

DIOTIMA, TAHIRA AND IQBAL

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Iqbal was not only an outstanding poet of the East but an eminent thinker and scholar of great erudition. Like his predecessors, Sadi, Rumi and Ibn Arabi, Iqbal had adopted deliberately the language of the verse for the expression of his thought and the hard facts of life which seldom gives vent to a harsh criticism and many controversial subjects are easily dealt with in a poetic manner. Every student of Islamic mysticism knows it very well that whatever Rumi and Ibn Arabi uttered in the language of the verse, would not have been possible in prose at all. One of the major characteristics of Iqbal's poetry is ' that he frequently refers to such personalities of the past which are not known to his readers generally and the main reason is that Iqbal as a scholar had surveyed some remote corners of the world of learning extending beyond the range of average scholars. His book, 'Jawid Namah' (The Everlasting Epistle), is full of such allusions to, for instance Qurratul-Ain Tahira¹ (Zarrin Taj), Sharafun-Nisa², Jahan -Dost³, Said Halim Pasha⁴, Syed Ali Hamadani⁵ and Bhartari Hari⁶, a great Sanskrit poet, who is referred to by him first time in Urdu poetry. There is no doubt that the names of these people are known to almost all the educated persons but they are not fully acquainted with the background on which basis an importance is attached to them by Iqbal. For instance Iqbal fully understands what he is writing but the readers are generally at a loss to understand what '*tawasin*' (طواسين) means to him and how '*Tawasin-i-Halla*' and '*Tawasin*' (one of the abbreviations of the Holy Quran) are inter-related.

In this short note I cannot naturally accommodate all the personalities mentioned above; therefore I will simply deal with his verses about Qurratul-Ain Tahira of Iran and Diotima of Greece, whose name is not mentioned.

¹ "Jawaid Namah" (Lahore edition 1947), pp. 126-127

² Ibid. pp. 181

³ Ibid. pp. 32

⁴ Ibid. pp. 63

⁵ Ibid. pp. 184

⁶ Bal-i-Jibril's Title Page (Any edition)

This fact should be borne in mind that Iqbal has name used the name of Sharafun-Nisa as a symbol of piety; the name of Diotima as a symbol of wisdom and the name of Tahira as a symbol of evil, abnegation and rebellion due to her antinomianism.

DIOTIMA

Iqbal has not mentioned the name of Diotima but simply referred to her calibre in relation to the euridition of Plato. Diotima, an out-standing teacher of the art of love, was a citizen of Mantinea in Greece. Many people have been of the opinion that Diotima⁷ is not a historical person but a legendary figure while others insist that had it been the case, the place of her dwelling would not have been mentioned because all the deities and imaginary heroes are always Olympians or Cosmopolitan and belong to no place particularly. Iqbal has referred to Diotima in the following verse:

مکالمات فلاطون نہ لکھ سکی لیکن اسی کے شعلے سے ٹوٹا شرار افلاطون!⁸

‘That though a woman could not write dialogues like Plato but still it was her flame that extinguished the sparks of Plato's wisdom’.

What Iqbal implies in this verse is that though a woman has never been occupying a place equal to Plato but it does not mean necessarily that no woman can be wise or witty enough to rule out the conclusion arrived at by an eminent thinker, philosopher or a scholar. In my opinion it is imperative to give a brief account of Diotima's life and thought. Due to the fact that there is very scanty information about Diotima at hand; therefore we shall have to depend upon Plato alone for the dialogue between her and the great Socrates. At this point we should bear in mind that Plato has ascribed everything to his great teacher Socrates whether it was befitting or not. For instance Socrates was a perfect monotheist and he had nothing to do with the Greek deities and the stories woven about them. His crime in fact was that he had diverted the attention of the young generation towards the

⁷ 'The Dialogues of Plato' tr. by Jowett, chap. Symposium (Library Pocket ed. 1955), pp. 205

⁸ "Darb-i-Kalim", (Lahore ed, 1947), pp, 92

realities and the meaning of 'Divine' in its true sense. His disregard for the traditional deities was enough to arouse the feelings of the infidels against him and to take his life which they did at last.

Plato in one of his marvellous dialogues⁹, entitled 'Symposium' has referred to a conversation¹⁰ between Diotima and Socrates, though according to Plato himself, it seems that Diotima was neither a con-temporary of Plato nor of Socrates and the dialogue is actually based on the teachings of Diotima in general and her ideas about the art of love in particular. Iqbal seems to be very careful about it and he simply refers to her without mentioning her name. However, a brief summary of the great dialogue on which his verse was based, is as following:

'Diotima of Mantinea was a very wise woman and a great expert not in the art of love alone but in other subjects also' says Plato. 'She was the woman who in the days of old, when the Athenians were suffering from fear of an epidemic, had delayed the disease for ten years by her spiritual powers!' Then Plato says ;

Plato = In my opinion and in the opinion of others, the deity of love is fair and good.

Diotima =It is absolutely wrong. He is neither fair nor good.

Plato = Is love then evil or foul?

Diotima =Hush! Must that be foul which is not fair? Is there nothing between the two extremes?

Plato Yes, there is, but I still insist that 'Love' is a great god.

Diotima=But how he can be acknowledged as a great god by those who say that he is not a god at all?

Plato = Who are they?

Diotima = You and I, are two of them. Plato = How?

⁹ 'The Dialogues of Plato' (ed. 1955), pp. 205

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 205-218

Diotima = Since it is clear that 'love' is always for something that we do not possess, as the 'love' for 'beauty' indicates that the god of love is not beautiful and when he is not beautiful, he is not good also, because 'Beauty' is 'Good' and thus a deity who is not fair and good cannot be a god at all.

Plato = You are perfectly right Diotima, but you please tell me what is 'love' then?

Diotima 'Love' is not a deity but an instrument of relation between man and god. Those who are saintly, want to embrace the divine beauty, so that they may become immortal but others who are involved in the charm of flesh lose their seed of procreation for a temporal pleasure.

Plato = Do you mean Diotima that we should not love beautiful bodies of our opposite sex?

Diotima = No! I do not mean so. What I mean to say is that we should procreate in good for the sake of good and not for the sake of physical pleasure alone. You know that the physical beauty is the image of the real beauty; therefore you should shift from this 'unreal love' to the 'real love' which is the destination of our soul.

Plato = I do not understand fully what you mean by procreation.

Diotima = I will make my meaning clear. I mean to say that all men are desirous for procreation in their bodies and souls. At a certain age all the human beings need procreation, which must be in beauty and not in deformity; and this procreation is the union of man and woman and it is of course divine thing; for conception and generation are an immortal principle in the mortal creature. Since beauty represents 'good' and deformity

represents 'evil', one should try to pro-create in the good and not evil. We are anxious to pro create because we want to be immortal through gene-ration after generation. Don't you see how all the animals, birds, as well as beasts in their desire of procreation, are in agony when they take the infection of love, which begins with the desire of union; where to is added the care of offspring, on whose behalf the weakest are ready to battle against the strongest even to the uttermost and to die for them, and let themselves be tormented with hunger or suffer anything in order to maintain their young. Man is more conscious about it because he is always prepared to sacrifice everything for his children and for his fame or prestige, which to his belief are the real sources of immortality. But those who are pregnant in the body, only betake themselves to women and beget children. This is the character of their love, their offspring, and they hope that they will preserve their memory in future, while the souls which are pregnant in themselves, create the same outwardly and more and more they proceed from unreal to the real. To them the concept of beauty is not physical or relative but absolute. These stages serve them as the stepping-stones from earth to heaven. This world of absolute Wisdom and beauty is above all other beauties in this universe. Consequently the love of the 'Real' is the real immortality.

So this is the summary of the discussion between Socrates and Diotima, according to Plato. Before we scrutinize this statement and separate the facts from fallacies, it is essential to note down some more remarks passed by Plato about Diotima. On one occasion he says that Diotima was a stranger to Athens from Mantinea. She talked like a great Sophist and she taught him time to time but at the same time he regards her a venerated lady of the old days. What we gather from the statement already noted above, is as following:

1. That Diotima was not an Athenian like Socrates and Plato but she had come there from Mantinea, to stay there for a while. It is not certain 'when she came to Athens and how long she stayed there'.
2. That she was a saintly woman of mature age certainly, who had protected Athens for ten years against an epidemic plague, *in the old days*.
3. That she taught Plato time to time and not in one sitting. What he learnt from her apart from the art of love is not known. From the word 'time to time' it seems that Plato had been studying her teachings time to time, because she was not his contemporary.
4. That she talked with certainty but like a Sophist. When she returned to Mantinea or when she died is not known.¹¹

The aggregate that leads us to some conclusion is that though the biographical data about Diotima is not complete but it is evident that she was not a legendary figure but a real person. Moreover she was not a polytheist like Socrates who believed in one God. Most probably she was not a contemporary of even Socrates because no writer of that age including Aristotle and Xenophon has referred to her presence. Iqbal rightly ascribes the dialogue to Plato because Socrates was never defeated by any human being and had never been a disciple of any academic person. He was a God-gifted person like the prophets.

TAHIRA

Qurratul-'Ain Tahira whose real name was Zarrin Taj was the beautiful and learned 1 daughter of Haji Mullah Muhammed Sualeh of Qazwin (Iran). In her youth when she was married, she came into contact of Haji Syed Kazim, by chance, who was a leader of Sheikhi Sect, founded by Sheikh Ahmad. The followers of this sect were antinomians in the opinion of Shi'ah

¹¹ Les religions et les philosophies dans L 'Asie Centrale' by Count — Gobineau, pp. 168

Sect to which Tahira belonged by birth. In the meantime Mullah Hussain, a disciple of Syed Kazim, showed her a letter from Bab¹², the founder of the newly formed Babi group, who seemed to be interested in Tahira. Soon she became his follower and he very kindly called her 'Janab-i-Tahira' (Her Excellency the pure) and, Qurratul-,Ain' (Lustre of the eye) was the title that she received from Bahauallah, the successor of Bab. Bahauallah not only claimed to be a prophet but the Incarnation of God also. He abrogated the Holy Quran and Islamic Shari'ah after introducing his own book '*al-Aqdas*' (The Holy Scripture) wherein he has sanctioned sex liberty to a great extent. For a long time this book was not available but now its English translation is published from London. The copy is very authentic because it is signed by the son of Bahauallah. Tahira was an excellent Arabic scholar and a poetess. She was very pretty, possessed of high intellectual gifts, eloquent, devoted and fearless. She was so dauntless that she made an attempt¹³ to take the life of the King of Iran who was opposed to the Babi and then Bahai movement¹⁴. Consequently she was imprisoned and then killed. Iqbal seems to be one of the admirers of her poetry and talent when he re-produces her poem under the caption of '*Nawa-i-Tahira*' in his '*Jawid Namah*' (pp. 137) but at the same time he refers to her in a most derogatory manner when she appears as prophetess on the Sphere of Mars, in the same book. What he says about her is following:

'We passed by thousands of streets and mansions. On the edge of the city was a broad square and in that square a swarm of men and women was hearing a woman of the radiant face but without the light of the soul. Whose words had no meanings. She lacked the fire of desire and tears. Her breast was void of the ardour of youth. She knew nothing of love and the doctrine of love. Rumi discloses further 'This damsel is not of the Martians but Farzmarz (Satan) has kidnapped her from Europe and has made her perfect in the craft of prophethood and then smuggled to this planet and now what she proclaims is--'I have come down from heaven. My message is final.' She speaks of the secrets of the

¹² 'The Epistle of Bab' pp. 285-291

¹³ 'Tarikh-i-Jadid, pp. 284

¹⁴ 'Bahauallah and Modern Times', Urdu tr, by A.A. Butt (Karachi ed. 1955), pp.277

male and female bodies more frankly. She induces women to become free and not to live as darling of men-folk because in her opinion 'to be a darling' is to be a victim, to be dominated and to be deprived of freedom of action and thought. To be the consort of a man is a torment of life for a woman. His union is like poison and separation from him is sweet. Man is a twisting serpent; therefore flee from his coils. Do not pour his poison into your blood by becoming the mother of his child¹⁵.

She proclaims further 'The divine revelation comes to me continuously. It is revealed on me that the time has come now when it is possible to see the foetus within the woman and now you can have male and female child of your choice. After this age another age will come when all the secrets of nature will be revealed. The foetus will be nourished outside the womb of a woman also but such creatures will not survive. The secrets of life will emerge themselves. The melody without string will be possible. Woman's unitarianism is to escape from the union of two bodies (i.e. the male and female). Be on your guard and tangle not with men¹⁶

In the light of the passages noted above it becomes clear that Iqbal by no means insults Tahira but rather he takes shelter in her name to prophesy about the time to come after him. Now we find that all the movements of women's emancipation throughout the world have similar slogans to shout against menfolk. They demand equality of sex also. The most remarkable thing is that Iqbal has predicted almost all the trends of sexology in modern times, the permissive society and even the test-tube babies which is a recent experiment and which was not practicable in Iqbal's lifetime. This power of prediction is also one of the main characteristics of Iqbal's poetry.

References:

¹⁵ 'Jawid Namah' (Lahore ed. 1947), pp. 126

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 127