

THE CONCEPT OF ISLAMIC POETRY

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The resurrection of mud was the rose. Or, you may say gil rose as gut, while it was destined for the honey-bee to become the poet. Iqbal in his 'Foreword' to Ghalib's illustrated edition, Muraqqa-i-Chughtai, says: "The modern age seeks inspiration from Nature. But Nature simply 'is' and her function is mainly to obstruct our search for 'ought' which the artist must discover within the deeps of his own being."

The words are a bit ambiguous. Someone might think that the artist has to put in a continuous effort to harmonize 'is' with 'ought'; or that Nature plays no essential part in our lives. But that would not be correct. Iqbal himself says:

نوائی من ازالا پر سوز بے باک و غم انگیز است
بخاشا کم شرار افتاد و باد صبحدم تیز است

Obviously, باد صبحدم represents the environment or Nature that enables the spark (شرار) to flare up.

The fact is that in the artist 'is' is harmonized with 'ought' by nature itself, and his function in human society, therefore, is to bring a resolution of discord between 'is' and 'ought' by sheer warbling. If so, why then so much criticism of the warbler? Why the reproach اشعر الشعراء و اشعر الغاؤون? Why even ان من البیان لسحرا even though the modification comes through ان and ان من البیان لسحرا even though the modification comes through ان and ان من البیان لسحرا? So then, there seem to be two kinds of poets: some speak hikmat while others only lead to eternal fire.

We get a hint from Iqbal, however unconscious, in the last passage of his 'Foreword' in which he says:

"And in so far as the cultural history of Islam is concerned, it is my belief that with the single exception of Architecture, the art of Islam (Music, Painting and even Poetry) is yet to be born—the art, that is to say, which aims at the human assimilation of divine attributes. تتخلقوا باخلاق الله"

This clearly indicates that there are not only different kinds of poetry and art, but also there is a possibility of ‘Islamic poetry’ and ‘Islamic art’. Here it may be pointed out that the Qur’an and Iqbal are not the only sources to suggest this variety, but as early as Greek times, Plato won’t have poets in his Republic. Even in more recent times, Tolstoy was dead against the art of his day—music included. The danger of a ‘doubtful art’ we may again describe in the words of Iqbal himself from his very same ‘Foreword’:

“The spiritual health of a people largely depends on the kind of inspiration which their poets and artists receive. But inspiration is not a matter of choice. It is a gift, the character of which cannot be critically judged by the recipient before accepting it.... The inspiration of a single decadent artist, if his art can lure his fellows to his song or picture, may prove more ruinous to a people than whole battalions of an Attila or a Changez.”

For the time being, we need not worry about the actual words of Iqbal (which might be misinterpreted as we mentioned above) that the artist is to put in conscious efforts to achieve as great a result as *تخلتوا باخلاق الله*. For the nonce, we might address ourselves only to one problem. What is “Islamic poetry” and how does it differ from the non-Islamic one? Having established that there are many varieties of art, we will try to find out what kind is Iqbal’s art, and whether by any chance it does represent what he conjectured to be Islamic poetry’.

Between the Greeks and Tolstoy came the master of Iqbal, the great Rumi, whose opinion we will quote below in his own words. En passant we may quote Caliph ‘Umar who said *كان الشعر علم قوم لم يكن لهم علم اصح منه* Now says Rumi:

ياران که نزد من می آیند از بیم آن که ملول شوند شعر می گویم تا بدان مشغول شوند۔ ورنه من کجا و شعر از کجا! و الله که من از شعر بیزارم۔ پیش من بدتر از آن چیزی نیست۔

Thus, Rumi composed poetry for the entertainment of his friends and, in his own words, he was actually “sick of shi’r”. Now we may quote Iqbal’s own words about his poetry. Says he:

مری نوائے پریشاں کو شاعری نہ سمجھ

کہ میں ہوں محرم راز درون میخانہ
نہ بادہ ہے نہ صراحی نہ دور بیخانہ
فقط نگاہ سے رنگیں ہے بزم جانانہ

Obviously, Iqbal considers “sight” (nigah) as the essence of poetry, all else being trappings and means to express it. He tries to explain his concept of nigah (sight) as:

خرد کے پاس خبر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں
ترا علاج نظر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں

He further clears his position in the following beautiful lines:

اقبال نے کل اہل خیاباں کو سنایا
یہ شعر نشاط آور و پر سوز و طربناک
میں صورت گل دست صبا کا نہیں محتاج
کرتا ہے میرا جوش جنوں میری قبا چاک

Still a further elucidation of the point comes:

اے اہل نظر ذوق نظر خوب ہے لیکن
جوشے کی حقیقت کو نہ دیکھے وہ نظر کیا
الفاظ کے بچپوں میں الجھتے نہیں دانا
غواص کو مطلب ہے صدف سے کہ گہر سے

This last one brings out the very word Meaning the significance of which we will speak later on:

جس معنی پیچیدہ کی تصدیق کرے دل
قیمت میں بہت بڑھ کر ہے تابندہ گہر سے

All this should make it clear to the reader, that Iqbal’s concern is meaning and not the Form. However, it should not be understood that he avoids the Form or concerns himself exclusively with the Meaning. That will amount to misreading the situation. It is not that he avoids Form deliberately, but rather the agent of inspiration is Meaning, not Form. This inspiration, as

lethal himself says, is a natural 'gift'

ذالك فضل اللدوتييه من يشاء

His inspiration does not arise at the level of Form but at the level of Idea.

This brings us to the definition of poetry, the classical one, that Milton once formulated. He said poetry must be "simple, sensuous and passionate", But we find that Iqbal will have nothing to do with the 'sensuous'. All the verses that we have quoted above make it perfectly clear that he is neither moved by the 'sensuous' nor the 'sensation'. His inspiration is set in motion only at the level of 'Idea' or 'Meaning'. The earlier writers would have called this kind of poetry as "didactic verse" not fit to be called 'poetry' at all, because their inspiration was bound up with the sensuous. No lyric poetry ever came into existence but through the sensuous. They considered talk about 'ideas' as cold philosophical teaching through the form of verse. Therefore, to them such a composition was more formal, than inspired. Here Iqbal runs down the very 'Form' itself. He wants 'Meaning' and nothing less. Rumi goes much further. He will have nothing to do with 'Forms' of any kind. Ghazali in his own inimitable philosophic way puts it down that the next universe is the universe of 'meaning', not of 'form'.

Now any one might ask, can 'meaning' reach us unless it is dressed in a 'form'? Idea is defined as 'meaning of a symbol', yet there are no ideas apart from symbols, whether natural or linguistic, expressing and embodying them.

The reply to this argument is that the 'form' cannot be done away with, but the stress and the spotlight is on 'meaning' and not on 'form' as such. This may be illustrated this wise. In earlier times, discovery of a plot and originality of a tale were the main glory of a literary composition. The Qur'an changed all that. It relates old qisas (stories) with an entirely new significance. The qissa (tale) itself was of no importance; it was the new wine put in old bottles that mattered. Iqbal would not be satisfied only with wine in a bottle but seeks significance further than wine itself:

يارب درون سينه دل بانجر بده

در باده نشه را گرم آل نظر بده

This Qur'anic lead initiated and set up a new fashion in the literary

world, that the most representative writers of the nation unconsciously followed. Dante and Shakespeare would take up an old tale and would try to give it a new meaning. All the Shakespearean plots are old stories. He has not invented a single one. But the meaning that he has given them is entirely new. Milton followed suit. Goethe, the most representative of the German literatti, also instinctively followed this fashion. His Faustus was treated by many writers before him, and so also his Iphigenia. But the Iphigenia and the Faustus of Goethe have entirely different significance than the earlier works. All this proves, as we have been mentioning all along, that Meaning and not the Form had become of consequence, since the Qur'an came.

Now the point that needs further clarification is: How is it Islamic? We have already mentioned that the Qur'an set the fashion. But that was only our implication. At the present time, more than at any other period in Muslim History, it is necessary for the people who call themselves 'Muslims' clearly to understand the position of Islam in the evolution of man. Europe, when it came of age, refused even to admit that religion was subject to evolution and was historical. They persisted to write "Judaism, Islam and Christianity": they would not have Christianity before Islam, because the importance of Christianity would then be historically reduced. All the same, that writing was a clear anachronism to the understanding mind. It falsified and misrepresented History.

What is the main difference between Islam and other religions? The first and the foremost is that Islam reduced formalism and ceremonialism to the minimum. Earlier religions emphasised 'ceremony' and 'form' to the utmost. No religious fuction was per-formed but as a ceremonial by the priest, and in a proper set up in a formal place, be it a church or a synogogue. Even thinking was a sin in a devotee:

تا ز بخششای آل سلطان دین
مسجد ما شد هم روی زمین

So far we have been talking about poetry directly or indirectly. A few words about the position of Islam may be permitted. Sufficient talk about Nature has also gone on in Iqbal's phraseology, although at times Iqbal separates Nature as 'is' from Art as 'ought', and makes one believe as if Art is outside Nature. Here we might for the sake of clarification, quote the

Shakespearean lines:

“Nature is made better by no means,
But Nature makes that mean.”

Let us, therefore, examine the fundamental position of the Qur’an. The Qur’an starts with *اقرأ*. What *اقرأ* indicates is: ‘Read the meaning in the symbol’. The entire Nature is a symbol to Qur’an. You have to catch at its meaning. When you have been the recipient of it, then make use of *بيان* (expression) which has been taught to you. Expression is both verbal as well as written; the pen and the writing is emphasised in *ن والقلم و ما يسطرون* which is chronologically the second surah of the Qur’an following *اقرأ* the first one.

Do these very first words of the Qur’an represent any values that were previously existent? We know only two fundamental values at the biological level: to assimilate food, to preserve life and to propagate and perpetuate the human species. Here these two values are represented by feeding the mind and assimilating that food *اقرأ*, and then to give birth to and create an issue through self-expression. In one word, the values at the biological level are substituted by spiritual ones. That is the fundamental difference between the levels of earlier religions and Islam. Material life in Islam is only a means but the stress lies on the life of mind and spirit. *المال و البنون زينة الحياة الدنيا*. But the actual *بنون* are your spiritual issues. . Whatever from mind and spirit, are your children Those who understand this much, have no difficulty in deciphering the actual position of Islam in the historical development of Religion.

With these preliminary viewpoints we are now in a position to review the history of Art, specially so far as it pertains to the Greeks. We hold that at that particular juncture, man was just becoming aware of his mind, and the toddler mind was learning to lisp, uttering words and trying to express itself, although in some other parts of the earth it had gone far beyond that stage. For example, in China, Confucius’s moral philosophy is miles ahead of Aristotelian Ethics. But, the West, becoming suddenly alive and conscious of itself and inspired by ‘power-thought’, chose to start philosophy from the Greeks. That has gone on since then. So far were they drunk with power that they believed that humanity could be kept in the dark for all time. They did

not even realise that an attempt to turn the Greeks into 'Westerners' and entirely different from the 'Easterners' was a silly attempt, when the very words of the language of the Greeks disclosed that they were the nearest cousins of the Iranian people, and had gone only a few hundred miles from home to Asia Minor. Their development took place in Asia Minor and Egypt rather than in Greece.

Now, which is the typical form of Greek art in which they could best express themselves and even hardly have an equal up to our times? It can be said without fear of contradiction that it is Sculpture and that too limited to the representation of 'Human Form'. No people have chiselled out of stone more beautiful human forms than the Greeks. They were absorbed in the beauty of human form. The two best specimens of their art, that they have left to the succeeding ages, are Apollo of Belvedere and Venus of Milo. They disclose human form at its best. That is what inspired the Greek artist at a time when Dionysus was the chief Greek god and when the spirit of grape wine was the chief moving agent to put the man in his best spirits. There was no question at that time for man to seek anything but the external.

However, Iqbal calls our attention by these emphatic words:

اگر بسینه 'ایں کائنات در نه روی

نگاه را به تماشا گذاشتن ستم است

And he further elucidates the point by declaring:

رقص تن در گردش آرد خاک را

رقص جان برهم زند افلاک را

To sum up our position, so far we have tried to show that Iqbal is not inspired at the level of 'form' and 'sensations' but at the level of 'Ideas'; in other words, the 'Meaning'. So far, then, his art is Islamic Art which he thinks has not yet come into existence. For the time being we are not in a position to talk about Painting and Music because that would be a subject by itself. The question is: Does Iqbal deal with 'Ideas' as a philosopher would do? Does he sit down to analyse them, classify them, create theories out of

them as a thinker would do? If that were so, Iqbal's poetry will not move us at all. It will be what we call 'didactic verse'. But the most of Iqbal's poetry is not only lyrical but most times moves our depths. So it satisfies the definition of Milton that it is 'emotional' and 'emotion-creating'. It differs from Milton's definition only in one respect, that it is not 'sensuous' but 'ideal'. The poetry of Iqbal could be defined as 'simple, ideal and soul-stirring', instead of the Miltonic 'simple, sensuous and passionate'.

It is, therefore, that I have many years ago called Iqbal's works 'Museum of Ideas'. Almost every idea that was prevalent in his time, he takes note of as an object of artistic inspiration, is attracted and stimulated by it, and responds to it. He reads Nietzsche and for the time speaks in the language of Nietzsche because he has taken note of it. He even uses his phraseology. He calls peaceful men as 'lambs' (گوسفند). At one time he is most impressed by Goethe, particularly by that which used to be called demoniac by Goethe. His vya and such pronouncements as

ما از خدای گم شده ایم، او بجز جستجوست

چون ما نیاز مند و گرفتار آرزوست

are merely reactions to Goethe's poem addressed to gods:

"You lead us into Life,

Then you let the poor one become, guilty,

Then leave him over in pain

Because all guilt is revenged on earth."

This is how Goethe speaks in his demoniac mood, while poor

Hafiz would go only to the length of saying:

گناه گرچه نبود اختیار ما حافظ:

تو در طریق ادب کوش و گو "گناه من است"

When Iqbal reads *لا احب الافلين*, he says *پرستیدم، شکستم*, *تراشیدم* too have created gods, worshipped them and broken them.” Here he is not busy with his *khudee* nor even in a mood to say:

خودی میں گم ہے خدا کی تلاش کر غافل

یہی ہے تیرے لئے اب صلاح کار کی راہ

He is not even building the *khudee* in that mood like *Rumi* who is all the time busy with his own *nafs*, and says: *”خام بدم، پختہ شدم، سوختم،* Now put these three words by the side of Iqbal’s poetry, *”شکستم تراشیدم پرستیدم،*” which occur in his following verses:

ہزاراں سال با فطرت نشستم

با و پیوستہ و از خود گسستم

و لیکن سر گذشت این دو حرف است

تراشیدم، پرستیدم، شکستم

In this mood, Iqbal is visualizing the man’s search of Nature as a ‘Scientist’ who goes to study Nature without keeping in mind *باسم ربک الذی* (“In the Name of thy Lord who created”). If he had kept that *”اسم ربک”* in mind, then the process of “thousand years in the feet of nature” would not have produced this result. There too in *الافاق* (the cosmos) there were enough *خود گسستن* (the signs). Obviously would have made no difference, for *flu afa’q* would have served the purpose. But the mood at that time was not “Y I”. Had the reading been, as we said above, *باسم ربک الذی*

حق, then "لا" would have intuitively led to "لا".

This is one more proof that the poet does not consciously take to reading but follows the mood. The wind bloweth where it listeth. The man who blames is wrong. The man who expects more is wrong.

The poet is a poet—neither a thinker nor a philosopher. So the ideas keep on agitating the poetic mind and the poet keeps on responding to them. The difference is that 'ideas' not 'sensations' are the agents.