

Highlights of Iqbal's Thought

This is the text of the opening speech presented by Muhammad Sabieh Anwar on 24 May 2003 at the symposium on the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal at St Antony's College, Oxford University. The symposium was organized by the Pakistan Discussion Forum, Oxford University.

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Iqbal openly claimed two merits for himself: first, that his profound verse is not a romantic lullaby. Instead it is a slogan of valour, incessant action and self-realization. Second, his poetry is not for one nationality alone. His message is far-reaching, and transcends any geography.

It is in light of these proclamations, that I take up two questions about Iqbal. We are not the first ones to ask these questions. They have been taken up by the introspective Iqbal as well:

- First, who owns Iqbal?
- Second, what makes Iqbal so different?

Who owns Iqbal? We would all know that he is Pakistan's national poet, but does this limit his applicability to any larger groups of humanity? What role does he capture for himself in world literature and world philosophy? What makes us gather here on a Saturday afternoon, not very sunny, 4000 miles from his place of birth, to refresh our past and our future, as envisaged by this man of clairvoyant vision? Is he not just the poet of Islam or the poet of the East, the "*Shair-e-Mashriq*", the "*Hakeem-ul-Ummat*", the "*Mufakkir-e-Islam*"— whose melodies are music only to Pakistanis or Persians or Indian Muslims? Let us now ask the same question about Homer, about Kali Das, about Rumi, about Dante or about Tagore. We fail to see in all of these names, the traits of local poets, of local thinkers, shriveled up in their secluded glens. At the one hand, Dante reviles counterpart beliefs in his "*Divine Comedy*"; Kali Daas starts in the name of Hindu deities; and Iqbal reaches out profoundly to Muhammad (PBUH)---but these faith-specific contexts do not undermine, rather they underpin their universality. If we believe in the brotherhood of man, a common ascendance, we must also believe in the all embracing appeal of these masters of art and thought.

The German Nobel laureate Herman Hesse remarks about Iqbal, "Iqbal belongs to domains of the spirit and intellect, with the tri-faceted sources of his tremendous work: the worlds of India, of Islam and of the west."

Well-versed in western education, Iqbal spent several years of the most creative phases of his life, not far from where we are today: in Cambridge and later in Munich. It seems that Iqbal did his best to distill what he considered to be the best in the east and in the west,

and synthesize these distillates into a perfect blend of ideas. Today we are proud to have Revd Prof Keith Ward giving the keynote address later this evening, on how Iqbal's philosophical contributions have been received in western thinkers, especially the philosophers.

With his multicultural training and the heart of a passionate thinker, Iqbal's Inner Eye could go beyond the veils and penetrate into the flaws of the modern society. He attacked western imperialism, their portrayals of democracy, their concepts of colour and race, and their emptiness of warmth or 'Soz', as Iqbal coins it. He had a sip of wine from the cups of disparate civilizations - both the east, being shuddered into the wormholes of ignorance and bigotry, as well as the west, with all its signs of teeming progress. To him, the west was somewhat glitter, with false standards, and soul-less ideals.

At the same time, Iqbal also looked beyond mere romanticism with the past glory of Muslims. His vision flew him over and above the cities of Kufa and Baghdad, always waiting for new camps to be drawn, new roads to be taken and new thoughts to be aspired.

This universal appeal makes Iqbal not only relevant to us in the sub-continent, but to many seeking souls, meandering near the confluence of the world's greatest civilizations.

Agreeing to an extent upon his universality, we can now turn to the second question and seek answers to **what makes Iqbal so different**. This question would throw imminent light on understanding Iqbal --- we have glorified him enough, we have worshipped him enough --- let us now take the bold step of starting to understand him. I call this a bold step because Iqbal is so unconventional, breaking away from the shackles of tradition, freeing himself of preconceived notions, creating and choosing to create an intellectual trajectory of his own, rather than being "enslav'd by another's". This "guided, inspired heterodoxy" is what keeps Iqbal different. Maybe he is like a stranger comet, orbiting the outposts of the Milky Way, but spending a considerable amount of its life in our solar system as well, where sometimes it conjuncts with Jupiter and Saturn, and sometimes throws flashes of its sparkling galactic dust onto the earth-dwellers as well, before it again shoots off to other unknown destinations.

اپنی جولاں گاہ زیر آسماں سمجھا تھا میں آب و گل کے کیل کو اپنا جہاں سمجھا تھا میں
بے جہلی سے تری ٹونا نگاہوں کا طلسم اک ردائے نیگاہوں کو آسماں سمجھا تھا میں
کارواں تھک کر فضا کے بیچ و خم میں رہ گیا مہر و ماہ و مشتری کو ہم عناں سمجھا تھا میں

*"I considered my playfields to be under the heavenly firmament,
I took this world of water and clay to be my kindergarden.
I considered the blue expanse above me as the skies,
But your exposition dispelled all the veils.
The celestial caravan lost itself in the maize of the heavens,
The sun, the moon and Jupiter could not catch up with my flight."*

Would we like to pick some dust from the trail this shooting star leaves behind? I don't really know. Iqbal's *Javid Nama* is a travelogue through the vault of heavens. Dr Homa Katouzian will recite excerpts from this *magnum opus*, later today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Iqbal is different because of both his art and his thought.

Iqbal's poetry is different because of the characteristic flavour of its terminology. The moth and the candle, the nightingale and the glow-worm, the tulip and the rose - are all well-retained traditions in Persian and then Urdu poetry, but they assume an altogether new appeal in his cavalcade of ideas. Even the roles of Prophets like Abraham and Moses find unique meanings in his thought cycles. It could be said that he took all the stock of gold from his predecessors in literary tradition and then remoulded it to his ambition's desire. Some aspects of Iqbal's poetry would be shortly touched upon by Prof Dr David Matthews in his paper "*Iqbal's poetry and art*".

Iqbal is also different because Iqbal questions---questions about the role of man and his relation to God. Many a time, he is seen posing questions, one after the other, inducing elegant dialogue between his personified conversants. Sometimes, he takes the bold step of establishing a direct communion with God. Sometimes, he assumes the role of a stray observer, a solitary walker, eavesdropping dialogues between Sa'di and Hali, Lenin with God and sometimes Satan with God. So much so, at times, he goes to the blasphemous extent of praising Satan.

نوری نادان نیم سجدہ پہ آدم برم او پہ نہاد است خاک من پہ نژاد آدم
تو بہ بدن جان دی ، شور بجان من دم تو بہ سکون رہ زنی ، من بہ تپش رہ برم

*"I am not a foolish creature made of ether. Why should I prostrate before Adam?
He has been made of dust, while I am created out of fire.
O Lord, you instill life into the body, whereas I set this life into motion,
You urge steadiness, whereas I incite restlessness."*

Parallels to this unique plot are difficult to find in the volumes of our literature.

To a first time observer like myself, the novelties in the Iqbalic world, appear as discrepancies; to an orthodox traditionalist, many a time, these curious findings emerge as heresies; to self-styled monarchs and royals, these clarion calls reverberate as the tremor of revolution. The philosopher Iqbal disdains the philosophers for their lack of passion; whereas the poet Iqbal disclaims himself of being a run-of-the-mill lyricist; the *Sufi* he says, corrupts the soul that empowers; the jurist, he declares, blindfolds the inner eye. He bashes at imperialism and capitalism masquerading in the garbs of democracy; he refutes the "medieval fancies of theologians"; he talks about reinvigorating the stagnated spirit of Muslim intellectualism by "creating a new spirit in a body grown too old". Where can this complicated state of affairs lead us to? How do we put together the pieces of an inchoate, formless jigsaw puzzle? These questions can be a first invitation to start studying Iqbal.

The prime mover in Iqbal’s novel philosophy is his concept of the Self, *Khudi*. When someone asked the poet about the source of this concept, he pointed to verse 19 of the 59th surah *Hashr* which goes thus:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ أُولَٰئِكَ
هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

“And do not become like the ones who forget Allah, for Allah makes them forget their own *Nafs* (their own conscience). They are the ones who have wronged.”

Equipped with the concept of the *Self*, we can lay our hands on the master key that unlocks every door and unentangles many ideas permeating in his works. Again there are two levels of the *Self*: the individual and the collective, societal self.

Iqbal’s individual *khudi* runs contrary to the traditional theologian’s or devotional sufi’s view. Iqbal’s self is like a drop of water. Hallaj’s voice “I am the creative Truth”, in Iqbal’s eye, would not be a drop drowning in the limitless ocean; rather it would be a drop that remains outside the ocean and yet, claims to be a part of the ocean. Devotional Sufism encourages the drop to lose its individuality, but for Iqbal the ego or the *Khudi* of the individual drop is more sacred. It retains its independence with respect to the ocean, while confessing its atomistic essence to be the same as that of the ocean. And that is why Iqbal is encouraged to take the audacious step of conversing directly to God as Ali Abbas will show in his rendering of the *Shikwa* and its *Jawab*.

Iqbal’s concepts about *taqdir*, commonly called *qismet* is another stark difference from traditional Muslim belief that sometimes borders on fatalism. As the throbbing pulse of the Muslim political, cultural and economic supremacy enervated over the course of years, resort to fatalist self-negation could be a natural outcome. Iqbal instead, talked about the free will of men becoming consummate with the desires of God. Thus Iqbal speaks of “human fate” as opposed to “heavenly fate” – the former being an outcome of Iqbal’s philosophy of incessant action.

His special place in Muslim intellectualism will be taken up by Dr Yahya Michot later in the evening.

The *khudi* is not only individualistic, but also elevates itself to become a collective treasure of the society. Iqbal believed that human egos are distinct but they are not isolated from one another. Life and this universe furnish testing grounds for “ego-activity”. The self or “egostitution” in this respect is dignified not only in its existence, but also in its action. The world animates the selves and provides them opportunity to discover, pro-create, create, grow and grow without bounds. The works of art and

science, the works of political wisdom and economic principle, architecture and culture, are all expressions of this regenerative energy unleashed by *Khudi*. Tawhid then becomes a dynamic assertion of possibility. The self-assertion and self-development heralded in Iqbal's concept of *Khudi* leads mankind to work miracles in both the physical and the spiritual realms.

Iqbal's conception of *Ishq* is also radically different from what other philosophers have to say. *Ishq* is his main ingredient of life and is also its driving force. This 'Iqbalic Love' would make man into a creator of and victor over his own ideals, setting him into never-ending motion. Outreaching from one conquest to another, he is never subject to surcease. There are many junctures in one's Life, when one reaches a divergence of passages. Reason alone cannot be the sole guide in such cases. Reason will always give one a sense of fear and deprivation; it safeguards interests in life, but *Ishq* creates life, procreates life and makes it grow beyond glitters. A litmus test would be that a life of pure reason would drear death, whilst a life of *Ishq* will welcome it. The *Ishq* goes hands in hands with *Khudi*.

Ishq without *Khudi* would lead to self negation. Iqbal doesn't want to side with the love that negates and overwhelms the self with the desire to disappear. Iqbal proposes a love that confirms the individualistic existence, rather than something which denies its foundations.

Iqbal, in short, lived before his age. The volumes of his work are a perfect blend of passion, reason and a gallery of strange ideas. His works and life contains substance for any seeking individual – he says, “He has a factory of ideas that churns out stars – you can pluck any star from this stellar assembly-line that suits your destiny.”

On behalf of the Pakistan Discussion Forum, a warm welcome is of order to all our panelists and distinguished academicians, critics of literature, students from Oxford, Cambridge and London. I hope we can together, make this into an enjoyable undertaking.

We are pleased to mention that today's proceedings will be presided by Prof Dr James Morris, who is a Professor of Islamic Studies at the Exeter University and a distinguished scholar on Islamic spirituality and *Ibn-e-Arabi*.

Finally, I would like to relate something which Iqbal wrote in his early, impressionable years as a poet-scholar embarking on a voyage to the west, in seek of knowledge. These verses are relevant to many students like myself, who have left their native countries and come to the west in search of education and instruction. While paying his respect on the mausoleum of Nizaam ud Din Aulia in Delhi, Iqbal says:

چمن کو چھوڑ کے نکلا ہوں مثلِ کبوتِ گل ہوا ہے صبر کا منظور امتحان مجھ کو
چلی ہے لے کے وطن کے نگار خانے سے شرابِ علم کی لذت کشاں کشاں مجھ کو
نظر ہے ابر کرم پر ، درختِ صحرا ہوں کیا خدا نے نہ محتاجِ باغباں مجھ کو

مقام ہم سفروں سے ہوا اس قدر آگے کہ مجھے منزل مقصود کا رواں مجھ کو
پھر آ رکھوں قدم مادر و پدر پہ جنیں کیا جنھوں نے محبت کا رازواں مجھ کو

*“I say farewell to my garden, like a rose’s scent,
Now I have submitted myself to the test of patience.
My desire to satiate my thirst of knowledge,
Is pushing me out of the gallery I call my homeland.
I am a solitary tree in a desert, my eyes are clung to the laden clouds,
Their shower can make me flower without the aid of the gardener.*

*O Lord, always keep me miles ahead of my kindred,
So that they can take me as their destination.
O Lord, grant me the chance, once again, to lay my head at the feet of my parents,
By whose blessing, I possess the secret of love.”*