

IQBAL, RUMI AND THE SUFI TRADITION

Michael James Nazir Ali

It is extremely fortunate that this seminar to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Muhammed Iqbal's sojourn in Europe is taking place as this university is also celebrating the 400th anniversary of the birth of John Milton. Iqbāl had, for long, wanted to emulate Milton and in his *Taskhīr-i-Fītrat* (overcoming of nature) he was eventually able to retell the story of *Paradise Lost and Regained* from his own perspective of the self's ability to overcome its lower instincts and to clear away all obstacles in its path until it reaches its destiny. This is, of course, a very different kind of anthropology from the biblical one of creation, fall and redemption but one which is entirely characteristic of Iqbal's work in his post-European period.⁷⁸

My task today, however, is not to speak of Iqbal and Milton but Iqbal and Rumi. Rumi is Iqbāl's mentor par excellence. He appears as such in the *Asrār-i-Khudi* or Secrets of the Self:

پیر رومی خاک را اکسیر کرد از غبارم جلوه با تعمیر کرد

*The master of Rum transmuted my base earth to gold, He has fired this puff of dust with splendour*⁷⁹

In the late *Bāl-i-Jibrīl* he appears again as the *Pīr-i-Rūmī* to Iqbal's *Murīd-i-Hindī*.⁸⁰ It is, however, in his *magnum opus*, the *Javid-Nāmeḥ*, that Rumi comes

⁷⁸ See further S A Vahid, *Iqbal: His Art and Thought*, Karachi, OUP, 1959, p158.

⁷⁹ *Asrar-i-Khudi*, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1971, p8, see also S A Durrani (ed) *The Secrets of Self* with notes in Iqbal's own hand on the text of R A Nicholson's classic translation, Karachi University Press, 2001, p9.

⁸⁰ *Bāl-i-Jibrīl*, pp134f in *Kulliyāt-i-Iqbal*, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1973.

to the centre: he accompanies Iqbal on his journey to heaven and is to him what Virgil, Beatrice and St Bernard are to Dante in the Divine Comedy.⁸¹

Iqbal's reassessment of Rumi (in which he was followed by scholars of the stature of Nicholson) goes hand-in-hand with his changing understanding of *tasawwuf* or Sufism. In *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Iqbal is content to identify both Sufism and Rumi with Pantheism. The universe is but a reflection of the Eternal Beauty and love for this Beauty is such that it burns up everything, except the Beauty itself. He claims that, for the Sufi, God is all things.⁸² This attitude changed, however, to such an extent that Rumi became Iqbal's master in understanding and propagating his new doctrine of the self and its relationship to the world and God. Iqbal also came to realise that there was more to Sufism than just pantheism and monism. He began to appreciate the work of reformers like Shaikh Ahmad Sarhindī who tried to restore the doctrine of *wahdat asb-shubūḍ*, what Anne Marie Schimmel has called the 'unity of vision', in place of the dominant *wahdat al-wujūd* (or essential monism) view of Sufism in his time. Sarhindī believed that the mystic is profoundly related to the divine being but is not identical with it. Nor is the experience of annihilation (or *fanā*) the ultimate mystical experience. Beyond it lies a whole world of the 'journey in God' if the mystic is to attain to maturity in the mystical way or *tariqa*. This is generally known as *baqā ba'd al-fanā* or survival after mystical annihilation. Both Iqbal and Sarhindī also identify this with the prophetic experience: after the unitive experience the prophet returns to change the world.⁸³

An understanding of the emergence of the human person in evolutionary terms is to be found in Rumi as well as in Iqbal. Such an understanding relates humans to the world around them. As opposed to the monists who

⁸¹Javid-Nāmeḥ, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1972 (Eng Tr A J Arberry, London, 1966).

⁸²*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Lahore, Bazm-i-Iqbal, 1964, pp88f.

⁸³ See further Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, Ashraf, 1971, pp124ff, pp192f, and Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, pp367ff.

had discarded Neo-Platonism, Rumi describes a differentiated universe where human beings belong to both the spiritual and material dimensions:

یک گوهری چو بیضا جوشید و گشت دریا
کف کرد و کف زمین شد وز دود او سما شد
انگه ز عالم جان آمد سپاه انسان
عقلش وزیرگشت و دل رفت و پادشاه شد

The one substance boiled like an egg and became the Sea

It foamed the foam became the Earth and from its spray arose the sky.

Then from the spiritual world, the human army came.

Reason was its vizier and the Soul went forth and became King.⁸⁴

In a famous passage in the *Reconstruction*, this is how Iqbal presents his view of the relation of the universe to God and of the emergence of the human ego:

I have conceived the Ultimate Reality as an ego; and I must add now that from the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed. The creative energy of the Ultimate Ego, in whom deed and thought are identical, functions as ego-unities. The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the 'Great I Am'. Every atom of Divine Energy however low in the scale of experience is an ego. But there are degrees in the expression of egohood. Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man. That is why the Qur'an declares the Ultimate Ego to be

⁸⁴ *Divān-i-Shams-i-Tabrīz*, Tabrīz edn, 1280 AH 162 4a.

nearer to man than his own neck-vein. Like pearls do we live and move and have our being in the perpetual flow of Divine Life.⁸⁵

The final part of this passage is, of course, strikingly similar to St Paul's speech to the philosophers in Athens where he is relating his message to the words of their own poets (Acts 17:28). The passage is also very similar to some verses in Rumi's *Mathnawi* which speak of the emergence of the human from inanimate matter and from the animal world. Iqbal knew these verses because he refers to them in *The Metaphysics* and even then saw them as the 'realistic' side of Rumi's idealism.⁸⁶ The cosmology of both Rumi and of Iqbal is pan-psychist i.e. they believed the whole universe to be alive because everything shared in Divine Life. Human beings, however, have developed a self-conscious personality and the discussion in both centres around this self-consciousness and its significance for human destiny; self-knowledge is highly valued by Rumi. It is developed as a result of 'response' to the Word of God:

من بندهٗ اَنَقوم که خود را دانند
پر دم دلِ خود را ز غلط برهانند

I will be that people's slave

Who truly themselves know

And every moment do save

*Their hearts from error gross.*⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Reconstruction*, p71f.

⁸⁶ *Metaphysics*, pp91f and *Mathnawi Book IV*.

⁸⁷ *Kulliyāt-i-Shams-i-Tabrizī* (ed M Dervish), Tehran 1341 HS, Vol3, p84, cf AJ Arberry *Rubā'iyāt of Rumi*, (Eng Trans), London, 1949, p188.

The proper affirmation of ego-hood, according to Rumi, is precisely within the flow of Divine Life and it is by immersing ourselves in self-denial that we find ourselves. Referring to *Mansūr Al-Hallāj*'s famous cry *Ana'l Haqq* (I am the creative Truth), he has this to say:

در قلمِ نیستی خود غوطه بخورد
آنکه پس از آن درِ انالحق می
سفت

He dived into the sea of his non-entity

And from that won the pearl 'I am the Truth'.⁸⁸

Hallāj is also important to Iqbal as anticipating his own work:

حلاج کی لیکن یہ روایت ہے کہ اآخر
اک مرد قلندر نے کیا راز خودی فاش

But Hallāj's story is that at last

The secret of the self has been revealed by a man of God.⁸⁹

Such a secret has to be revealed at the proper time and in the right way lest it become our undoing:

آن انا بی وقت گفتن لعنت است
آن انا در وقت گفتن رحمت است
آن انا منصور رحمت شد یقین
آن انا فرعون لعنت شد ببین

⁸⁸ *Kulliyāt*, p76, Arberry p31.

⁸⁹ *Darb-i-Kalīm, Kulliyāt-i-Iqbal*, p118.

To say 'I' at the wrong time is a curse

To say 'I' at the proper time is a mercy

The 'I' of Mansūr certainly became a mercy

*But the 'I' of Pharaoh became a curse: watch out!*⁹⁰

According to Rumi, the mystic takes on the characteristics of God in the same way as iron takes on the qualities of fire when it has been in it long enough. It does not lose its own properties entirely but takes on the heat and the glow of the fire so that it can rightly say 'I am the fire':

اَشْتَمُ مِنْ غَرِّ تَرَا شَكْسَتْ وَ ظَن
اَزْمُونِ كَنْ دَسْتِ رَابِرِ مِنْ بَزَنْ

I am the fire, if you have doubt and suspicion

*Try me out yourself, put your hand on me and see!*⁹¹

In his lectures Iqbal interprets Hallāj's famous cry in the light of the prophetic tradition:

تَخْلُقُوا بِاخْلَاقِ اللَّهِ

Create in yourselves the attributes of God.

Here unitive experience is not the finite self being absorbed into the infinite. It is rather the infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite.⁹²

⁹⁰ *Mathnawi II*, 2522-23.

⁹¹ *Mathnawi II*, 1345f.

⁹² *Reconstruction*, p110, and *Fibi mā Fibi*, Tehran, 1959, p160.

Both Rumi and Iqbal believed that human beings are free but within the domains of a given moral order. They relied on the prophetic tradition that the true faith was between predestination and free-will. Rumi explains the expression القلم جف (the Pen has dried) as meaning that every action has an effect and a consequence appropriate to it. If you do wrong, you will not flourish. If you act rightly, you will be rewarded. Justice and injustice are not alike and will be dealt with differently.⁹³ Maulānā Shiblī Nauḥmānī, a distinguished biographer of Rūmī, tells us that Rūmī held that free-will must exist because we behave as if it did:

انسان کے تمام افعال و اقوال سے اختیار کا ثبوت ہوتا ہے۔ ہم جو کسی کو کسی بات کا حکم دیتے ہیں۔ کسی کام سے روکتے ہیں۔ کسی پر غصہ ظاہر کرتے ہیں۔ کسی کام کا ارادہ کرتے ہیں۔ کسی فعل پر نادم ہوتے ہیں۔ یہ تمام امور اس بات کی دلیل ہیں کہ ہم مخاطب کو اور اپنے آپ کو فاعل مختار خیال کرتے ہیں۔

Free-will is proved by all human deeds and words. When we order someone to do something, or stop them from doing it; when we show anger towards another or decide upon a certain course of action; when we are penitent, all these are a sign that we consider the other person and ourselves free-agents.⁹⁴

Iqbal bases his view on the freedom of the human personality on the famous ‘trust’ verse in the Qur’ān (33:72). Human beings accepted this trusteeship (*amānah*) which other aspects of creation could not.⁹⁵ God, according to him, is not only the creator of the Universe and of the human person but also of human freedom. The emergence of free selves is a limitation on the divine but this is not externally imposed. It arises, rather, out of God’s free act whereby he has chosen such free selves to be

⁹³ *Mathnawi V*, 3131f.

⁹⁴ *Sawānib-i-Maulwī-i-Rūm*, India, Undated, p125.

⁹⁵ *Reconstruction*, p88f.

participants of his own life, power and freedom. On their part, such selves must realise that their freedom depends on God and it is as they approach the source of their freedom that they get more and more free.⁹⁶

The self is not only free but active. S. A. Khundmiri has remarked that in this area Iqbal was greatly influenced by Rumi. It seems likely that much of Iqbal's vitalism and activism were derived from the philosophy of Henri Bergson and Iqbal's teacher at Cambridge, James Ward, even if it is true that Iqbal was attracted to these philosophers because of their affinities with Muslim thinkers such as Rumi.⁹⁷ Iqbal certainly recognised activism in Rumi and even put suitable verses in Rumi's mouth:

مومن از عزم و توکل قاهر است
گر ندارد این دو جوهر کافر است
کوهسار اذ ضربت او ریز ریز
در گریبانش هزاران رستخیز

The believer is mighty through a sense of purpose and trust in God,

Without these qualities, he is as good as an unbeliever.

He smashes mountains by his blow,

*In his heart are a thousand resurrections.*⁹⁸

⁹⁶ ibid 78f, Cf R A Nicholson's 'Trans of the *Asrar*, *The Secrets of the Self*, London, Macmillan, 1920, pXV.

⁹⁷ See further Vahid, op.cit, pp99f, B A Dar *A Study in Iqbal's Philosophy*, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1971, pp78ff, cf S A Khundmiri, *Conception of Time* in H Malik (ed) *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan*, Columbia, 1971, p251.

⁹⁸ *Mathnawi Pas Che Bāyad Kard Ay Aqwām-i-Sharq*, Lahore, 1936 p6.

That this is a correct interpretation is seen by examining Rumi's own work:

دوست دار دیار این اَشفتگی
کوششِ بیهوده به از خفتگی

The friend loves this restlessness; to struggle even vainly is better than sleep.

A few verses later, he goes on to say:

اندر این ره می تراش و می خراش
تادمِ اَخِرِ دمی فارغِ مَباش

*In this way be ever exerting yourself, until your last breath do not be unoccupied for a moment.*⁹⁹

In the end, both Rumi and Iqbal depend on the well-known Arabic proverb:

فی الحركات برکات

*In movements are blessings.*¹⁰⁰

For Iqbal and Rumi it is, in a very real sense, love which makes the world go round. For the latter, it is a force that unifies. The force of attraction in every atom and one form of life losing itself in another and thereby resulting in growth are all forms of love.¹⁰¹ For the former, the end of love is not a monistic union where all individuality is lost but a union of relatedness. According to him, love 'individualises' the lover as well as the beloved. The

⁹⁹ *Mathnawi* I, 1819-1822.

¹⁰⁰ *Fibi mā Fibi*, p247 cf *Reconstruction*, p123.

¹⁰¹ K A Hakim, *Metaphysics of Rumi*, Lahore, 1959, pp37ff.

effort to realise the most unique individuality individualises the seeker and implies the individuality of the sought, for nothing else would satisfy the nature of the seeker.¹⁰²

Rumi emphasises the transforming nature of love. It makes service and sacrifice possible and it gives new life in place of death:

از محبت دار تختی می شود و ز محبت بار بختی می شود
از محبت شاه بنده می شود وز محبت مرده زنده می شود

By love the cross becomes a throne, by it the rider the lowly mount

By love the King becomes a slave and by it the dead are raised to life

It is difficult to imagine a better summing-up of the Gospel of Jesus Christ than this.¹⁰³ In the preface to the Second Book of the *Mathnawi*, Rumi claims that God's love is primary whereas ours is derivative. He refers here to Qur'ān (5:57) where it is said that God loves believers (*yuhibbubum*) and that they, in turn, love him *یحبهونہ و یحبہم* (*yuhibbūnahu*). The earliest Sufis used the Qur'ānic term for love, *mahabba*. The word *'ishq*, which had overtones of sensual passion was not used at first and only gradually came to be acceptable. Iqbal and Rumi, however, use both words freely and, it seems, interchangeably. So, Rumi can say:

در عشق مست باش که عشق است هرچه هست

*Be intoxicated in love for love is all that is.*¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² R A Nicholson, *op.cit.* ppXXVf.

¹⁰³ *Mathnawi II*, 1529-1531.

¹⁰⁴ R A Nicholson (ed) *Divani-i-Shams-i-Tabrizi*, CVP 1898, p50.

And for Iqbal:

یے محبت زندگی ماتم همه
کاروبارش زشت و نامحکم همه

*Without love, life is all mourning, its affairs disordered and unstable*¹⁰⁵.

But then he can also say:

ابتدای عشق و مستی قاهری است
انتهای عشق و مستی دلبری است

*The beginning of love and intoxication is the experience of the tremendum,
its climax is the experience of the fascinans.*¹⁰⁶

Iqbal, as well as the Cambridge scholar Margaret Smith, draw our attention to the contact and dialogue between the early Sūfis and the Christian monks of the deserts of Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Iqbal goes so far as to say that the presence of this monasticism ‘as a working ideal of life’ was one of the reasons, in addition to the Qur’an and the Sunnah, for the rise of Sufism in the first Islamic centuries. It is interesting, in this connection, that Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh tell us of the abiding concern of the desert fathers to uphold the priority of God’s infinite love and compassion. Ours can only be, however inadequately, a response to such love.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *Zabūr-i-ʿAjam*, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1970, p264 *Zabūr-i-ʿAjam*, Lahore, Ghulam Ali, 1970, p264.

¹⁰⁶ *Pas Che Bāyad Kard*, p15.

¹⁰⁷ Iqbal, *Metaphysics*, pp76f, Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, London, 1931 (reprint Kessinger n.d) and Benedicta Ward (ed), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Oxford, 1981, ppVIII cf Michael Nazir-Ali in D Thomas and C Amos (eds) *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, London, Melisande, 2003, pp319ff.

Whilst Rumi and Iqbal are in agreement with the Sūfī emphasis on the unitive nature of love, they also want to affirm that such a union is one of relatedness and not absorption into the Divine. In this, they are at one with the mainstream of orthodox Christian, Muslim and Jewish mysticism.

Love leads to the mystic vision, the rest is dispensable. Iqbal quotes from Rumi:

اَدَمی دیدست باقی پوست است
دید اَن باشد که دید دوست است

Humans are sight, the rest is worthless and vestigial

*that only is true sight which is sight of the Beloved.*¹⁰⁸

Such a vision is also called ‘heart’ by Iqbal. The heart ‘sees’ spiritually and can be in direct contact with that reality which is beyond everyday experience and yet underlies it. Rumi agrees:

حس ابدان قُوتِ ظلمت می خورد
حس جان از اَفتابی می چرد

The bodily senses are eating the food of darkness,

*the spiritual senses are feeding on the Sun itself.*¹⁰⁹

Rebirth is another significant way of talking about spiritual life and the vision it brings:

سفر در خویش؟ زادن بے اب و مام
ثریا را گرفتن اذ لب بام

¹⁰⁸ *Mathnawi I, 1406 and Javid-Nāmeḥ, p23.*

¹⁰⁹ *Reconstruction, p15 and Mathnawi II, 51.*

*Journeying into the self – what is it? It is to be born without father or mother. It is to seize the stars from the edge of the roof.*¹¹⁰

Again, in the *Javid-Nāmeḥ* two kinds of birth are compared:

زادن	طفل	از	شکست	اشکم	است
زادنِ	مرد	از	شکست	عالم	است

*The birth of a child is the opening of the womb; that of the godly is the opening up of another world.*¹¹¹

Rumi compares such re-birth directly with the birth of Jesus:

بانگِ حق اندر حجاب و بے حجاب
آن دهد کو داد مریم را زحیب

*The call of God, manifest or hidden, gives that which he gave Mary from his very heart.*¹¹²

As we have pointed out, for both Rumi and Iqbal, such a vision is not a reason for the dissolution or absorption of self. It is, in fact, what prepares the self for immortality. Discipline, inward wakefulness and endurance of suffering are needed for the mystic vision and the immortality of which it gives us assurance.¹¹³

There is, of course, much more that Iqbal and Rumi have in common: their understanding of God, of the nature of revelation and of human

¹¹⁰ *Zubūr*, p225.

¹¹¹ *Javid-Nameḥ*, p21.

¹¹² *Mathnawī I*, 1935.

¹¹³ *Reconstruction*, p. 119, *Fibi ma Fibi*, pp208ff.

destiny, for example. They are also concerned about the relationship of the individual to the community and how this is expressed in the Islamic tradition. Whilst both believe in the superiority of Islam, they are also prepared to go beyond and to consider what may be imaginative, suggestive and even true in other faiths. They both attempt to develop theodicies which explain the ways of God to human beings and, in this, there is no blame if the effort is heroic but, as with Milton, ultimately unsuccessful.

PROMISE OF MODERNITY