

# RELIGION AND POETRY IN IQBAL

SYED ALI AHSAN

In poetry, it is not words that have meaning, but the poet or listener who means something by them. A poet starts his poetic career as a person intellectually fashioned by a particular idiom, acquired through his affiliation to a civilization that prevailed in the places where he had grown up, at a particular period of history. Within it he has to find his theme and seek the terms for its expression. All his later amendments to these original terms will remain embedded in the system of his previous beliefs. The words that a poet has used and is yet to use mean nothing by themselves; it is only the poet who means something by them. As a Hungarian philosopher has said, "I do not focally know what I mean, and though I could explore my meaning up to a point, I believe that my words must mean more than I shall ever know, if they are to mean anything at all". Because poetry has its immediate starting point in a state of excitement, it gives rise to certain thoughts and ideas before it can be expressed in words and therefore these words will not mean anything by themselves — only the poet will mean something by them. To set up strictness of meaning as the ideal is wrong; words for poets must have an open texture.

Iqbal had his affiliation to Islam at a particular period of IndoPakistan history. For him this affiliation was an experience, a realization and not an unconscious acceptance. He as a highly sensitive poet, discovered words for such an experience. When we study Iqbal, we become interested only in what he is saying and thereby uproot language from experience. Iqbal definitely never aimed at this. He wanted his words to reveal his religious and emotional experiences. In his introduction to the *Muraqqai-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 art can lure his fellows to his song or pictures, may prove 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."

This creation in poetry means the poet's response to a stimulus, spiritual and religious experience and his sensations of delight and awe. The words that the poet uses are embedded in his experience. The greatness of Iqbal lies in the fact that he never expresses his religious beliefs. He expresses his realizations — realizations which had their beginning in a state of excitement. Just as a painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions, similarly Iqbal uses metaphors, similies and images to express his deep and intense realizations with equilibrium and clarity. The greatest art is an inseparable blend of reason and emotion springing from excitement in the mind and in the feelings. This highest sphere of all is the sphere of vision, where the mind of genius is in contact with the eternal pattern of things. "In his poetry it is not the awareness of religion that moves us, but a capacity to see into the life of things".

Denis de Rougemont has remarked that man alone among animals can lie. A truthful statement commits the speaker to a belief in what he has asserted: he embarks in it on an open sea of limitless implications, whereas an untruthful statement withholds this belief. In poetry, unless an assertion is accompanied by some persuasive feeling, it is a mere form of words saying

nothing. I am now quoting from a critic of Iqbal who has stated this beautifully: "According to Iqbal, poetry which fails to awaken in man sympathy for neglected truths and to provide guidance towards the light in dark and gloomy days has completely failed in its great mission. To him the true function of a poet is to benefit man for a more courageous grappling with life's problems and to enable him to overcome all obstacles in the way of his onward march". With Iqbal, Islam is the Truth, and he discovers the fullness, the meaning and the exuberance of life in Islam. And here lies the greatness of Iqbal as a poet of deep religious sensibility. In his poetry we do not get the expression of an accepted belief, we actually get a creation in words, an objective equivalence of his emotional experience and religious determination. In *Tulu-i-Islam* and *Khizr-i-Rah*, Iqbal expresses through metaphors and symbols his religious affirmation and realizations. It is because of this emotional blending of religion with poetry that Iqbal's poetry have metaphorical significances. Had it been only a traditional and social acceptance of Islam, Iqbal's poetry would have lost its value. It would have become religious poetry and not poetry of religious experience. This experience is so universal, that whether the reader is a Muslim or not, believes in Islam or not, his poems are a poetic success. There are, in many cases, analysis and argument in Iqbal's poetry, but over and above the analysis and argument there is an affirmation. It is not reason which makes Iqbal a poet, it is not analysis and argument but affirmation and ecstasy of realization which make him a poet and a great poet indeed.

I have translated Iqbal's *Asrar-i-Khudi* in Bengali. While translating it the thing which inspired me was the sublimation of an imaginative flight into the realm of ideas. This flight is presented with arguments. There are also many highly didactic parables and anecdotes in *Asrar*. But these parables and arguments do not disturb our appreciation, rather they add to it. The moments of purest inspiration acquire these arguments and parables as they proceed to express the secret of life. Iqbal's 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 religious and poetic experience at the same time:

"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 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 mooses 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 Iqbal 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 awaken '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-i-Khudi* is great poetry.

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 beliefs. 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.