

# IQBAL AS A POET AND PHILOSOPHER<sup>1</sup>

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In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.

— *Thomas Mann.*

Even as I depart from this world,

Everyone will be saying 'I knew him.'

But the truth is that none knew this traveller,

What he said, unto whome he said: or whence he came. Iqbal

We know him better now. And not only his own people know him but the whole world. Recognition of Muhammad Iqbal's genius was slow in the West, and this was for a very simple reason. Modern European poetry is almost entirely divorced from action — the last great poet of affirmation was probably Milton — and the European mind is naturally suspicious of the kind of poetry that carries a message. Muhammad Iqbal's work is nothing but a message and hence its lack of impact on the West until very recently.

What was not realized by the West was the essential unity of Iqbal's poetic vision; for in this poet, thought and poetry were fused as these had very rarely been done before, and as such it is not possible to discuss the poetry without a knowledge of his thought. It is also difficult to fully understand the thought without an appreciation of the poetry; as both are complementary. In the ultimate analysis poetry, thought and action are all merged into one. It is this oneness of the poetry of Iqbal that I would like to discuss here.

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Iqbal begins and ends with the belief in *Tauhid* — *the oneness of God* — as expressed in the Holy Qur'an. From this all Man's potentialities spring and return to it in the end. Man is spiritual, his ultimate aim is spiritual. But in Islam the search for spiritual reality is not something contradictory to the world of matter — on the contrary, since we live in the world our destiny can be worked out only in and through the world. Here lies the great difference between Islam and Christianity, for whereas Islam fosters a spirit of unwordliness through the visible world, Christianity rejects reality in favour of the ideal. Europe, it might be said, was both created and permanently spoiled by Christianity. Very early in his career, Iqbal realized this, and incidentally, in realizing it, and the individualism that had resulted from it, foresaw the First World War —

A nest built on a slender bough cannot last.

The Greeks too, because of their one-sidedness, were rejected by him. He even went so far as to criticize the early Muslim thinkers for reading the Qur'an in the light of the Greek thought, for the Qur'an is basically anti-classical and sees even in the humble bee a recipient of divine inspiration, whilst Plato despised sense-perception to such an extent that he rejected the real world altogether. The ideal of Islam is 'to appropriate the real with a view eventually to absorbing it, to convert it into itself and to illuminate its whole being.'

But Iqbal, following Ghazzali, does not limit knowledge to strivings of intellect alone; he stresses that inner intuition which the heart achieves and which in the words of Rumi 'finds its food in the rays of the sun.' Here again he is close to the Qur'an, which stresses the value of all modes of knowing. But with knowledge in and for itself Iqbal was not content — he even criticized such knowledge as well as the modern educational system which encourages it.

Thou and thy books are never apart;

Thou readest but thou dost not see.

For him knowledge was useless if it did not further the ideal of 'self' or '*Kbudi*'.

The concept of *Kbudi*, as developed in the major philosophical poem, *Asrar-i-Kbudi* (1915), is basic to Iqbal. It is a concept very close — some might say dangerously close — to Nietzsche's concept of the Superman. But Iqbal, possibly in reaction to the Sufi ideal of passive contemplation, was thinking in terms of the dynamic individual in society long before he studied Nietzsche, and there is one great difference between the two ideals: Iqbal's concept of selfhood was both religious and democratic, while Nietzsche's concept was aristocratic and in a universe where 'God is dead.' Iqbal summed up his idea in these words:

Loyalty to God virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature."

The great poet, scanning the mass of phenomena, finds eventually his own heart. Iqbal, like Dante, and in our own time, Eliot, finds in his own heart love, and finds love at the heart of the universe. For Love

Paints the tulip petals 'hue;

Love robbed thee of thyself and gave thee tears;

Love brought me ever closer to my soul.

This all-pervading love, knowledge, and Iqbal's concept of *Kbudi*, are all inextricably mixed. Knowledge is a progression beginning with sense-perception (*Ilm*), and ending with the knowledge of the heart which is the knowledge of ultimate reality, i.e., Love (*Ishq*). Harmony between these two forms of knowledge, a constant synthesis of 'Ilm and *Ishq*, are the basis of *Kbudi*. The major part of Iqbal's poetry is an attempt at achieving this

harmony, and it is precisely here that his thought is clearest and his poetry greatest:

Bring back the cup and soul-reviving wine,

Let me rise again to my spire of glory.

Though lingered in my flask a drain of freedom's wine,

This too the pious elder dubbed forbidden joy.

No lion-heart now rides, fearless to the truth,

None now remains but slaves of creeds and sects.

Who has dared to uplift the *foulful* sword of love?

The hand of knowledge grasps an empty sheath.

If in the breast a heart illumined beats, then warmth of words will breathe the fire of life,

But if no light there be, then words are forever dead.

But not my night from the moon-gleams' light,

In thy cup is the full bright moon, O Saqi.

Iqbal could hardly be content with *Kbudi* in and for itself. Certainly man's individuality must be developed, for only by the completion of the personality can we hope to achieve that awareness of reality which Iqbal believed to be man's ultimate goal on earth, that awareness of what Eliot has called the 'still point of the turning world.' But man is a social being; we must be ourselves but we must also live together. After the completion of the *Asrar-i-Kbudi*, Iqbal addressed himself to the problem of the individual within the community. This resulted in his second major philosophical poem, *Rumuz-i-Bekbudi* (1918), in which he argues that the only hope for the future

is a return to the past, to seek what is vital and for all time in the teaching of the Qur'an. This is a difficult poem by any standards, but the difficulty is in proportion to the theme itself. What kind of society is best suited to the twofold human problem of individuality within the community? Iqbal argues that by clearing away the dross of the ages, the hard core of Islam as set out in the Qur'an could be discovered again, that the Qur'an which is the only religious book whose teaching was aimed at all society, contained the answer to the problems confronting the twentieth century. As an individual should always be in 'a state of tension', so also a society should be ever striving because the highest development of self meant equality, freedom and solidarity. In this way a State should also try to translate these principles according to space-time forces. The State should aim above all, at the completion of the individual and in achieving this it would also achieve its own highest goal. There is only one means to this end, and that is the right action.

Here we reach that point in Iqbal's thought which has, to a great extent, prevented his genius from being recognized until very recently in the West. For a European a poem has its own end; Iqbal had no time for such a belief — for him art was an attempt to grasp the deepest realities of human existence, and since these could be grasped only through action, and particularly that kind of action which widened our frontiers not only from a purely earthly point of view but also with an eye on the complexity of life behind it, therefore art should not be an end in itself but an attempt to produce useful action — or at least a state of mind conducive to this. This is the crux of the problem. Fifty years ago, for all this great qualities as a poet, Iqbal would have been dismissed as an 'impure' artist, but today in Europe, with the realization growing ever stronger that the artist cannot stand aloof from the great social problems of his time, there is a lot to be learned from Iqbal (as he himself remarked), firstly because he managed to write great poetry while remaining always (or nearly always) close to his people, secondly

that through his poetry he managed to create 'the consciousness of his reality'.

Apart from the above mentioned philosophical works, Iqbal wrote other major works like the *Bal-i-Jibril* in Urdu, regarded by many as his greatest work and the *Javid Namah*, in Persian, a kind of Divine Comedy of the East, in which Iqbal ascends through different stages to heaven, guided by Rumi, as Dante was guided by Virgil. The main theme of the poem is that both the East and the West have been wrong in their attitude to reality:

The East saw God but failed to see the world of matter,

The West got embroiled in the world and neglected God.

But it was not this poem or the two philosophical poems that made Iqbal a popular poet so much as his poems in Urdu, which often put forward the same ideas but with greater simplicity and conciseness. These poems were directed to an audience close at hand, and in them — and especially in the poems of *Bal-i-Jibril* and *Zarb-i-Kalim* there is, it seems to me, an immediacy that is often lacking in the greater works;

Hear my complaint and feel, or do not feel, with me:

He does not come to beg redress whose soul walks free;

Vast skies, and frozen winds, and man's one pinch of dust:

What urged Thee to create ? — kindness or cruelty?

The garden breeze has shattered the rose's petalled tent,

Is this your bounteous spring, your fair wind's ministry.

and a lyricism that the theme of the greater poems could not permit:

The tulip's lantern

In desert bare

Is fanned to brightness

By spring air.

But Iqbal was a many-sided genius, and there are no poetic forms which he did not attempt successfully.

Many visionaries have dreamed of action-to Iqbal alone, so far as I know, was it granted to realize his life's dream. The whole basis of his work was Faith:

Faith in essence is a burning search,

Whose beginning is respect, whose end is love.

The rose is honoured for its grace and charm,

And a man is worthless if he has not these.

Faith in his vision of a meaningful universe:

Each thing in essence is the same, be it light or dust;

The sun's blood will flow if the atom's heart be rent;

Firm faith, a constant striving and world conquering love,

These are men's weapons on the battlefield of life.

Faith in man is continuously pushing him forward.

On rides the moon to its peak of glory,

But there is no halting place for man's endeavour.

Here is not the place for a discussion on politics, though no essay on Iqbal would be complete without at least a reference to Iqbal's crowning achievement — the conception of Pakistan. Great poets contain in themselves the unformulated aspirations of their time and people. Iqbal went a step further and actually formulated the aspirations of the Muslims of the then undivided India, and did so by translating his thoughts logically into action. He saw that Islam was 'a state conceived as a contractual organism . . . animated by an ethical ideal which regards man not as an earth-rooted creature . . . but as a spiritual being understood in terms of human social mechanism.'

To quote from him:

"Patriotism is a perfectly natural virtue and has its place in the moral life of man. Yet what really matters is a man's faith, his culture, his historical tradition. These are the feelings which in my eyes are worth living for and dying for, and not the piece of earth with which the spirit of man happens to be temporarily associated."

Iqbal's conception of Pakistan, far from being the result of narrow nationalism, which some have thought it to be, mainly because they failed to understand Iqbal's motives, was noble, on the part of a great poet and thinker, who all his life advocated action, whose whole life was an attempt to revive the lost purity of Islam, and in doing so to remake his people, whose one aim was, after all, very human:

This, my God! is my desire,

Let all men have my vision.