

# IQBAL'S CONCEPTION OF SATAN

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To represent Iqbal's concept of Satan, one has to comb through his works and select bits and pieces. On these bits and pieces one can build up the skeleton and pad it with interpretation and explanation. I have chosen this subject because for a general understanding of Iqbal's philosophy or poetry, a lot depends on his concept of Satan. It is his Satan — a product of his mind and imagination, carved and chiselled out of the ancient legends of the Fall of Man, and the preconceived ideas of Good and Evil. His concept of Satan reflects to a very large extent on his conception of God and man; Satan being the inevitable cause of this eternal drama of life.

This most fascinating living character appealed to the poetic sensibilities of Iqbal; a character as old as time itself, as defiant as nothing that the Universe has ever known or will ever know; a being given to fierce condemnation, cursed by God and man alike; a being who has within him the absolute notions of evil and without him the absolute notions of good. Hero or villain? That indeed is the question. Is Satan the hero of the eternal drama of life? Villain of course. Villain for ever. All his undeniable splendour and majesty cannot wash away his sin. He will remain the villain of the piece because he revolted against love and not against sheer power. Surely it was a revolt against love because if we believe that Almighty is all powerful, it also follows that he is all love. Without all love, all power is inconceivable.

Milton was carried away completely by

"What though the field be lost?

All is not lost — the unconquerable will."

This defiance which has absolutely no parallel, appealed to Iqbal in an overwhelming fashion. But, he could not make a hero out of Satan. Not in so

many words. He described him in all his glorious dimensions of dignity and heroic endurance. He robed him in the turbulent grandeur of Hell. He clothed him in magnificent images of greatness, sublimity, dauntless courage and determination. But his purpose was at odds with his imagination. His purpose, as declared by Milton himself, was 'to justify the ways of God'. So he pointed out Satan's folly in fighting against Omnipotence — a folly which swallows up even the slightest trace of heroism, because all degrees of power become equally futile against all power. Milton condemned him as 'the infernal serpent', 'the subtle fiend', 'the spirit malign', 'the evil one', 'the Prince of darkness'. But in the picture of omnipotence, Milton's imagination failed, as human imagination must. He painted Heaven as a lecture room. His Omnipotence is anything but impressive when He delivers a thesis on Predestination and Free Will. The Omnipotent, in his scheme, seeks to justify himself and in doing so, he creates doubts in our minds whether Lucifer had some excuse to doubt His Omnipotence and Omniscience. In the background of this, it hardly looks absurd when Satan, cast down to Hell, half-persuades himself that only thunder has made his enemy greater.

Though a great poet, Milton is not a great philosopher by any means. His conception failed him when he needed it most. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton produced great poetry but he confounded the theme, because, as I have already pointed out, his purpose was at odds with his imagination.

Milton's Satan suffers pains, — pains confessed as 'utter misery'. Milton's Satan is also a coward; a defeated angel who cries and groans like a bashed up wrestler. Milton's Satan, after his externment from Heaven, casts his first look at Hell and screams,

"Is this the region, the soil, the clime?

Then said the lost archangel,

'Is this The seat that we must change for Heaven,

'This mournful gloom for that celestial light.' "

Iqbal's Satan has almost forgotten the celestial light. He is intoxicated by his own dissipation. He derives pride from the fact that he has none else but God as his enemy. He most certainly prefers to stay in this world of ours than to go back to Heaven.

In his poem *Gabriel and Satan*, Gabriel puts a direct question to Satan, "whether a reconciliation is possible." To which Satan replies, "It is no longer possible for me to live in your soundless, actionless world."

Says Gabriel, "You have insulted us all in the eyes of God by your refusal." Satan's reply to this is classic. These lines are immortal, and shall live as long as there is life on this planet:

ہے مری جرات سے مشمت خاک میں ذوق نمو

م میرے فتنے جامہ عقل و خرد کا تار و پو

دیکھتا ہے تو فقط ساحل سے رزم خیر و شر

کون طوفان کے طمانچے کہا رہا ہے میں کہ تو

خضر بھی بے دست و پا الیاس بھی بے دست و پا

میرے طوفان یم بہ یم دریا بہ دریا جو بہ جو

گر کبھی خلوت میسر ہو تو پوچھ اللہ سے

قصہ آمد کو رنگیں کر گیا کس کا لہو

سیں کھٹکتا ہوں دل یزدان میں کانٹے کی طرح

تو فقط اللہ ہو اللہ ہو اللہ فقط

But in Man's pinch of dust my daring  
spirit has breathed ambition,  
The warp and woof of mind and reason  
are woven of my sedition.  
The deeps of good and ill you only  
see from lands far verge:  
Which of us, is it you or I, that  
dares the tempests, scourge?  
Your ministers and your prophets are  
pale shades: the storms I teem  
Roll down ocean by ocean, river by  
river, stream by stream!  
Ask this of God, when next you stand  
alone within His sight---  
Whose blood is it has painted Man's

long history so bright?

In the heart of the Almighty like a

pricking thorn I lie;

You only cry for ever God, oh God,

oh God most high!

(Tr. by V. G. Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal* p. 52).

Iqbal's Satan is proud, unrepentant, deprived of the pleasure of defeat; a confidante of the Almighty; the giver of knowledge and wisdom, the knower of the secrets of creation and annihilation. Iqbal's Satan is confirmed in evil and reeking with the proud spirit of seeking vengeance for the indignities and insults that he had to suffer because of the birth of Adam. In Iqbal there is no direct condemnation of Satan as such. In one of his Persian Ghazals addressing God, he says, "Our sin lies in eating the grain, whereas his (Satan's) fault lies in refusing to prostrate before man. You are neither on good, terms with him, nor with us."

Iqbal, in his capacity as a man, is not prepared to accept any responsibility about Satan's refusal to prostrate before Adam, his subsequent rebellion and externment from Heaven. He indirectly questions the origin of Satan's incomparable courage to defy the dictates of the Divine Will. "I cannot understand", he says, "how he dared defy you, because he is your confidante and not mine." This statement in itself contains more than it suggests. It has a much deeper significance.

Iqbal regards God as the ultimate source of existence, and recognises evil as a reality and not a delusive appearance and so faces the big problem, which indeed all such philosophical systems have to face. The problem is how to reconcile evil with an all powerful and all good God. The moment we recognise evil as a reality we have to answer this question, "who created it?"

Agreed, that in the midst of evil, good persists, or in other words evil is a *condition of the good*. Admitted, that these two conflicting forces are fundamentally parts of the same whole. But the question is "who created it?" If God created it, it limits His goodness. If God did not create it, it limits his Omnipotence. Iqbal, himself, calls it a "painful problem." In search of an answer he goes to the Quran, and gives a brilliant interpretation to the legend of the Fall of Man. He disregards the Semitic form of the myth as "the primitive man's desire to explain to himself the infinite misery of his plight in an uncongenial environment." He makes a comparative study of how the Quran and the Book of Genesis handle this legend. Here are the relevant portions from the Old Testament:-

"And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil."

"And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die!"

"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made it a woman, and brought her unto the man."

"Now he (serpent) said unto the woman,

"Yea, hath God said, 'Yea shall not eat of every tree of the Garden'?"

Unto the woman he said,

"I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception;

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children;

And thy desire shall be to thy husband,

And he shall rule over thee."

And unto Adam he said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, 'Thou shalt not eat of it.' "

"Cursed is the ground for thy sake;

In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee;

And thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.

Till thou return unto the ground;

For out of it wast thou taken:

For dust thou art,

And unto dust shalt thou return."

"And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them."

The Quran describes the two episodes as follows:

"O Adam! dwell thou

And thy wife in the garden,

And enjoy (its good things)

As ye wish; but approach not

This tree or ye run

Into harm and transgression".

"But Satan whispered him (Adam): said he, O Adam!

Shall I show thee the tree of Eternity and the

Kingdom that faileth not. And they both ate thereof,

And their nakedness appeared to them, and they began to sew of the leaves of the garden to cover them, and Adam disobeyed his Lord, and went astray.

Afterwards his Lord chose him for Himself, and was turned towards him, and guided him."

According to Iqbal the Quran omits the serpent and the rib story altogether. The reason for the first omission seems to be the desire to drop the "phallic setting" and to free the story from its original gloomy and depressing atmosphere. The second omission follows naturally as the Quran does not try to relate the history of man from the first human pair as does the Old Testament where this incident has been mentioned as a sort of introduction to the history of Israel.

The Quran relates these two legends as two distinctly separate incidents. One of these is related to the incident described simply as "the tree" and the other to the "tree of eternity" and the "kingdom that faileth not". The first is mentioned in the 7th and the second in the 20th *Sura* of the Quran.

The Quranic version has it that after Adam and Eve had been tempted successfully by Satan, whose prime work is to create doubts in the minds of men, this first human couple tasted the fruit of both the trees. According to the Old Testament, however, man was expelled from the Garden



immediately after he had disobeyed and committed the first folly. Angels and a flaming sword were then stationed in the eastern side of paradise to drive away this guilty couple even if they should care to re-enter the garden, thus keeping them away from the tree of life.

The Old Testament lays the blame for Adam's downfall on earth and curses it for this act of disobedience. But the Quran declares the earth to be the dwelling place of man, a bounty for which he should be thankful since it has been furnished with things which are or can be made to be a 'source of profit' to him. "And we have established you on earth and given you therein the supports of life. How little do ye give thanks (7:9)."

Because Adam disobeyed, Man lost paradise. But this first disobedience of Man was also his first exercise of the power to choose between right and wrong. This was his first act of free choice; and that being so he is forgiven his first transgression.

Goodness is not something hide-bound, straightlaced, without a choice of being anything else. It is the voluntary choosing of a line of action or deed by an ego which is free to balance the good and the bad side of any contemplated course of action. If it chooses 'goodness' it is not that it is oblivious of the bad or that it was not tempted to do otherwise. It chooses goodness freely and voluntarily, urged solely by its inherent desire to reach up to the peak of ideal nobility and goodness lodged in its soul. Had man no freedom of choice whatsoever he would be little better than an automaton and his actions would then be neither good nor bad. Freedom of choice alone gives meaning to the conception of goodness.

This, however, brings up another consideration. To permit a finite ego to come to life with the powers and liberty to weigh the pros and cons of every action and to decide then which he would care to accept is taking a very great risk. That God has done so shows the trust He reposes in Man; and it is for him now to justify this trust. Perhaps this great risk alone could

truly put to test the mettle and the potentialities of a creature of the 'goodliest fabric' who has been 'brought down to be the lowest of the low.'

Adam was prohibited to taste the fruit of the tree obviously because his finite make-up, his sense-equipment and his capacity to gather knowledge were of a kind that could permit him to gather in knowledge only through the method of patient toil and observation and experience. That Adam yielded to Satan was not because he was intrinsically wicked but because he was hasty — a defect present to some extent in all human beings. His expulsion from paradise to earth — from bliss absolute to this painful environment — can thus be looked upon not as a kind of punishment unadulterated but as a help to him. The environment and atmosphere of this earth are very painful to him both mentally and physically, but they are much better suited to the development and unfolding of his intellectual faculties. The placing of man on earth may thus be regarded not as a punishment but as a means rather to defeat the object of Satan who, as the eternal and vigilant enemy of man, tried to keep him ignorant of the joy of perpetual growth and expansion. But it is the continuous expansion of knowledge based on actual experience that decides the life of a finite ego placed in an obstructing environment. This continuous expansion of knowledge can come about only through a method of trial and error. Therefore error which can be regarded as an intellectual evil is necessary and indispensable for the growth and maturity of man.

This interpretation of the legend of the Fall of Man finds a good illustration in Iqbal's poem *تسخیر فطرت* ('The Conquest of Nature'), where Satan refuses to prostrate before man.

"I am not gullible as angels are,

Prostrate myself to this mere thing of clay,

This Adam, \_\_\_\_\_ I, fire-born, incarnate fire

Bow thus in lowly homage! No, not I Whatever I  
make, or elect to make, I break to fragments, crumble it to dust,  
And from the ruined old create the new  
Unsatisfied with presence uniform  
From dust of old, I raise, I rear new form, I cast and activise new mould.  
For you, — you did but fashion stars,  
Filled Space with planetary shapes and orbs,  
I gave them revolution, urged them on,  
I am the soul your cosmos draws upon —  
The principle, the secret, I, of every urgent act —  
Of life itself the breath.  
You give to body, life, but I, indeed,  
To life the impulse of its being,  
Tumult of desire; —  
You draw the active to its goals of rest —  
All movement is from me —  
The zest of *thine* created world is *mine*.  
What Adam! Bow to him, earth-moulded thing,  
Devoid of light, close-fisted, narrow, crude,  
Constricted in desire, in vision rude,

Still grovelling in his earth-born impotence!

Besides, remember — cradled in your lap,

He ripened to his present age, in mine."

Satan emerges as the enemy of man. He does compare himself with God, but all the time the tone is one of rebellion against authority, against a very much more powerful and superior being. For man, Satan has no kind words. Iqbal accepts this challenge. He is prepared to fight against it, because he believes that evil is necessary for the expansion of man's moral potential.

مزی اندر جهان کور نوقے

کہ یزداں دارد و شیطان نہ دارد

Very freely translated it means that without Satan life would not be worth living.

Iqbal's Satan is disappointed in man, even more than God is. He is bitter, terribly bitter about man's weaknesses. He takes it as an insult to have an enemy so frail and feeble. Through Satan, Iqbal criticises man's present state and through Satan again he gives a mental image, an idea of what man should be, as in ناله ابلیس 'Satan's Lament'. —

"Of Good and Evil thou progenitor".

With Adam thus consorting dismal long

I am dragged low, despoiled of all my power

Thou mighty Giver — hear my tale of wrong.

What viler than the yielding will?

How noble to command; but nobler still

The courage to disdain command, the strength  
To disobey where mind and soul require —  
But Adam! \_\_\_\_\_

O must I recall the shame,  
Unworthy dwarfing, fit for baser name  
Than spurning mind deems fit to coin,  
Could not respect potential self, nor Self discover,  
Even of his own Good proved imperfect lover  
The victim's eye invoked the tyrant's power,  
It is the prey provokes the hunter's barb!  
From such a prey redeem my ill-spent strength  
For unresistance dissipates the will  
Unequal matched, the tightened fibre preys  
Upon itself;       dost thou forget the hour  
When I *thee* worshipped for *thy* strength and power!  
By nature frail, he lacks the will to strive —  
Create thou me a creature eager, keen,  
Whose piercing eye unravels destiny,  
Responsive, quick, alive, — with will serene

In knowledge of its strength, — superb  
In seasoned thought, awareness of his being,  
Whose strength and vision rival well my own,  
Pitched tense against such power, I could atone  
A past unsoulful, and a life misspent! —  
Redeem me from this creature, crude and weak, unseeing.  
Take but a glance at him, this Adam's son!  
The eye meets poor reward —  
A handful he of miserable straw —  
Thy world contains no better wealth than this ?  
A single spark of mine would to its ash  
Consume the fragile frame, O such abuse of Power !  
Why gayest thou me, then, destructive fire,  
Wouldst quench my passion with a patch of straw?  
And I, eternal principle of fire!  
Wouldst do me this, when sheets of shimmering glass  
Would not invite my strength, — for I was born  
To melt the heart of steel and granite stone.  
To try my strength on straw I'm put to shame;  
The stain of idle conquest!. I would change —

(O past inglorious, past without a name!)

Defeat in strength for feeble victory.

No idle pining worshipper I seek —

I seek for other boon, a compensation

For the bitter wrong of idling my strength,

An age of mockery and taunted power —

Give me, God, tried, and true, thy servant,

Such a one as sends a tremor through this giant frame,

With clasp of steel can coil around my neck

His bulging arm, and twist it clean about,

Afford, with clear commanding voice, to say,

"Lay off me        hence! ."

And with mere presence shrink me to a grain.

Grant thou me, mighty God,

The fruit and harvest of a proud defeat!