

# IQBAL'S TULIP OF SINAI:

Prof. A.J. Arberry's Translation

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Prof. Nicholson of Cambridge University set the pace of translating Iqbal's poetical works in the West by first turning into English medium his *Asrar-i-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self) in 1922. He found the poem "so powerful and original" that he sought Iqbal's permission to dress it into an English garb.

Twenty-five years later Prof. A. J. Arberry, then Professor of Persian in the University of London, undertook the translation of the Persian quatrains from the first part of Iqbal's *Payam-i-Mashriq* (Message of the East), written in reply to Goethe's *West Oestlicher Divan*. Prof. Arberry published his translation under the title *Tulip of Sinai*.

In making the translation Prof. Arberry says: "I have sought to be as faithful to the letter of original as possible and have imitated the stanzas used by Iqbal...Iqbal is not an easy writer to understand, as Prof. Nicholson himself confessed and the form of the quatrain he uses in the *Tulip of Sinai* further augments the difficulty of grasping his full meaning. But think I have made out his intention and have endeavoured to compress it into the version."<sup>8</sup>

Persian is a language of symbols and in poetry these symbols are profusely used to denote a certain meaning. In a literal translation of symbolic words the reader will catch only the peel but the kernel inside will escape his understanding. Thus in a literal translation the whole range of meaning will fall flat upon the ears of the English readers and will be a source of puzzlement to them.

It is true that Iqbal is a difficult writer to understand. The difficulty lies in the fact that he uses the traditional symbolic expressions, imparting a new meaning to them. I quote an Urdu verse of his to explain this point:

ٹپک اے شمع! آنسو بن کے پروانے کی آنکھوں سے

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<sup>8</sup> Prof. A. J. Arberry: *Tulip of Sinai*, Introduction.

سراپا درد ہوں، حسرت بھری ہے داستاں میری<sup>9</sup>

O Candle! fall in tears drop by drop from the eyes of the moth, For I am ever so full of pain and my story is so full of anguish and deep yearning.

Now the moth and the candle are one of the important and familiar traditional symbolic themes of Persian poetry. In it the moth is so fond of the light of the candle that it burns itself in its fire. This theme is also well expressed in the famous poem, *Sehensucht* of Goethe included in his *West Oestlicher Divan*.

Now Iqbal in invoking the candle has put the stress not on the moth traditionally put on it, but on the candle which is made to melt into tears and flow from the eyes of the moth due to the pain and strong yearning of the poet. This transferred epithet gives a new meaning to the verse and deepens its effects. This may cause difficulty even in the minds of those most well versed in the symbols of Persian poetry.

Now I give below a few quatrains of Iqbal in original along with Prof. Arberry's translation and shall try to show how a literal translation has deviated from the meaning of the verse and may cause confusion in the mind of English readers. Such readers may even find Iqbal an extravagant poet.

دارین گلشن پریشان مثل بویم      نمی دانم چه می خواهم چه جویم

بر آید آرزو یابریا نیاید      شہید سوز و ساز آرزوم<sup>10</sup>

A spent scent in the garden I suspire,  
I know not what I seek, what I require,  
But be my passion satisfied, or no,  
Yet here I burn, a martyr to Desire.

<sup>9</sup> *Bang-i-Dara*, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> *Peyam-i-Mashriq*, p. 14.

The word *parishan* (پریشان) has been translated as spent and the idea behind the word, "spent" is "consumed or exhausted," while the proper idea of *parishan* (پریشان) here is scatteredness like the spread of the fragrance in the garden.

دلا نـارائی پروانہ تاکہ نگیـرہ شـیوہ مردانہ تاکہ

یکے خود را بسوزِ خوِستن سوزِ طوافِ آتـش بیگانہ تاکہ<sup>11</sup>

How long this fluttering of the moth, my heart?

When wilt thou take at last the manly part?

Why honest thou about another's flame?

Go, burn thyself within the Fire thou art!

The word *narai* (نارائی) has been translated as "this fluttering" but it does not indicate the character of fluttering. The word *narai* (نارائی) shows, however, the immaturity and lack of sobriety of the moth because it burns itself in the fire of others.' It would have been proper for it to burn itself in its own fire.

I have before me the German translation of the same quatrain by Prof. Annemarie Schimmel which reads as follows:

Herz, schwach gleich Schmottrlingen-wirlangenoch?

Willst Mannheit nicht essingen-wie langench?

Its literal translation reads as follows:

O, heart, frail like a moth—how long such a course?

Will you not attain manhood — how long such a course ?

<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.* p. 17

In German the adjective "frail" gives only a partial idea of narai (نارائی) which the English version totally fails to convey. As I have said before, the proper sense would be immaturity or a senseless act.

تنہ پیداکن از مشت غبارے      تنے محکم تر از سنگین حصارے

درون او دل درد آشنائے      چوئے جوئے در کنار کوهسارے<sup>12</sup>

A hand of dust a Body fortified

Firmer than rocky rampart shall abide,

Yet beats therein a sorrow-conscious Heart,

A river flowing by a mountain side.

The phrase *dil-i-dard ashnai* (دل درد آشنائے) has been translated as "sorrow-conscious" which does not convey the complete idea of the phrase. Properly it is a tendency to share another person's emotion or mental participation in another's trouble — i.e, a sort of sympathy with another person's misfortune. This is what Heine has called "Heiligkeit der Schmerzen" (holiness or sanctity of pain).

شنیدم در عدم پروانه می گفت  
دسے از دنگی تاب و تبیم بخش<sup>13</sup>

Thus in annihilation, spoke the moth;

Give me a while the glow and fever of life.

<sup>12</sup> *Payam-i-Mashriq*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

The word 'adam (عدم) has been translated as "annihilation". When a living being is annihilated, it is no more able to do or to speak anything. But the word "adam" (عدم) has a whole philosophy behind it. It means the world beyond where the soul lives, although the body is annihilated. The proper meaning of the word "'adam" (عدم) would be the world beyond.

In quatrain 22 the word *adharniyaran* (آذرنیاران) has been translated as the "sons of Fire". In Arab tradition Adhar was the father of the Prophet Abraham and he was an idol maker. Thus *adharniyaran* (آذرنیاران) would mean those who possess a tendency to shape idols and not the sons of fire.

بگو جبریل را از من پیامے      مرا آن پیکر نوری نداند

ولے تاب و تب ما خاکیاں بین      بنوری ذوق مہجوری ندادند<sup>14</sup>

Speak this my message unto Gabriel:

My body was not made with light aglow:

Yet see the fervour of us sons of earth,

This joy-in-grief no child of light can know.

Here *paikar-i-nuri* (پیکر نوری) has been translated as a body made with light aglow. In fact it means here the angels who are supposed to be made of light. In the last line the "child of light" becomes ambiguous and it gives no clear indication as to whom it refers. *Zauq-i-mahjuri* (ذوق مہجوری) has been translated as a joy-in-grief. It gives a sort of sadist meaning while the real connotation is the joy in separation. Iqbal's entire theory of mysticism deals not with the final merging of the human soul into God but in its remaining separate. And in this separation there is a desire and yearning to be near God

<sup>14</sup> *Payam-i-Mashriq*, p. 34.

but not to merge into Him. The phrase "joy-in-grief," becomes a contradiction in terms and perplexes understanding. Here lies the difficulty in literal translation.

میارا بزم بر ساحل که آن جا نوائے زندگانی نرم خیز است

بدریا غلط و باموجش در آویز حیات جاوداں اندر ستیز است<sup>15</sup>

Take not thy banquet on the shore; for there

Too gently flows the melody of life;

Plunge in the sea, do battle with the waves,

For immortality is war in strife

The word *bazm* (بزم) has been translated as banquet which is generally associated with dinner. But *bazm* (بزم) may or may not mean a dinner. It is a meeting of people for merry-making and enjoyment. If we take the meaning of dinner, then it would be improper to ask the people just to jump into the sea after having a good dinner. However, the poet gives a contrast between merry-making and doing battle with the waves and considers the latter act as proper for life for lies immortality in it.

In quatrain 141 *rah-i-kehwabida* (راه خوابیده) has been translated as "the way sleeps long," while the proper sense is the lonely way.

تو می گوئی که من هستم، خدانیست جهان آب و گل را انتها نیست

هنوز این راز بر من ناکشود است که چشم آنچه بیندهست یا نیست<sup>16</sup>

"I am, and God is not": thou sayest,

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<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> *Payam-i-Mashriq*, p. 89.

"Water and clay into the boundless god";

Yet I have not resolved this mystery

Whether it is mine eye that sees or no.

Here the last line is rather completely inverted. Its literal translation would be as to whether what my eye sees exists or not. The emphasis is on the transitoriness of the objects seen but the seer is always there. Prof. Arberry's translation changes the object into subject and is made to question the observer's vision; i.e, whether it is the observer's eye that sees the object or somebody else's. This world is in flux and every moment some change is taking place. The old Greek idea that you cannot step twice in the same stream has been the subject matter of philosophy both in the East and West for long. And Iqbal mentions this flux in a poetic way.

به برگ لاله رنگ آمیزی عشق      بجان ما بلا انگیزی عشق

اگر ایس خاکدان را وا شگافی      درونش بنگری خونریزی عشق<sup>17</sup>

The love that paints the tulip petal's hue,

"This Love that stirs the spirit's bitter hue;

If thou couldst clear this carrier of clay,

Thou shelt behold, within, Love's bloodshed too.

The word *khakdan* (خاکدان) has been translated as "carrier of clay". Perhaps the translator means by it the human form itself when it is dead and becomes a carrier.

But *khakdan* (خاکدان) is not a "carrier". It means the "form or house of dust", pointing to this universe.

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<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 13

Describing the function of Love, the poet first mentions its effect on the tulip leaf, then he goes to speak of its influence "on our own soul". And then he goes a step further and includes the entire world of matter which bears inside itself the tumult of love.

Yet these are many beautiful quatrains beautifully done in English. There is no doubt that it had been rather a difficult job for Professor Arberry to translate into English metre Persian verses with all their implications and symbolic pitfalls. And again to compress them within the metrical length was even more difficult. The attempt was praiseworthy but at places it has been done at the expense of meaning, perhaps due to metrical necessity.