

# POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY IN IQBAL

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While discussing Ezra Pound's poetry, T. S. Eliot says that he knows that Pound has a scheme and a kind of philosophy behind it and it is quite enough for Eliot that Pound thinks he knows what he is doing. 'I am glad that the philosophy is there, but I am not interested in it.'

It is rather a difficult task for us to be less interested in what a poet is saying, and only be absorbed in the way he says it. Our assessment of Iqbal's greatness is generally on the basis of his abstract thoughts or his political credo, that is on the basis of what he says. Not to study the exploitation of the language for the expression of his ideas, but actually to study the apparent propositions in his poems seems to be our aim. Unfortunately this is an absurd position. It uproots language from experience and makes it a dead weary tool. Iqbal definitely never aimed at this. He always wanted his words to reveal his emotional staves and the accumulation of sense-perceptions. In his introduction to the *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai*, Iqbal says:

"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. It comes to the individual unsolicited and only to socialise itself. For this reason the personality that receives and the life-quality of that which is received are matters of the utmost importance for mankind. The inspiration of a single decadent, if his part can lure his fellows to his song or pictures, may prove more ruinous to a people than whole battalions of an Atilla or Changiz...To permit the visible to shape the invisible, to seek what is scientifically called adjustment with Nature is to recognise her mastery over the spirit of man. Power comes from resisting her stimuli and not from exposing ourselves to their action. Resistance to what is with a view to create what ought to be, is health and life. All else is decay and death. Both God and Man live by perpetual creation."

The poet is therefore a creator and creation in poetry involves several things, words, metaphors, similes, images, and symbols and meaning interwoven with them. If we want only the meaning, which normally we

do in the case with Iqbal, we actually uproot words from his experience and kill poetry. It must be remembered that Iqbal as a poet always tried to balance certain harmonies, to achieve certain rhythms and to conquer certain difficulties of medium. He created specifically poetic emotions. We always say that he created religious emotions or philosophical emotions, but the very fact that we are moved by these emotions in poetry proves that these emotions are connected with words and their esthetic apprehension and therefore these are not detached emotions of religious or philosophical contemplation. Even *Tulu-i-Islam* and *Khizr-i-Rab* which are essentially Islamic in character and emphasis have an emotional ecstasy which gives these poems a depth of feeling and a grandeur of thought.

It must be remembered that when we accept a poet for his religious significance only, his words do not get any extension of meaning. If it is a question of belief in relation to a certain religion, we give scope to the believers of other religions to regard the belief of the poet as false.

This will invariably happen if we judge poetry in terms of its subject, considered in abstraction. If we allow such a judgement to stand we would have to do without Dante, Rumi and Milton. Therefore we need a criterion. In reading Iqbal, say, in *Payam-e-Mashriq*, we find the belief of the poet giving the poem metaphorical significances. Whether the reader is a Muslim or not—believes in Islam or not, these poems are a poetic success not because of any message but because of an experience of love. Love, here, is not just a word but a whole universe of experience, of feeling and apprehension, which, as a critic has rightly said, "cannot be encompassed in any language known to man." Though it cannot be encompassed in any way, it is also simple because it brings about an identity of emotion between the poet and the reader. It does not require any analysis or argument. Iqbal affirms and herein lies his greatness. It is not reason which makes Iqbal a poet, it is not analysis and argument but affirmation and ecstasy of realization and experience which make him a poet and a very great poet indeed. We should not be interested in hearing the religious beliefs of the poet stated, we must be interested in poetry. Whether or not the reader shares Iqbal's beliefs, he will always accept his affirmation and realization expressed through metaphors and symbols. In a poem in *the Payam-e-Mashriq*, Iqbal expresses his admiration of Einstein. A certain critic of Iqbal discovered Iqbal's

appreciation of the Theory of Relativity and these lines are quoted as an example:

"Impatient like Moses he wanted a manifestation of the Glorious,  
To his bright intellect resolved the mysteries of light.

Whose flight from the heights of the sky to the observer's eye takes but  
one instant.

'And is so swift that it cannot even be conceived'."

This is poetry and not the Theory of Relativity, poetry because of its emotional significance, determination and experience. This poem has an emotional unity. This emotional unity cannot be measured by the instruments of reason. If the reasonable expression of a religious idea is what is desired in a poem, it would be simpler to express it in prose. The poem is always "received directly without questioning, and loved or hated. It is impervious to reason, and if it has no discoverable meaning, it has immeasurable power." I am quoting from Herbert Read in support of my argument. "The poet has created in words an objective equivalence of his emotional experience: the words may not make sense, but they make the emotion—follow the contour of the thought—and reproduce, as nearly as possible, the mind's eternal echo of the imperfect sound."

What should be my comment on Iqbal's '*Asrar-e-Khudi*'? This great poem has been judged as the philosophical realization of self by an ascetic. I am not contesting this opinion, but the thing which inspires me in *Asrar* is the sublimation of an imaginative flight into the realm of ideas. This flight is presented with arguments, but arguments in terms of poetry. Certain parables and anecdotes in *Asrar* are of course highly didactic and have no emotional existence, but moments of purest inspiration in this poem are many. His comment on the secret of life, which according to him is desire and seeking, is refreshing and has definite emotive content. To me it is a poetic experience and not philosophical abstraction.

"The secret of life is in the seeking,

Its essence is hidden in desire.

Keep desire kindled in your heart,

Lest your dust becomes a tomb.  
Desire is the soul of this world of colour and scent,  
The nature of everything is faithful to desire.  
Desire sets the heart dancing in the breast,  
And by its glow the breast is bright as a mirror.  
It gives to the earth the power of growing,  
It is the *Khizr* to the Moses of perception."

Professor Nicholson describes the scope and purpose of Iqbal's *Asrar* in these words:

"Its author professes, indeed, to expound the inmost sense of the prophetic revelation; but any one looking through -the work at random can see that the doctrines, interwoven with apologies, anecdotes, fables, legends, and traditions range over the whole domain of medieval religious life and thought. Whereas in his odes he often wishes from the standpoint of the mystic who sees nothing but God, the *mathnawi* shows him as an eloquent and enthusiastic teacher explaining the way to God for the benefit of those who have entered upon it."

Iqbal found in himself a sense of identity of spiritual purpose with Rumi and like Rumi he saw as his main mission in life the exposition of "the inmost sense of the prophetic revelation." Through the process of negation and purification, by clearing the mind of all irrelevancies and by purging the world of Islamic thought of all that was impure and alien, Iqbal wanted to experience the truth of the revelation. And in his ecstasy to experience the truth of the revelation, Iqbal reached the heights of true poetry. *Asrar* is essentially the imaginative story of the journey of the poet to the desert sublimity of Arabia:

"You who have gathered roses from the garden of Persia  
And seen the birth of spring in India,  
Now taste something of the heat of the desert,  
Drink the old wine of the date,  
Lay your head for once on her hot breast,

Yield your body a while to her scorching wind".

In *Asrar*, we find the poet's creative process as an active enjoyment, not a passive suffering of his experiences. Like all great poetry we find here the ordering activity of the imagination which gives significance to emotion. Mere emotion in itself is not what is needed in great poetry, what is necessary for poetry is the imaginative command of this emotion. "The life of art is in this sense a strenuous effort after release from emotion in the very act of experiencing it: There must be a quietness in the midst of the speed of passion." Poetry is not concerned primarily to awake 'emotion' and attitude; its concern is to convey imaginative ideas of, among other things, emotions. Successful conveyance of such imaginative prehension will certainly be accompanied by excitement—but excitement of a unique kind, which is not itself part of the content of the poem, for it is that which accompanies contemplation of the object. Judged from this standard, *Asrar-e-Khudi* is great poetry. While reading this poem I never felt the need of studying Bergson, Nietzsche and Hegel but the inspiration of the poet carried me to the realm of imaginative radiance.

It is true that one cannot afford to ignore Iqbal's philosophical and theological beliefs; but it must be remembered that the reader should not be called upon to believe them himself. It will be wrong to think that *Asrar* or *Ramuz* is of interest only to Muslims, because in these poems we do not discover philosophical belief. What we do find is poetic assent. It is not necessary for me to know what Iqbal believed as a man, I am interested in what he believes as a poet. "The question of belief or disbelief", as a critic has beautifully said, "never arises when we are reading well. If unfortunately it does arise, either through the poet's fault or our own, we have for the moment ceased to be readers and have become astronomers, theologians, or moralists, persons engaged in a quite different type of activity."