

# THE FRUSTRATED MAN

*A Rejoinder to a Western Critic of Iqbal*

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A leading professor of an American University recently visited the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent to study the religious thought and its currents and cross-currents in this region. Naturally, he had to devote a good deal of his time on Iqbal. He had a lengthy discussion with the writer of these lines and one of his main objections on Iqbal was that he was not a realist. As an architect of Islamic renaissance he leaned heavily towards the hypothetical. In a nutshell, the society Iqbal visualized was a society of saints and not of fallible human beings made of flesh and bones.

Our American Professor is not alone in expressing this doubt. Most of the Westerners think in these terms. And we shall try to analyse in these pages the ideas of those who proffer this objection.

## **What Iqbal Wanted?**

Before we analyze the objection it would be in the fitness of things to be clear about what Iqbal wanted and what the Muslims believe in. Iqbal is the pioneer of the twentieth century renaissance of Islam. He critically studies the contemporary phase

of Muslim History and came to the conclusion that the Muslims have declined by gradually drifting away from Islam and their revival can come only if they reconstruct that individual and social life in accordance with the principles of Islam. He rejected the line of the blind imitation of the West and hope-fully asserted that Muslims can even beat the West by bringing about an Islamic renaissance which would open a new chapter in the life of the mankind. He was perturbed over the spiritual crises of the West and saw the way out only in the Islamic revival. His recipe was as follows:

“And religion alone can ethically prepare the modern man for the burden of the great responsibility which the advancement of modern science necessarily involves and restore him that attitude of faith which makes him capable of winning a personality here and retaining it hereafter. It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future, his whence and whither, that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition, and a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity of its inner conflict of religious and political values.”

He therefore crusaded for a moral reorientation of the human society and the establishment of right over might and of virtue over vice. It is under Iqbal's impact that the renaissant forces of Islam are endeavouring to reform the individual, the social organisation and the state. They want that instead of greed, scramble for power, social antagonism and economic exploitation, moral values should reign supreme and the individual and

collective life should be organised on the basis of love, truth, human brotherhood, social cohesion and political cooperation. They do not believe that this change can be brought about in the twinkling of an eye; but they do hold that reform will come gradually and assuredly. This is a highly rational and moral approach and its sponsors look towards future with hope, courage and confidence.

Now, those who say that this is utopian and a vain hope, they, in effect, say that man is irrational and an incarnation of vice. They allege that man cannot and will not act according to the true light of reason; that human nature is wicked and that baser passions have so overwhelmed the good sense of man that he cannot organise his life in accord with nobler values. They have lost faith in man, his moral calibre, his creative faculties, his powers of reason and his virtuous nature. It is this frustrated attitude which turns them into arch-pessimists, the prophets of despair. And unfortunately many a Western thinker suffer from this agony of despair.

## **Historical Background**

This attitude has a history of its own. Renaissance in Europe opened up a new age. New confidence in the powers and faculties of man was expressed. Modern man revolted against God and arrogated to himself all the human and divine powers. A new social philosophy was developed, the philosophy of Humanism.

This Humanism had three important ingredients and they are as follows:

- (i) An appreciation of all that is noble and lovely in the works of man and nature;
- (ii) Complete faith in the powers of science and the confidence that education alone can create a new and more perfect order; and
- (iii) Inevitability of progress.

Humanism envisaged that the world and all its inhabitants will get better and better as the generations succeed each other, until at last there will be formed a perfect community built on an international order of justice. The Dialectical Idealism of Hegel, Historical Materialism of Marx, Theories of Evolution of Darwin and Herbert Spencer, all intensified the belief in the continuous progress of mankind; so much so that Herbert Spencer openly declared that:

“Progress is not an accident but a necessity—it is certain that men must become perfect.”

H.G. Wells, the famous historian and liberateur challengingly said that:

“Men are borne along through space and time regardless of them-selves as if to the awakening greatness of man.”

Condorset, in the same spirit, wrote:

“Men will never retrograde, so long, at least, as the earth occupies the same place in the solar system. Progress in the art of medicine will so prolong life that death will be the exception rather than the rule.”

And Wordsworth in an optimistic flare shouted:

“Burn your books on chemistry and read Godwin on necessity.”

This inevitability of progress became an article of faith with the modern man. But the course of history did not follow his bright fancies. He was confident that he was creating a paradise on earth and he had outmaneuvered God; but something else was revealed to his unwary eyes; the failure of his civilization. Wars; wholesale massacres of human beings; unending cycles of economic depression; moaning cries of the hungry and the underfed; social antagonisms; class-struggle; the rising waves of crime and intolerance; all these drove the winds off his utopia of automatic progress. His confidence was shattered; his faith melted away. And a general feeling of disillusionment filled the air. This feeling of disappointment and frustration is today writ large on the horizon.

To support this contention, we would like to present a few glimpses of the modern trends in the Western thought. This will clearly show why our critics say what they say.

## **Modern Trends**

Luis Mumford is a leading historian of our age. He says:

“Today every human being is living through an apoclyce of violence... Now, for the first time in human history there is no spot on earth where the innocent man may find refuge... something else has been revealed to our unwarry eyes. The rottenness of our civilisation itself... If oar civilization should perish, this will come about in part, because it was not good enough to survive.”

Prof. Susan Stabbing says in “Ideals and Illusions” that:

“In no other century have so many human beings— men, women, and children—suffered pain, anguish of heart, bitterness of spirit and unnecessary death.”

Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee warns the modern man and says that: “Looking back on the twenty one civilizations I have studied, I am not sanguine about man's ability to make good moral decision if he aims only at a worldly goal.”

Albert Schewitzer, a leading philosopher of history declares: “We have entered a dark journey in a time of darkness.”

**J.J. Sanders ably sums up the situation:**

“Five centuries have now passed away since the reawakening of cultural life in Italy, which we knew as the Renaissance, ushered in the most brilliant and fruitful period of Western European history. Today the universal mastery in science, in thought, in art and in literature, which our continent seemed to have attained in the nineteenth century, is threatened by assault from without, by disintegration from within. Faith in unlimited and uninterrupted progress is dimmed; the world war has destroyed the hopes of perpetual peace and prosperity; national hates and rivalries are intensified rather than diminished and the gloomy prophecies of ‘the decline of the West’ are something more than the fancies of a few eccentric philosophers.”

### **Philosophers at their Wits End**

This is the general feeling of discontent and frustration which has filled the modern world as waters fill the oceans. Philosophers of progress have become philosophers of despair. Nicolas Berdayve is one of the greatest contemporary philosophers of our age. He says:

“The hands of universal history are pointing to a fatal hour, that of twilight, when it is time to light our lamps and prepare for the night.”

He calls the mechanization and collectivisation of the modern age as “the disintegration of the human image.”

Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher, was more disgusted. He said:

“When I want to it, I spit at my own face.”

Even A.N. Whitehead has declared in his “Adventures of Ideas” that :

“The nineteenth century was an epoch of civilized advance. But at length it wore itself out. ...The values of life are slowly ebbing. There remains the show of civilization without any of its realities.”

The economist is puzzled at the paradox of poverty amidst plenty and the recurring cycles of prosperity and crises. The psychologist is worried at the prospects of the neurotic man and the study of the disturbed psyche has become the central problem of psychology. Theories of Sigmund Freud are the production of this age of frustration and those who have studied Dr. Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* know what baffles the modern psychologist. Modern literature is also portraying the frustrated man and his shattered ambitions.

T.S. Eliot says:



All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance, All our  
ignorance brings us nearer to death,

But nearness to death no nearer to God.

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? The  
cycle of Heaven in twenty centuries

Brings us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

And That :

We are the hollow men We are the stuffed men Leaning  
together

Headpieces filled with straw.

Alas!

Our dried voices, when We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless

As wind in dry grass

Or rats' feet over broken glass

In our dry cellar.

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;  
Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us—if at all--not as lost  
Violent souls, but only As the hollow men  
The stuffed men.

W.H. Audin cries in agony :

“I have come a very long way to prove,

No land, no water, and no love.

Here am I, here are you;

But what does it mean? What are we going to do?”

In literature Aldous Huxley's “Ape and Essence” and “Time Must a Have Stop” are best illustrations of this frustration. James Joyce has also dealt with the frustrated man in a literary fashion and T.F. Powys has played on the same tunes. Earlier, Friedrich Nietzsche and Dostoevski were two great prophets of the Frustrated Man. Dostoevski's “The Possessed” (particularly the character of Kirilov), “An Author's Diary” and “Pages from

Journal of an Author” clearly portray the frustration of the age. Albert Camus, the French literary idol, is one of the best representatives of this new trend. His novel “The Outsider” has now become a classic in the literature of frustration. His central themes are Death and Suicide. The Angry Youngmen of English and continental literature also represent the same trend. Colin Wilson, in his masterly survey of the English, French and German literature (The Outsider), shows that the hero of the modern novel is one who is indifferent towards life, towards values and towards himself. He is a stranger in his own society, an outsider!

This disillusionment had been so widespread and deep that H.G. Wells, who used to paint future in bright colours before the first world war, confessed his frustration by the close of his life. The lamps of his imagination were extinguished and in his “Fate of Homo Sapiens” he writes :

“In spite of all my disposition to brave-looking optimism, I perceive that now the universe is bored with him, (i.e. Man), is turning a hard face to him, and I see him being carried less and less intelligently and more and more rapidly along the stream of fate to degeneration, suffering and death.”

And his final testament to mankind was that pathetic book, “Mind at the end of its tether” wherein he says:

“There is no way out or round or through the impasse. It is the end.”

## Why Passivism?

Now, this is the intellectual atmosphere and cultural context in which our modern critic lives and breathes. He had to sustain such shocks that his confidence in man has been shaken. He fails to see that man can become virtuous and society can be organized on moral values. He has such a bitter ring of memory that the image of a better society baffles him and he cries in astonishment:

“You want to establish a society of saints!”

The fact is that we have faith in man and God. We believe that the catastrophe which engulfed the West is of its own making. The modern man started in folly and ended in frustration. Had he correctly understood his real position in the universe he would not have gambled and lost. This is the crux of the problem.

Iqbal stands for the twentieth century renaissance of man and feels that man is reasonable enough to sort the grain from the chaff and is capable of rearing a new and prosperous civilization. We are prepared to learn from the successes and the failings of others; but, are determined to strain every nerve to bring about the coveted renaissance. Iqbal very beautifully sums up the entire situation when he says:

“Modern Europe has, no doubt, built idealistic system... but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced man, while religion has always elevated

individuals, and transformed whole societies. The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life, and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies, whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich. Believe me Europe today is the greatest hinderance in the way of man's ethical advancement. The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of revelation, which speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalises its own apparent externality.”

If the West fails to understand Iqbal and his revivalist thought on this count, the fault lies in the psychological and cultural make-up of the educated critic and the sooner it is realized the better.

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<sup>i</sup> See Dr. M. Rafiuddin, First Principle of Education, Iqbal Academy, Karachi.

<sup>ii</sup> Iqbal Review, April, 1962