

NUANCES OF SPIRITUALITY  
AND RESURRECTION  
IN SAINT EXUPERY'S  
*THE LITTLE PRINCE* –  
WITH A COMPARATIVE NOTE ON IQBAL'S THOUGHT

Dr. Saleha Nazeer

## ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the thoughts of 20<sup>th</sup> century French writer and aviator Saint Exupéry encompassing his views on the nuances of resurrection and spirituality based on his critique on modernity. The arguments of this paper are based on his master piece novella *The Little Prince* – the widely read book of French literature with translations in more than 250 languages. In its comparative dimension, the critique of Muhammad Iqbal, the 20<sup>th</sup> century poet-philosopher, is also elaborated to expose how mankind has lost its spirituality and ethics in this modern world. Whereby the modern life indicates the technological advancement and scientific progress, it also mirrors the disregard of spiritual aspect of human life crushed by science and technology. Saint Exupéry develops a critique on the modern world, science and technology at the time when the same technology is being used to defend the frontiers across the world through World Wars. The character of the little prince visiting this world highlights the spiritual, philosophical and ethical vacuum in which we are actually living. On a comparative note, Iqbal's poetic works with regard to the critique on the modern world further support the dearth of spirituality and ethics. His critique on modernity and industrialized society expounds the void between the secular and sacred dimensions of the modern world. The study thus seeks to examine how Saint Exupéry and Iqbal view the modern society as unspiritual, profane and materialistic. It also explores the alternatives that the two thinkers highlight vis-à-vis the modern rational thought and the sacred destiny of mankind.

As an introduction to the topic, I would like to quote André Gide, the French Nobel laureate, "*Souvent une grande idée n'a pas assez d'un seul homme pour l'exprimer, pour l'exagérer tout entière; un grand homme n'y suffit pas; il faut que plusieurs s'y emploient, reprennent cette idée première...*"<sup>1</sup>

Quite often one single man is not enough to express a great idea, to describe it in its entirety; one great man does not suffice; several (great men) must work over it, represent and refract that basic idea in order to expose its real and original beauty.

In the same context, the present paper is an attempt to expound upon the thoughts of 20<sup>th</sup> century French author Antoine de Saint Exupéry by drawing upon his literary and philosophical masterpiece *Le Petit Prince – the Little Prince* that he wrote in early 40's. This was the time when he was serving as a reserve military pilot and had to spend a couple of years in the United States after the fall of France during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript, illustrated by Saint Exupéry himself in water colours, highlights the quest for life's meaning with its real values and morals. One of the most thought provoking themes evoked by Saint Exupéry in this novella is the critique on modernity and the increasing trend of dehumanizing civilization of the present age that points out directly at the loss of ethics and spirituality in the modern society. In a symbolic yet simple way Saint Exupéry focuses on the growing deficiencies of the ever expanding technological efficiencies thus highlighting the essentials of life that are totally lacking in the modern industrialized and machine dominated society. His following quote suffices to prove the fundamental and indispensable role of spiritual and ethical aspect of life : *On ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.*<sup>3</sup> "One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Using a variety of characters in this long fable, Saint Exupéry paints the modern society that is heading towards a yet greater chaotic order. Apparently he relies heavily upon his own experiences as an aviator and imitates his own role by creating the character of Author who, stranded in the Sahara desert with his airplane breakdown, meets the little Prince who has come from a small asteroid in space and is in search of wisdom and the real meaning of

life. At the onset of the story, what appears to be a young innocent child in the guise of the little prince, full of queries about this life on earth, is revealed later on – as one enters the intrigue of the novel – to be a mentor and guide for the Author. The questions that he asks from the Author do not really imply a response rather they have an eye opening role for the reader. These short dialogues between the little Prince and the Author clearly demonstrate that Saint Exupéry condemns materialism and underlines the need of morals and values in human life.

During the little prince’s journey from his home planet to Earth till he meets the Author, we see him conversing with different characters on the planets and asteroids that he comes across. Through these characters Saint Exupéry develops his critique on the modern scientific world: each character, symbolic in nature, constitutes a satire on the modern thought. This leads us to formulate a central thesis: while modern man focuses on concrete things, his predecessors were conscious of the value of abstract thoughts. One can thus see, within the same paradigm, the focus of modern man on objective rationality while ignoring the spiritual reality – the essence of life. Through a few examples from *Le petit prince*, one can depict Saint Exupéry’s critique on modern civilisation and on the redefining of moral values, ethics and essentials of life according to the modern scientific rational thought :

|   | <b>Aspect of modernity criticized by Saint Exupéry</b>        | <b>Character / symbol used</b>                                 | <b>Reference of the event</b>                                      | <b>Comments</b>  | <b>Alternative visualized by Saint Exupéry</b>        |
|---|---|--|--|--|---|
| . | Exertion of authority and lust to dominate and rule the world | King who loved to give orders                                  | Labeling Prince’s actions as King’s orders                         | Dignity, self esteem and self respect ruled out            | Respect for individual uniqueness and freedom         |
| . | Technology: Linear approach in scientific progress            | Author’s airplane  | Author preferred repairing his airplane ignoring Prince’s miseries | Loss of spirituality                                       | Honoring real values of life: spirituality and ethics |
| . | Quantification: Reducing knowledge to numbers and statistics  | Businessman and Adults: who always need figures and numbers to | Vicious cycle of counting the stars                                | Loss of quality in all aspects of life; the most essential | Pursuit of quality                                    |

|   |  |                    |   |  |   |
|---|--|--------------------|---|--|---|
|   |  | understand         |   | things in life cannot be counted – love, beauty, faith, innocence, wisdom,     |   |
| . | Pursuit of money                                       | Grown ups          | Example of grown ups pursuing worldly titles  | Wealth honoured; Self ignored  | Preservation of real values that are durable, everlasting and independent of material world |
| . | Exclusive material gain as life's main objective       | Fox; Geographer;   | “One can see truly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”       | Spiritual growth excluded leading to decaying humanity                         | Truth can be seen only through heart.   |
| . | Defining money as the real wealth                      | Rose               | Caprices of the rose, rejecting Prince's love   | Modern man has lost the sense of real wealth in life                           | Realization of the real essence of love, knowledge, wealth, and time                        |
| . | Ignoring the worth of time                             | Pills' Merchant    | Pills that replace meals and save time  | Saving time to waste it more   | Realization of the real essence of time   |
| . | Emphasis on physical appearance as a sign of knowledge | Turkish Astronomer | Rejected his claim in Turkish dress but accepted the same when he got dressed in European | Honouring superficial layer while rejecting the inner reality: basis of racism | Emphasis on knowing the philosophy of life and true love                                    |

Saint Exupéry declares : « ...il n'y a qu'un seul problème, un seul, de par le monde. Rendre aux hommes une signification spirituelle. »<sup>4</sup> *There is only one problem, one alone, in this world. To give a spiritual meaning to man.*

The image of spirituality witnessed in Saint Exupéry's thought thus seems to play a pivotal role in the thematic construction of his texts. The reader can easily elucidate his philosophy of life through the following quotation: « *Mais n'espère rien de l'homme s'il travaille pour sa propre vie et non pour son éternité.* »<sup>5</sup> *But don't expect anything from man if he strives for his own life and not for his eternity.* The morals, ethics and the spiritual aspects of life are hence envisioned by Saint Exupéry as life's most essential part. The departure of the prince from this Earth undoubtedly culminates in a sort of resurrection for the prince, hereby proving the concept of eternity in Saint-Exupéry's thoughts.

Saint Exuperian point of view regarding eternity and eternal life of man leads us to other great thinkers who have articulated their ideas in this regard. For the comparative axis of this study, we would like to refer to the poetic works of Muhammad Iqbal, the 20<sup>th</sup> century poet philosopher of the Sub-continent, who is known for promulgating his philosophical concept of khudi. The critique on modernity in Iqbal's thought encompasses various characteristics of the modern scientific world and rational thought in a yet more stringent manner. Just to quote a few examples, his poems *Airplane*, *The Wisdom of the West*, *Civilization*, *The Tavern of the West*, *Bookworm*, *A Message to the West*, etc. in his book entitled *Payam-e-Mashriq – Message from the East*, constitute an interesting poetic satire on the Western thought and civilization. The elements of critique found in Saint Exupéry's thought are strikingly similar to those found in Iqbal's texts. Both the thinkers have not only criticized the modern scientific thought but also presented the alternatives for the characteristics of modernity that they have criticized.

As mentioned earlier, the little prince's journey is embedded with the symbolic visits to different planets which are used as symbols for representing the weaknesses of human beings. Such a symbolic journey through various planets also marks an essential part of Iqbal's philosophical poetry in his anthology published in 1932: *Jāvid nāme*, *The Book of the Eternity*, where one can witness Iqbal travelling through different celestial spheres in his quest for reality and self affirmation. Through these poetic dialogues, he presents his critique on the prevailing state of mankind, indicating the reasons that have led to today's dehumanized and profane society.

The following section explores various such examples of critique of modernity in Iqbal's poetic works in correlation with the Saint-Exuperian critical account. Each subheading marks the aspect of modernity that is criticized by both the thinkers:

### Exertion of "Power"

Describing the little prince's visit to a planet, Saint-Exupéry criticizes the exertion of *power*, through the character of the king, to rule over the world of his planet, rather, ironically speaking, to rule out the respect from the world. The king wants to dominate everything around him with his power, and his power depicts the lust which is part of his nature. The construct of "Power" has been explained as a substitute for dignity, self stature and respect. The irony of life is that "Power" construct is considered to be an exchange for the respect of a human being. The lowliness of human nature is exposed through the actions of the King on the planet. The uniqueness of the individual is thus compromised with the imperial ruling Power. The single human being, who is ruling over the other human being, mars the individuality of his fellow humans. This idea can further be elaborated in Iqbal's words where he incorporates the absence of conscientiousness and the death of *kehudi* :

نہ ایشیا میں نہ یورپ میں سوز و سازِ حیات  
خودی کی موت ہے یہ، اور وہ ضمیر کی موت<sup>۶</sup>

The hearts of both the East and West  
Of zeal and zest are quite bereft:  
One means the death of *Self* and soul,  
Other deceased of conscience whole.<sup>7</sup>

معلوم نہیں، ہے یہ خوشامد کہ حقیقت  
کہہ دے کوئی اُلو کو اگر "رات کا شہباز"!<sup>۸</sup>

Don't know whether its flattery or reality,  
If one calls an owl, the eagle of night

کرتے ہیں غلاموں کو غلامی پہ رضامند  
تاویل مسائل کو بناتے ہیں بہانہ<sup>۹</sup>

They have coerced slaves for a willing slavery  
They present the pretext of problems as a mere excuse.

جمہوریت اک طرزِ حکومت ہے کہ جس میں  
بندوں کو گنا کرتے ہیں، تو لا نہیں کرتے<sup>۱۰</sup>

Democracy is that style of government,  
In which the heads are counted, not weighed.

### Intellect versus reason:

The central theme in *The Little Prince* emanates from this quote: "One can see truly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye"; the bare critique of the author over modern thought, materialistic approach and reason is sufficient to support the underlying philosophy that the quote portrays in its latter part, i.e. the value of imagination and intellect. Here one witnesses the reality of truth and the lack of spirituality in modern times that leads to the death of human values and morals. One may witness the following verses of Iqbal who unravels the similar, though not identical, perspective in his poetic verses :

علم تجھ سے تو معرفت مجھ سے  
تو خدا جو، خدا نما ہوں میں"

Knowledge comes from you, gnosis from me;  
You seek God, I reveal Him.

رازِ ہستی کو تو سمجھتی ہے  
اور آنکھوں سے دیکھتا ہوں میں!"

You penetrate the secret of existence,  
But I see it with my eyes.

می تراشد فکرِ ما ہر دم خداوندے دگر  
رست از یک بند تا افتاد در بندے دگر"

Our thinking carves a new god with each passing moment

It gets freed from one bond only to get entangled in a new one

The metaphysical perspective in Iqbalian critique is profoundly connected to the divinity in contrast to that of Saint Exupérian critique where the latter hardly pronounces the name of God, although the notion of divinity and the image of life after death can be read in between the Exupérian lines; e.g. the last lines of the novella announce, thus, the resurrection of the little prince.

### Technology: Linear approach in scientific progress

According to Saint Exupéry, the upheaval in the modern era is related to the technology and scientific progress: Prince's misery is that the Author prefers repairing his airplane instead of comforting the aggrieved prince. For him, mending a material thing has more importance than mending a broken heart. The lacking part of the new modern air is that there are no ethics left in the modern era. Iqbal, in his criticism over the unbalance created by the ruling norms

of the modern technology, borrows from his Iranian predecessor, Sa'adi:

تو کارِ زمیں را نکو ساختی؟  
کہ با آسماں نیز پرداختی؟<sup>۱۴</sup>

Have you solved the affairs of the world?

That you have started flying in the sky?

This linear approach of the contemporary modern age has resulted in the loss of spirituality, dignity, honour and self esteem, leaving no possibility for man to transcend. Iqbal, therefore, lays emphasis to disenchant this superficial world, to surpass its shallow image of colors for the quest of its depths, and for the profound meaning of life:

از طلسم و رنگ و بوے او گذر  
ترک صورت گوے و در معنی نگر<sup>۱۵</sup>

Come out from the apparent beauty of the flower and its color

Do not look at its apparent beauty but dive deep into the meaning

Here Iqbal reveals the dichotomy between the ways of East and West and unfolds the secret of universe in the form of "Love", the same view as Exupéry presents in *The Little Prince*:

غربیان را زیرکی سازِ حیات  
شرقیوں را عشقِ رازِ کائنات<sup>۱۶</sup>

For the people of the West, reason is the instrument of life

But for the people of the East, Love is the secret of the universe

نیز و نقشِ عالمِ دیگر بنہ  
عشق را با زیرکی آمیزدہ<sup>۱۷</sup>

Arise, be the creator of a new world!

Mingle the sparkle of love with intellect!

تاریک ہے افرنگِ مشینوں کے دھوئیں سے  
یہ وادیِ ایمن نہیں شایانِ تجلی<sup>۱۸</sup>

The air of Europe has been littered with dark fumes

It is no more worth the glory of light

### **Quantification: Reducing knowledge to numbers and statistics**

The quantification and statistical analysis of number count is given preference over the essence of the spirit and heart which is

directly connected to the purification of soul, as shown in *The little Prince*. The most essential things in life cannot be counted: love, beauty, faith, innocence, wisdom, pursuit of quality; all these aspects are important as they constitute the basis for the pursuit of satisfaction in life, and tranquility of the soul and heart. Iqbal brings our attention to the decline of human pursuit with reference to the modern science in which knowledge is reduced to numbers and statistics. The following verses of Iqbal convey this reduction of knowledge in a form of scathing critique:

می شود در علم و فن صاحب نظر  
از وجودِ خود نگردد باخبر<sup>۱۹</sup>

He gains the connoisseur vision in art and knowledge  
But remains astray from his own Self

علم ازو رسواست اندر شهر و دشت  
جبرئیل از صحبتش ابلیس گشت<sup>۲۰</sup>

Modernity has discolored the true knowledge,  
The color of Satanic influence has taken over the angelic image.

The material prospects are very much highlighted in *The Little Prince* By Saint Exupery as example number 5, 7 and 8 given in the table above. In the same course, Iqbal presents the view of the pursuit of knowledge vis-à-vis material gains:

غربیان گم کرده اند افلاک را  
در شکم جویند جانِ پاک را<sup>۲۱</sup>

The people of West have lost the spirituality  
They search for spirituality in the deep pit of their belly

رنگ و بو از تن نگیرد جانِ پاک  
جز به تن کارے ندارد اشتراک<sup>۲۲</sup>

The pure soul takes not colour and scent from the body,  
and Communism has nothing to do save with the body.

The question arises that whether the alternative solution offered by each of the two thinkers is similar or not. If not what are the distinguishing features in their critique? In the light of the above discussions and the arguments presented, one may infer that Iqbal's critique overpowers the Exuperian critique: As per the narratology of the modern critique, both the thinkers belong to the same line of

thought but, on a different note, Iqbalian metaphysical poetry shows a strong dimension of transcendence while this aspect seems veiled and hidden in Exuperian thematic essence. The fate of *The Little Prince* can be considered as a nuance of resurrection that stands in contrast to the Iqbalian metaphysical perspective of resurrection preceded by “Self-affirmation”. This brings in another interrogation as to whether their approach remains pragmatic for the 21<sup>st</sup> century society? To what extent the Iqbalian and Saint Exuperian critique can influence the modern mind of rational setting? How do these two thinkers connect the image of contemporary man with the evolution of his soul, of his destiny and final abode, and eventually towards his immortality? I leave these threads for another comparative study and research in these dimensions in future. As a sequel to this present study, it would be quite interesting to explore the concept of love, death, immortality and eternity in Iqbalian thought vis-à-vis the Saint Exuperian critique on modern profane society and its materialistic and dehumanizing civilization; as for now, Iqbal’s message still reverberates with the call of ‘*Qum*’:

عالمے در سینه ما گم ہنوز  
عالمے در انتظار "قُم" ہنوز

The seed of the knowledge is hidden in our “Self”  
And it awaits the call of *Qum*<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Gide, André, *De l'influence en littérature*, Œuvres Complètes, S.d., T. 3. Paris, Gallimard, 1935, pp.251-73.
- <sup>2</sup> Le petit prince was therefore first published in New York in 1943 by Reynal & Hitchcock, Later on after the liberation of France, the French publisher Gallimard published this novella in 1945.
- <sup>3</sup> Saint Exupéry, *Le petit prince*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945.
- <sup>4</sup> Saint Exupéry. Lettre au Général X, in *Un sens à la vie : Œuvres Complètes*, Paris : Gallimard, 1956. p. 225.
- <sup>5</sup> Saint Exupéry, Citadelle, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959, ch. VI, p. 529.
- <sup>6</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Zarb-e Kalim* (The Rod of Moses), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Urdu)*, Fazli Sons, Lahore, 2003, p.762.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, Eng translation Syed Akbar Ali Shah. <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/>
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.763.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.765.
- <sup>10</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Zarb-e Kalim* (The Rod of Moses), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Urdu)*, p.773.
- <sup>11</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Bang-e Dara* (Call of the Caravan Bell), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Urdu)*, p.77.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, (Eng. Tr. M.A.K.Khalil in *Collected Poetical Works of Iqbal*)

- <sup>13</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Payam-e Mashriq* (Message of the East), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Farsi)*, Vol. I, Sheikh Ghulam Ali & Sons, Lahore, 1992, p. 638.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 628.
- <sup>15</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Javid Nama* (The Book of the Eternity) 1932 ; in *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Farsi)*, Vol. II, Sheikh Ghulam Ali & Sons, Lahore, 1992, p.1298.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.1300.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Zarb-e Kalim* (The Rod of Moses), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Urdu)*, p.764.
- <sup>19</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Pas Che Bayad Kard ay Aqwām-e-Sharq* (Que faut-il donc faire, ô peuples d'Orient ?), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Farsi)*, Vol. II, p.1598.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.1656.
- <sup>21</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, *Javid Nama* (The Book of the Eternity), *Kolliyat-e Iqbal (Farsi)*, Vol. II, p.1298.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.1304.
- <sup>24</sup> *Qumr*: in Arabic, it means, Arise! Here Iqbal uses this word as an allusion to the Quranic verse of chapter 74 - Surat al-Muddaththir, verse 2, in which Allah is ordering the Prophet (peace be upon him) to get up and spread the message of Allah.