

THE NATURE OF DANTE'S INFLUENCE ON IQBAL

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Almost all the important writers on Iqbal have referred to Dante's influence on Iqbal, so far as the *Javid Nama* is concerned.

This has left an impression in the minds of some students of Iqbal that *Javid Nama* is an imitation, and lacks originality because of its resemblances with the *Divine Comedy*.

That *Javid Nama* has some similarities with the *Divine Comedy*, there is no doubt. But mere resemblance in a few details or even imitation of certain aspects does not necessarily prove that Iqbal was an imitator having no scheme of his own, conceptual as well as artistic. In fact, Iqbal's work is almost original in ideational approach as also in the architecture of his story.

Inspiration in the field of ideas, life and culture is one of the commonest phenomenon of human culture, even great masters, like Shakespeare not excluded. Dante's own borrowings from old poets and men of letters (including the Muslim, authors and Scholars) were considerable. Yet, Dante's masterpiece, the *Commedia* stands aloft as a wonderful piece of originality. Similarly, Iqbal's claim to originality and greatness is not vitiated because of a few resemblances, or for reasons of casual inspiration from Dante.

This assumption necessitates a critical and fuller discussion on a few points, e.g.:

(a) What is the nature and extent of Iqbal's borrowings?

(b) Why should Iqbal solely depend upon Dante, when he could fall back directly upon the Muslim materials (like Mrajnamas, prophetic traditions relating to Miraj and their adaptations in verse and prose) which, according to Miguel Asin (the author of the famous book *Islam and the Divine Comedy*) Dante also used profusely.

(c) What are the characteristic features of the *Jawid Nama* which account for its distinction and individuality as against the *Divine Comedy*.

(d) Some other notable aspects of the *Jawid Nama*.

Nature and extent of resemblances

It can not be denied that the *Jawid Nama* seems to have some similarities with the pattern of the *Divine Comedy*. It may also be surmised that the idea of compiling such a book may have struck the Poet of the East, after studying the memorable book of Miguel Asin on the subject, the first English Edition of which had already appeared in 1926, and become very popular among the Muslim intellectuals of the time. However, we know on the authority of the late Chaudari Muhammad Husain, a disciple and trusted associate of Allama Iqbal—who wrote an article on *Jawid Nama* soon after it was published) that the Allama had always in his mind a book on the mysteries of the Miraj of the Holy Prophet, till in 1929 he decided to compile the present work *Jawid Nama* (see *Nairang-i-Khayal*, Annual Number 1942, pp. 108). In any case, Dante's work may have been taken as model by Iqbal.

Similarities

In fact, the basic scheme of the work is the same. Of course, differences are there as we shall see later, but the general outline is the same, e.g.: (1) the starting point (an incident in the D.C. (*Divine Comedy*), mis-track in a Jungle), (2) sudden appearance of a guide (Rumi in the case of the *Jawid Nama*, and Virgil in the case of the D. C.), (3) Ascension of both poets stage by stage, according to the Astronomical (or theological) arrangement, (4)

Interviews with several men or personalities in Hell and Heaven, (5) Various kinds of torments and tortures and rewards to the sinners and the righteous men respectively, (6) description of several places providing an atmosphere to each situation (rivers of gold and silver, mountains covered with snow, landscape, characters and mythological figures and several other things.

Differences

This is a list of similarities but as already observed differences are more glaring and are of a basic nature.

As against Dante, who takes deeper interest in the spiritual conversion of the individual on theological basis of the Catholic-ism, in vogue in the 14th Century, A. D., Iqbal is more concerned with the metaphysical questions of his own age, and political questions of the Muslim world during the twentieth century.

The age of Dante was that of scholastic rationalism as expounded by St. Thomas Aquinas but Iqbal belonged to the age of Science, Mathematics and Space—Physics. While Dante insists on the identity of Religion and Reason, Iqbal emphasises the unity of spirit and Matter, hence of Religion and Science. So, the interpretation of Reality is different in both cases.

In a sense, we come across two different voices while going through the texts of these two poets. In Dante, we have a Christian voice while in Iqbal, we find a Muslim voice expressing ideas, characteristically Muslim.

For Iqbal Ascension to the Divine Sphere (معراج) is not an unfamiliar phenomenon because every Muslim believes in Miraj (ascension) and lsea (nocturnal journey) of the Holy Prophet. Iqbal refers to the idea of of the Mi'raj in the first section of the book.

He thereby suggests that ascension of man to the Divine Sphere was not impossibility. No doubt, Iqbal's view of Miraj apparently does not strictly

conform to the traditional belief, and he interprets Miraj as a change or revolution in consciousness but this is his interpretation. The case of the Holy Prophet is quite different and specific as we shall see later.

Here we have two different tempers. Generally speaking Dante is always seen frightened, depressed, terrified, confused and panicstricken throughout his heavenly journey, while Iqbal even in a very grave situation looks calm and composed, although enthusiastic and eager to know more. Again, Dante is too much submissive, even timid. When he accompanies his guide he puts very few questions, and when he has ever the courage of asking about anything, he is snubbed and is satisfied with one or two casual remarks of his guide. As against this, Iqbal is very inquisitive, goes deep into delicate questions, and, in most cases argues with 'heavenly personalities', nay even with his Guide.

Javid Nama begins with Muaajat (prayer in Quietude or whispering with the Lord, in which the poet expresses his craving for a vision of Reality. Here Iqbal's approach is positive. His passion for Higher Knowledge is intense. In such a state of Mind, he prays that he may be granted light, yet more light.

Dante's attitude throughout his journey smacks of his conviction in the Christian idea of the 'original sin', whereas Iqbal's idea of human dignity and glorious destiny is based on God's declaration on the eve of Adam's mission to earth that Man is going to be the Deputy of God on earth (خلیفہ) and has a great future. There is no guilt complex, no indication of inferiority, no wavering, no defeatism. In a section of the Jawid Name, there is an assurance from the Angels about the superiority of Man (of Naghma-i-Mala'ik—the Song of the Angels), after which the great Rumi appears on the scene with a surer and more confident voice. Those interested may examine the Canto in the D. C. regarding the emergence of Virgil who exhorts the Poet (Dante) to proceed under the lure of Poet's beloved Beatrice idealized by him (Dante).

Here we find the two poets on two different planes. While Ideal Love is the chief motive with Dante, with Iqbal it is love for the knowledge of Reality which is the main motivating force. Another great difference between the two poets lies in their treatment of the super-natural element as a means of the development of the story, In Dante, this element is very strong He creates an atmosphere completely flouting the law of probability. He wishes his reader to believe what is not believable. He carries his reader through his undoubtedly superior power of description and delineation which captures the imagination not allowing him to ponder rationally. However, Iqbal does not lose his rational sense under any situation. In most difficult situations necessitating the intervention of the super-natural element, his regard for the law of causality and probability never fails him. For instance, if we compare the episode of the Heavens, appearance of the suburbs of the inferno in the D. C. and of reaching the lower limits of the sphere of the Moon in the J. N., we will at once find that while Iqbal's approach is gradual and almost natural and therefore intelligible, Dante's approach is sudden like a jerk. Iqbal passes through the various stages methodically: for instance, after the first prayer ('h.L4) there is (1) Tamhid-i-Asmani, (2) the Song of the Angels, (3) Tanshid-i-Zamini, (4) Rumi's Appearance and sudden emergence of Zarwan—(the Higher spirit controlling time and space—and then entrance of the two poets) (the Guide and the Disciple) into the Afiak-i- Falak-i-Qamar, Falak-i-Utarad, Falak-i-Zuhra and so on: All this process is gradual and therefore credible.

But in Dante, in the 3rd canto (of the Inferno), Caronte refuses to take poets further, a severe whirlwind takes over, an earthquake sets in along with lightening and lashing winds. Here Dante falls down unconscious. But after a thunder, when he regains his consciousness, he finds that someone has carried him across the chasm which was hitherto impassible.

Now this is sheer 'phantasy' overloaded with fiction of the most violent type. Usually we find Dante crossing one stage after the other in a state of unconsciousness.

As observed before, the differences of the two are those of the age—and also those of the religious tradition.

Iqbal follows the Holy Quran which maintains that nobody from the Earth could penetrate into the Heavens, except with the essential (spiritual or divine) powers (Quranic words: *الابسطان*). This means that the Heavens could through Sultan be pierced through by human being—and the Holy Prophet set an example of that.

The recent Space Conquest has further strengthened the view, but Iqbal's reference may be read in a wider context.

Dante could not conceive that Heavens could be pierced through. Therefore he proceeded fictionally. Yet another sphere of distinction between Dante and Iqbal is found in the handling of the mythological materials. Dante has utilized Greek mythology to the fullest extent,—three-headed demons, some creatures, half human and half animal and so many other things. But in Iqbal use of mythology is rare. It exists only in the episode dealing with the Hindu saint Jahandost (Vishwa Mitr) and the Hindu poet Bhartari Hari.

Dante is allegorical throughout while Iqbal's statements are factual, logical, with allegorical significance only rarely. However, inspired by all this, Dante excels in his superb characterization, excellent artistry and marvellous power of description, as also in his great dramatic skill, and this justifies T. S. Eliot's remarks that "Shakespeare gives the greatest width of human passion:

Dante the greatest altitude and greatest depth. They complement each other. It is futile to ask which undertook the more difficult job." (T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 265). One thing, however is certain that Iqbal's job was decidedly more difficult because he belonged to the age of scientific thought in which concrete reality rather than fiction reigned supreme.

The system of the Universe which Dante employed was Ptolemaic and not the familiar Copernican—, the macrocosmic system as one would say. But Iqbal is not very strict about the system: he simply follows the usual familiar astronomical system in vogue among the Muslims.

Anyhow, in the words of Robert H. Lynn, (Notes on the Divine Comedy, vol. 1 p. 9) "the Commedia is a cathedral in language and is unique in several ways" and so is Jawid Noma unique in certain other ways.

Miguel Asin, who has already been quoted above, has taken great pains to prove that Dante based his book on the Muslim legends of the Isra and the Miraj. Isra mean's undertaking of journey at night as the Holy Prophet did, according to the Holy Quran (سبحان الذى أسرى بعبده ليلا الخ), from the Holy mosque of Makkah to the Holy mosque of Aqsa (Jerusalem), followed by accession to the Heavens. Quite a large mass of Muslim literature exists on these topics, and M. Asin has examined it' to arrive finally at the conclusion that Dante with all his fame as a great poet, which praise he deserves, has substantially borrowed from the above-mentioned Muslim sources.

In this article, I do not propose to go into the merits of the above-mentioned conclusion. I am only refering to the question of Iqbal's utilization of the original Muslim sources from which Dante undoubtedly borrowed a lot.

I do not claim to have gone through the entire body of this literature but I have an impression that Iqbal did not depend much on these stories of the Miraj and the Isra. Conversely, he partially based his poem on the plan of the Divine Comedy as is suggested by the systematic arrangement of the episodes having almost the same details here and there.

Iqbal did not follow the pattern of the Isra and the Miraj out of respect for the Holy Prophet whose special privilege it was to have ascended the Heavens with prophteic dignity and sublimity.

No other human being according to Muslims can have that honour.

This also accounts for Iqbal's interpretation of the ascension (معراج) that it could only be a higher state of Ordinary human consciousness (and not specific), without involving any physical implication. This refers to men other than the Holy Prophet. Others can attain to some sort of superconsciousness but the Ascension of the Holy Prophet's is a unique experience and without parallel.

It is quite certain that Ibn-i-Arabi's *Fatuhāt* and his other work on *Isra* could not be the models of Iqbal for his *David Nama* because details differ widely and basically. Similarly *al-Ma'arri's Risalatul-Ghufran* could not catch the imagination of Iqbal because its contents contain heretical materials. There are certain other works of importance such as the *Miraj Nama* of Ibn-i-Sina (in Persian), and certain poems on *Miraj* in the *Mathnawiyat* of great Persian poets such as *Nizami Ganjawi*, *Amir Khusru*, *Jami* and others. These also could not serve as models because most of these contain vague rhetorical statements lacking in accuracy and precision.

Ibn-i-Sina's work is more or less an interpretation of the facts of *Miraj* in philosophical terms, and in *Amir Khusru's Matla'-ul-Anwar*, the only resemblance with *Jawid Nama* is that *Khusrau* also describes the various stages of the heavenly journey but that is only casual.

There are certain chapters in the *Ma'arrijun-Nubuwah* also which could benefit Iqbal but their subject matter is different and more theological.

In any case, Iqbal owes a bit to Dante but only to the extent indicated in this article. But with all his indebtedness to Dante he has his one scheme and his own ideals.