

DEVIL IN THE TRIANGLE OF RUMI, GOETHE AND IQBAL

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The problem of evil has baffled many thinkers. Evil is not mere darkness that vanishes when light arrives. In other words, evil does not have a negative existence. This darkness has as positive an existence as light. The problem is how to account for evil in a world created by an all-good God? Rumi's answer is that the existence of evil is necessary for the fulfilment of the divine plan. Goethe thinks that evil is the reverse of good. Without evil, it would not be possible to identify good. Iqbal is of the view that the running parallel lines of good and evil meet in infinity. He points out in one of his quatrains:

How may I describe good & evil?

The problem is complex, the tongue falters,

Upon the bough you see flowers and thorns,

Inside it there is neither flower nor thorn.

(Payam i Mashriq)

Rumi's long poem titled "Mu'awiyah & Iblis", Goethe's Faust and Iqbal's verses dedicated to Satan can be considered as great diabolical apologies in the world literature. The three poets blend the "classical" with the "romantic", and despite the gaps in the times of their lives, their ideas on the role of evil in the spiritual and material development of man are similar.

In Iqbal's poetic vision, Rumi and Goethe meet in paradise. Goethe reads out to him the tale of the pact between the Doctor and the Devil, and Rumi pays tribute to him in these words:

O portrayer of the inmost soul

Of poetry, whose efforts goal

Is to trap an angel in his net

And to hunt even God.

You from sharp observations know,
How in their shell pearls form & grow,
All this you know, but there is more.
Not all can learn love's secret lore,
Not all can enter its high shrine,
One only knows by grace divine,
That reason is from the Devil,
While love is from Adam.

(“Jalal and Goethe”—*Payam i Masbriq*)

When Goethe became acquainted with Rumi's *Mathnavi* through German translations, he found it too complicated and confusing as he initially failed to fathom the depths of Rumi's thought. Iqbal had an identical experience of lack of comprehension and in his early stage of life mistakenly believed that Rumi was a pantheistic Sufi.

In the revealed scriptures, evil is connected with the story of the creation of Adam or, in Rumi's words, when man in the process of evolution, had passed through the stages of plant & animal life and arrived at the stage from where he was to develop into superior forms of life.

When God informed the angels that he was about to place Adam on Earth in His stead, and that Adam would be granted freedom of choice, they expressed apprehensions that Adam would do ill therein. But God admonished them that they knew not what he knew. Since disobedience of Adam by partaking the forbidden fruit was his first act in exercise of freedom of choice, he had to choose between good and that which is reverse of it. Therefore it was necessary to introduce evil by deputing a “tempter” to mislead Adam before he was to exercise the freedom. It is probably in this background that Iqbal is prompted in one of his verses to blame God for conspiring with Satan against man. He wonders suspiciously:

How could he (Satan) have the courage to

refuse on the day of creation?

Who knows whether he is your confidant or mine?

(*B«l i Jibrâl*)

Goethe's view of evil is Pelagian when he claims that evil is merely the reverse of good. The forces, good and evil, apparently working in opposite directions, in fact work in cooperation in order to carry out the divine plan. The action and reaction of good and evil or the succumbing before temptation and the resulting remorse in the course of conflict between the Devil and man, according to Goethe, brings out the best in man.

Iqbal supplements Goethe when he affirms "evil has an educative value of its own. Virtuous people are usually very stupid". (*Stray Reflections*)

He says:

I asked a sage: "What is life"?

He replied: "It is wine whose bitterness is the best."

I said: "They have put evil in its raw nature."

He answered: "Its good is in this very evil."

(*Pay«m i Mashriq*)

While the positive existence of evil is acknowledged by Rumi, Goethe and Iqbal, the nature of evil can only be poetically illustrated through a reference to the Devil. Therefore, *Iblis* in Rumi, Mephisto in Goethe and *ShayÇ«m* in Iqbal represent different aspects of the same "cobweb" personality.

Rumi's Iblis wakes up Mu«wiyah at dawn reminding him to offer the morning prayers before the time runs out. A dialogue ensues, in the course of which Iblis tries to convince Mu«wiyah that he adores God. It was the hand of God's bounty that sowed his seed and brought him into being from nothingness. God procured milk during his infancy. God rocked his cradle. Therefore God's wrath is only temporary like a mother's anger. The doors of His grace are not permanently shut on anyone.

"My refusal to bow before Adam", Iblis argues, "did not amount to disobedience of God's command. On the contrary, it resulted from my extreme love of God. Has he not himself commanded 'do not bow before any other except Me?' This forehead which has always bowed only before God cannot bow before anyone else even at His bidding."

Iblis contends, “This was a game between lover and beloved. He commanded me to play and I played the predetermined hand of lover. Thus I did what I was destined to do and was made to accept His wrath. But I still remain His companion, friend and comrade.”

Iblis advances the argument that although virtue and vice are opposed to each other, their operation is complementary. He asks: “How can I be held responsible for transforming good into evil. I am not the Creator. The Creator makes man good or bad. I am only expected to hold a mirror through which virtuous and vicious can see their faces and identify themselves.” According to Iblis’s reasoning evil circulates in every drop of human blood and yet man blames. Iblis for his own frailties.

Rumi’s Iblis is equipped only with reason, like a snake who attacks with his head. None can controvert his arguments, and no one can get out of his snare except through divine grace. However Mu‘*kwiyah* is not persuaded by Iblis’ articulate apology. He finds it deceitful and consisting of a pack of lies. When Iblis sarcastically claims that man is incapable of distinguishing between truth & falsehood, Rumi steps in and points out that falsehood always agitates the heart whereas truth provides solace and satisfaction.

Eventually Mu‘*kwiyah* overpowers Iblis who confesses that he woke up Mu‘*kwiyah* because had he missed the morning prayers his remorse would have earned him more grace. Iblis remains a liar until the end when he defends his act as based on envy, i.e. as a lover of God he is envious of man.

Rumi’s portrayal of Iblis depicts him as a lover of God. But a heartless being is incapable of loving, and here lies his deceit. Therefore when Iblis claims that all envy arises from love, for fear lest another becomes the chosen of the beloved, he is lying. In fact Rumi’s Iblis is nothing but reason (*‘aql*), the reverse of love (*‘ishq*). According to him Adam lapsed because of his stomach and sexual passion whereas Iblis was accursed because of pride and ambition engendered in him by reason. Rumi also shows to us that Iblis not only instigates man to commit sin, he sometimes persuades man to perform a virtuous act in order to deprive him from earning a higher reward.

In Goethe’s Faust the role of Mephisto is not that which is usually attributed to the Devil. He represents a spirit of nihilism, negation and contradictions, which is inimical to all life and higher forms of existence. Goethe first takes up the conflict of good and evil on a subjective plane and

thereafter at the cosmic level. It is only when Faust rejects all pretensions of knowledge that Mephisto appears at Faust's own craving. The events that follow take the reader through the problems of human innocence, suffering, love, hate, desire, appetite and -sin. It is the unique quality of Goethe's genius that he picked up an ordinary legend and filled it with the experiences of the entire human race. According to Goethe, evil is a stepping-stone to virtue in a mysterious way, and this is conveyed through the words of Mephisto in Faust:

Part of that power, not understood,

Which always wills the Bad,

And always promotes the Good.

The pact that Mephisto made with Faust was to dissuade him from striving in life. He offered Faust all forbidden worldly pleasures that Faust readily accepted but his nature did, not change. He was only temporarily lulled to sleep. According to Goethe it is in the nature of man to move from lower to ever higher plane and from there to still higher planes, and it is only by constant striving that man can carve out his destiny. Faust went on striving Without regard to good and evil as, in the eyes of Goethe, to strive is an act of willing and an act of willing does not fall in the realm of freedom, but to that of nature. Mephisto used all his devices to lure Faust into accepting conditions which were not conducive to the fulfilment of the divine plan. It was not only striving for a virtuous life that ultimately won Faust the divine grace. But it were fear and hope which elevated him to forgiveness. He was delivered in the end and God's faith in man was vindicated. Mephisto did not succeed in dragging Faust down to nihilistic depths of hell.

Thus restless activity in the nature of Faust did not hinder him in any manner even to wager his soul to the Devil:

To bear the woe of earth & all its joys,

To tussle, struggle, scuffle with its storms,

And not fearful in the crash of shipwreck.

In Goethe's words, God himself has provided an explanation for the creation of the Devil. In the "Prologue in Heaven" He declares:

*Of all the spirits that deny,
The Rogue (Devil) is to me least burdensome,
Man's activity too easily run slack,
He loves to sink into unlimited repose
And so I am glad to give him,
A companion like the Devil, who excites,
And works and goads him on to create.*

On the other hand, when the Devil confronts God in the "Prologue in Heaven", he complains that Adam is not his match, but is only a "long-legged grasshopper." Mephisto sarcastically affirms:

*My Lord! I find things there (on earth),
Still bad as they can be,
Man's misery even to pity moves my nature,
I've scarce the heart to plague the wretched creature.*

.....

*When a corpse approaches, close my house,
It goes with me as with the cat the mouse.*

It is interesting to note that Goethe refrained from describing the nature of God. Faust only explains that He is All-embracing and All-preserving and therefore cannot be named. Faust says:

*Call it Bliss! Heart! Love! God!,
I have no name thereof, feeling is everything,*

The name is sound & smoke, only to obscure celestial fire

When Eckermann asked Goethe about the nature of relationship of the Divine with the Daemonic and the incompatibility of one with the other, he answered:

“Dear boy! What do we know of the idea of the Divine, and what can our narrow conceptions presume to tell of the Supreme Being? If I call him by a hundred names, like a Turk (Muslim), I should yet fall short & have said nothing in comparison to the boundlessness of his attributes.”

Iqbal was profoundly influenced by Rumi who is his spiritual guide. On the other hand he was also a great admirer of Goethe. Yet Goethe's spirit, like the Urdu poet Ghalib's, is that of a poet, whereas Iqbal's spirit, following in the footsteps of Rumi, is more of a prophetic nature.

Iqbal is acknowledged as the poet of “Khudi” (Self/Ego). “Khudi” has many dimensions and forms. Therefore, Iqbal's Satan is one of the forms of “Khudi”. Since Iqbal believed in the greatness of human ego and was a poet of action, he could not resist being attracted by the dynamic personality of the Devil.

Iqbalian Satan is a gigantic five dimensional figure. His **first dimension** is that no one can surpass his deceit, cunning, remarkable planning and constant striving for the realization of his objective. He is not evil incarnate. His self-confidence, determination, pride and ambition are the qualities that make him a model of self-hood (Khudi).

Like Rumi and Goethe, Iqbal believes in restless & feverish activity for attaining the goal. The goal itself has no significance to Iqbal. It is the striving for the goal, the energy for tireless effort, and the strength to always continue to remain a wayfarer that matters. Life is a chase after a goal, which must go on changing. Iqbal says:

In a spark I crave a star,

And in a star a sun.

My journey has no bourn,

No place of halting, it is death for me to linger.

In the same strain there is another verse:

When my eye comes to rest on the loveliness of a beauty,

My heart at that moment yearns for a beauty lovelier still.

Iqbal, like Rumi and Goethe, believes that evil is necessary for the development of man. Had there been no evil, there would have been no conflict, no struggle and no striving. Therefore, Iqbal emphasizes:

Waste not your life in a world devoid of taste,

Which contains God but not the Devil.

(Payam i Mashriq)

Iqbal does not want man to get involved in the controversy of virtue & vice or good and evil, but must only concentrate on striving for better destinations. Life which leads to paradise is a life of passivity, inactivity and of eternal death.

The *second dimension* of Iqbal's Devil is his cheeky confrontation with God. Addressing God, he claims that he is no less than Him:

You bring stars into being,

I make them revolve,

The motion in your immobile

Universe is as I breathe my spirit into it.

You only put soul in the body

But the warmth of tumultuous activity

In life is from me.

You show the way to eternal rest,

I direct towards feverish activity and constant striving.

Man who is short-sighted, clueless and ignorant,

*Takes birth in your lap
Attains maturity only in my care.*

The third dimension of Iqbal's Devil is that he is the first lover (of God's Unity). He unhesitatingly accepted God's wrath and separation by his disobedience. But even in the state of negation he fulfilled the inner will of God. While introducing Iqbal to Satan in *Jawād N«mah*, the crucified Sufi ManÄër Àall«j says:

Since Satan is the first lover,
Preceding all others,
Adam is not familiar with his secrets.
Tear off the garb of imitation,
So that you may learn the lesson
Of "Tawâd" (God's Unity) from him.

The fourth dimension of Satan that fascinated Iqbal is his pride and rivalry with his adversary, man. Here Iqbal follows Rumi by affirming that satanic reason is the basis of the Devil's entire activity. Therefore, Iqbal says:

*If reason remains under the command of heart, it is Godly.
If it releases itself, it is Satanic.*

Iqbal's Satan mocks at Gabriel's cloistered piety and declares proudly:

*In man's pinch of dust my daring spirit
Has breathed ambition,
The Warp and Woof of mind and reason,
Are woven of my sedition.
The deeps of good & evil you only see from land's verge,
Which of us it is, you or I, that dares tempest's scourge?
Ask this of God, when next you stand alone within his sight,*

Whose blood is it has painted Man's long history so bright?

In the heart of Almighty like a pricking thorn I live

You only cry forever God, Oh God, Oh God, most high!

Iqbal's Devil like Goethe's, shows his disgust for the weakness of his rival. His Satan's complaint to God in *Javād N«mah* sounds very much like that of Mephisto:

O Lord of good & bad! Man's company

And commerce has degraded me. Not once

My bidding dares he to deny; his "self"

He realizes not. And never feels

His dust the thrill of disobedience,

His nature is effeminate

And feeble his resolve, he lacks the strength

To stand a single stroke of mine.

A riper rival I deserve. Reclaim

From me this game of chaff and dust,

For pranks and impish play

Suit not an aged one.

Confront me with a single real man

May I perchance gain bliss in my defeat!

The fifth dimension of Iqbalian Devil is political i.e., how he, on national and international planes, carves out earthly devils in the form of political leaders who through their strategies lead to war, deacease, misery and destruction of mankind. In his poem, "Satan's Parliament" (*Armaghan i Hijaz*)

Iqbal's Devil prophesises that since he himself is the founder and protector of capitalism, he is not afraid of the communist revolution *of* tomorrow.

But Iqbal's Devil is as miserable as man in this world full of complexities. In one of his quatrains Iqbal says:

From me convey the message to Iblis,

How long he intends to flutter,

Twist and scuffle under its net?

I have never been happy with this world,

Its morning is nothing but a prelude of the evening.

On another occasion Iqbal entreats the Devil for cooperation. If divine help is not forth coming, why not ask the Devil:

Come! Let us cooperate and lead the life of harmony.

Our mutual skills can transform

This wretched planet into a paradise

Under the skies, if we together

Disseminate love and healing,

And banish jealousy, hatred, disease & misery.

To sum up, good without evil amounts to the passivity of paradisaal rest. Therefore it is disapproved by the three poets as against the divine plan. Man's destiny lies in constant creative activity. Iqbal is categorical when he asserts:

When act performed is creative,

It's virtuous, even if sinful.

The crux of the message of the three poets is that the creation of Adam is not a "wasteful effort. It must be clearly understood that under the divine plan man is still in the state of becoming. Rumi says man has taken millions

and millions of centuries to evolve, from insect to plant, from plant to animal, and from animal to man. The evolution continues and through man's ceaseless efforts he is bound to cross higher stages of life and presumably go beyond angels. Goethe also lays emphasis on the achievement of higher forms of life by man. Iqbal through the constant strengthening of "ego" expects man to become a co-worker or rather a counsellor of the Divine Being in creating a more perfect universe. He hints that man would perhaps eventually democratize the arbitrary divine system, so much so that if a destiny is to be changed, action would be taken by God in consultation with and according to the will of man.

However, this indeed would be the man of distant tomorrow, the aspiration of the triangular poets, who, with the assistance of the Devil, could go beyond good and evil. But he justifiably cannot be found today, as Rumi in his famous quatrain asserts:

An old man carrying a lamp,

Was seen wandering in the streets.

When asked: "What are you looking for?"

Replied: "I am sick and tired of the beasts,

And look for a real man."

I said: "You can't find him

Our search was in vain."

"This is what I look for" he said,

"That which can't be found.