’s awaiting his ardent attention. There is no finality to his exploratory adventure. Every moment hold out to him a new peak of perspective. No finality of destination for him. From a spark he moves on to a star; from the star he produced towards the Sun. The caravan of being knows no stop; the splendour of being is ever fresh. Every particle of the universe is restlessly a throb; calm and permanence are mere fantasy. (Suroor 57-58)

Iqbal believes in the concept of destination as elaborated in the Quran and Hadith in detail. The destination lies in future, which is yet to occur and is not subservient to any sort of cause and effect. Time according to Iqbal is a reality of events. The events are not repetition of intervals but the manifestations of ultimate reality. He in his book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam* presents the various arguments for the existence of God as propounded by various philosophers. He says:

The cosmological argument views the world as a finite effect, and passing through a series of dependent sequence, related as causes and effects, stops at an uncaused first cause, because of the unthinkability of an infinite regress. It is however, obvious that a finite effect can give only a finite cause, or at most an infinite series of such causes. (Iqbal 23)

Iqbal further discusses the concept of matter in length and quotes Mr. Russell saying as:

The theory of relativity by merging time into space- time, says Mr Russell has damaged the traditional notion of substance more than all the arguments of the philosophers. Matter for common sense, is something which persists in time and moves in space. But for modern relativity- Physics the view is no longer tenable. A piece of matter has become not a persistent thing with varying states, but a system of interrelated events. The older solidity has gone and with it the characteristics that to the materialist made matter some more real than fleeting thoughts. (The Religious Thought in Islam 47)

Dr. Iqbal subscribes to the view that time can't be defined on logical grounds, but can be perceived intuitively. It has no present, past and future but can be conceived as pure duration. The "Real Time" according to Iqbal, creates "Time Continuum" which we call Silsilai- Roz-u-shab. Real time is a flow, wherein, there is no day and night but it takes the shape of a unity. He further says that time can't be conceived through five senses but can be comprehended through consciousness. The truth about time is hiding in heart. "This thing" or "that thing" is of course creation of the flow of the time and life itself is hidden in time. Life according to him is a mystery among other mysteries of time. But Ultimately Life and time coincide at every juncture. Moreover, Iqbal has also quoted the famous Hadith in support of his argument. The Hadith with an international number from Sahih Muslim 6003 "La tasabu dhar" which can be translated as, "Don't vilify time, because time is God"

As soul can't be defined perfectly, so can't be time. Soul is hidden in life and life in soul, so is the case with time. In his famous poem "Masjid-e-qurtabah", Iqbal has tried at length to debate on the concept of time. In the very first stanza of the poem Dr. Iqbal proclaims that sequence of day and night is the shape maker of events and it is this sequence that causes life and death. According to him all the life can be conceived through the prism of time only. In other words, Dr. Iqbal is in favour of the statement that the "Being" is manifested through the durations of day and night and we can't comprehend the world of being without the continuity of day and night. He states the whole statement as:

silsilah-e roz-o-shab , naqsh-gar-e ḥādīsāt
silsilah-e roz-o-shab , aṣl-e ḥayāt-o-mamāt
silsilah-e roz-o-shab , tā-r-e ḥarīr-e do-rang
jis se banātī hai zāt apnī qabā-e ṣifāt
silsilah-e roz-o-shab , sāz-e azal kī fighāñ
jis se dikhātī hai zāt zer-o-bam-e mumkināt
tujh ko parakhtā hai yih , mujh ko parakhtā hai yih
silsilah-e roz-o-shab , ṣerāfī-e kā'ināt

tū ho agar kam-‘ayār , maiñ hoñ agar kam-‘ayār
 maut hai terī barāt , maut hai merī barāt
 tere shab-o-roz kī aur ḥaqīqat hai kyā
 ek zamāne kī rau , jis meñ nah din hai nah rāt !

Translated as:

Sequence of day and night,
 shape-maker of events

Sequence of day and night,
 origin of life and death

Sequence of day and night,
 two-coloured strand of silk
 from which Being makes
 its robe of qualities

Sequence of day and night,
 wail/lament of the tone/instrument of eternity

Through which Being shows
 the treble and bass of possibilities

This one examines/assays you,
 this one examines/assays me,

Sequence of day and night--
 the Jeweller of Creation

If you would be of low quality,
 if I would be of low quality

Death is your assignment,
 death is my assignment

The movement of one age,
 in which is neither day nor night.

Dr. Iqbal after discussing the nature of time as propagated by the philosophers, thinkers, and scientists in their respective theories, states in his book *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, “we are now, I hope in a position to see the meaning of the verse -‘And it is He Who hath ordained the night and day to succeed one another for those who desire to be thankful.’ A critical interpretation of the sequence of time as revealed by

ourselves has led us to a notion of the Ultimate Reality as pure duration in which thought, life and purpose interpenetrate to form an organic unity. We can't conceive this unity except as the unity of a self an all embracing concrete self which is the ultimate source of all individual life and thought. (*The Religious Thought in Islam* 44)

Conclusion: - In the conclusion, we may say that the concept of time has been defined as proportional to the motion of heavenly bodies. While as Dr. Iqbal subscribes to the view that time can't be defined on logical grounds, but can be perceived intuitively. It has no present, past and future but can be conceived as pure duration. On the other hand Shakespeare depicts time as the powerful entity whose ravages are visible throughout and nothing could be escaped from its talons no doubt how strong may be the one. However, there is no denying in the fact that there is greater scope for the scientists and philosophers to ponder on the subject at length.

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