

THE CONCEPT OF ISLAMIC POETRY

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The resurrection of mud was the rose. Or, you may say *gil* rose as *gul*, while it was destined for the honey-bee to become the poet. Iqbal in his 'Foreword' to Ghalib's illustrated edition, *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai*, says: "The modern age seeks inspiration from Nature. But Nature simply 'is' and her function is mainly to obstruct our search for 'ought' which the artist must discover within the deeps of his own being."

The words are a bit ambiguous. Someone might think that the artist has to put in a continuous effort to harmonize 'is' with 'ought'; or that Nature plays no essential part in our lives. But that would not be correct. Iqbal himself says:

نوائے من ازاں پر سوز ہے باکب و غم انگیز است
بخاشاکم شرار افتاد و باد صبحدم تیز است

Obviously, باد صبحدم represents the environment or Nature that enables the spark (شرار) to flare up.

The fact is that in the artist 'is' is harmonized with 'ought' by nature itself, and his function in human society, therefore, is to bring a resolution of discord between 'is' and 'ought' by sheer warbling. If so, why then so much criticism of the warbler? Why the reproach *الشعراء وقائدهم الى النار*? Why even *يتبعهم الغاؤون*? even though the modification comes through *ان من البيان لسحراً* and *ان من الشعر لحكمة*? So then, there seem to be two kinds of poets: some speak *hikmat* while others only lead to eternal fire.

We get a hint from Iqbal, however unconscious, in the last passage of his 'Foreword' in which he says:

"And in so far as the cultural history of Islam is concerned, it is my belief that with the single exception of Architecture, the art of Islam (Music, Painting and even Poetry) is yet to be born—the

art, that is to say, which aims at the human assimilation of divine attributes *تخلقوا باخلاق الله* ”

This clearly indicates that there are not only different kinds of poetry and art, but also there is a possibility of ‘Islamic poetry’ and ‘Islamic art’. Here it may be pointed out that the Qur’an and Iqbal are not the only sources to suggest this variety, but as early as Greek times, Plato won’t have poets in his Republic. Even in more recent times, Tolstoy was dead against the art of his day—music included. The danger of a ‘doubtful art’ we may again describe in the words of Iqbal himself from his very same ‘Foreword’:

“The spiritual health of a people largely depends on the kind of inspiration which their poets and artists receive. But inspiration is not a matter of choice. It is a gift, the character of which cannot be critically judged by the recipient before accepting it. . . . The inspiration of a single decadent artist, if his art can lure his fellows to his song or picture, may prove more ruinous to a people than whole battalions of an Attila or a Changez.”

For the time being, we need not worry about the actual words of Iqbal (which might be misinterpreted as we mentioned above) that the artist is to put in conscious efforts to achieve as great a result as *تخلقوا باخلاق الله* . For the nonce, we might address ourselves only to one problem. What is “Islamic poetry” and how does it differ from the non-Islamic one? Having established that there are many varieties of art, we will try to find out what kind is Iqbal’s art, and whether by any chance it does represent what he conjectured to be ‘Islamic poetry’.

Between the Greeks and Tolstoy came the master of Iqbal, the great Rumi, whose opinion we will quote below in his own words. *En passant* we may quote Caliph ‘Umar who said *كان الشعر علم قوم لم* Now says Rumi:—

یاران که نزد من می آیند از بیم آن که ملول شوند شعر می گویم تا
بدان مشغول شوند - ورنه من کجا و شعر از کجا! والله که من از شعر
بیزارم - پیش من بدتر از آن چیزی نیست

Thus, Rumi composed poetry for the entertainment of his friends and, in his own words, he was actually "sick of *shir'*".

Now we may quote Iqbal's own words about his poetry. Says he:

مری نوائے پریشاں کو شاعری نہ سمجھ
کہ میں ہوں محرم راز درون میخانہ
نہ بادہ ہے نہ صراحی نہ دور پیمانہ
فقط نگاہ سے رنگیں ہے بزم جانانہ

Obviously, Iqbal considers "sight" (*nigah*) as the essence of poetry, all else being trappings and means to express it. He tries to explain his concept of *nigah* (sight) as:

خرد کے پاس خبر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں
ترا علاج نظر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں

He further clears his position in the following beautiful lines:

اقبال نے کل اہل خیاباں کو سنایا
یہ شعر نشاط آورو پر سوز و طربناک
میں صورت گل دست صبا کا نہیں محتاج
کرتا ہے میرا جوش جنوں میری قبا چاک

Still a further elucidation of the point comes:

اے اہل نظر ذوق نظر خوب ہے لیکن
جوشے کی حقیقت کو نہ دیکھے وہ نظر کیا
الفاظ کے پیچوں میں الجھتے نہیں دانا
غواص کو مطلب ہے صدف سے کہ گہر سے

This last one brings out the very word *Meaning* the significance of which we will speak later on:

جس معنی پیچیدہ کی تصدیق کرے دل
قیمت میں بہت بڑھ کے ہے تابندہ گہر سے

All this should make it clear to the reader, that Iqbal's concern is *Meaning* and not the *Form*. However, it should not be understood that he avoids the *Form* or concerns himself exclusively with the *Meaning*. That will amount to misreading the situation. It is not that he avoids *Form* deliberately, but rather the agent of inspiration is *Meaning*, not *Form*. This inspiration, as Iqbal himself says, is a natural 'gift'—

ذالك فضل الله بوتيته من يشاء

His inspiration does not arise at the level of *Form* but at the level of *Idea*.

This brings us to the definition of poetry, the classical one, that Milton once formulated. He said poetry must be "simple, sensuous and passionate", But we find that Iqbal will have nothing to do with the 'sensuous'. All the verses that we have quoted above make it perfectly clear that he is neither moved by the 'sensuous' nor the 'sensation'. His inspiration is set in motion only at the level of '*Idea*' or '*Meaning*'. The earlier writers would have called this kind of poetry as "didactic verse" not fit to be called 'poetry' at all, because their inspiration was bound up with the sensuous. No lyric poetry ever came into existence but through the sensuous. They considered talk about 'ideas' as cold philosophical teaching through the form of verse. Therefore, to them such a composition was more formal, than inspired. Here Iqbal runs down the very 'Form' itself. He wants 'Meaning' and nothing less. Rumi goes much further. He will have nothing to do with 'Forms' of any kind. Ghazali in his own inimitable philosophic way puts it down that the next universe is the universe of 'meaning', not of 'form'.

Now any one might ask, can 'meaning' reach us unless it is dressed in a 'form'? *Idea* is defined as 'meaning of a symbol', yet there are no ideas apart from symbols, whether natural or linguistic, expressing and embodying them.

The reply to this argument is that the 'form' cannot be done away with, but the stress and the spotlight is on 'meaning' and not on 'form' as such. This may be illustrated this wise. In earlier times, discovery of a plot and originality of a tale were the main

glory of a literary composition. The Qur'an changed all that. It relates old *qisas* (stories) with an entirely new significance. The *qissa* (tale) itself was of no importance; it was the new wine put in old bottles that mattered. Iqbal would not be satisfied only with wine in a bottle but seeks significance further than wine itself:

یارب درون سینہ دل باخبر بده
در باده نشہ را نگرم آن نظر بده

This Qur'anic lead initiated and set up a new fashion in the literary world, that the most representative writers of the nation unconsciously followed. Dante and Shakespeare would take up an old tale and would try to give it a new meaning. All the Shakespearean plots are old stories. He has not invented a single one. But the meaning that he has given them is entirely new. Milton followed suit. Goethe, the most representative of the German literatti, also instinctively followed this fashion. His *Faustus* was treated by many writers before him, and so also his *Iphigenia*. But the *Iphigenia* and the *Faustus* of Goethe have entirely different significance than the earlier works. All this proves, as we have been mentioning all along, that *Meaning* and not the *Form* had become of consequence, since the Qur'an came.

Now the point that needs further clarification is: *How is it Islamic?* We have already mentioned that the Qur'an set the fashion. But that was only our implication. At the present time, more than at any other period in Muslim History, it is necessary for the people who call themselves 'Muslims' clearly to understand the position of Islam in the evolution of man. Europe, when it came of age, refused even to admit that religion was subject to evolution and was historical. They persisted to write "Judaism, Islam and Christianity": they would not have Christianity before Islam, because the importance of Christianity would then be historically reduced. All the same, that writing was a clear anachronism to the understanding mind. It falsified and misrepresented History.

What is the main difference between Islam and other religions? The first and the foremost is that Islam reduced formalism and ceremonialism to the minimum. Earlier religions emphasised 'cere-

mony' and 'form' to the utmost. No religious function was performed but as a ceremonial by the priest, and in a proper set-up in a formal place, be it a church or a synogogue. Even thinking was a sin in a devotee:

تا ز بخششهای آن سلطان دین
مسجد ما شد همه روی زمین

So far we have been talking about poetry directly or indirectly. A few words about the position of Islam may be permitted. Sufficient talk about Nature has also gone on in Iqbal's phraseology, although at times Iqbal separates Nature as 'is' from Art as 'ought', and makes one believe as if Art is outside Nature. Here we might for the sake of clarification, quote the Shakespearean lines:

"Nature is made better by no means,
But Nature makes that mean."

Let us, therefore, examine the fundamental position of the Qur'an. The Qur'an starts with 'اقرا'. What 'اقرا' indicates is: 'Read the meaning in the symbol'. The entire Nature is a symbol to Qur'an. You have to catch at its meaning. When you have been the recipient of it, then make use of بیان (expression) which has been taught to you. Expression is both verbal as well as written; the pen and the writing is emphasised in ن والقلم وما يسطرون which is chronologically the second surah of the Qur'an following 'اقرا' the first one.

Do these very first words of the Qur'an represent any values that were previously existent? We know only two fundamental values at the biological level: to assimilate food, to preserve life and to propagate and perpetuate the human species. Here these two values are represented by feeding the mind and assimilating that food 'اقرا', and then to give birth to and create an issue through self-expression. In one word, the values at the biological level are substituted by spiritual ones. That is the fundamental difference between the levels of earlier religions and Islam. Material life in Islam is only a means but the stress lies on the life of mind and spirit. المال والبنون الدنيا زينة الحياة الدنيا. But the actual بنون are your spiritual issues. Whatever you produce from mind and spirit, are your children. Those who understand this much, have no difficulty in deciphering the actual

position of Islam in the historical development of Religion.

With these preliminary viewpoints we are now in a position to review the history of Art, specially so far as it pertains to the Greeks. We hold that at that particular juncture, man was just becoming aware of his mind, and the toddler mind was learning to lisp, uttering words and trying to express itself, although in some other parts of the earth it had gone far beyond that stage. For example, in China, Confucius's moral philosophy is miles ahead of Aristotelian Ethics. But, the West, becoming suddenly alive and conscious of itself and inspired by 'power-thought', chose to start philosophy from the Greeks. That has gone on since then. So far were they drunk with power that they believed that humanity could be kept in the dark for all time. They did not even realise that an attempt to turn the Greeks into 'Westerners' and entirely different from the 'Easterners' was a silly attempt, when the very words of the language of the Greeks disclosed that they were the nearest cousins of the Iranian people, and had gone only a few hundred miles from home to Asia Minor. Their development took place in Asia Minor and Egypt rather than in Greece.

Now, which is the typical form of Greek art in which they could best express themselves and even hardly have an equal up to our times? It can be said without fear of contradiction that it is Sculpture and that too limited to the representation of 'Human Form'. No people have chiselled out of stone more beautiful human forms than the Greeks. They were absorbed in the beauty of human form. The two best specimens of their art, that they have left to the succeeding ages, are Apollo of Belvedere and Venus of Milo. They disclose human form at its best. That is what inspired the Greek artist at a time when Dionysus was the chief Greek god and when the spirit of grape wine was the chief moving agent to put the man in his best spirits. There was no question at that time for man to seek anything but the external.

However, Iqbal calls our attention by these emphatic words:

اگر بسینهٔ این کائنات در نه روی
نگه را به تماشا گذاشتن مستم است

And he further elucidates the point by declaring:

رقص تن در گردش آرد خاک را
رقص جان برهم زند افلاک را

To sum up our position, so far we have tried to show that Iqbal is not inspired at the level of 'form' and 'sensations' but at the level of 'Ideas'; in other words, the 'Meaning'. So far, then, his art is *Islamic Art* which he thinks has not yet come into existence. For the time being we are not in a position to talk about Painting and Music because that would be a subject by itself. The question is: Does Iqbal deal with 'Ideas' as a philosopher would do? Does he sit down to analyse them, classify them, create theories out of them as a thinker would do? If that were so, Iqbal's poetry will not move us at all. It will be what we call 'didactic verse'. But the most of Iqbal's poetry is not only lyrical but most times moves our depths. So it satisfies the definition of Milton that it is 'emotional' and 'emotion-creating'. It differs from Milton's definition only in one respect, that it is not 'sensuous' but 'ideal'. The poetry of Iqbal could be defined as 'simple, ideal and soul-stirring', instead of the Miltonic 'simple, sensuous and passionate'.

It is, therefore, that I have many years ago called Iqbal's works 'Museum of Ideas'. Almost every idea that was prevalent in his time, he takes note of as an object of artistic inspiration, is attracted and stimulated by it, and responds to it. He reads Nietzsche and for the time speaks in the language of Nietzsche because he has taken note of it. He even uses his phraseology. He calls peaceful men as 'lambs' (گوسفند). At one time he is most impressed by Goethe, particularly by that which used to be called demoniac by Goethe. His شکوه and such pronouncements as

ما از خدای گم شده ایم، او بجهت جستجوست
چون ما نیارمشد و گرفتار آرزوست

are merely reactions to Goethe's poem addressed to gods:

"You lead us into Life,
Then you let the poor one become guilty,
Then leave him over in pain,

Because all guilt is revenged on earth.”

This is how Goethe speaks in his demoniac mood, while poor Hafiz would go only to the length of saying:

گناہ گرچہ نبود اختیار سا حافظ :
تو در طریق ادب کوش و گو ”گناہ من است“

When Iqbal reads لا أحب الأفلين, he says “I too have created gods, worshipped them and broken them.” Here he is not busy with his *khudee* nor even in a mood to say:

خودی میں گم ہے خدا کی تلاش کرغافل
یہی ہے تیرے لئے اب صلاح کار کی راہ

He is not even building the *khudee* in that mood like Rumi who is all the time busy with his own *nafs*, and says: خام بدم، پختہ شدم، سوختم. Now put these three words by the side of Iqbal’s poetry, تراشیدم پرستیدم, شکستہم, which occur in his following verses:

ہزاراں سال با فطرت نشستہم
باو پیوستہ و از خود گسستہم
ولیکن سرگذشت این دو حرف است
تراشیدم، پرستیدم، شکستہم

In this mood, Iqbal is visualising the man’s search of Nature as a ‘Scientist’ who goes to study Nature without keeping in mind ‘In the Name of thy Lord who created’ (”In the Name of thy Lord who created”). If he had kept that ”اسم ربک“ in mind, then the process of ”thousand years in the feet of nature“ would not have produced this result. There too in الافاق (the cosmos) there were enough آیات (the signs). Obviously خودگسستن would have made no difference, for *fil afa’q* would have served the purpose. But the mood at that time was ”لا“ not ”یا“. Had the reading been, as we said above, باسم ربک الذی خلق, then ”لا“ would have intuitively led to ”یا“.

This is one more proof that the poet does not consciously take to reading but follows the mood. The wind bloweth where it listeth. The man who blames is wrong. The man who expects more is wrong.

The poet is a poet—neither a thinker nor a philosopher. So the ideas keep on agitating the poetic mind and the poet keeps on responding to them. The difference is that ‘ideas’ not ‘sensations’ are the agents.
