

IQBAL AND WORDSWORTH

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It was with considerable interest and surprise that I started reading the article on Iqbal and Wordsworth by Alim Siddiqui in *Iqbal Review* (July 1980). It had never occurred to me before that there existed any affinities between them. They belonged to two different traditions and two different cultural backgrounds. What could they possibly have in common? But considering that Iqbal, like other educated people in the subcontinent, must have read the English poets in school and college, and having regard also to the fact that many subcontinental writers have been influenced by them, I imagined that the author of the article had perhaps discovered traces of this kind of influence. I thought of Tagore in Bengali in whom one could see various European influences at work. But I was disillusioned soon. For what Mr. Siddiqui has done is to quote some passages from the two poets on subjects which by a stretch of the imagination could be called analogous and put on them an interpretation which is untenable.

One need not doubt that Iqbal had read Wordsworth. He is said to have remarked on one occasion that it was the study of Wordsworth's poetry which saved him from atheism (*ilhad*). This is all to the good. The writer then proceeds to say or rather imply that this must be due to the having had the same sort of upbringing: Wordsworth in the Lake District of England and Iqbal in Sialkot! The idea that the Lake District and Sialkot have much in common and would breed the same moods and attitudes is certainly original. Neither of the two was what we call a city-bred poet. Wordsworth was not a Cockney like Keats, nor had Iqbal the urban background of Ghalib. But does it follow that they must have spiritual affinities? That needs substantiation.

A few passages are quoted from such pieces as *Himalay*, *Khizr-e-Rah*, *Ek Arzoo*—which certainly prove that Iqbal was not unresponsive to nature—and having done so the writer goes on to adduce passages from Wordsworth on the subject of nature and asks the reader to accept that his point has been demonstrated. It never struck him that whereas Iqbal's poems are plain evocations of natural beauty Wordsworth's exemplify the philosophical idea that Nature was a living force, a presence that disturbed him with the joy of elevated things. Unlike Wordsworth, Iqbal never formulated a philosophy out of his love of nature such as it was. Wordsworth is pantheistic. Now there have been great lovers of nature in English poetry. Both Shelley and Keats wrote magnificent nature poetry, but we do not on that account try to establish affinities between them and Wordsworth. Anyone who has ever read Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* and Keat's *To Autumn* and compared them with Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and the *Prelude* would know what I am talking about.

The fact is that all poetry revolves around such basic subjects as love, nature, suffering, death, God, beauty and so on. There are hundreds of poems in every literature on these themes. But unless one could prove that two poets have approached a subject from the same point of view it is not customary to speak of affinities. What poet who had deep feelings could avoid writing at one time or another on the pain of separation from the loved one? But would it be wise to group together Kalidasa and Horace and Shakespeare and Browning because they have all written on love? That is the kind of parallelism Mr. Siddiqui has established.

The strange example of parallelism that occurs in the article relates to the attachment of the two poets to two women. Iqbal, he writes, was deeply attached to a woman called *Atyia Begum*; Wordsworth, similarly was attached to his sister *Dorothy*, as they say in geometry. There are hundreds of poets in whose lives a woman has played a part. Why not say that Iqbal and Shakespeare belong to the same group, because the latter also loved a *Dark Lady*? This is neither good logic nor sound literary criticism. I suppose that

one could from this point of view also establish a likeness between Iqbal and Petrarch who worshipped his Laura and Dante whose devotion was concentrated on Beatrice.

Something could possibly have been said about the interest which both Iqbal and Wordsworth had in politics. The early revolutionary fervour in the latter and Iqbal's life-long interest in the political fate of his fellow Muslims sprang probably from the same motives. But this is an area which the author has avoided.

Another example of the kind of parallelism the writer has sought is the mention in the last paragraph of the article of the fact that both poets received public recognition from their peoples. Wordsworth had been appointed poet Laureate, while Iqbal was acknowledged as the national poet of the Muslims in the subcontinent. If this testifies to any affinity between the two, could one not trace a parallel between Iqbal and Tennyson or Iqbal and Robert Bridges?

Literary comparisons are sometimes illuminating. They bring to light aspects of the work of two poets which may have passed unnoticed. But a forced comparison where no affinities exist can serve no purpose. Both temperamentally and in their approach to life, their beliefs and ideas, Iqbal and Wordsworth were very dissimilar. This is not denying the fact that at a certain stage in his life Iqbal may have owed some inspiration to him. That is an entirely different matter. One can usefully compare a poet like Milton with Dante with their preoccupation with Christian theology, but it would be absurd to draw a comparison between either of them and say a poet like Philip Sidney or Gray. The mention of Dante reminds me that the striking similarity between Iqbal's use of Rumi as a spiritual guide and Dante's use of Virgil in the same capacity deserves to be studied in depth. This would throw light on Iqbal's indebtedness to Europe and at the same time on his originality.

I confess that I am not an Iqbal scholar. The whole purpose of this note is first to disparage the tendency to draw fanciful comparisons between dissimilar poets, and secondly to protest against the idea that the true test of an Eastern poet's greatness is whether he has affinities with some European poet. The fact that there is nothing to be found in Wordsworth which could be called the counterpart of Asrar-i-Khudi or Javid Namah does not detract from his greatness. Likewise, the absence in Iqbal's works of anything like the Prelude or Tintern Abbey does not take away from his renown, they are great in their different ways.