

IQBAL: THE PHILOSOPHER-POET

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An erroneous impression obtains in some quarters that Iqbal is not so great a poet as great a philosopher and that his poetry has no universal appeal because of its 'sectarian' outlook and religious undertone.

In the present article I shall try to show that, in spite of all his omissions and commissions, Iqbal is not only a great poet, but the greatest poet of this age.

The under-estimation of Iqbal is largely due to a general misconception about poetry and the poet. We should, therefore, have, at the very outset, a clear idea about the meaning and significance of poetry and the function and the province of the poet.

What is Poetry

It is very difficult to give a correct definition of poetry. For, it is one of those few things which we understand but cannot define. "If not asked, I know; if you ask me, I know not" that is exactly the attitude of our mind in respect of definition of poetry. Different persons have, therefore, given different definitions, but none is self-sufficient or all-comprehensive. Carlyle defines it as 'musical thought', while to Wordsworth, it is "a the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." Matthew Arnold characterizes poetry as "the criticism of life", while in the opinion of Edgar Allan Poe it is "the rhythmic creation of beauty". On the other hand, Dante defines it as "the divine phantom of Reality".

A fuller idea of poetry can be had if we interpret it in terms of Art. Poetry falls within the province of Art, in as much as a poet does by means of words what an artist does by means of colour. Both attempt at conveying adequately and beautifully their inner feelings and sentiments to others. Art is thus "the expression of the impression". All good pieces of art, therefore, must embody sincere feelings and beautiful expressions; in other words, the idea and the form constitute the two main contents of Art. Both need equal looking-into. Without idea, the expression or form becomes meaningless, however exquisite or gorgeous it may be. On the other hand, a good and genuine idea may prove ineffective or unimpressive if it is not properly and

beautifully garbed. Any failing on either side will proportionately undermine the quality of Art.

Another determining factor in Art is its power of communication. If the artist conceives an idea and if he can transmit it to others in such a way that they can equally share his feelings, then his work becomes a successful piece of Art. Thus, the success or failure of Art largely depends on its communicative value.

There remains still a controversy as to what should be the content of Art. There are some who maintain that Art has no connection with Truth or Good; its only connection is with Beauty.

To them, Religion or Ethics is taboo to Art. They uphold the theory of “Art for Art’s sake.” But that view is not tenable. Beauty or pleasure is, no doubt, a component part of Art; it cannot be the sole standard or criterion of Art. Pleasure is a vague term. Different persons have different standards of pleasure. Whose pleasure will then be the criterion of Art? The pleasure of the producer or the consumer? What sort of pleasure will it be? Will it be sensual pleasure, or intellectual satisfaction or spiritual ecstasy? Then, again, the pleasure of A may not be pleasure to B and vice versa. The “Art for Art’s sake” theory has, therefore, no leg to stand upon.

The guiding principle of all artistic works should be: “Art for man’s sake”, or more precisely, “Art for life’s sake”, as has been beautifully explained by Iqbal himself in the following lines:

“The ultimate end of all human activity is Life—glorious, powerful, exuberant. All human art must be subordinated to this final purpose and the value of everything must be determined in reference to its life-giving capacity. The highest art is that which awakens our dormant will-force and nerves us to face the trials of life manfully. All that brings drowsiness and makes us shut our eyes to Reality around, on the mastery of which alone life depends, is a message of decay and death. There should be no opium-eating in Art. The dogma of “Art for the sake of Art” is a clever invention of decadence to cheat us out of life and power.”

Thus it is clear that poetry or Art is useful and good only when it impinges dynamically on life and works harmoniously with the eternal varieties of mankind: Truth, Beauty and Good.

The pleasure-theory of Art therefore betrays perversion of taste. No man can discard religion or moral values of life for the sake of mere aesthetic enjoyment. There should be no antagonism between Religion and Art. All great works of Art have emanated from a deep sense of religion and moral sentiments. A good piece of Art may outwardly represent any particular religion or community and maintain its local colouring, but that does not stand in the way of its universal appeal. In Poetry and Art, the Individual becomes the Universal if it can represent any phase of the three fundamentals of humanity: Truth, Beauty and Good. Dante's "Divine Comedy", Milton's "Paradise Lost", Raphael's "Madona", Rumi's "Masnavi", and such other artistic creations will bear me out.

How a religious theme can be transformed into a brilliant piece of Art can be illustrated from Iqbal himself. His "Shikwa" and "Jawab-i-Shikwa", judged from the view-point of Art and Literature, cannot but give universal satisfaction. The subject-matter is, after all, a prayer to Allah for bestowing favours upon the Muslims. But what a wonderful myth has been created by the poet out of this simple thing! It is not the customary supplication of a devoted voter with tearful eyes or with a beggar's bowl in hand; it is a forceful demand of favours, almost bordering on extortion on point of bayonet! Iqbal files a regular complaint in the Court of Allah against Allah Himself, alleging colossal neglect, on His part, of the legitimate rights and privileges of the Muslims and partiality to others. The force of argument was so great and irresistible that Allah had to put up a self-defence and come to an amicable settlement with the poet! Is it not pure poetic artistry, even though the material used is Islamic in character? Where is hostility, then, between Poetry and Religion?

Philosophy also is not hostile to Poetry; rather they have close affinity to each other. Poets are "seers", as Carlyle has aptly said.

They are nothing if their poetry does not reflect any philosophic truth or foreshadows the shape of things to come. Philosophers may not be poets, but poets must be philosophers. "No man was ever yet a great poet", says Coleridge, "without being at the same time a profound philosopher." Browning goes one step farther and says: "Philosophy first, and poetry, which is its highest outcome, after-wards." Indeed, there is no reason why philosophy must not come in the arena of poetry. Of course, philosophizing or moralising often makes poetry didactic. But that is the fault of the poet.

Didactic poems are detestable, not because they are didactic, but because they are not poetry.

The scope of the poet is, therefore, unlimited. He cannot be confined to a particular place or a particular subject. His penetrating eye pervades through heaven and earth and encompasses the entire universe. Little poets think of little things, they may be adepts in composing love-songs, sonnets or lyric poems; but great poets come with prophetic missions for giving new ideas and new messages to mankind. They revolutionize and reconstruct religious, social, political, scientific, moral, economic and cultural outlook of the people and deal with major problems of humanity. A great poet is thus a philosopher, a religious reformer, a political thinker, a man of science, a literary critic—all combined in one. Such a poet was Iqbal. It is an irony that these outstanding qualities of Iqbal as a poet are turned down as great disqualifications by the pseudo-critics of art and literature! That is why, perhaps, that it has been said that “critics are the men who have failed in art and in literature.”

With these introductory remarks, let us now study the various aspects of Iqbal’s poetry and thought and see where he stands.

Iqbal as a Philosopher

Iqbal was confronted with the dominating influence of the philosophy of Pantheistic Idealism that was exercising the minds of both the West and the East, in some form or other, from the time of Plato. The Western philosophers held that the external world is unreal, a mere illusion, and that the Absolute Idea is the only Reality. The inevitable corollary of this view is that man is also unreal and that he disappears into nothingness as soon as he dies. The independent existence or immortality of the Soul was thus denied. In the East, the Hindu and *Buddhistic* philosophies also held identical views on human life and the world. Self-annihilation or absorption into God was their motto. A section of Muslim spiritualists was also caught in the grip of Sufistic Pantheism, called “*Wandatul-Wujud*” which, too, denied individuality of the Soul and maintained that absorption unto God was the ultimate end of human life. It encouraged men to run away from the battle of life and evoked in them a spirit of passivity and other-worldliness. The recognition of Ego was nowhere to be found.

Iqbal assailed these soul-killing doctrines and propounded a new

philosophy. He said: God is not a mere “Idea”. He is a living personality; man is not a mere emanation from God, he has an independent identity; and this world is not an illusion, it has also a reality. Of course, this world, he said, is not the only reality; beyond this phenomenal world there is another world—the world of transcendent reality, which, no doubt, corresponds to physical reality. In short, Iqbal assigned the right place to man vis-a-vis God and Universe and exalted his status and position by emphasizing his independent entity and the immortality of the human soul. He further said that the Ego or Self, far from being a mere illusion, is the centre of all reality because to know one’s self is to know God and the Universe.

“I-am-ness” is thus the keynote of Iqbal’s philosophy. He says: “Thou alone art the Reality All the rest is a mirage.”

Again he says: “Only that truly exists which can say ‘I am’. It is the degree of the intuition of ‘I-am-ness’ that determines the place of a thing in the scale of being.”

But Iqbal’s independence of the Ego does not mean any separation or revolt from God. He recognises God as the Creator and Sustainer of this universe and admits that He is the Ultimate Reality; but at the same time, he proclaims the immortality of the Soul. This gives a permanent value to human life and provides an incentive to work for the progress and development of the world. In this connection, Iqbal says that the ego has tremendous powers and potentialities and, if properly strengthened and developed, it can attain the exalted position of the Vicegerent of God. The ego can achieve this power and strength through vital communion with God as He is the supreme source of all life and strength. But this communion with God must not be misconstrued as absorption unto Him. Man must communicate with God, but must not absorb himself unto God; rather he must absorb God unto himself. Says Iqbal:

“Abandon thyself and flee to God

Being strengthened by God,

return to thyself.”

Evidently, Iqbal’s philosophy is the philosophy of affirmation of the Self, and not its negation or annihilation, as maintained by others.

But the philosophy of Egoism is not yet complete. Iqbal is conscious of the danger of excessive egotism. He realises that the Ego, however strengthened and developed it may be, cannot do anything in complete isolation. It can grow to its full stature only in Society. Primarily, man must look upon himself as a single entity, but he must not forget that he is a social being and that beyond his individual self, there is a wider circle of Society of which he is a member. In Society, man feels the existence of his greater self—the social or national self—in which he cannot but take a lively interest. The Ego has, therefore, two “I”s: (i) the individual and (ii) the national I. The individual and the national I must, therefore, cooperate with each other for reciprocal interests. Iqbal, therefore, emphasised the simultaneous strengthening of the Individual and the society, as both are inter-dependent on each other for their all-round development. How beautifully has he said about the mutual relationship between the individual and the society:

“Individual exists in relation to the Community,
Alone he is nothing,
The wave exists in the ocean
Outside the ocean it is nothing.”

The philosophy of the Self which Iqbal started in his “Asrar-i-Khudi” is thus completed in his “Rumuz-i-Bekhudi”, where he preaches the necessity of merging one’s self with the Society or Nation to which he belongs. The two books must be studied together, so that one can have a complete picture of Iqbal’s philosophy and thought.

It is interesting to note that this over-all conception of Man, God and the Universe is in complete accord with the teachings of Islam. Iqbal cannot, therefore, be blamed for his alignment to-wards Islam. His searching mind saw that the Islamic society was pre-eminently fit for the implementation of his philosophical, social and political ideas. Muslims may feel proud that Islam has come upto the mark even at the touch-stone of modern philosophy and social science. Credit must go to Iqbal for his bold adventure of testing Islam in the light of philosophy and science and proving its efficiency and superiority to the modern world. It is really heartening that in the spiritual darkness and intellectual stagnation of the present-day Muslim world a true son of Islam got over all inferiority complex and servile

mentality and brought out in bold relief the hidden beauties of Islamic ideology, so long relegated to the background of apathy and neglect. Iqbal may truly be called a “Mujaddid” of the modern age. True Islamic Renaissance dates from Iqbal.

It is really astonishing that Iqbal had also up-to-date scientific knowledge. We have definitely reached a new age—the age of space-flight and interplanetary journeys. All the time-honoured notions of Space, Time and Velocity have now been changed. It is now universally admitted that our knowledge of Space, Time and Velocity is relative. Iqbal knew all this, as will be evident from the following lines of his lectures:

“The object observed is variable; it is relative to the observer; its mass, shape and size change as the observer’s position and speed change.”

In *Javid Nama* Iqbal takes a flight into space along with his spiritual guide, Maulana Rumi, and visits different planets, such as the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, etc., and gives interesting accounts of those stellar regions. This description of the heavenly spheres and imaginary conversations between different persons there, are, no doubt, poetic fantasy, pure and simple; but we now find that it has a great scientific significance. Modern space-scientists are now busy preparing expeditions to the Moon and then to other planets by means of rockets and spaceships. Readers of “Man on the Moon”, “The Exploration of Space” “Across the Space Frontier”, “The Worlds in Space” and such other books will be surprised to find striking affinity between poetic fiction and scientific facts. Here is a brilliant example to show how poetry, philosophy, religion and science can meet together in a beautiful amalgam. It is a pleasant surprise to learn that Islam lies at the root of all these poetic fictions and scientific speculations. It is the ‘Mi’raj’ or Ascension of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be on him) that coloured the mind of Dante resulting in the production of one of the world’s greatest epics: *The Divine Comedy*. Iqbal was equally inspired by the same Mi’raj’ and wrote his immortal book “*Javid Nama*”. Modern space-scientists, too, have drunk deep from the same fountainhead of inspiration and are trying, just like the Holy Prophet Muhammad, to conquer space and time and make interplanetary journeys. Can Iqbal be blamed, then, if he places his superstructure of poetry and thought on the basis of Islam?

Iqbal not only accepted the modern theories of Space and Time, but

also criticised them and gave his own views on the subject. This is not a mean achievement on the part of a poet.

Iqbal was also a great political thinker. He attacked many of the existing political theories of the West, viz., Nationalism, Communism, Capitalism, Democracy, etc., and propounded new theories of his own. His conception of an “Ideal State” did not conform to any prevalent political system. The most outstanding of his political thoughts was the conception of the idea of Pakistan. It is no mean glory to Iqbal that he was the architect of a new State.

Iqbal as a Poet

I have so long showed the versatility of Iqbal’s genius. But the main charge remains yet to be answered. What was his position as a poet? He might be a great philosopher, a great thinker, but was he really a great poet? We must, therefore, judge him once from a purely literary point of view. I am glad to say that even in that exclusive perspective, Iqbal will shine as a brilliant star in the literary firmament of the world. Apart from the philosophic, religious, moral or ideological excellence of his poetry and thought, Iqbal stands unparalleled in point of word-music, similes, metaphors, imagery, original ideas and their artistic expressions. I give below a few examples to substantiate the point:

(i) We have grown up under the shadow of the sword,

The curved crescent is thus our national emblem.

(ii) The fading of the stars is the sign of the advent of dawn,

When the sun rises and nobody remains dormant,

The dead veins of the eastern horizon again become live

with new blood of twilight

Avicenna or Al-Farabi does not know this secret.

(iii) The simili of the Mu’mins is the Sun,

If it sets in one horizon,

it rises again in another.

(iv) The Muslims have built a new Haram,

The Azar of modern civilisation has supplied
many idols to them,

Of all these new gods, the greatest is the god of Nationalism,
What is garment to it is the shroud to our Millat.

(v) Raise the self to such a height that, before destiny, God asks man:
“What dost thou desire?”

(vi) Be a man of honour and, like the bubble,
Keep thy cup inverted
even in the midst of the sea.

(vii) Like the Moon, scrape food from thine own side, Albiet thou art
poor and wretched.

(viii) The journey of the moon is nearly complete,
It is now hiding its face behind the hill,
The dawn is peeping through the eastern gate,
It has no longer its night-gown on,
It is now waking in the morning breeze.

(ix) Fashion a new pattern,
Bring a more perfect Adam into existence,
This making of playthings of clay
Is not worthy of God, the Creator.

(x) Woman is the covering for the nakedness of man,
Her heart-ravishing beauty is the attire for love.

The examples are illustrative, not exhaustive. They can be multi-plied ad
infinitem.

The subject-matter of Iqbal’s poetry and thought is not confined to
Islamic only. The range of his themes is very wide. It represents the entire
universe, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, heaven and hell, God,
angels, Satan, man, woman, Hindustan, China, Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Asia,

Europe, Western civilisation, Lenin, Karl Marx, Mussolini, Religion, Politics, Democracy, Communism, Socialism, Capitalism, and many other topics of abiding human interest. He has written in three languages: Urdu, Persian and English—a quality rarely found in other poets. The influence of his poetry and thought is also not confined to his own people and country. His name and fame have travelled far and wide in the modern world. He opened up a new chapter in the realm of Philosophy and Political Science. The sweeping current of Western thought and civilization got a successful rebuff only from Iqbal. His anniversary is now observed almost throughout the world. Translations of his works are now appearing in all the languages of the world. This shows the extensive popularity and appeal of his poetry and thought to the modern mind.

Can we not then call Iqbal as the greatest poet of this age? In point of versatility of genius, vastness of subject-matter, breadth of outlook, originality of ideas, metaphors, similes, imagery, diction, style, word-music, myth-making power, sincerity of feelings and their communicative values, Iqbal outshines all others in the galaxy of poets and thinkers. In the domains of Philosophy, Religion, Politics and other social sciences, Iqbal has given a message of his own. Shakespeare, Shelly, Byron, Rabindranath Tagore—all are great poets, no doubt; they excelled in one or the other branches of literature; but they appear less luminous when they stand in line with Iqbal. Iqbal's poetry is of a superior type in the sense that it deals with the the fundamentals of humanity and the major thought-movements Let us conclude with the beautiful observations of a distinguished literary critic:

“We may write little things well and accumulate one upon another, but never will any be justly called a great poet unless he has treated a great subject worthily. He may be the poet of the lover and the idler, he may be the poet of green fields and gay society; but whoever is this, can be no more.”