

REVOLUTION THROUGH REVELATION:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF MUHAMMAD IQBAL'S
AND MUHAMMAD AKIF'S POETICS

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ABSTRACT

Only a small contingent of Muslim intelligentsia from the last century has influenced the Muslim societies. Muhammad Iqbal, the philosopher-poet from the present-day Pakistan and Muhammad Akif from Turkey are examples of an intellectual mind in quest of restoring the lost glory of Islam, paradigmatically knowledge-oriented, and this paper argues that both Iqbal and Akif use poetry as a medium to convey the epistemology of Quranic thought and Apostolic literature (Hadith). But what makes these two poets extraordinary is the way they juxtapose the cultural and political operations of Western civilization with Islamic civilization. Utterly disillusioned with western civilization's materialism and its commitment to bifurcation of Church with State both Iqbal and Akif marshal the cause of Muslim renaissance relying on the glory of Islamic values grounded on Quranic injunctions, and the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). But what makes their work more enchanting as they choose the genre of poetry warding off the perils of putative didacticism and pay special attention to the compulsions of aesthetics and write in metaphors establishing their project that art and aesthetics is not the legacy only of western civilization.

Plato defined poet as an imitator. A poet copies the ideal world which exists beyond sense perception. Plato labeled it as the world of ideas of which the material world we live in is a copy (mimesis). And a poet copies a copy, hence twice removed from reality. According to this epistemic standpoint, poetry produces inferior knowledge because of its being far away from the world of ideas or the ideal world. Hence, it is a journey from unknown to known, from ideal to real. Poetic reality, in Plato's view, cannot be trusted because it is a fiction or a lie. It is interesting to note here that the scriptures including the Holy Quran also have the same opinion about poetry.

Neither have we taught you (The Holy Prophet) poetry nor is it worthy of your status. Rather it is the guidance and an open call for revolution. So that it warns all those who have the potential to grow.¹

The question arises why such an open rejection of the discourse of poetry where both Plato and the Quran have drawn upon the poetic imagery to denounce the role of poets in society. The answer lies in the peculiar type of irrationality that the discourse of poetry celebrates. A poet's freedom is not circumscribed by any limitation on his thoughts and imagination. This unlimited aesthetic power ultimately paves way for the critique of existing power hierarchies. And Plato as an idealist feels scared of the subversive power of poetry.

We argue in this paper that Iqbal revisited the Quranic and Platonic conception of poetry by bringing in the element of ontological discussions in the field of poetry. Iqbal's poetry is deeply rooted in the cultural consciousness of colonial India but his themes are not related to any particular spatiotemporal reality. Since human soul is the subject matter of poetry hence Indian Muslim becomes the prototype human being who will present the ideal model of Quranic humanity to the generations to come. Thus past, present and future are fused in his poetry to give birth to a Quranic humanist philosophy which though addresses the political realities of colonial India yet the appeal remains universal. In the words of Dr. Abdul Mughni Iqbal was the most informed of the philosophers of the world. He had a multidisciplinary understanding of life. He had read both the Occidental and Orientalist tradition of poetry. At various

places in his poetry, he has not only referred to their work but also critiqued it.²

The holy Quran is Iqbal's epistemic site. He celebrates his Muslim identity and categorically declares that only the Quranic philosophy has the capacity to redeem suffering humanity. And nowhere does he feel defensive about this commitment. The concept of self which revolutionized the Indian Muslim philosophical thought is deeply rooted in the Quranic conception of life and selfhood. As a colonized Muslim, he was faced with the challenge of evolving a poetic discourse which capacitates Indian Muslims to review their status in the cosmos. We have deliberately used the word cosmos because Iqbal's Muslim hero would ultimately lead the whole world. In other words, decolonization was the issue of the present but Iqbal envisages the role of world leader for Indian Muslims.

The concept of self or Khudi is pivotal to Iqbal. But before we explain it, it is better to have an overview of the Quranic concept of the human self. According to the Quran, the major difference between animal self and human self is of "Nafs". Human life follows the same patterns of birth and death as of other animals. But the possession of self-differentiates it from other forms of existence. The Quran uses another word "Rooh" which can also be translated as the self. The other forms of animal existence are aware of their paths of life. Their life is programmed in their mind. Hence animals cannot change their course of life. But a human child is not aware of anything of the choices that he has to make. He is free to take any path in life he likes. The freedom of this unlimited choice is the result of the gift he has been blessed with i.e. human soul.

The soul expresses itself by making choices. And in human society the most complex of issues that humanity is faced with is to define the nature of good and evil. Since, the development of the human soul is the ultimate objective of society and the universe; hence it needs guidance to make those choices which would be beneficial for the entire humanity. At this point the Quran defines those who raise ontological questions and then reach a positive conclusion about the purposefulness of human life. They are the true possessors of soul because they take a critical view of their surroundings. Before citing the relevant verse of the Quran, we would also like to spell out the epistemic differences between Plato and the Quran. Plato considered the world of matter as the world of illusion because it was a copy of the real. Thus, the knowledge produced about this world would remain questionable because of the illusory nature of this universe. It must be kept in mind that at the time of revelation of the Quran, the world was in grip of Platonic

thought. The Quran challenged this epistemic position. In Surah Al Imran, it is revealed:

It is an established truth that in the creation of this universe (the sky and the earth) and the cyclic patterns of day and night, there are signs of wisdom for those who think. These are the people who remain engrossed with the study of this universe and then proclaim that our Lord has not created this universe without purpose.³

The Quran clearly rejects the Platonic epistemic position by positing that matter is not an illusion but a reality. The word used in Arabic is “Haq” which means anything which can be verified. For example, if it is raining outside and I state it in words, my statement would be based on “Haq” or truth because anyone can go outside and verify it. This degree of verifiability that can be experienced through senses is described as “Haq” in Arabic. Moreover, anything which is based on haq always produces results. We argue that the Quranic episteme brought a paradigm shift by declaring matter as an agency which exists per se and has the potential of producing results. In our view, it was a Copernican revolution in human thought as it presented the external universe as an existential reality worthy of creative engagement. And the Quran enjoins that only those who have wisdom engage with this meditation over the existence of the external universe.

Iqbal’s ideal Muslim borrows his wisdom from the revelation. And since he has been assigned the primary duty to think and meditate, he does not have any chance of being misled by other philosophies as the love for the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the guidance of the Quran serve as the torch bearers of his life. This is the first stage of self-awareness or the awakening of the self in which Iqbal’s hero develops a passionate love for freedom and struggle. The slave of Muhammad (SAW) cannot be the slave of anyone else. Freedom from borrowed thoughts is only possible when Indian Muslim develops a sense of selfhood which refuses to surrender to any kind of slavery. Iqbal labels these feelings as “Ishq” or love. The English word does not convey the meanings of the Urdu word Ishq as used by Iqbal in his poetry. Ishq is not love in the literal sense of the word. It has a broader range of meanings in Iqbal. To sum up it can be argued that for Iqbal, Ishq means the human subjectivity that makes decisions in the light of revelation of the Quran and considers the Holy Prophet (SAW) as the absolute ideal to be followed in all walks of life. Thus an ideal Muslim surrenders his freedom to Muhammad (SAW) only to become the master of the world. In “Masjad-e Qartaba” “Mosque of Cordoba”, Iqbal celebrates the idea of the Ideal Muslim:

The hand of God is the hand of the pious Muslim,

which is triumphant, effectual, resourceful [and] skillful.
[He possesses] the traits of both man and angel and the attributes of the Lord;
his heart, though carefree, is richer than the two worlds.
His expectations are few, his objectives are sublime;
his style is irresistible, his sight is captivating.
[He's] soft while conversing, passionate while in action;
be it the battlefield or a social gathering [he's always] pious and orderly.
His faith is the focal point of truth
and the rest of the cosmos is illusion, sorcery and unreal.
He's the destination of reason, he is the output of love;
He's the warmth of the assemblage in the circuit of cosmos.⁴

The slavery of Muhammad (SAW) turns the ideal Muslim into another being whose objectives are aligned with the divine designs. He becomes the hand of God and his heart is filled with content. The Muslim hero does not become a recluse or mystic to hide in a cave and meditate. We have used the word creative meditation in the above discussion which means that political engagement with the surrounding political realities. During the era of colonization, Iqbal rejected Deoband idea of religious struggle in the private sphere of life. The development of self cannot take place during colonization. And Muslim becomes hand of God only when he is free and fights for freedom of the whole world. With his small hopes, and larger than life desires, he views the whole world as the anti-self that he is destined to conquer. And the love for the ideal character of the Holy Prophet leads him in this struggle. He is never sceptical of his commitment and destination. This is the stage when he becomes the practical demonstration of the ideal Muslim selfhood. In Surah 72, verse 30, it is said about the ideal Muslim that they want only those things that their God wants them to do. This harmony between the earthly existence and divine ideal is the ultimate goal of Muslim self.

For the Indian Muslims, the first step towards the realization of this dream was contained in the struggle for decolonization. A slave can neither think independently nor can his wisdom be trusted. Only a free man is capacitated to bring the humanistic revolution based on the principals of equality and justice. And this revolution cannot be local. Since the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was destined to bring freedom to the whole humanity, the Indian Muslim, according to Iqbal is also destined to play this role in his political life. In the poem "The Rise of Islam", *Bange Dra*, Iqbal enjoins the Muslim hero:

Read again the lesson of truth, Justice and Valour
You will be asked for the responsibility of leadership (Immamat)⁵

We have translated the word Immamat as leadership. But in our view, it does not do justice to the spirit of the word Immamat.

Immamat is an Arabic word. And in the Quranic context, it has a history of its own. And we find it pertinent to introduce our readers with the context of this word. In Surah Baqarah, Allah (SWT) narrates the tale of the Prophet Ibrahim and how had to face the opposition of his father and the King. But the Quran interprets the entire struggle of the Prophet as an opportunity to develop his dormant potentialities so that he could become a touchstone for the actions of the entire humanity. The translation of Surah 2 Verse 124 is as under:

We made Ibrahim face Ibtala (sufferings). And when he came out successful, we bestowed upon him the status of Imam for the entire humanity.⁶

Iqbal uses the word Imam in this particular context. For him, the Muslim hero, like the Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) will pass through sufferings (political challenges). These challenges serve as the anti-self that he is destined to conquer in the light of divine injunctions. This will give him an opportunity to see the empirical evidence whether he is ready to lead or not. In Iqbal's political context, modernity in the garb of colonization was the real threat. The Muslim hero has to reject worshipping the atheistic materialism that modernity celebrates as its core value. After a successful encounter with this anti-self, Iqbal's hero is ready to lead the world under the divine guidance enshrined in idea self of Muhammad (SAW).

Qumwat-e-Ishq Se Har Past Ko Bala Kar De

Debr Mein Ism-e-Muhammad (S.A.W.) Se Ujala Kar De

Raise thou, through Love, all humble to greatness and to fame;

Enlighten thou the groping world with dear Muhammad's Name.

*(Jawab-e-Shikwah).*⁷

The Indian Muslim selfhood in Iqbal's vision is not apolitical. It engages aggressively with its political habitat and tries to change it in terms of the Quranic injunctions. Hence Iqbal's hero, in the present case Indian Muslim, though rooted in the socio political and cultural consciousness of colonial India strives to set the whole world free of tyranny and exploitation. Commenting upon this Ghulam Ahmed Pervez in *Iqbal and Quran* observes:

When the ideal Muslim becomes the hand of Allah, he tends to change the fate of nations of the world. He changes the course of history. He subverts the planning of the other nations. He creates a new universe. All this happens when there is a complete harmony between the desires of Man and the desires of God.⁸

Turkish poet Muhammad Akif Erosy (1873-1936) and Muhammad Iqbal were contemporaries. Muhammad Akif is Turkey's national poet and the creator of country's national anthem. Iqbal also wrote a national anthem of United India before he changed his mind

and demanded creation of a separate homeland for Indian Muslims in his famous address at Allahabad, December, 29, 1930. Therefore, both poets in their contexts upheld nationalism based on identity-crisis however both poets also insisted the necessity of revisiting golden principles of socio-political Islam enshrined in Quran. Iqbal had seen the western civilization closely and while on one hand admired its critical thought was also highly critical of its materialism and worldliness. Iqbal was a student of philosophy but tuned to poetry with a purpose manifold and complex, used poetic language to deconstruct the scared core of Quranic metaphors and its metaphysical corollaries and conundrums, and transferred these to poetic discourse using it as a medium to stimulate the youth of Indian Muslims whose imagination was captured by British colonialism. For Iqbal, breaking the mundane barriers of consciousness was the utmost the hour as he took to the pulpit of poetry and infused it with revolutionary impulse. Iqbal was aware of the sublime heritage of Muslim history and had a critical eye on its failures too over the centuries therefore he lamented the religion going into the hands of various theocratic establishments and seminaries rejecting modern/scientific thought being deemed inimical to Muslim identity. Indeed, the religious mind of Iqbal's days was turning more and more irrational and Iqbal admonished against this trend. Similarly, Muhammad Akif the admirer of Ottoman glory witnessed its decline in the aftermaths of the WWI and saw the necessity of returning to basic Islam marching along a modern ideology.

Both Akif and Iqbal turned to poetry in search of an art form conducive for disseminating social and political awareness. In other words Muhammad Akif was a strong exponent of art for the sake of life. After the WWI ended Europe pursuing its Imperial designs laid hands on Turkish lands attempting to dismember and Akif himself once the part of Government officialdom resigned from his position and took to activism safeguarding Turkish national aspirations and historical glory. He physically visited different parts of Turkey urging people to resist Turkey's imminent dismemberment.

Therefore, a part of Akif's poetry is didactic and written from the perspective of educating the Turkish youth. Like Iqbal he was wary of Western civilization capturing the young and impressionistic minds and wrote poems with deep moral messages obviating effects of material temptations of European life. Turkey's geographical proximity with Europe nonetheless was a reality however the Ottoman Empire upheld its Islamic character with devotion and determination and Akif could not endure his heritage becoming a

hostage to western ideas. Kelime Erdal is of the view that nineteenth century Turkish “poets and authors, defending the idea that literature should be educational, mostly put emphasis on children, attach importance to children’s education and see the future through children”. Therefore Akif also wrote poems with children as speaker’s confronting Turkey’s political landscape showing their commitment to motherland. Iqbal also wrote allegorical poems for children teaching them the significance of universal human values but his poems for children were also adapted from English literature. In Akif’s poems the young boys are witty and take lead representing the future of Turkey. Prosperous Turkish families sent their children for education to England and Germany however Akif in his poems warned against their cultural indoctrination to the extent of depleting Islamic values from their minds. The youth was supposed to return to Turkey and take care of the country’s political life manipulated by aggressive imperial powers.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions was Akif’s commitment to create awareness about the revival of Ummah. Both Iqbal and Akif wanted intellectual revival of Islam which dates back to the times of Prophet (PBUH) onwards eight century when Muslim mind dominated the world of science and philosophy. It was a time Europe was in abysmal darkness and the Church ruled with impunity and tyranny. Both Iqbal and Akif recall that glory of Muslim intellectual fermentation manifested in the Muslim Spain. But both also were critical of paying a decadent attention to the past therefore they wanted Muslims of the modern world to embrace modernity without becoming slavish followers of the western civilization. So, basically both Iqbal and Akif were resisting against the hegemony of western colonialism. Indeed, both were aspiring for an Islamic renaissance based upon the paradigm of knowledge. Therefore, both poets were aware of the hidden agendas behind western colonialism and in their poems exposed the western notions of freedom and secular pluralism as dangerous masquerades.

Nationalism was another aspect similar in Iqbal’s and Akif’s poetry. Although nationalism was a western concept and its ideological grounding divested off religious ideals however many countries fighting against colonial rule re-invented nationalism in accordance with their local ethos and needs. Iqbal rejected the concept of polity unguided by the supreme laws of governance enshrined in Quran. Similarly, Akif did not support the secular wave overtaking Turkey and in one way contested with Kamalism. Present day Turkey is also conscious of its national identity and despite the fact that Turkish constrictions are secular Turkish identity is not absolutely secular. In the national anthem of democratic Turkey Akif compares the western civilization with a

monstrous animal with one tooth. He was precisely pointing at its veneer of sophistication but deep inside Western civilization is fragile hence self-destructive. Similarly, Iqbal in one of his couplets compares western civilization with a brittle branch that cannot take its own burden for long and is doomed to collapse. Akif too criticizes French for promoting sexual promiscuity and Germans a culture of alcohol. Therefore, he wanted the Turkish Muslims to preserve their identity. This could not have been possible without Turkey re-envisaging its Ottoman glory. Akif wanted Turkish Muslims to re-visit and re-absorb the Islamic values which were at the roots of the edifice of Ottoman Empire whose cultural grandeur, military power, and intellectual singularity mesmerized the western world for centuries. The national anthem of Turkey written by Akif is the zeitgeist of spiritual Islam, eclectic and democratic, and compatible with modern world, an acknowledgement of knowledge as the supreme ethic of human existence.⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ¹ Al-Quran, Surah 36 Verse 60-70 (*Translation mine*)
 - ² Mughni, Abdul, *Iqbal Ka Nazame Fan (The Art of Iqbal)*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1990, p.17-18.
 - ³ Al-Quran, Surah 3 Verse 190 (*Translation mine*)
 - ⁴ Muhammad Iqbal, *Complete Works of Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2011, p.424.
 - ⁵ Ibid, p.300.
 - ⁶ Al-Quran, Surah 2 Verse 124
 - ⁷ Muhammad Iqbal, *Complete Works of Iqbal*, p.236.
 - ⁸ Pervez, Ghulam Ahmed, *Iqbal and Quran*, Tolou-E-Islam Publishers, Lahore, 1996, p. 240.
 - ⁹ Erdal, Kelime. *The Ideal Turkish Youth and Teacher in Mehmet Akif Ersoy's Poems*, U.U. Fen-Edebiyat Fakultesisosyal Bilimler Dergisi Yıl: 10, Sayı: 17, 2009/2, pp- 331-347.