ALLAMA MUHAMMAD IQBAL AND TRANSLATION POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSLATION OF IQBAL'S R*ECONSTRUCTION* IN URDU WAS BESET NOT ONLY WITH THE PROBLEM OF A DIFFERENCE OF MILIEU BUT ALSO WITH THAT OF THE UNPREPAREDNESS OF THE SUBJUGATED TO IDENTIFY WITH THE SUBJUGATOR IN ANY WAY

Sir Muhammad Iqbal was a prominent literary and political figure in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Though he died before the creation of Pakistan, he is considered to be among the first few people to talk about an independent Muslim state in the North-West India. In this respect he is venerated by Pakistanis as a freedom-fighter who used his pen to stimulate his dormant nation.

However, it is a pity to note that there is scarce research about Iqbal's ideas and philosophy in the West. He was educated at Trinity College, University of Cambridge and at Munich University, Germany, but the West often ignores him as a scholar. The most prominent western writings on him include an analysis of his writings and political life in Hamilton A. R. Gibb's *Modern Trends in Islam* (1947); Iqbal's contribution to modern Islam in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Modern Islam in India* (date); Iqbal's fundamental principles and his assimilation of Western ideas in Annemarie Schimmel's *Gabriel's Wing* (1963); and a detailed discussion of different aspects of Iqbal's philosophy in *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan*, edited by Hafeez Malik (1971). There are a few scholarly articles by Western writers which mostly appeared in Pakistani newspapers and journals. Despite the fact that Iqbal immediately captured the attention of famous Orientalists of his time, such as Professor Thomas Arnold and Professor Reynold A. Nicholson, he could not get as much attention as was due to him. One such proof is the date of publication of the said sources– there is a difference of approximately a decade between each of them.

One reason for this oblivion is the scarcity of good translations of Iqbal's work. In order to appeal to a wider Muslim audience he chose to write in Persian; and for the masses of India, in Urdu. Both languages suited best his poetic endeavours. But when it came to addressing the whole world, he chose English, which was a natural choice for him for two reasons: first, he was educated at English-language institutions; second, he was living in a British colony. But ironically, his most representative works were not in English. Hence the West did not read him. His *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* could not win Western favour because its antecedents were not familiar to Western scholars, except for a few Orientalists of his time.

As a result, not only the Western failure to appreciate Iqbal's talent but also its indifference to acknowledge the traces of Western ideas in his work demands a revival of interest in Iqbal's works and his system of thought. I intend to draw the attention of scholarly circles, both in the East and the West, towards Iqbal and the quality of his work. A study of Iqbal is very germane to the present socio-political situations. The deplorable human condition and the impassable difference between the East and the West urge researchers to delve deep into those sources which can cement relationships between the continents and heal our wounds. One such source, no doubt, can be the work of a writer like Iqbal who stands at the meeting point between the two cultures.

I have divided my paper into two parts: part one deals with the implications of British imperialism for the languages of the subjugated Indians with a specific emphasis on Urdu; and part two dwells on the subject of translation of Iqbal's two major works, *Asrar-i-Khudi* (*Secrets of the Self*) and *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. This is germane to our present discussion as the translation issue in Iqbal's case presents a new paradigm for *translatio imperii* studies, because he had to face resistance from both the imperialists and his own countrymen, the Indians of the sub-continent.

D. J. Matthews *et al* mention in their book *Urdu Literature* that as the national language of Pakistan and as one of the official languages of India, Urdu ranks as one of the most important languages of the subcontinent of South Asia. It is one of the most widely spoken languages of the subcontinent, and has been further carried by emigration to many other parts of the world, and yet the mainstream of its literary development extends back

only some two and a half centuries, and the term 'Urdu' itself came to be applied to the language still more recently.

Urdu developed as a result of the expansion of the Muslim empire. It has always been directly linked to the Muslims of the subcontinent, though its origin can be dated only to a period many centuries later than the foundation of Islam itself. It is certain that an expedition in AD 711 led by Muhammad bin Qasim succeeded in subjugating Sind and the lower Punjab, but this remained only a peripheral outpost of the Islamic world (Matthews *et al*).

Only some three centuries later the invasions of Sultan Mahmūd of Ghazni (998-1030), who followed the historic route from Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, established a somewhat stable Muslim presence in India. Under Mahmūd's successors the Punjab and the adjacent north-western areas were brought under the permanent authority of a Muslim kingdom, with its capital eventually established in Lahore. After a period of consolidation, further conquests of the neighboring Hindu kingdoms were undertaken by the Muslims, whose political dominance of northern India was effectively inaugurated by the conquest of Delhi in 1192 by Qūtb ud Dīn Aibak. So began the period of the Delhi Sultanate, which was to dominate for the next three centuries until the coming of the Mughals (2).

The origins of Urdu lie in this early period of Muslim rule in the subcontinent. V. P. Liperovsky mentions in *The Encyclopedia of Pakistan* that Urdu dates back to *Khari Boli* or "stable speech" which developed from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries in the Delhi, Meerut and Agra region which originally included Lahore. According to him, these regions formed "a zone of intense contact between Muslim newcomers speaking Turkic and Iranian languages and the local population" (286). Thus Urdu resembles English in being a language of very mixed origins.

The story of how these languages eventually came together in Northern India is all the more interesting for its complexity and its association with Muslim imperialism. Linguistically the most remote of all is Arabic, a member of the Semitic language family, which also includes Hebrew. Yet, in religious terms, Arabic has always been of central importance to Muslims as the language of the Quran and Muslim theology. The first expansion of Islam was accompanied by a rapid expansion of Arabic beyond its original homeland in the Arabian Peninsula. Not only was it the language of the new

religion, but it also served as the official language of the Caliphate, cultivated both for administrative and for literary purposes. It also quickly came to be adopted as a spoken language over much of the original Islamic empire, but Arabic was to prove less successful in the eastern realms of the Caliphate where Persian began to be cultivated in preference to Arabic (Matthews *et al* 3).

The Ghaznavid kingdom of Sultan Mahmud was one of these eastern successor states of the Caliphate where Persian was cultivated. Irrespective, therefore, of the actual racial origins of the Muslim invaders of the subcontinent, who included besides Persians many Turks as well as Pashto-speaking Pathans, it was Persian which was the chief language brought by the conquests to north-western India (Matthews *et al* 4). With the establishment of Muslim rule in Delhi, it was the old Hindi of this area which came to form the major partner with Persian. This variety of Hindi is called *Khari Boli*. Thanks to the association of *Khari Boli* with the central area of imperial capital, it proved the ideal basis for a widespread lingua franca, which would be spread in time over a large part of the subcontinent (6).

Although Persian continued to be universally used as the language of administration and literature in the Delhi Sultanate, its Muslim population no longer consisted of a majority of foreign, Persian-speaking immigrants, for they were soon outnumbered by a native Indian Muslim community as a result of the process of intermarriage and widespread conversion. In the conversion to Islam of a large proportion of the Hindu population of north-western India, the principal role was played not by the maulvis and qazis who upheld the religion in its strictest orthodox form, but by representatives of the mystical Sufi orders (Matthews *et al* 7). It is in the Persian account of the lives of these saints that the first garbled fragments of Urdu are recorded, in descriptions of their conversations with their disciples. Since none of this literature was recorded until later centuries, its original form can only be dimly glimpsed. But it seems that Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), the greatest Persian poet of the Delhi *Sultanate* and a disciple of a famous Sufi, Khwaja Nizam ud Din, also composed some poetry in *Khari Boli* (8).

During the middle and later years of the eighteenth century, Urdu finally supplanted Persian as the main medium of poetry in circles associated with the Muslim courts. This was the age of the great masters Sauda (d. 1781) and

Mir (d. 1810), who both grew up in Delhi, but--like so many of their talented contemporaries--were forced to move in search of patronage to the wealthy court of Lucknow, already protected against political upheaval by having been reduced to the effective status of a vassal of the expanding British power. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the British had brought the feeble remnant of the Mughal empire in Delhi under their control.

Cocooned within the web of British paramountcy, the royalty and nobility of Lucknow were able to extend lavish patronage to Urdu poetry. The first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, saw a spectacular development of Urdu in Lucknow. An ornate and Persianized Urdu was also cultivated in the circle of writers grouped around the last Mughal 'emperor' of Delhi, of whom the greatest was Ghalib (d. 1869), one of the finest of all Urdu poets, and - thanks to the vividness of his letters - one of the outstanding pioneers of prose-writing in the language.

It is also from this period that the name 'Urdu' came to be applied to the language. Throughout the period of their rule in the subcontinent Muslim writers had been casual in their references to the spoken local languages, usually describing them indifferently by such labels as 'Hindi', 'Hindui', and 'Indian'. For a while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries other names became current, notably *Rekhta*, the 'mixed language'. Finally, however, the term 'Urdu' came to be preferred. This is derived from the Turkish word *ordu*--which is also the origin of English word 'horde'. The headquarters of the imperial army in Delhi were known as the *Urdu-e-Mualla*, or 'exalted camp,' and Urdu owes its present name to being the language of this camp, and--by extension--of the imperial capital (Matthews *et al* 10-12).

The British rulers supported Urdu as a lingua franca, though they called it 'Hindustani'. Christian missionaries used it as a vehicle to spread the Gospel as widely as possible. But the Hindu majority of India increasingly alienated itself from Hinustani/Urdu as the Muslims more vigorously clung to the language for their separate identity, especially after the mutiny of 1857. Hence two separate languages of the Indians emerged: Hindi for the Hindus and Urdu for the Muslims. This language divide helped accelerate the British imperial plan of 'divide and rule'.

Iqbal was born to a Punjabi-speaking Muslim family that converted from Brahman Hinduism to Islam just a few centuries before his birth. The family, though not highly educated, paid special attention to nurturing of their promising son, Iqbal, who was trained in Persian, Arabic, Urdu and English languages by his early tutors. Yet German was another language which he learned as a part of his PhD programme in Germany. This equipped him with the ability to communicate with felicity in languages of both Muslim and British imperialism: the use of Persian could be nostalgic; the use of Urdu was due to a separate Muslim identity; and the use of English was to show his competence in advanced knowledge and learning.

However, his mastery of these languages gets him into trouble if we analyze the reception of his two major works: *Asrar-i-Khudi* (*Secrets of the Self*) and *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. I consider both works as specimens of resistance literature: resisting both the domestic orthodoxy and the British hegemony. Stephen Slemon in his article "Unsettling the Empire" explains literary resistance as embedded in a text which resists a "definable set of power relations" (104). He further explains, "all literary writing which emerges from these cultural locations will be understood as carrying a radical and contestatory content– and this gives away the rather important point that subjected peoples are sometimes capable of producing reactionary literary documents" (106). Iqbal's *Secrets of the Self* and *Reconstruction* follow this paradigm with a twist, that is to say, Iqbal had to resist not only British imperialists but also indigenous factions who opposed his work tooth and nail.

The history of the reception of *Secrets of the Self* is very interesting as it involves the issue of translation and misinterpretation. Originally written in Persian, it was published in 1915 and provoked an uproar in the orthodox and so-called educated Muslim sections of India. Iqbal, who never hesitated from acknowledging the dynamic nature of Western Europe, proposed a change in the mystic trends then so popular in India. His introductory remarks about a famous Persian mystic poet, Hafiz Shirazi, were received with great resentment. Iqbal infused his message with new ideas of a constant struggle stemming from internal tensions and conflicts of the human being as an ego. His ideas of ego, self-determination and self-realization were interpreted as sacrilegious attempts on the part of a Westernized mind in the garb of a

liberal Muslim. In a letter to R. A. Nicholson, Iqbal enunciated his philosophy of *khudi* or ego as follows:

> What then is life? It is individual: its highest form, so far is the Ego in which the individual becomes a self-contained exclusive centre….The greater his distance from God, the less his individuality. He who comes nearest to God is the completest person. Not that he is finally absorbed in God. On the contrary, he absorbs God into himself. (*Discourses of Iqbal* 195)

The way Iqbal interpreted ego was a clear departure from the conventional interpretation of the term in Muslim mysticism. Iqbal believed that the current sufistic practices in Islam had nothing to do with the plain teaching of Islam and its Arabic essence. Though only the ego could take an individual to the heights of human perfection, the current sufistic trends could lull it into a deep slumber and make it inactive, hence paving way for subjugation of the nation. Further he draws attention towards the difference between the conventional and original meaning of the word Ego (*khudi*). In a note dictated to Nazir Niazi he explains:

> The word 'Khudi' was chosen with great difficulty and most reluctantly. From a literary point of view it has many shortcomings and ethically it is generally used in a bad sense, both in Urdu and Persian….Thus metaphysically the word 'Khudi' is used in the sense of that indescribable feeling of 'I' which forms the basis of the uniqueness of each individual. Metaphysically it does not convey an ethical significance for those who cannot get rid of its ethical significance. I have already said in the *Zubur-i-Ajam*, 'The wine of egohood is no doubt bitter, but do look to thy disease and take my poison for the sake of thy health.' When I condemn self-negation I do not mean self-denial in the moral sense; for self-denial in the moral sense is a source of strength to the ego. In condemning self-negation I am condemning those forms of conduct which lead to the extinction of 'I' as a metaphysical force, for its extinction would mean its dissolution, its incapacity for personal immortality. (*Discourses of Iqbal* 211-12)

But this ideology was far-fetched for the orthodox Muslim sections in India whose chief representatives unleashed a torrent of abuse against him and severely criticized him in newspaper essays and articles from 1915 to

1918. The most painful aspect of the dispute was that those who did not read the poem also participated in this war against Iqbal and dubbed him as infidel, enemy of Sufism and religion, advocate of the devil, and traitor. This war-mongering faction added many objectionable ideas to the original passage while translating it into Urdu.

But that was only one part of the controversy. The second part commenced with the English translation of the poem in 1920. This time the criticism came from the forces associated with the imperialists, the British. In a letter to the poem's English translator, Dr. Nicholson, Iqbal referred to the misinterpretation of his idea of Perfect Man and Ego. He objected to the view of a critic published in *Athenaeum* (London) in which the critic attempted to draw close similarities between Iqbal's Perfect Man and Nietzsche's Superman. Iqbal's reply was that he had developed his idea at least twenty years before reading Nietzsche. He further commented on the criticism of Dickinson that he did not believe in brute force, but rather in the power of the spirit:

> I am afraid the old European idea of a blood-thirsty Islam is still lingering in the mind of Mr. Dickinson. All men and not Muslims alone are meant for the Kingdom of God on earth, provided they say good-bye to their idols of race and nationality, and treat one another as personalities. Leagues. Mandates, treaties…and Imperialism, however, draped in democracy, can never bring salvation to mankind….That Muslims have fought and conquered like other peoples, and that some of their leaders screened their personal ambitions behind the veil of religion, I do not deny, but I am absolutely sure that territorial conquest was no part of the original programme of Islam. As a matter of fact, I consider it a great loss that the progress of Islam as a conquering faith stultified the growth of those germs of an economic and democratic organization of society which I find scattered up and down the pages of the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet….The object of my Persian poem is not to make a case for Islam; my aim is simply to discover a universal social reconstruction… (*Discourses of Iqbal* 204-05)

Was it a translation or transfusion? I leave it to the discerning eye and now turn to his *Reconstruction* which was originally written in English--the colonizer's language. Though Urdu/Hindustani won the favour of the British officials for administrative needs, it did not and could not enjoy equal status

with English. History proves that Urdu was taught to British bureaucrats, but the irony is that those textbooks were published in London. English had first ousted Persian as an official language and was later considered far better for the expression of ideas than the language(s) of the colonized.

Iqbal's decision to write his major philosophical work, *Reconstruction*, in English could not extricate itself from the power struggle fought on the terrain of language. This is, to some extent, what Chinua Achebe talks about in his article "Colonial Criticism". Under imperial rule "a new situation was slowly developing as a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe's presence and position in their native land with the intellectual weapons of Europe itself" (58). Iqbal uses such intellectual weapons very successfully.

Reconstruction is a philosophical treatise based upon Iqbal's wish to inculcate the spirit of inquiry among Muslim youth. It consists of seven lectures which were first delivered during 1929 and 1930 to the gatherings of learned and highly-educated Indians, and that is why the medium used was English. Translation works on various levels in the composition of this book which was finally published in 1930.

First of all, Iqbal translated/interpreted around one hundred and fifty Eastern and Western scholars, which in itself is amazing. He assumed that his audience was well familiar with all those sources and anticipated no difficulty to use the sources to establish his view of the dynamic nature of the universe. By this implication he meant the dynamic spirit of Islam which had been stifled by hegemonic struggle. The proposal that he had for this revival of interest was to do a synthetic study of Islamic theology and European progress in science and technology. In a letter to a famous Muslim scholar, Syed Suleman Nadvi, he commented on his intention:

> My intention is that the Muslims should do the study of Islamic theology in the light of modern jurisprudence, but this should be a critical study rather than slavish imitation. The Muslims of the early ages did the same - Greek philosophy was once considered the acme of human intellect but when Muslims were well-equipped with critical insight, they fought against the philosophy by using Greek syllogism. I believe that we need the same drive today. (qtd. in *Zindah Rud* 413 my translation)

But this was not an easy task. First, Iqbal had to wrest his meaning from European philosophical works with great difficulty. This enterprise was dangerous in the sense that on the one hand, he acknowledged his indebtedness to Western sources, and on the other, he tried to synthesize them with the basic teachings of Islam. Here is the danger: the subjugated Muslims in the entire Muslim world had strong resentment for their colonizers. They were not mentally prepared for such a daring work which shows glimpses of the approval of the West. The ideas and above all the language in which the ideas were clothed, were of the imperialists - the suppressors'. Those who took this book seriously were few in number and those who opposed the work joined the camp of orthodox *maulvi*s who had already issued a fatwa against Iqbal in 1924. Iqbal had already been warned by his well-wishers against an Urdu translation of the book. It was first translated into Urdu in 1958, twenty years after the death of Iqbal.

The story of the composition and translation of *Reconstruction* illuminates our discussion of translation theories and imperialism. Its author had to face resistance first from the English language itself when he declared that some ideas which are the product of modern philosophical debates are difficult to represent: "I cannot, at times, find most appropriate expressions for such thoughts (*Zinda Rūd* 419, my translation)." In my view, this points to the process of decolonization via the medium of language— the English language, which was the language of the imperial power, could be used as an intellectual weapon at a very high price. In Iqbal's case, this led to the confusion and complexity of his views in the book as marked by his son, Javid Iqbal, in his biography, *Zinda Rūd*.

On the other hand, translation of the book in the language of the subjugated, Urdu, was also problematic. The terrain of this language was not then fertile enough to absorb the hail of the imperialists' ideas, no matter how much effort was put to synthesize them with Islamic sources. The irony is that the book could not win many readers in either language. Perhaps, it is waiting for yet another translation - a translation in a globalized era.

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