

THE BOOK OF SERVITUDE

Translation of Iqbal's Bandagi Namah

by Hadi Hussain

INTRODUCTION

THE moon, addressing God, said: “Lord, my light

Turns night to day by Your divine command.

But Oh! how fondly I regret the time

When there was neither day nor night and I Still slumbered in

Time’s mind. There was No star within my orbit: to revolve

Was not my nature’s law. My light did not

Make mirror-bright the desert’s sands,

Nor did my beauty stir the oceans’ breast.

Alas! all this was suddenly transformed

By Being’s sorcery and by its love

Of self-display. I for my part learned from

The sun the art of shining and lit up

This derelict and lifeless globe of dust—

A globe, for all its love of light, without
The joy of life; its face all badly marred
By servitude's marks deep-burnt into it:
And its men caught like fish in nets cast by
Their fellow-men. What, men to worship men
And turn away their faces from their God!
O! ever since You bound me to this globe,
It has been my disgraceful duty to revolve
Around it like a humble worshipper.
It is devoid of the light of the soul,
And is not worthy of Your sun and moon.
Dispatch it hurtling into Your blue space
And cut it off from us, Your luminaries.
Spare us the shame of being slaves to it.
Or bring forth a new Adam from its dust.
If neither, it were better that my eye
Was blind, O God! and this globe plunged in gloom.”

Bondage kills the heart in the live body
And makes the very soul a burden on it.
It enervates youth into palsied age.
It blunts the mighty jungle lion's teeth.
It tears the fabric of society
To shreds, making each individual
Go his own selfish way, so that the whole
Community becomes the image of
A congregation praying pell-mell with
No leader to direct its movements: while
Some people prostrate themselves, others stand.
One individual is at odds with
Another, everyone with his own pain
To bear. Even the man of God assumes
The girdle of devotion to false gods.
The true pearl of his soul becomes a sham
And like a tree which sheds its leaves before
The autumn's advent he divests himself

Of everything except the fear of death.
Deprived of all sense of distinction, he
Thinks bee-stings to-be honey and takes good
For evil. Dead, although he never died,
He bears his own corpse on his shoulders;
And having staked away life's honour, he
Is happy like an ass to be fed grass.
Look at his possibilities and his Impossibilities.
Think of the way
His hours and days, his months and years go by
A funeral procession in which everyone
Bewails everyone else, in which all move
More slowly than the sands of time run out.
Think of a heath all thorns with scorpions' stings,
The Book of Servitude
Whose ants bite dragons and tarantulas,
Whose stormy winds are fires of hell at large
(Strong gales which fill the sails of Satan's bark);

Fires tumbling in the air, flame intertwined
With flame; fires wreathed in swirling smoke-puffs; fires
With thunder's rumble and the ocean's roar
(And on their outskirts snakes with ugly hoods
Replete with poison, all coiled up in strife
Like their own flames); fires whose flames pounce
Like biting dogs, which horrify, which burn
The living, but whose light is cold and dead—
A million years in such a dreadful place
Are better than a moment's servitude.

I. THE ARTS OF SLAVES

(1) Music

Death lurks behind the arts of slavery.
Oh! fatal is their sorcery.
The song Of slavery is lacking in life's fire;
But like a flood it storms the walls of life.
A slave's heart is dark like his face; his song

Is as depressing as his spirit is Depressed.

There is no gusto in his heart,

No joyous memories of yesterday,

No hope of a to-morrow: and his lute

Betrays the doleful secret of his soul.

It mourns the death of multitudes and makes

You sad and weak and tired and sick of life.

Perennial tears are collyrium

To a slave's eyes: remain as far away

As you can from his lachrymose laments.

Beware, for they are only songs of death;

Annihilation in the guise of sound.

If you are thirsty, go elsewhere; for there

Is no sweet-water well, no Zamzam, on

This Ka'bah's grounds.

The rhythm of these sad songs

Is the rhythm of the death-throes of mankind.

They take away the burning passion of

The heart and leave behind mere grief and woe.
They are a poison served in Jamshed's cup,
Which, therefore, mirrors death instead of life.
There are two kinds of sorrow (listen well
And let my flame be your path-lighting lamp).
One kind of sorrow, brother, eats up man,
The other kind eats up all other sorrows.
The second kind is our companion,
Our friend; it is the comfort of our soul;
It keeps away all paltry grief's from us.
In its depth slumber all the tumults of
The world: it is a coastless sea which spans
The panorama of Creation as
A whole. When it finds lodgement in a heart,
That heart becomes a deep and boundless sea.
To be a slave is to be ignorant
Of the soul's mystery.
The slave's song is Devoid of the Great Sorrow's overtones,

Though I do not say that its notes are false;

For after all a widow's dirge must have

Its own peculiar wailing style.

Music should be forceful and impetuous

And should rush forward like a flood so that

It sweeps away all sorrow from the heart.

It should be nurtured on pure ecstasy,

A fire that is dissolved in the heart's blood,

A sap that nourishes the fruit of flames,

A storm of sound with silence at its heart.

In music, do you know, there comes a stage

Where speech sprouts forth without words from the heart?

A fiery song is Nature's naked light,

Which no man shaped: its meaning makes its form.

I do not know the origin of meaning;

But its form is apparent and we know it.

If music has no meaning, it is dead:

Its fire is a cold fire, an ember's glow.

The mystery of meaning was unveiled
By Rumi, on whose threshold does my thought
Prostrate itself. He said: "Meaning is that
Which is transcendent, which transports you out
Of yourself and which makes you independent
Of outer form. It is not that which turns
You blind and deaf and makes you fall in love
With mere form all the more." The pity is
That our musicians never saw the beauty
Of meaning and lost themselves in mere form.

(2) Painting

The art of painting is in the same plight.
It bears the stamp of neither Abraham,
The worshipper of the One God, nor that
Of Adhar, fashioner of idol-gods.
A monk caught in the snare of carnal lust;
A beauty with a bird imprisoned in

A cage; a king with folded knees before
A hermit wrapped up in a patchwork cloak;
A man from the hills with a firewood load;
A lovelorn maiden going to a temple;
A yogi sitting in a wilderness;
An old man tortured by the pains of age,
Whose candle is about to flicker out;
A minstrel with an alien instrument,
So deeply lost in its strange melodies
That if a nightingale—an alien bird,
Again—were to break into song, the shock
Would surely make his instrument's strings snap ;
A young man wounded by a glance's shaft ;
A child astride his aged father's neck—
Such are the death-themes that pour forth galore
From the brushes of painters who are slaves.
All modern art and science worship at
The evanescent's shrine: they have robbed hearts

Of faith and given them doubt in return.
One who lacks faith cannot seek after truth;
Nor does he have the power to create.
His heart quakes inside him with fear; so he
Cannot bring forth new forms. He is remote
From his own Self and sick at heart.
His guide, His vade-mecum, is mere vulgar taste.
He goes to Nature with a begging bowl
For beauty's alms—a robber in disguise,
He steals from Nature, itself destitute.
To seek for beauty outside of yourself
Is wrong: what ought to be is not before
Your eyes, all ready-made, for you to see.
A painter who surrenders himself to
The forms of Nature loses the form of his
Self In imitating mere external forms.
He does not smash the crystal images
Of our false gods with granite-strokes

From his creative brush. His canvases
Show Nature captive, lame and helpless in
Its multicoloured garment as if it
Were a straitjacket made to hold it down.
The moths he paints burn at an alien flame
And have no living flame within themselves.
His pictures of to-day reflect no vision of
To-morrow and his eyes can never penetrate
The curtains of the sky ; for in his breast
There beats no fearless, enterprising heart.
Cringing, meek and self-ashamed, he has
No access to the Gabriel in him.
His thought is poor and has no zest for strife.
His trumpet-call has nothing in it of
The trumpet-call of Israfil, because
There is no Resurrection in its wake.
When man regards himself as mere dust, then
The light of God within his spirit dies.

And if a Moses loses hold of his own Self,
His palm no longer shines, his staff becomes
A piece of rope. An artist cannot live
Without performing miracles. But Oh!
This secret is not known to everyone.
An artist, when he adds to Nature, brings
To light the secret of his inner Self.
Although a sea that needs no increment,
He yet receives full tribute from the streams
Of other minds. He makes good life's defects,
And shows it ways of being beautiful.
The houris he creates are lovelier
Than those of Heaven ; the images he shapes
Are more authentic than Lat and Manat:
Denying them is like denying God.
He brings into existence a new world
And gives a new life to the heart of man.
He is a sea which hurls its waves upon

Itself and which casts its pearls at our feet.

Out of the fullness of his soul he fills

All voids. His pure heart is the touchstone

Of the beautiful and the ugly and

His art a mirror which reflects them both.

He is the essence of both Abraham

And Adhar, and both breaks old images

And makes new ones.

He digs up every old Foundation and pounds it up into new

Material for building a new world.

In servitude the body is drained of

The soul: What good can be expected from

A body with no soul? The heart is shorn

Of all joy of creation and all zest.

If you turned Gabriel into a slave,

He would fall down from his celestial heights.

The credo of the slave is imitation

And his job is to make false images.

In his religion novelty is sin.
New things fill him with doubt and misgivings;
With old things he is in his element.
His eye is on the past and future-blind.
Like an attendant at a tomb, he seeks
His living through the dead. If this is art,
Then art is aspiration's death—a corpse
Draped in a pretty shroud. Wise is that bird
Which shuns a net, be it made of silk thread.

II. THE RELIGION OF SLAVES

In servitude religion and love are
Apart: life's honey goes sour and tastes bad.
What is love? It is to hurl unity
At your heart like a thunderbolt and then
To hurl yourself at every obstacle.
In servitude, love is all idle talk,
Talk with which deeds are not in harmony.

The caravan of aspiration has
No ears for the call to the road; no faith,
No knowledge of the way, no guiding chart.
The slave parts cheaply with religion and
With wisdom both: he gives away his soul
To save his body and, although the name
Of God is on his lips, the object of
His worship is the ruler's might—a might
Which is a living, growing lie and which
Gives birth to nothing but more lies. It is
An idol which is God to you so long
As you kneel down and worship it, but which
Falls to the ground if you stand up to it.
The real God provides both life and bread,
While this false god provides bread but takes life.
The real God is one; this god is in A hundred bits.
The one is Providence;
The other is a helpless thing.

The one Heals gaps; the other breeds disunity.
The false god teaches men to be his slaves,
Divesting their eyes, ears and minds of faith.
When he rides on the souls of his bondsmen,
The souls remain within the bodies, but Fall dead.
Alive and yet without a soul!
Let me explain to you this paradox,
The inner meaning of this mystery.
To be alive and to be dead, wise man,
Are modes of being which are relative.
For fish there are no deserts and no hills ;
For birds the ocean's depths do not exist.
The deaf are dead to music's charms ; for sound
Is alien to their world. A blind man may
Enjoy the music of a harp, but not
The sight of colour, to which he is dead.
The soul abides with God and, as for men,
It lives in one but is dead in another.

The one who lives and never dies is God:
To live with Him is to live absolutely.
A godless man is dead of soul, although
No one mourn him. From his eyes are concealed
Things which it is a joy to see: his heart
Is empty of all ardour and all zest.
There is no fire of passion in his deeds,
No light of heavenly wisdom in his speech.
His faith is just as narrow as his world:
His morning is as gloomy as his night.
Life is a heavy burden on his shoulders;
He bears and nurtures death in his own breast.
Love finds his company an agony,
And his cold breath extinguishes all flames.
For worms that spend their lives in their earth-holes
There is no sun, no moon, no circumambient sky.
Expect no waking soul, no vision, from
A slave. His eyes cannot endure the strain

Of looking, and all he exists for is
To eat, to sleep a heavy sleep, and die.
If one bond of his is unfastened by
The ruler, then another one is forged.
The ruler fashions new chains, link on link,
And makes him put them on like coats-of-arms.
With demonstrations of his rage and wrath
He drives the fear of death deep into him,
Until he loses every bit of hope
And all desire. At times the ruler grants
The slave a robe of honour and, perhaps,
An office of responsibility
The chess-player's trick of losing a chessman,
Promoting thus another pawn to queen.
Employing a small gift as a decoy,
He robs the slave of all his future wealth.
The body fattens on the boons of kings;
The soul grows spectre-thin. Far better that

A cityful of bodies perishes
Than that a single soul is thus destroyed.
The slave does not wear fetters on his feet;
He wears them on his soul. Insidious is
The terrible disease of slavery.

III. THE ARCHITECTURE OF FREE MEN

Come, spend a moment in the company
Of the great dead. Come, witness and admire
The art of free men, the creations of
An Aibak or a Suri, if you have
A living heart and eyes that are not blind.
They brought themselves out of themselves and thus
Embodied their great souls before their eyes.
They took Eternity and, stone by stone,
Built it into those monuments of theirs
To moments of creative energy.
The sight of their creations makes your mind

Mature and shows to you another world.
They mirror their originators' souls.
High minds and manly enterprise are both
Embedded in their stones like precious gems.
Do not ask me who worships at these shrines:
The body cannot tell the soul's story. Ah me!
I am screened off from my own Self
And have not tasted of the waters of Life's stream.
I am uprooted from my home,
Cast far away from my real abode.
Stability comes from a stable faith.
Ah me ! my faith is but a sapless plant.
I do not have in me the power of
The faith which says, "There is no God but GOD,"
My worship is not fit for this high shrine.
Look for a moment at that precious gem,
The Taj, agleam in the light of the moon,
Its marble rippling like a flowing stream,

Each ripple a wave of Eternity.

A man's love has expressed itself in it,

Stringing the stones together with the thread

Of his eyelashes as if they were pearls.

The love of free men is a breeze from Heaven

Which draws forth melodies from bricks and stones.

It is a touchstone for the gold of beauty:

It both uncovers beauty and preserves Its sanctity.

Its aspirations soar

Beyond the summit of the skies, beyond

This world of quantity, cause and effect.

Since what it sees can never be described

In words, it throws the veil off its own soul.

Love sublimates all passions and invests

With worth much that is worthless.

Without love Life is a funeral, a joyless thing,

A celebration of decay and death.

Love meliorates man's mental faculties

And burnishes stone into a mirror.
It gives to men with living hearts the light
Of Mount Sinai and to the artist's hand
It gives the miracle-performing power
Of Moses' Shining Palm. All that exists,
All that is possible, yields to its might:
And in this bitter, gloomy world, it is
A gushing fountain of sweetness and light.
The ardour of our thought comes from its fire.
Its work is to create and to breathe life
Into what it creates.
It is enough
For all—for insects, animals and men.
“Love by itself suffices both the worlds.”
Divorced from power, charm is sorcery:
Combined with power, it is prophethood.
Love makes both charm and power work for it:
It pools two worlds into a single one.

[Zabur-i 'A jam]