

Iqbal—Poet between India and Europe

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(Abstract: A man, Iqbal, stands between East and West, as a poet and a philosopher. On the scene of politics and in the field of religion Iqbal hardly achieved an encounter between the Orient and the Occident. In his philosophical knowledge and in his poetry, Iqbal accomplished a mingling of the two oceans- East & West).

The personality of Muhammad Iqbal puzzles the Westerner who endeavours to fathom the creative depth of his poetry and to grasp the vast scope of his philosophy. Iqbal's erudite command over the literatures of the European and Islamic cultures is combined in his work with some of the most powerful poetry written in Persian or Urdu during the Twentieth Century. His poetical intuition creates a world of symbols that emerges from their Indo-Iranian setting and assimilates a wide selection of European motifs. His philosophical vision anticipates the future of the Muslim and his community. It is cast in the language of the past Islamic ideal though directed towards a revolutionary reconstruction of Muslim life in the contemporary world. In our view, then, present-day Pakistan points to Iqbal as its "spiritual father" because it discovers in him the active inspiration of its own search for cultural identity rather than the mere instigation for the definition of its political boundaries.

The personal career of Iqbal illustrates this search for cultural identity that is found throughout his work as it is marked by the current pattern of the junction of opposites and the collection of contrasts.

Iqbal grew up in undivided India over which the British had long since established foreign rule and colonial tutelage. His ancestors had migrated from their native Kashmir to Sialkot in the Panjab. There Muhammad Iqbal was born in 1873 or 1877, his precise birthday being uncertain. He describes himself as "a son of Kashmiri Brahmans, but acquainted with the wisdom of Rum and Tabriz, and says of himself, "I am of India, Persian is not my native tongue." His mother-tongue, Panjabi, was of little use for his formal education, and thus he set out to acquire a perfect command of English, Urdu and Persian. Instructed by his father in matters of religion in his early years, he was married in 1895, and proceeded to study at the colleges of Lahore where he was attracted by the orientalist T. Arnold. About the age of thirty, Iqbal set sail for England to study philosophy at Cambridge in 1905 with the neo-Hegelian, MeTaggart. In 1908 he obtained his doctorate degree during a brief stay at the University of Munich with a remarkable dissertation on "The Development of Metaphysics in Persia".

This portentous book ushers in the first decade of Iqbal's work and marks a decisive stage of his intellectual maturation. He displays in it a thorough knowledge of Islamic religious thought and mystical speculation, tracing the development of Persian philosophy from the dualistic conceptions of Zoroaster and Mani to the monistic metaphysics of Suhrawardi and Sabzawari. In the process Iqbal summarizes the philosophical world-view of Ibn Miskawaih and Ibn Sina, demonstrates the theological synthesis of Ash'ari and Ghazali, discusses the Quranic roots of Sufism and follows the course of Islamic mysticism from incipient Neoplatonic trends to the universalist and pantheistic conceptions of Jili. As the occasion arises, Iqbal confronts the manifold aspects of Islamic thought with certain ideas of major European philosophers of religion like Hegel, Leibniz and Schleiermacher. Although he later declined the translation of the work into Urdu and rejected much of the pantheistic mysticism that he had espoused in his dissertation, "there can be no doubt that the mystics who are discussed in the 'metaphysics', and their religious and philosophical convictions have helped him to form his philosophy either in congruence with

them, or out of a complete antithesis." In essence, the dissertation situates Iqbal at the cross-roads of two intellectual homelands, namely, the Indo-Iranian world on the one hand, and the European world of England and Germany on the other hand.

In the summer of 1908 Iqbal returned to India and had to face what appears to have been the crucial crisis of his life. Coming back from the West to his homeland in the East he witnessed the agonizing problems of his country and yet felt powerless to overcome them. He realized the decay of Islam from its former greatness and searched for a means to see it regain its authority and vitality. This crisis of cultural re-adjustment found its expression in his *Shikwa* that had an immediate and compelling appeal to Iqbal's public. In this powerful Urdu poem he raises his voice in a prayer of complaint and pleads with God in protest against the inequality of this world. As a spokesman for the Muslims of the world, the poet complains that the countries of the occidental infidels abound in wealth and beauty while the godfearing Muslims of the Orient have to subsist on the mere hope of future joys and eternal bliss. A year later he finds a first answer to his complaint in the *Tawab-i Shikwa* by pointing out the reason why the Muslims appear to be destitute and abandoned by God. "There is neither fire of faith left in their hearts nor divine love; they have forgotten the love of the Prophet, have transformed their religiously founded unity into earth-rooted nationalism, and therefore have fallen a prey to the imperialists."

During the following years Iqbal struggled with this crisis and finally, in 1915, presented his solution to the problem in a magnificent work, the *Asrar-i khudi* ("The Secrets of the Self"), a *mathnawi* that took the younger generation by storm. This revolutionary work challenges the Indian Muslim, who in Iqbal's view, had long since ceased to exploit the depths of his inner life, to abandon his attitude of despair and submission and to discover the creative impulse of his own personality, that is to say, those secrets of his own self. In the poem Iqbal explains that the Self in its movement towards uniqueness passes through three stages: from obedience to the Law, to self-control as the highest form of self-consciousness, until it reaches divine vicegerency as the ultimate ideal of the

complete person who lives in the harmony of mind and body, thought and action, instinct and reason. In his endeavour to induce a dynamic spirit of self-assurance in his fellow Muslims, Iqbal overcame the idealism of the Greek philosophers, their "sheep's doctrine" and left behind the Persian pantheism, in which he now recognised the harbinger of idle and romantic dreaming.

The powerful lines of his poetical message came as a shock to many since Iqbal employed as his central notion the term of *khudi* which traditionally denotes the self-centred, almost atheistic self-assertion of man. Furthermore he had dared to amalgamate the Islamic religious values with the Western vitalist philosophy of a Bergson and a Nietzsche. Iqbal knew well what he had wrought and exclaimed, "I have no need of the ear of today; I am the voice of the poet of tomorrow." His first translator summed up Iqbal's impact and said, "indeed he is a man of his age and a man in advance of his age; he is also a man in disagreement with his age." Thus it came as no surprise that there were many Muslim intellectuals who disagreed with the *Asrar-i khudi* and decried it as *khud-parasti*, "ego-worship", since it appeared to them as a proud and unlawful egotism which depreciated the Muslim values of self-effacement and divinely ordained obedience. As the *Asrar-i khudi* dealt only with the awakening of the inner forces of the Muslim individual, Iqbal added a second part to it, the *Rumuz-i bekhudi* ("The Mysteries of the Not-Self") which defines the role of the individual within the Muslim community and puts forth the ideal of Muslim rule on earth as the democracy of more or less unique individuals. Although Iqbal presented his views in terms of the Islam of the Arabian Prophet, he endeavoured to kindle the vision of a glorious Muslim future in the hearts of his fellowmen.

Whereas Iqbal had reacted in an original way to the philosophical currents of the West in the "Metaphysics" and the *Asrar-i khudi*, he entered into dialogue with the poets of Europe in two masterpieces of Persian poetry.

In 1923 Iqbal presented the *Payam-i mashriq* ("The Message of the East") to his public with the intention of "Warming the cold

thoughts and ideas of the West." He conceived this collection of poems as an answer to Goethe's "West-ostlicher Diwan" since in Goethe he had discovered "the Sage of the West who fascinated by the charms of Persia." The encounter with the Faustian poet of the West led him to the peak of his literary accomplishment and gained him the highest recognition as a poet. The *Paym-i mashriq* has been acclaimed as "a genuine attempt of a qualified Eastern poet, endowed with wide knowledge of Western literature and thought... to enter into dialogue with Europe." The work includes a short introduction to the oriental movement in German literature, a collection of quatrains called.

Lal-ye Tur ("The Tulip of Sinai"), followed by a group of poems setting forth Iqbal's philosophy of life in lyrical form and some poetical sketches that picture European poets, philosophers and politicians.

The *Javidanama*, a narrative poem dedicated to Iqbal's son published in 1932, has been called "The Divine Comedy of Islam" since it was conceived in emulation of Milton's "Paradise Lost" and Dante's "Divina Commedia". But it also took its clues from the literature of heavenly journeys that popular and mystical Islam focus on the theme of the prophet's ascension and nocturnal journey. Choosing Rumi, the great Persian poet and mystic, as his guide, Iqbal sets out on a spiritual journey from the earth through the spheres of the planets, and, having broken the spell of time, Iqbal reaches the utmost horizon and the beyond of the presence of God. The fascinating journey, not unlike Goethe's Faust, begins with a prologue in heaven and a prologue on earth and ends with the theophany of the divine Majesty. In his ascent the poet meets a mixed cast of mythological and historical figures from India and Iran, Europe and the Sudan. The Pharaoh and the Buddha, Baal and Satan, Hallaj and Ghalib, Afghani and the Pasha, Nietzsche and Tolstoy, each one of them has his place and function in this poetical drama and enters into the discussion with *Zinda-rud*, the living stream and life-giving force (Iqbal's penname selected for this poem). The *Javidnama* is probably unparalleled among the Persian poems of our century in the grandeur of its expression, the beauty

of its diction, and the richness of its illustrations. Although Iqbal employs the notions of traditional symbolism, his poetry communicates a sense of originality and novelty that is enhanced by his peculiar combination of words and by his complex fusion of images that makes his language acquire surprising and unusual meanings.

In the time between the appearance of the *Payam-imashriq* and the *Javidnama*, two other beautiful collections of Iqbal's poetry had been printed. The first, *Bang-i Dara* ("The Sound of the Caravan's Bell"), published in 1924, represents a remarkable section of extraordinary Urdu poetry, while the second, *Zabur-i 'ajam* ("The Persian Psalms"), printed in 1927, may be considered as the collection of poems dearest to Iqbal. Here Iqbal displayed his mastery of pattern and image in the finest literary form of Persian poetry, the *ghazal*. The ardent prayer-poems of the Persian Psalms summon the Indian Muslims to rise from deep sleep and to rebuild the universe. In the manner of Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz* ("The Rosegarden of Mystery"), Iqbal continually introduces the reader to his own philosophy of life. The same message is conveyed throughout his later poetry in two short Persian collections of 1936, the *Pas che bayad karad ay aqwam-i share* ("what is to do now, oh peoples of the East") and the *Musafir* ("The Traveller") as well as two Urdu collections, the *Bal-i Jibril* ("Gabriel's Wing") and the *Zarb-i Kalim* ("The Blow of Moses"), published one after the other in 1936 and 1937.

While writing his poetry Iqbal had taught at the Government College of Lahore and had practised law for many years. He had been married twice after his return from Europe, and in 1922 a kingship had been conferred upon him. In 1924 he had become a member of the legislative assembly of the Panjab and was elected President of the Moslem League of India in 1930. Taking part in the London Round-Table Conference on India in 1931-32, he also attended the World Muslim Congress in Jerusalem, visited Paris, Cordob and Rome, and spent the next year (1933) as educational adviser in Afghanistan.

These travels during his later years were preceded by his main

philosophical work, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" which was based on six lectures that he delivered at Madras, Haidarabad (Deccan) and Aligarh in 1929-1930. These lectures represent the philosophical essence of Iqbal's work and are the fruit of his philosophical studies for almost three decades. Iqbal intended to renew and revive Islam in the manner of Ghazali's *lhya' `ulum id-din* ("The Vivification of the Religious Sciences") and divided his thought into six chapter headings (1) Knowledge and religious experience, (2) The philosophical test of the revelations of religious experience, (3) The conception of God and the meaning of prayer, (4) The human Ego—his freedom and immortality, (5) The spirit of Muslim culture, (6) The principle of movement in the structure of Islam; to which he later, in 1934, added a closing chapter, (7) Is religion possible ?). As a whole these lectures combine a psychological elucidation of basic Islamic ideas with a fresh interpretation of the Qur'an in the light of modern science and manifest the author's unshakable faith in the revelations on which Islam is based. Iqbal testified himself: "I have tried to meet, even though partially, this urgent demand by attempting to reconstruct Muslim religious philosophy with due regard to the philosophical traditions of Islam and the more recent developments in the various domains of human knowledge." Whereas Iqbal's "Metaphysics" demonstrated the historical depth dimension of his philosophy, the "Reconstruction" documented his socio-religious concerns that gave an immense horizontal dimension to his philosophy. Together, the "Metaphysics" and the "Reconstruction" this twin pair of Iqbal's "pure" and "Practical" reason, provided the vertical and horizontal coordinates of his thought that stretched into infinity and described the space in which his poetry created newness of life.

The socio-religious reflections of these lectures as well as Iqbal's day-to-day involvement in the politics of the sub-continent suggest that he advocated the political future of the Muslim community in South Asia as a separate entity from the Majority community of India. One year after his return from Europe, in 1909, Iqbal had already formulated his thoughts on the subject in the following way: "I have myself been of the view that religious differences

should disappear from this country, and even now act on this principle in my private life, But now I think that the preservation of their separate national entities is desirable for both the Hindus and the Muslims. The vision of a common nationhood for India is a beautiful ideal, and has a poetic appeal, but looking to the present conditions and the unconscious trends of the two communities, appears incapable of fulfilment." Some twenty years later, in 1930, Iqbal came out with the historic proposal: "I would like to see the Panjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West India State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims at least of North-West India." Iqbal realized that he had to abandon his ideal of a pan-Islamic caliphate in order to follow the path required by political expediency, although he continued to profess his philosophy of a universal Muslim community.

In 1934 Iqbal's health began to decline. He was exhausted from the prolific output of his poetry, the vast range of his philosophical investigations and the demanding chores of his political activity. He died on April 21, 1938, a man in his early sixties, who was one of the outstanding personalities of Muslim South Asia in the twentieth century.

In retrospect, we perceive Iqbal's greatness as a poet and the vast range of his readings in philosophical literature. We are surprised, however, to discover that Iqbal does not display a deep understanding of Indian philosophy and Hindu culture in his works. Indeed, none of his many articles and papers seems to focus on the contact with the literature and culture of his Hindu neighbours. True, it has been said that he began studying Sanskrit, translated the Gayatri into Urdu and admired the "sublimity of the Vedanta". In some of his poems he alludes to the Upanishads, mentions such concepts *karma* and *atman*, and includes the Hindu poet Bartari-Hari and the mythological Vishvamisra among the *dramatis personae* of the *Javidnama*. At no point however does Iqbal derive a fundamental inspiration from the sacred scriptures and philosophical sources of the Hindus. Iqbal's natural homeland was the Islamic Indo-Iranian

world, not Hindu India. In his search for an intellectual homeland he did not look out towards the East that was so close at hand, but oriented himself totally to the Occident and the distant scene of European learning.

Iqbal quotes a wide range of European authors. Among the philosophers, Hegel, Bergson and Nietzsche appear to have attracted him most. In his years of study abroad and during his early philosophical work Iqbal was under the spell of the dialectic and idealistic philosophy of Hegel whom he describes as "a hen which lays eggs from sheer phantasy without the presence of the cock." However, he realized this kind of philosophy as lifeless and loveless and turned to the vitalist current of philosophy that had its exponents in Nietzsche and Bergson. Iqbal was fascinated by the vigour of vitalist philosophy, with its active conception of the human self and its dynamic outlook on life as a flow of becoming rather than a static entity of being. But he also foresaw the fatalism that was included in Nietzsche's superman ideal and rejected the idea of eternal recurrence. Thus Iqbal carefully selected those ideas from his admired philosophers that appeared to him as seeds for this own thought.

In spite of all the admiration for the philosophy of the West, Iqbal often takes an antagonistic stance, towards Greek thought, Christian ethics, and European civilisation in general. He employs some peculiar apologetics in claiming here and there that any profound idea of the West had already been conceived centuries ago by some Muslim forerunner. Iqbal, however, confesses that it had not been given to him to integrate fully his study of Western philosophy with his Islamic heritage and his Indo-Iranian, cultural background, for he says: "My life has been spent mostly in the study of Western philosophy, and this point of thought has become nearly a second nature to me. I cannot express well in Urdu what is in my heart."

These Lines seem to articulate the predicament of Iqbal. Here we meet the intuitive mind of an ingenious author who lived in the Indian environment, professed the religion of the Arabian prophet,

wrote in the style of Persian poetry, studied German philosophy, and proclaimed his thought in the English language. It is the same man who in his enthusiasm exclaimed: "China and Arabia are ours, India is ours: Muslim we are, the whole world is ours," and who in his loneliness compares himself to the ruby hidden in the heart of the stone and proclaims himself to be "the first Adam of a new world."

In his poetry Iqbal demonstrates a remarkable ability of assimilation, making frequent adaptations from English and German. He cites a whole list of European poets in his works and was predominantly influenced by Milton and Dante in the outline of his *Javidnama*. Iqbal's preferred model among the European poets was Goethe whom he had emulated in the *Payam-i mashriq* and about whom he had said: "A real insight into human nature you can get from Goethe alone." "It is not until I had realized the infinitude of Goethe's imagination that I discovered the narrow breadth of my own."

Although Iqbal had a good grasp of Western philosophy and poetry, he had a rather limited knowledge of Christianity and was deeply suspicious of the Western scholars of religion, foremost among them the orientalist. "I am not sure of the European orientalist. Because they create their works for end of political propaganda." "The professors have special purposes which they conceal in the exterior talisman of what they investigate and what they prove; and the pure table of the Muslim student becomes filed by this spell and he is led astray." For Iqbal there is only one ideal religion, namely Islam, the final religion that is in no need of reform by an other religion, particularly since in Iqbal's interpretation it had assumed the character of a universal human (that is Muslim) brotherhood.

In retrospect we have seen Iqbal as a man between East and West, as a poet and a philosopher. On the scene of politics and in the field of religion Iqbal hardly achieved an encounter between the Orient and the Occident. In the vast range of his philosophical knowledge and in the magnificent display of his poetry on the other

hand, Iqbal accomplished a mingling of the two oceans of the East and the West. His lasting impact on the course of history, however, rests with his poetry that points a way to the future encounter of East and West.

Iqbal himself knew that he stood in the field of tension between East and West, neither at home in the Orient nor settled in the Occident. He had severed the bonds with the past but had not yet caught up with his vision of the future. Awed by the forces of the bringer of evil, Ahriman, and keeping his distance from the mediator of revelation, Gabriel, the poet discovered a melody of life in his inmost self, when he said in conclusion to the *Javidnama*:

“Abandon the East, be not spellbound by the West, for all this ancient and new is not worth one barely corn. That signetring which you gambled away to Ahriman should not be pledged even to trusty Gabriel. Life, that ornament of society, is guardian of itself; you who are of the caravan, travel alone, yet go with all !”

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