

# IQBAL: A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST<sup>170</sup>

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In speaking on the above theme, one cannot do better than to start by quoting one of Iqbal's own couplets:

“The dervish imbued with the spirit of God is neither of the East nor of the West

My home is neither Delhi, nor Isfahan nor yet Samarkand.”

B«d-i-Jibrâl (Gabriel's Wing), p. 357\*

One is also put in mind of Iqbal's inscription on the frontispiece of his book of Persian poetry entitled Pay«m-i-Mashriq (Message of the East, 1923), namely:

.....(To God belong the East and the West). And this was the book which he subtitles: ‘In reply to the Diwan of the German poet, Goethe’. It is worth mentioning here that Goethe's West-oestlicher Diwan (The Western-Eastern Diwan) had itself been inscribed in its author's own handwriting in the Arabic script. The translation is as follows “Eastern Diwan by a Western Author”. So the discourse came a full circle!

It is with such thoughts that the famous German writer and Nobel prize-winner (1946) Herman Hesse (1877-1962), who was a contemporary of Iqbal's (1877-1938), wrote thus of him:

“ Iqbal belongs to three domains of the spirit or intellect, the sources of his tremendous work: the worlds of India, of Islam, and of Western thought.” There are, to my knowledge, few writers or poets, whether in the East or in the West, who have been as much at home in the philosophies of both these vast domains, or who have written with such eloquence in Urdu, Persian and English. (He also had full command of Arabic and Panjabi, and also knew German.)

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<sup>170</sup> All the pages quoted in this essay refer to Iqbal's *Kulliy«t-i-Urdu* (Collected Works in Urdu) and the *Kulliy«t-i-Farsi* (Collected Works in Persian), both published by Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1990. The translations are by the present author, except where indicated otherwise.

Iqbal had shown early signs of this duality of interest. In his application for admission to the University of Cambridge as a research student in the field of philosophy, he wrote to the Senior Tutor, Trinity College, Cambridge on 29th September 1905: “ My knowledge of Arabic and Persian and my acquaintance with European philosophy (the study of which I began 12 years ago) suggest to me that I might make a contribution to the knowledge in the West, of some branch of Muhammadan philosophy .....” Perhaps I might add parenthetically that such studies were probably greatly influenced by his erstwhile mentor, Professor Thomas Arnold - the great Orientalist, who was a good role-model for the young Iqbal, and who had arrived at Iqbal’s alma mater, Government College, Lahore, in February 1898 as the Professor of Philosophy. Iqbal’s BA dissertation, submitted to the University of Cambridge in around March 1907 -on the basis of which he subsequently gained his Ph. D. degree from the University of Munich in November 1907 - entitled “The Development of Metaphysics in Persia”, was a perfect expression of Iqbal’s duality of approach. For in this dissertation, starting from a description of Persian dualism as displayed by Zoroaster, Mani and Mazdak, Iqbal critically examines the interaction of Persian metaphysical thought with the Greek system of philosophy expounded by Aristotle and Plato. He then goes on to discuss the resulting amalgam as displayed by Neo-Platonic Aristotelians of Persia, as he calls them, and then on to rationalism, materialism, and finally Islamic Sufism.

But I do not wish to lay undue emphasis on Iqbal’s output or originality as a philosopher: to me more important is his standing as a visionary or a ‘prophet’. As one of his contemporaries, the Persian language Indian poet, many years his senior, Ghulam Qadir Ghalib (1854-1927) - who was the Court Poet of Hyderabad Deccan and the Nizam’s poetry teacher - wrote:

(In the eyes of those who can fathom his meanings, Iqbal

Has wrought a kind of prophethood, and yet one may not call him a Prophet.)

Here, may I draw a parallel or an analogy? A prophet may repeat or reiterate a received message - not necessarily original to him - but with passion. The Prophet of Islam did this, and many other biblical prophets, too. It is worth remarking here that the Bible is a book of grace and compassion, not a dry, philosophical discourse. Similarly, the Koran, while

emphasizing the importance for ‘those who can see’ (ulu ’l-abĀ«r) of pondering the orbits of the sun, the moon and the stars, does not append mathematical equations of planetary motion: for that is not its primary purpose. But the same token, what Iqbal wrote was poetry, with rare passion and eloquence and lyricism; he did not aim to present a consistent philosophy which would conform to the style and standards of a philosophical magazine. And what he wrote in the Introduction to his afore mentioned dissertation, namely: “... Yet the inquirer who approaches the extant literature of Persia expecting to find any comprehensive systems of thought, like those of Kapila or Kant, will have to turn back disappointed, though deeply impressed by the wonderful intellectual subtlety displayed therein ... (and) the Persian people’s love of metaphysical speculation.” - perhaps applies equally to Iqbal himself. But so far as passion is concerned, Iqbal says emphatically:

“ If Truth does not contain Passion, it is merely a statement of facts

It becomes Poetry, when it is suffused with the heart’s Passion.”

(Pay«m-i-Mashriq) p. 262.

I am afraid I have been carried away in my somewhat passionate advocacy of Iqbal’s message, for his message aroused, and continues to arouse today, many people and nations throughout the world. Let me, therefore, hasten to return to my main theme.

Iqbal’s Urdu and Persian poetry is full of references to the teachings and doctrines of both Eastern (Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian) and Western philosophers and famous figures: statesmen, poets, writers, men of action. For instance, in Pay«m-i-Mashriq (Message of the East) alone one finds poems and verses about illustrious figures of the West, such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel, Bergson, Comte, Lock, Tolstoy, Karl Marx, Lenin, Kaiser Wilhelm, Mussolini, Goethe, Byron, Browning, Petofi, Einstein .... And in his Javâd N«meh (The Chronicles of Eternity) one comes across Eastern immortals, such as Gautama Buddha, Zarathustra, Jesus, MuĀammad, Bhartarâ Harâ, Āall«j, Pharaoh, Jam«l-ud-Dân-Afgh«nâ, Jal« - ud-Dân Rëmâ, Gh«lib, Syed ‘Alâ Hamad«nâ, Ghanâ Kashmârâ, Qurtul-‘Ain ñ«hira, N«dir Sh«h, AĀamad Sh«h Abd«lâ, the Dervish of Sudan, Tâpë SulÇ«n the Martyr, Ibn-S‘aud, etc., etc. In what other poet - whether Oriental or

Occidental - can one find such all-embracing and ecumenical wealth of dramatis personae?

On the face of it, it may appear that Iqbal is hostile to the West. But what he is hostile to is the West's imperialism and exploitation of the weak and the poor. For example, Iqbal says:

“ Europe’s hordes, with flame and fire  
Desolate the world entire,  
O architect of sacred realms,  
To rebuild the world arise!  
Out of leaden sleep  
Out of slumber deep  
Arise!  
Out of slumber deep,  
Arise!”

Zabēr-i-‘Ajam (Persian Psalms), p.396

(A. J. Arberry’s translation)

And again:

“ Don’t entertain the illusion that Europe will sympathize with you:  
The eagle’s heart does not melt for the bird that is clutched in its  
claws!”

Zabēr-i-‘Ajam, p.417.

Another thing that Iqbal is up in arms against is the materialism and permissiveness or immorality prevalent in the West, e.g. in speaking of the overlords of the East - the whites of Europe, Bā-d-i-Jibrāl, p. 434) he thunders:

“This knowledge, this wisdom, this statesmanship, this governance  
They suck blood, and teach the tenets of equality!  
Unemployment and promiscuity and inebriation and destitution  
Are these not victories enough for the civilization of the West?”

(From: Lenin in the presence of God.) Bā-d-i-Jibrāl, p. 435.

And then

“ Is this the zenith of your civilization?

Man without work, and woman without a child.”

Zarb-i-Kalâm (The Rod of Moses), p.605.

“These Western houris, a mirage of the eyes and the heart

The paradise of the West is nothing but ephemeral vision.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p. 371.

But Iqbal is very even-handed. He is full of praise for the dynamism, creativity, and the intellectual incisiveness of the Western nations. And while extolling the oriental values of spirituality, sincerity of heart, respect for high traditions, he also chastises the East for its blind obsequiousness to old ways of thought, received doctrines, slavish mentality, lack of self-respect, and a bedazzled view of all things Western. For example, he says

“The Sufi’s circle is bereft of the fire of longing

What is left is but the stale tales of miracle-making.

On the Day of Judgment even God will feel sorry

For the blank pages that the book of the Mullah and the Sufi will display.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p. 393.

“The forest of learning and invention is devoid of lion-hearted men

What remains is but the slaves of the Sufi and the Mullah, O Saqi!

Who has stolen the sharp sword of creative passion?

The learned hold an empty scabbard in their hand, O Saqi!”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p. 351.

“ I have observed the Leader of the Faithful:

His Character hath no fire, his speech no sense.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p.382.

And

“ Where there once were schools for lions and emperors

Those shrines are now the haunts of foxes alone.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p.400.

Finally, Iqbal sums it all up:

“ Reality has been lost in trivialities

This nation has lost itself in mere folklore.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p.451.

Iqbal also advises the East to learn the good things of the West -not simply shun everything that it has to offer: for that would be bigotry and paranoia. In the words of the old adage “pick what is clean and reject what is unclean”. This attitude shows Iqbal’s open-mindedness and moderation.

For instance, he declares:

“ Open to all are the wine-houses of the West

It is no sin to drink deep at the wells of new learning.”

Zarb-i-Kalâm, p.691.

He also very perceptively observed that:

“The strength of the West comes not from the dulcimer or the lyre

Nor does it spring from the cavortings of veil-less beauties.

Its solidity does not stem from godlessness

Nor does its ascendancy result from the Latin script.

The strength of the West stems from science and technology:

This is the fire that lights its lamp so brightly.

Javâd-Nameh, (Chronicles of Eternity) p. 648.

It is true, of course, that as one scans Iqbal’s poetical works, one finds that there is much more of a strident criticism than praise of the West. Thus one reads:

“ Humanity wept bitterly from the excesses of the West

Life received much turmoil from (the workings of) the West..”

Pas Cheh B«yad Kard ai Aqw«m-i-Sharq ?

(So What Should be Done, O Nations of the East ?)

Thus, what he had said as early as 1907 (writing in Cambridge) near to the beginning of his poetic career, addressing the West, namely

“ Your civilization will commit suicide by using its own dagger

A nest that is built on a slender bough will always be impermanent.”

B«ng-i-Dr« (The Caravan Bell), p. 167.

He reiterated towards the end of his life (1936):

“ Europe is in the throes of death from its own sword  
For it launched the rule of godlessness on this earth.  
The problems of mankind stem, verily, from it:  
Humanity has sustained deep wounds thereby.  
It regards man as nought but water and clay;  
It assumes that the caravan of life has no destination.”

Pas Cheh B«yad Kard, p. 713.

In the same vein he reports:

“ I have been informed by the powers that rule the land and the sea:  
The West lies in the path of a flood that is ineluctable.”

B«d-i-Jibrâl, p. 395.

And Iqbal is equally vociferous in cautioning the Orient against adopting the facile and harmful aspects of the Occidental life rather than grasping its sturdier and more difficult qualities. For example:

“The slave of the West, in order to show himself off  
Adopts from the Westerners music and dance.  
Being indolent, he takes up that which is easy;  
His nature only absorbs that which is painless.”

Javâd-Nameh, p. 648.

Which is as true, if not truer, today as it was in Iqbal’s time. And he advises the East:

“ Preoccupied with the beauty of others, not like a mirror be  
Of the image of others, eye and heart wash free.”

Pay«m-i-Mashriq, p. 311.

(Paraphrased by Peter Avery)

“Do not court the favours of the glassblowers of the West  
Make thy wine jars and goblets from thine own Indian clay.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p.477

For:

“The tavern of the East still holds in its vaults  
That wine which sets alight men’s consciousness.”

Zarb-i-Kalâm, p. 625

But what Iqbal is really stressing is his belief that the East and the West have each their different and intrinsic strengths - and that it is best to strive to adopt the strengths and eschew the weaknesses. Thus he points out:

“For the Westerners, intellect is the maker of life  
For the Easterners, love is the secret of the cosmos.  
Intellect recognizes the truth through love  
Love consolidates its works by intellect.  
Rise, and draw the blueprint of a new world  
Go, and make an amalgam of love and intellect.”

Javâd-Nameh, p. 538

He is not partisan; he sees some good in each system when he says:

“I speak only that which I consider to be the truth  
I am neither the idiot of the mosque nor the progeny of civilization.”

B«l-i-Jibrâl, p. 357

“Shun not the East nor fear the West  
Nature decrees that you turn each night into a bright morn.”

Zarb-i-Kalâm, p. 621

And there are weaknesses in each, too:

“The East is in ruins, and the West, in even greater ruin  
The whole world is dead and without the urge to seek and search.”

Zabër-i-‘Ajam, p. 376

“The knowledge of the West, the metaphysic of the East  
All a house of idols - and to run round the idols leads one nowhere.”



Iqbal, at the same time, is quite aware of the fact that he links the two worlds, and he thus stands as a bridge between the East and the West - like a Colossus astride the gulf that separates the two historically, spiritually and philosophically. He is an ambassador of unity: a joiner rather than a divider, for he declares:

“ I have spoken two words according to the temper of my times:  
I have enclosed two seas within a pair of vessels.  
I am a stream that originates from two seas  
My split is a parting and, withal, a union, too.”

Javâd-Naemeh, p. 669

It is in this context that one is inspired to hear Iqbal’s immortal declaration regarding the twin sources of his genius, as noted by Hermann Hesse:

“ My intellect was enhanced by the philosophy teachers of the West;  
My heart was enkindled by the company of men of vision.”

Pay«m-i-Mashriq, p. 296

And, finally, how fitting that the “ Knower of the secret” of the East should send a salutation, a homage, to that immortal savant of the West, Goethe, whose mortal remains rest in Weimar:

“ O zephyr! take our salutation to the garden of Weimar  
For the soil of that land lighted up the eyes of those who could  
perceive.”

Pay«m-i-Mashriq, p. 300.