THE "PSEUDO-DRAMATIC" POEMS OF IQBAL

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Burdened with such epithets as the *Ḥakim al-Ummat,* "the Wiseman of the Community," and the Shā'ir-i *Mashriq,* "the Poet of the East," Iqbal has rarely received the notice he deserves as a poet-craftsman of great skill and sensitivity. Many writers have reviewed Iqbal's ideas on Poetry and Aesthetics but very few have made note of the aesthetics and poetics of Iqbal's own verses. One notable exception that immediately comes to mind is Professor Muhammad Sadiq, who devoted an entire section to that matter in his history of Urdu literature.[1] Another, much earlier and rather disreputable, though historically quite interesting, case is that of the anonymous reviewer in the *Avadh Punch* who wrote a lengthy series of articles soon after Iqbal's second Urdu volume, *Bāl-i-Jibrīl,* "Gabriel's Wing," came out in 1935.[2] He castigated Iqbal for mistakes of idiom and for transgressing the traditional conventions of Urdu and Persian poetry. Needless to say that Lucknow critic remains buried in well-deserved neglect, while *Bāl-i-Jibrīl* is universally regarded as Iqbal's finest book of poetry in Urdu. The credit for that goes to Iqbal the poet-craftsman as much as to Iqbal the thinker.

Iqbal was an innovative poet, in spite of the fact that he wrote neither free nor blank verse. He wrote *ghazal,* the conventional lyric, and *naẓm,* that is poems in various stanza forms but with regular metres and rhymes. I am not concerning myself here with Iqbal's *ghazal,* where his innovations are significant, particularly in the way he expanded the range of associations of various traditional symbols. This brief paper deals with only one of Iqbal's

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[1] Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 372 if.

[2] "Idbar" (Pseudonym), *"Miqrāḍ-i-Idbaril dar Bāl-i-Jibrīl"* (The Scissors of Adversity at the Wings of Gabriel), in *Avadh Punch* (Lucknow), 12 May, 1935, and several subsequent issues. The nature of the comments can be guessed at from the fact that the contentious critic deliberately „calls 1qbal's *ghazal "naẓm"*.

favourite modes of poetic expression in his *naẓm*. Iqbal's poems are metrically conventional, yet they possess an effect of variety and freshness which is not merely of the surface. He creates this variegated effect by using different, often unusual, stanza forms, by displaying a remarkable ear for the music that choices of metres and words can create, and by creating a heightened sense of drama through dialogue. It is to this latter aspect that this paper seeks to draw attention.

Some of Iqbal's most important poems, in Persian as well as in Urdu, are exquisite examples of what may be called "pseudo-dramatic" poetry — they are poems with certain elements of drama in them and their success is essentially due to the way they are structured. In dramatic poetry, according to one writer, poets "speak through interior monologues or assumed masks; they liberate minor objects and elevate them as striking sympols; they indulge in contrasts between great and small, or private and public, or ancient and contemporary, or elegant and tawdry—in short, they strive for a heightening, not by connected discourse, but by ellipses."[3] Iqbal did not write interior monologues, but he did create a "dramatic" effect through other ways, as we shall see below.

Iqbal is primarily didactic in his intentions; in his poems he is aware of an audience and consciously addresses it. Toward that end he insists on using what Eliot calls ihe second voice of poetry. Didactic poetry can be rather tiresome for most people except the true believer. Iqbal, however, enchants his reader and keeps his interest alive by assuming masks and by turning simple objects into potent symbols. By doing so he relieves the monotony of the didactic second voice, giving it a semblance of the third voice of authentic drama. He discards continuous discourse, and instead presents to his reader pseudo-dramatie situations of contrast and confrontation. In calling them "pseudo-dramatic" my intentions are not at all pejorative. What I wish to convey is the fact that they are devoid of bare narrative—as is proper for true drama—and yet they lack genuine action. The characters or personae do not take on the kind of three-dimensional individuality that can come through action alone, Iqbal was not writing plays. He had no models available to him for that purpose in

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[3] 3. John J. Enck, "Dramatic Poetry," in Alex Preminger, et al., Eds., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1974), p. 199.

any Islamic language, nor was there a viable stage in India at that time. Iqbal's "pseudo-dramatic" poems are not, however, mere lifeless tableaux, for something does take place in them, invariably through a verbal exchange. One can, therefore, call them poems of dialogue. Of course, a closer look brings out finer distinctions. In some the dialogue forms a disputation, in others a chain of inquiry. There are other variations too. In some of these poems, the poet may himself be one of the protagonists—sometimes with a mask on—in others, a mere observer or recorder of the event. But the core structure is always that of a dialogue, and, in that sense, reflects perhaps iqbal's training as a jurist and a philosopher. Belew, some such poems will be discussed under three headings.As will be evident, further subcategories can be made, but have not been made here. Neither does the discussion include all the poems that show "pseudo-dramatic" characteristies.[4]

(I) Poems of Disputation. In certain poems the dialogue is in the spirit of a disputation between two protagonists; in some cases, each trying to assert one's supremacy over the other. The poet simply presents the individual arguments, ostensibly leaving the verdict to the reader. As is well known, this is a fairly respectable, old genre of poetry in both Persian and Arabic, its origin lying in Middle Eastern antiquity.[5] In Arabic such poems are called

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[4] A partial listing of such dialogue poems would include *'Aql wa Dil*; *'lshq aur Maut*, *Shikwah, Jawāb-i Shikwah*, *Akhtar-i Ṣubḥ*, *Khiḍr-i Rāh, Ek Mukālamah—in Bāng-Darā (1924) ; Lenin Khudā Ke Hadar Men, Farishtan Kā Gīt, Farmān-i Khudā, Pīr-o Murīd, Jibrīl wa lblīs, Adhān,—in Bāl-i-Jibrīl(1935) ; Taqdir (Iblīs-o Yazdān), Ṣubḥ-i Carman—in Ḍarb-i-Kalīm* (1936); *lblīs ki Majlis-i Shūrā, Taṣwir wa Muṣawwir, 'Alam•i Barzakh—in Armughān-i Ḥijāz* (1938) *; Taskhīr-i Fṭtrat, Muḥāwarah-i 'Ilm-o-'lshq, Muḥāwarah-i Mābain Khudā wa lnsān, Ḥūr wa Shā`ir—in Payām-i Mashriq* (1923); and the entire book Jāvīd Nāmah (1932).

[5] Jes P. Asmussen, *Studies in Judeo-Persian Literature* (Leiden, 1973), Chapter II, "A Judeo-Persian Precedence-Dispute Poem and Some Thoughts on the History of the Genre," pp, 32-59.

Through Arabic this genre also spread into various European languages. Cf. *Streifdichtung* in German. Some of the very earliest poems by 1qbal are Urdu adaptations of several English poems for children that belong to this genre. For example, "The Spider and the Fly," "The Mountain and the Squirrel," "The Cow and the Goat" in *Bāng-i Darā,* all written before 1905.

munāẓarai or *muḥāwarai* and it is the latter term that Iqbal frequently uses in the titles of such poems. An excellent example would be his Persian poem, *Muḥāwarah Mābain Khudā wa Insān,* " A Dispute between God and Man,"[6] but before we look at that let us glance at a simple, early poem titled *'Aql wa Dil,* 'Intellect and Heart"[7]:

One day Intellect said to Heart,

I guide those who are lost.

From the earth I range to the heavens,

Just see, how far I can reach.

I give meaning to the Book of Life;

I make visible God's great glory.

You?—a mere clot of blood.

I put to shame the finest ruby.

Heart said, That may be true, but

See what I really am.

You merely *know* Life's secret;

I *see* it with my eyes.

You beget learning; I, gnosis.

You search for God. I show Him.

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[6] It occurs in *Payām-i-Mashriq* [*Kulliyāt-i-Iqbāl* (Fārsī), (Lahore, 1973)], p. 284.

[7] It occurs in *Bāng-i-Dārā;* it was written before 1905 *[Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl (Urdu),* (Lahore, 1973)], p. 41.

See, how high my status is, In me resides the Almighty.[8]

The final word is with Heart, so we know who the winner is in that dispute, but in the dispute between God and Man, as delineated by Iqbal, we see a stalemate: God is all powerful, but Man also plays a crucial role in the scheme of things.

God

I made this world, from one same earth and water,

You made Tartaria, Nubia, and Iran ;

I forged from dust the iron's unsullied ore,

You fashioned sword aud arrowhead and gun;

You shaped the axe to hew the garden tree,

You wove the cage to hold the singing-bird.

Man

You made the night and I the lamp,

And You the clay and I the cup;

You—desert, mountain-peak, and vale:

I—flower-bed, park, and orchard; I

Who grind a mirror out of stone,

Who brew from poison honey-drink.[9]

A different kind of disputation is found in the two long "complaint"

[8] This incomplete translation is by the author of this paper. A complete translations can be found in *Poems from Iqbal* by Victor G. Kiernan (Bombay. 1947), p. 24. The later edition of the book, however, does not contain it.

[9] Victor G. Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal* (Condon, 1955), p. 93.

poems written in Urdu, *Shikwah* and *Jawāb-i Shikwah,* "Complaint" and "Answer to the Complaint".[10] To the best of our knowledge, Iqbal did not originally plan the second poem at the same time as the first, but the immense popularity of the *Shikwah* and the logic of Iqbal's thought both demanded a sequel, and the two now form a pair. Together they are perhaps the two most popular Urdu poems of Iqbal. In the first, the poet complains to God on behalf of all Muslims concerning their down-trodden and humiliating state in the affairs of the world. He enumerates the past deeds of the: Muslims to underscore his complaint of God's neglect.

We erased the smudge of falsehood
from the parchment firmament,

We redeemed the human species

from the chain of slavery;

And we filled the Holy Kaaba with

our foreheads humbly bent,

Clutching to our fervent bosoms the

Koran in ecstasy.

Yet the charge is laid against us we

have played the faithless part;

If disloyal we have proved, hast

Thou deserved to win our heart?[11]

He then continues:

Why no more are worldly riches

among Muslims to be found,

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[10] These poems occur in *Bāng-i Darā [Kulliyāt (Urdu)]. pp.* 163 and 199, respectively. According to Muhammad Sadiq (op. cit.), they were written *in* 1909 and 1912, respectively.

[11] A. J. Arberry, Tr., *Complaint and Answer* (Lahore, 1955), p. 15.

Since Thy power is as of old beyond

compute and unconfined? .. .

All we have is jeers from strangers,

public shame, and poverty—

Is disgrace our recompense for laying

down our lives for Thee?[12]

There is much more in a similar vein, expressing the sentiments of an average Muslim, often in a delightfully playful tone. A more serious note comes in near the end, and the complaint ends in a supplication.

Grant at last Thy sore-tried people in
their difficulties ease,
Make the ant of little substance peer
of Solomon to be;…[13]

In the second poem, God responds to the complaint by pointing out the listless state of the Muslims themselves.

We would fain be bountiful, but no
petitioner is there;
When no traveller approaches, how
can We guide on the way?...[14]

God charges the Muslims with a lack of initiative. They are also disunited, having fallen victim to rising nationalism, and have lost the true spirit of Islam that was a combination of Faith and Action.

Nations come to birth by Faith; let
Faith expire, and nations die;
So, when gravitation ceases, the
thronged stars asunder fly.[15]
Who erased the smudge of falsehood
from the parchment firmament?

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[12] Ibid., p. 19.
[13] Ibid., p 29.
[14] Ibid., p. 42.
[15] Ibid., p.45.

Who redeemed the human species
from the chains of slavery?
Who once filled the Holy Kaaba with
their foreheads lowly bent,
Clutching to their fervent bosoms the
Koran in ecstasy?
Who were they?
They were your fathers;
as for now, why, what are you,
Squatting snug, serenely waiting for
tomorrow to come true?[16]
Sure enough, you have your Syeds,
Mirzas, Afghans, all the rest;
But can you claim you are Muslims,
if the truth must be confessed?[17]
If the child learns not the knowledge
that has made his father sage,
Then what right has he by merit to
his father's heritage?[18]

The poem ends with a promise from God:

Be thou faithful to Muhammad, and
We yield Ourself to thee;
Not this world alone—the Tablet and
the Pen thy prize shall be.[19]

(2) *Poems of Inquiry*. In such poems the dialogue consists of questions asked by the poet, speaking in the first person, addressed to some figure, historical or imaginary, and answers given by that figure. These answers essentially represent the opinions of the poet himself concerning various issues; he quotes the other protagonist or puts words in his mouth to express his own conclusions. In a poem like *Pīr-o-Murīd*, "The Master and

[16] Ibid., p.47.
[17] Ibid., p. p. 53
[18] Ibid., p. 55,
[19] Ibid., p. 72.

the Disciple," Rūmī's responses to lqbal's questions are Rūmī's own verses[20]; in other poems, Iqbal provides the words, for example in *Khiḍr-i- Rāh*, "The Khiḍr-i (Guide) of the Road".[21] Most of these poems are too long to quote in full; only a few selected verses from the latter will have to suffice.

Poet to Khiḍr

To thy world-ranging eye is visible the storm
Whose breakers now sleep silently beneath the sea;
The poor man's boat, that wall of the orphan, that pure spirit!
The wisdom even of Moses stood in awe of thee;
Thou shunnest all abodes, to tread the wilderness,
Of day and night, of yesterdays and tomorrows, free.
What is the riddle of life? what thing is kingship? Why
Must labourer and merchant bloodily disagree ?

Khiḍr to Poet

The chapter of the Kings, let me
Unriddle to your mind.—

A conjurer's wand is sovereignty,
That conquering nations find.
If ever a little in their sleep
His subjects stir, the sure
Enchantments of the ruler steep
Their wits in night once more…
In the West the people rule, they say:
And what is this new reign?
The same old harp, the same strings play

[20] It occurs in *Bāl-i-Jibril* [*Kulliyāt* (Urdū)], p. 426.
[21] It occurs in *Bāng-i-Darā* [*Kulliyāt* (Urdū)), p. 225. According to Sadiq, it was written in 1921.

The Empires' old refrain…[22]

(3) A third category can be set up of certain poems, which, for the sake of convenience, may be referred to as *Poems of* "*Witnessing*". Poems falling into this category consist of a dialogue or a series of dialogues between two or more protagonists, not involving, however, the ego of the poet and not necessarily always in the nature of a disputation. The poet is, in fact, observing or witnessing an imagined scene, which he desires to share with his readers. The scenes contain hardly any action; they consist of verbal exchanges. Even these verbal exchanges may sometime appear to be a great deal independent of each other. In other words, rather than a sustained dramatic scene, it may turn out to be a series of tableaux, somewhat static in themselves, yet capable of generating drama through their juxtaposition. Some of the important poems belonging to this category would be the trilogy consisting of "Lenin in the Presence of God," "Angel's Song," and "God's Command,"[23] or the cycle titled *Taskhīr-i-Fiṭrat*, "The Conquest of Nature".[24] I can quote here only a short poem titled *Taqdir*, "Fate".[25]

Satan (to God)

O God, Creator! I did not hate your Adam,
That captive of Far-and-Near and Swift-and-Slow;
And what presumption couid refuse to *You*
Obedience? If I would not kneel to him,
The cause was Your own fore-ordaining will.

God (to Satan)

When did that mystery dawn on you ? before,
Or after y our sedition?

Satan (to God)

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[22] Kiernan, op. cit., Bombay edition, pp. 43-47.

[23] They occur in *Bāl-i-Jibrīl* [*Kulliyāt* (Urdū)], pp. 398-402. An English translation can be found in Kiernam (op.cit., London edition, pp. 42-44). He does not, however, include the second poem of the trilogy.

[24] They occur In Payām-i Mashriq [Kulliyāt (Fārsi)], pro. 255-58.

[25] It occurs in Ḍarb•i Kalīm [Kulliyāt (Urdū)], pp. 508-09. A note by the poet tells that it is an adaptation from some writing of Ibn 'Arabī.

After, oh brightness,
Whence all the glory of all being flows.

God (to His Angels)

See what a grovelling nature taught him this
Fine theorem! His not kneeling, he pretends,
Belonged to My fore-ordinance; gives his freedom
Necessity's base title ;—wretch! his own
Consuming fire he calls a wreath of smoke.[26]

One of the books that Iqbal published in Persian was Jāvīd Nāmah, "The Book of Jāvīd". All critics agree that as a brilliant achievement of poetic art it is Iqbal's finest work. It is a dazzling panorama of shifting scenes, unusual juxtaposition, and fascinating exchanges. Its language is simple yet elegant; its rhythms and rhymes musically vibrant as well as contextually perfect. No English translation has succeeded in doing justice to it, and the task is wellnigh impossible.[27] Reading it one wishes some brilliant composer would set it to music, like an oratorio or a concert opera. It is a dialogue poem, but on a scale never before attempted by Iqbal. Myriads of protagonists—some historical, some mythical—carrying symbolic values, speak in it in their own as well as in Iqbal's voice, to each other as well as to *Zindahrūd*, the mask adopted by Iqbal on that celestial journey. In short, *Jāvīd Nāmah* is a brilliantly executed dialogue poem, and as an Urdu speaker I regret the fact that Iqbal did not find time to write something equally grand in Urdu.

Iqbal did not write a play. It is not known if he ever even planned to write one. Near the end of his life he wanted to write two long poems, one in Urdu on the story of the *Ramoyana*, the other in English, "The Book of an Unknown Prophet," modelled after Nietzsche's *Also Sprache Zarathustra*. No record indicates that any progress was made on either of the projects. It is also regrettable that Iqbal had a very low opinion of both the stage and the screen. One cannot blame that on the poor quality of the theatre and cinema in India at that time, for Iqbal had had ample, though little availed, opportunity to experience the art of the stage while in Europe. His short

[26] Kiernan, op. cit., Loodon edition, p. 64.
[27] The most readable translation in English is by A. J. Arberry: *Jāvīd Nāmah* (London, 1966).

poem titled "Cinema"[28] reads like a fanatic's diatribe, refusing to see in it any possibility of aesthetic and intellectual reward. Cinema, for him, is nothing but "new fetish-fashioning, idol-making and mongering". His contempt for the theatre arises from the same impulse: acting involves a denial and suppression of one's own selfhood, and that is the worst crime in Iqbal's eyes.

> Your body be the abode of another's ego,
> God forbid! Do not revive the mongering of idols![29]

It is an interesting question to ask ourselves: why did the Muslims all over the world fail to create viable theatre until quite recently? The Arabs translated Greek philosophy and sclences but completely ignored the great plays. Was it simply a matter of a difference in literary tastes? Was it because of the sexual segregation in the society? Was it due to the despotic nature of the milieu which, as Baraheni suggests, was not conducive to a true "dialogue"?[30] Was acting or impersonation actually regarded as a blasphemous act? This is, however, not the right place to speculate on these issues. We only know that Iqbal felt no desire to write true drama, remaining quite satisfied with the "pseudo-dramatic". That in itself was a major contribution to Urdu poetry, for which we are grateful to him.

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[28] It occurs in *Bāl-i-Jibrīl*. An English translation can be found in Kiernan, op. cit, London edition, pp. 57-58.

[29] *Tiyātar* (Theatre) in *Ḍarb-i-Kalīm Kulliyāt* (Urdū)], p. 568.

[30] Reza Baraheni, The Crowned Cannibals (New York), p. 70.