

# HAS IQBAL'S THOUGHT BEEN DISTORTED?

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In a letter published in The Pakistan Times sometime ago, I had stated: "An impression is being created that Iqbal was an advocate of the type of Sufism which is prevalent amongst the ignorant Muslim masses. Iqbal was a rationalist and an evolutionist, and never uttered anything against the Qur'ān." In a letter written to Maharaja Kishan Parshad on the 14th of April 1916, he says: "I have not written the *Mathnawī* on my own, but I was instructed to write it, and I am surprised why I was selected to express my views on this subject... . I knew I would be opposed, because we are the product of decadence. ... ' [translation mine]. This seed which Iqbal has sown in the dead land will grow, and in spite of opposition it will bear fruit. I have been promised that it will live.<sup>69</sup>

Then, in the Preface to the second edition to the *mathnawī Asrār-i Khudī*, he says: "In this edition those verses have been dropped which dealt with Khwājah Ḥāfīz, although they merely meant to criticise a certain literary attitude of the people and not the personality of Khwājah Hafiz."

In view of the above quotations, I would like to say that all that Iqbal's had said in his poetry, and what was expunged later, reappeared in his English writings, and still persists there to this day! This goes to show that Iqbal did not change his ideas about Sufism, and it was only under pressure that his rationalistic ideas about Sufism were forced to be dropped. This habit is still continuing, and many of his verses have been dropped. Even today efforts are being made to expunge his verses about Mawlānā Husain Aḥmad Madanī, not to mention about other problems, like the Return of Christ. I wonder if Iqbal's thought has been distorted. Why should Iqbal have expunged his verses about Ḥāfīz, if he was confident that he had been inspired? Iqbal believes in the Qur'ānic *Taṣannuḥ* and not in the present-day ritualistic Sufism.

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<sup>69</sup> *Adabi Dunyā*, "Iqbal Number," V1/30, 12.

As no reply was received to this query, I have resolved to dilate upon this question a little more and elaborate on the trend of thought that perpetrates to interpret the real teachings of Iqbal. I feel, we have fallen apart from what Iqbal meant to convey and have engaged ourselves in poetical and philosophical intricacies in which Iqbal never intended to enshroud himself. Of course, his medium of expression and communication is mostly poetry, and his line of thought philosophical, but he never meant to impress us by these two factors. Iqbal is the Poet of Islam, and we must not lose sight of this important fact. Iqbal is the interpreter of the Holy Qur'ān, and in his writings he has done nothing but to awaken in us a consciousness of religious duty regarding the wholesale recognition of the Almighty Creator. His preaching is the Unity of Being, the unity of thought and the unity of existence. Iqbal has in various ways interpreted the verses of the Qur'ān and he hoped the nation will ponder over his newer interpretations. He was fully conscious of the fact that all translations and interpretations of the Holy Qur'ān had become out of date, and newer meanings according to the dictionaries had to be given to make it more understandable according to the advancement made by modern research. With this in view he took a panoramic view of the Scriptures and brought out the salient features which had resulted in our decadence. The references of Iqbal in his poetry and prose are not meant to over-awe us with previous philosophies and thinking; but he brings them along to point out the gaps and loopholes they have created in our thinking which has led us far away from the Holy Qur'ān. In his *Lectures (Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam)* he refers to almost two hundred persons of all branches of Science, Philosophy and Religion, but nowhere does he once recommend to us to follow any one of them. After giving their views he gives his own opinion and then refers to the Qur'ān as to what it says. In each problem, there-fore, he takes us back to the Qur'ān, meaning to prove to us that this is the only right path we should follow: a path we had forsaken since the last three hundred years. No matter what subject he is discussing, whether it be the existence of God, the meaning of Prayer, or .Ijtihād, or the philosophy of Movement and Time, for each subject he reverts to the Qur'ān and gives a modern interpretation of the verses as he understands them. This is discernible throughout his poetry and prose. In his selection of the translation of the verses of the Qur'ān, we find that he uses words which are most appropriate in our day, and which have been overlooked in the past. He was fully conscious of the fact that the

original rendering of the Qur'ān into Persian by Shāh Walī Allāh was according to the Arabic dictionary and suited to the times, but since then the world had advanced a very great deal putting new meanings into those words still remaining within the Arabic dictionary meanings. This needed readjustment to avoid con-fusion to the modern reader. The Uidu translations had failed to do so. They Had merely translated the Persian text without pondering what meanings fitted into the verses.

Iqbal's attitude towards Science is very compromising. It is because he knows that all knowledge, according to the Qur'ān, is external to man, in contradistinction to the Sufistic attitude which is mostly diverted inwards. Iqbal's whole teaching is directed towards arousing the Muslims towards a self-consciousness based on Revelation. With this in view he develops his idea of personality, in the form of *Khudi* which is the essence of a human being. To give it perfection he links it with the Unity of Being and comes to the conclusion that there is nothing outside *Tawhid* and elaborates traits which are expressions of this unique belief. Iqbal's whole thought revolves round *Tawhīd*, be it politics or religion.

In interpreting Iqbal today, this vital point is lost sight of, and we start mixing up Iqbal with Existentialistic thinkers making a wide curve from his true teachings. We bring in all kinds of philosophies to aid us in this errand. Iqbal keeps philosophy at an arm's length, like Ghazālī, and merely refers to them where they have gone astray. Iqbal's philosophy is the philosophy of action. Obviously, it cannot be pure philosophy: for, philosophy, instead of activating, is pacifying and par alysing ! The Holy Qur'ān does not discuss philosophy. This is a strange paradox. The Qur'ān mentions Biology, Genetics, Astronomy, Botany, Zoology, Minerology, Cosmology, Cosmogony, even Anatomy and Physiology, Embryology and Biochemistry, but never even a word about Philosophy ! Of course, it asks man to ponder, think and rationalise the creation outside and inside him, but nowhere asks man to philosophise! Once when a question was asked about the Soul, back came the reply: "It is Our business, and you have been given meagre knowledge of it." This was a shut-up reply, and man was prevented from putting any further questions on the subject. But strange as it would seem, man leapt out in search of the Soul and has written hundreds of thousands of pages without reaching any conclusion. And, then, he mixed up the *Nafs* with the soul (Hebrew, *Nafesh*) which meanings were against the Qur'ānic teachings. This led to the evolution of a whole system of Mysticism which

paralysed the community. It was against this misinterpretation that Iqbal had raised his voice. *Nafs* does not mean something sublime and immaterial inside the body of man. It means the conscious material self. This word appears almost two hundred times in different forms in the Qur'ān, and in only five places it means Heart; in the rest it means the Conscious Self. This shows that the entire thinking of the early and medieval Muslims was un-Qur'ānic. They had obviously been influenced by extraneous thought into which I have no intention of entering at this stage. It was this diversion towards which the nation had been driven when Iqbal proposed his theory of the Self, and expressed it in the *Secrets of the Self*. This Self is the Conscious Self or *Nafs* or Iqbal's *Khudī* which he desires to polish, illuminate and elevate. Unfortunately, so much pressure was brought upon him that he had to withdraw certain verses in the second edition of *Asrār-i Khudī*. But, strange as it may seem, Iqbal never forsook his ideas, and he was fully convinced that his ideas would bear fruit (see *supra*). But, unfortunately, the pressure of the clergy was so great that Iqbal had to bow down to their demand. However, Iqbal had repeated these ideas in his *Lectures*, and his article "Islam and Ahmadism". But, most unfortunately again, our intellectuals who deal with modern philosophy and study and write about Iqbal seem to have missed this idea of the Unity of Being in Iqbal's thought, as they have completely overlooked it. They are writing on all kinds of things pertaining to Iqbal, but forget that Iqbal is reinterpreting and unfolding the Qur'ān to give the nation a sounder footing for further progress. Iqbal repeatedly says that this Book, the Qur'ān, is from a different Heaven: it is not a book, it is something entirely different — and if you wish to exist as a Muslim, you cannot live without the Qur'ān. Yet the interpreters of Iqbal are presenting him as a philosopher. To think is not to philosophise. To think is to rationalise! Iqbal's thought is primarily concentrated on the Qur'ān, and every time he tries to resolve the current problems in the light of Qur'ān's rationalistic thought and bring about a unity in creative thinking and unfold the unadulterated Unity of Being. It is for this reason that Pantheistic philosophy does not appeal to him. He has regard for Ibn 'Arabī as a philosopher, but not as a thinker; for, he often goes astray from the true teachings of the Qur'an. Iqbal is a rationalist and an evolutionist in his thought. He tries to bring about a sequence in the process of creation and synchronises the happenings in the universe. Iqbal has dealt with almost all the significant problems of philosophy, but he reinterpreted them in the light of the Qur'ān.

Iqbal is, therefore, a modern interpreter of the Qur'ān, and has brought the Qur'ānic knowledge up to date. There are some people who are trying to find contradictions in his statements. Some are even labouring to show that the Qur'ānic translations adopted by him are incorrect. This is all incorrect. There is a definite evolution in the thought of Iqbal, and all his thinking is beautifully linked. Those who find fault in his translations are themselves ignorant and unaware of the potentialities of the Qur'ānic words. Iqbal's translations of the verses of the Qur'an are factual and based on experience and modern research. They are not fanciful. Iqbal has drunk deep into modern philosophy and physics. But he is not content with their achievements, for he finds the various problems described differently in the Qur'ān. In the days when Ghazālī wrote his *Tabā fut a1-Falāsifah* he also criticised the philosophers, and with their own weapons. He did not bring in the Qur'ānic verses to contradict them. Their newer meanings had also not been unfolded upon him. But his main aim was to defeat the arguments of the philosophers with their own logic. In the time of Iqbal, knowledge had advanced to a much greater extent and the *Mutashābihāt* verses of the Qur'ān were becoming unfolded and con-firmed (*Muḥkamāt*) by a continuous process of research. Iqbal had full appreciation of this confirmation. Such verses as had become fully established for Iqbal still remained unestablished (*Mutashābihāt*) for the clergy, who had studied in the ancient lore and were unaware of modern knowledge. To them Iqbal seems unintelligible and un-comprehended. The so-called modern intellectuals in the Islamic world have indeed somewhat studied the modern sciences, but they are unaware of the Qur'ānic teachings! Iqbal was conversant with them both, and that is where he differs from them all. Iqbal, therefore, is unique in his thought and interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān.

Iqbal had a natural gift for poetry, and during the time he started to express his ideas, he naturally took to poetry ; for it was also the period of poetry with the Indian Muslims. Abu'l-Kalām Azad and Mawlānā Shiblī had just started to write prose, and also Muhammad Husain Azād. Ghālib, Dhauq and Ḥālī were hovering over the heads of the Muslims of India. Iqbal also tried his hand in writing prose. His excellent article in English on al-Jill's *Insān al-Kāmil* proved too high-flown for the Muslims to comprehend. He, therefore, resorted to writing poetry in Urdu, to express his ideas. But rather too soon he realised that Urdu was not the language for the expression of his ideas. It was too immature and incomplete. He, therefore, took to writing in

Persian, for it would also communicate his ideas to Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. He found Persian more fertile and the lands where Persian was spoken also more fertile. His thought would bear fruit sooner. By the time he had spread his message in poetry, he had gone through almost all the relevant literature and advances in scientific thinking in the Western world. He now wanted to convey the result of his researches to his people, but very soon realised that both the Persian and the Urdu languages were insufficient for the expression of his modern ideas, and he probably had the clergy also in mind who would perhaps again make an effort to rise up against him. He, there-fore, decided to write his masterpiece, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, in the English language. Iqbal has a great mastery over the English language too. Very few people indeed amongst his admirers have realised this fact. I say this, because the subject "Iqbal as a Prose-writer" has been completely neglected. One of Iqbal's English passages I cannot forget, and I have often quoted this as a masterpiece of English literature. I cannot refrain from quoting it here, He writes:

"The life history of nations shows that when the tide of life in a people begins to ebb, decadence itself becomes a source of inspiration, inspiring their poets, philosophers, Saints, Statesmen, and turning them into a class of apostles whose sole ministry is to glorify, by the force of a seductive art of logic, all that is ignoble and ugly in the life of their people. These apostles unconsciously clothe despair in the glittering garments of hope, undermine the traditional values of conduct and thus destroy the spiritual virility of those who happen to be their victims."<sup>70</sup>

Does this not remind one of Sa'dī's prose in his *Majlis-i Panchgānah* or the Urdu prose of Abu'l-Kalām Āzād in his *Tadhkirah*? It is certainly an excellent example of writing poetry in prose ! Iqbal's thought flows unobstructed even in prose where he has been able to express his ideas even more fully. He has thus repeated many of his thoughts in his English prose which were dropped out of his Persian and Urdu poetry! ! Iqbal's thoughts could not have been suppressed by the pressure of clergy The clergy did not understand his

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<sup>70</sup> Reproduced from *Islam-* the organ of Anjuman-I Khuddamuddin, Lahore 1.16, Tuesday, 22 January 1936.

method of revitalising and rejuvenating the Muslim nation. They were concerned only with their own ritualistic and traditional thought that remained uninterfered with, so that they could go on influencing the ignorant Muslim masses, so that they did not lose their importance.

I do not deny that there may be some flaws and contradictions in Iqbal's writings. But we must not forget that Iqbal's writings are a human composition and not a Divine Revelation. However, most of the contradictions pointed out are not contradictions in my opinion. They are a step in the process of evolution in his thought which is progressive and has a forward movement. I feel that Iqbal has tried to bring about a compromise between the various schools of thought amongst the Muslim thinkers. In this small article it is not possible to go into the details of this subject, but I will cite one example for which Iqbal is often quoted and sometimes maligned. It is the problem of Reason and Emotion which appears in his poetry as '*Aql*' and '*Isbq*'.

This problem is as old as Adam and Eve! And there has always been conflict between the two! But the two have never lived apart without a compromise. At the time of the creation of Man, God endowed man and woman with four attributes, viz.: (1) '*Ilm*', or Knowledge, (2) '*Aql*', or Reason, (3) Speech and (4) Emotion, or '*Isbq*'. To man He gave more of Reason and Knowledge and to woman He gave more of speech and emotion! This was a necessary and natural distribution. Woman had to bring up a progeny, and if she kept mum she would produce a progeny of dumb children! This is, therefore, an essential quality that she should speak more and speak by repetition. Man had to think more and hence he of necessity would speak less. And as the faculty of speech required an emotional background, woman was made more emotional. This was also necessary, as man after the day's toil needed more of attention: woman was endowed with more of this faculty. Marital relations also required that woman should be more emotional than man. This was thus the natural distribution of functions between the two sexes.

If we go through Iqbal's prose and poetry we will find that he is trying to bring about a compromise between prevalent Sufistic thought, which had inclined towards emotionalism due to the influence of Greek thought and later the Vedantic thought, and the rationalistic Qur'ānic thought. In his Urdu poetry we find him coming to grips with this problem for the first time and he appears to be pacifying the emotionalists. But in his Persian poetry he

is more rationalistic and has almost brought about a compromise between the two. In his *Lectures* he completely avoids the problem and makes it appear that he has resolved it. Only in one place he mentions the word Passion, if that can be construed to mean *'Ishq* (emotion): and here too he does not use it in a very healthy sense. Briefly speaking, Iqbal's attitude towards this problem is factually compromising, and similar is the attitude of his spiritual teacher Mawlānā Rūmī.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, those who write on the subject select such verses of Iqbal which give an air of emotionalism, as if Iqbal was a non-rationalist! Iqbal cannot be an emotionalist as he is following in the footsteps of the Holy Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is a book of Reason — *'Aql*. This is clearly indicated by the abundance of its verses on the subject. It grants a very high place to Reason. In one place it says: "And He casts uncleanness on those who will not use their Reason" (x. 100).

Iqbal is primarily a commentator of the Qur'ān, which very few people have realised. He offers a modern commentary in accordance with the advances of knowledge, thus making the renderings more up to date. Indeed, very few people have realised that the Qur'ān is not giving us a ready digested material. We have to swallow and digest it! It contains everything that has been verified and discovered and that has yet to be discovered. Its *Mutashābihāt* verses are becoming established by a gradual process of research, and by the end of this universe the whole of the Qur'ān will have become established or confirmed (*Muḥkam*) and then the people will see that all that the Qur'an was saying WAS CORRECT! Only we had failed to understand it. Even Kenneth Cragg (*Mind of the Qur'an*) has failed to understand the significance of close these verses.

Iqbal had fully realised that the medieval commentators had brought in superfluous ideas drawn from extraneous sources and had tried to impinge them upon the Qur'ān, which, instead of taking the reader forward, takes him back into wild untraced valleys of philosophy and logic. The Qur'ān has a logic of its own which cannot be disowned or denied even though it may not



fit into the devices of syllogism. The Qur'ān also does not dabble in philosophy, for it knows that philosophy makes things vague. The teachings of the Qur'ān are firm, concrete and definite. The Qur'ān discourages philosophy, as already pointed out above. We see that philosophy in all its aspects has tried to confuse Reality and take people away from the true religion. The Revealed Religion teaches about the Unity of Being-*Tawḥīd*. But philosophy tries to split it up in its own peculiar way, either as a Trinity or as a Pantheon. It even does not hesitate a denial of the Ultimate Being, the Creator. *Wahdat al-Wujūd* and *Wahdat al-Shubūd* (Pantheism and Panantheism) are tricks from up its sleeves ! This, in short, is the achievement of philosophy. Iqbal had very early realised this and tried to contradict this attitude in his prose and poetry. Alas ! we have failed to understand him and have taken the controversy further instead of calling a halt to it. The reason for this lack of appreciation is that the bulk of Muslim thinkers had inclined towards Sufistic thought. Sufistic leanings had also destroyed the pristine purity of *Tawḥīd*. This they affected by bringing in mediators ! The Muslims had come so much under the influence of Sufis that it became an ordeal to avoid them. Islam is a practical religion. It is the religion of action. It is not the religion of monasticism or escapism. It is the religion of "Do" and "Remember," as the Qur'ān directs. Iqbal wanted to dissolve this mystery, but so much pressure was brought upon him that he reluctantly had to withdraw some very significant Persian verses which were the matrix of his thought.

Iqbal had a great desire to rewrite the Islamic *Fiqh* and he had expressed this desire to several friends verbally and in writing. One wonders why he wanted to do this. The science of *Fiqh* was greatly valued by the 'Ulamā', and they could not afford to let anyone mould it. But Iqbal was very much conscious of the modern needs of man. He knew fully well that all *Fiqh* had been written in the cosy atmosphere of metropolises, while the actual *Ijtihād* was being done by Islam's fighting forces in lands far beyond the original frontiers of Islam, and in the outlying areas of Central Asia, fighting under varying circumstances and under strenuous conditions. The 'Ulamā' could not realise the difficulties of the struggling man; for, they themselves did not have to struggle and were living on easy money of the courts of the rulers. The 'Ulamā' soon turned into a class of *Mullās*, whom Iqbal has condemned because subsequently they did not possess that knowledge with which the 'Ulamā' were endowed and which the Qur'ān was demanding. They thus

created difficulties in the life of the struggling people. These *Mullās* put the brakes so tightly that the nation could hardly move. The *Fiqh* which we follow today has led the nation into blind alleys of ignorance and apathy. It was for this reason that Iqbal had a great desire to rewrite the *Fiqh*. Says Iqbal: "Since the destruction of Baghdad they 'became extremely conscious and would not allow any freedom of Ijtihad.'"<sup>72</sup> Iqbal further says: "Thus the first objection of the nineteenth-century Muslim reformers was a fresh orientation of the faith and a freedom to reinterpret the law in the light of advancing experiences."<sup>73</sup> By reformers, of course, he means Mawlānā Jamāl-ud-dīn Afghānī, Sayyid Aḥmad Khan, 'Abduh, and in the twentieth century Prince Saïd Ḥalīm Pāshā, Muṣṭafā Kamāl Pāshā (Kamal Atatürk), Ibn Sa'ūd and Ridā' Shah Pehlevi. Another reason Iqbal considers for the reorientation' of Islamic thought is the growing influence of mysticism amongst the ignorant Muslim masses. He says: "The nineteenth-century reformers rose in revolt against mysticism and called Muslims to the broad daylight of the modern world. Not that they were materialist. Their mission was to open the eyes of the Muslims to the spirit of Islam which aimed at the conquest of matter and not flight from it."<sup>74</sup>

It will thus have become quite clear that Iqbal had become fully alive to the problem of giving the Muslims a newer interpretation of the Islamic Law which would give them a simpler path to tread on in this modern world.

Iqbal was fully conscious of the contribution of the non-Arab Muslims towards Islamic studies, but he was rather pessimistic, and lamentably so, whether they had really understood the real spirit of Islam in which a lot of extraneous matter had poured in to dilute the dynamic spirit of this universal religion; Iqbal had indeed taken inspiration from Rūmī and Ghazālī, Shah Walī Allāh and Jamāl-ud-dīn Afghānī. But he had selected the matrix of their teachings which, according to Iqbal, represented a truer appreciation of the Qur'an. The extraneous matter they had also rejected. Iqbal does not in any way ridicule or deprecate the non-Arab nations, as something inferior; no, he admires their culture and character. But Iqbal had realised very early that all

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<sup>72</sup> Islam, I/10, 22 January 1936, p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

that was un-Qur'ānic had been coming through their sources, as, for instance, Manichaeism and Zoroastrian ideas had trickled in, and, similarly, Vedantic Buddhist spiritualism had greatly influenced Islamic thought and also the Greek thinkers had influenced the Islamic teachings. All these Iqbal considered as non-Arab influences. The pristine purity of Islam had been adulterated by these sources which included the new converts. Iqbal clearly says in one of his Urdu quatrains<sup>75</sup> that all are prostrating before the idols of the non-Arab ('Ajam) world who have created a culture, a mysticism, a *Shari'ah* and *Kalam* in their own fashion, in which the *Ummah* is lost by forsaking the teachings of the Qur'an. Iqbal does not mean to belittle the personality of the great men of the non-Arab world, but he certainly detests the thought and ideas brought in by them.

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<sup>75</sup> Sāqī Nāmah" *Bāl-i Jibrīl*:

تمدن تصوف شریعت کلام      بتانِ عجم کی پجاری تمام  
 حقیقت خرافات میں کھو گئی      یہ اُمتِ روایات میں کھو گئی!