

Muhammad Iqbal—the Religious Poet as an Adopter

Aiman Reyaz

Abstract

A poet, philosopher, Islamic scholar, Muhammad Iqbal was a relevant man in each of these genres. For some, he is one really behind the conception of Pakistan; for others, he penned one of the most beautiful and patriotic songs for India – ‘Saare Jahan se Achcha’ for India. Iqbal acted as a bridge between the scientific advancements of the West and the traditional spirituality of the East. He was an ‘Adopter’, that is to say, in his case, one who brings compatibility between the East and the West. His writings and his thought are always evolving and they always propagate democratic equality and liberty. He is against stagnancy because that would signify getting fossilized. The purpose of this paper is to highlight him as a conduit where the inventions and ideas of the Orient and the Occident meet and adapt. For the same, some of his most famous works are taken and analysed using a comparative Close Reading approach.

Keywords: West/ Occident; East/Orient; Science; Spirituality; Adopter.

Introduction

When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, then something has to give. This is the case when the East meets the West. When the Eastern thinkers were confronted with the military and technological superiority of the Western powers, then generally one of the four

ways in which reaction took place before, during and after the blitzkrieg of the West over the East, was:

- a. Traditionalists- reassert the superiority of their own tradition
- b. Adopters- hold on to some tradition while selectively adopting from the West
- c. Proselytizers- try to employ tradition to reshape the West
- d. Westernizers- reject tradition, embrace Western modernity

Muhammad Iqbal can be listed under the second category i.e., Adopter- he wanted to hold on to his Islamic tradition while simultaneously selectively adopting from the West. He did this in order to bring compatibility between his tradition and of the West. There are not many instances where one finds a balanced convergence of religion, culture and politics and which leads to the culmination of original ideas that shape a generation. It was, however, the case with Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who is famously known as Allama Iqbal (Allama is a title given to persons who have scholarly knowledge in Islamic fiqh, jurisprudence and its exegesis). He is undoubtedly one of the most original and influential modern Muslim thinkers/poets of the first half of the 20th century.

He was a poet and a philosopher and he was the first person to propose a separate Muslim homeland in the subcontinent; a dream that became a reality with the establishment of Pakistan, nine years after his death. He is today known as the national poet of Pakistan. Iqbal was born in Punjab to devout Muslim parents and he was educated in Lahore. In 1905, he went to Cambridge, England for a law degree and then after he received that, he went on to Germany where he stayed for another year and earned a doctorate. His dissertation was entitled “The Development of Metaphysics in Persia”. So he is one of those people who learnt about the West, but he also told the West about his own traditions. Iqbal seems to embrace both tradition and modernity each with a sympathetic but a critical eye. Iqbal is open to western values; the best of which he thought was already present or implicit in Islam. However, he is a selective

adopter: he likes modern science, for example, but he is wary of pure reason that is divorced from love or by human feeling. The whole notion of my country is better than yours, just because it is mine- he found all of that repellent.

Balancing Tradition with Technology

He wrote in Urdu, his native language to begin with and then, later on, he started writing in Persian to gain a greater, broader audience. So, Iqbal studied the traditions of both East and West intently. He was influenced by Immanuel Kant, G W F Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson etc but his primary inspiration came from the Quran and from Persian literature, including the works of the 13th-century Sufi poet, Rumi. One of the most striking examples of Iqbal's eclecticism was a book-length poem called the Javid Nama—The Book of Eternity, in which the poet, like Dante, was taken on a spiritual journey through the celestial spheres until he reached the habitation of God. In Islam, there is also a tradition of Prophet Muhammad¹ taking a spiritual journey as well. Iqbal's guide through this journey was Rumi, rather than Virgil or Beatrice and along the way he speaks with various spirits who have known Buddha, Zarathustra, Jesus, Muhammad and he also converses with the Sufi mystic Al Hallaj along with Nietzsche and Leo Tolstoy.

His writings had so much influence that it changed the face of the Indian subcontinent. And his writings also led to the re-emergence of the reformation in the interpretation of Islam according to the changing needs of the time. He undertook the task of the “reconstruction of religious thought in Islam” (Iqbal). He realized that the time of his was a time of rapid change and if things are not reformed then there is a chance of people's ideology getting fossilized.

¹ Muslims are expected to say ‘Peace be upon him’ whenever the name of any Prophet comes, especially Prophet Muhammad

The best way, which Iqbal thought, was to go back to the religious scriptures and reinterpret it according to the needs of the time. Iqbal was a devout Muslim and for him, the primary text was the Quran and the best example for him to follow from the teachings of the Quran was Prophet Muhammad. Iqbal wanted to re-read the Quran to suit the changing times. Iqbal grew up during the time when the British were at the zenith of their power. Almost the whole of the Indian subcontinent was subjected to the British Rule. After a series of strong rulers in the 17th century, the Mughals slid into decline, weakened by internal feuding, by invasions that were coming in from Persia and Afghanistan and massive Hindu revolts within the Mughal Empire. Into this chaotic situation came the newly ascended Dutch, English and French. Finally, the British gained the upper hand and Muhammad Iqbal grew up in an India which was ruled by the British Colony.

The British were able to perpetuate their rule not only because of the physical force but also because of intellectual force. All kinds of institutions were catering to prolong and expand the British colonial empire. Be it history textbooks, wherein chapters like the Benefits of British Rule were also incorporated and/ or Sunday Church lecture where the priest would also include in his sermon the need for the British rule and the British were considered as the *mai baap* of Indians (Chandra). All these things affected the psyche of the Indians and Iqbal was no exception. But he quickly realized that this onslaught of the British needs to be fought not just on the political front but also on the intellectual front (which for him was the religion of Islam). Since Iqbal was also well versed in Western philosophy, he tried to incorporate some of their ideas into his own thinking and tried to bring in compatibility between western thought and Islamic religion. He propagated that Islam is not only consistent with the modern time but also that it would add to the advancement of global culture.

Iqbal's attitude of the open-minded humane form of Islam is quite appealing to the West and the writers wish that he and his works become much more widely known. Indeed the

writers wonder how the world would be different today if Iqbal's moderate, modernizing form of Islam had become predominant. The best place to start understanding Iqbal is a collection of seven lectures, published in 1934, and entitled 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'. Many consider this to be the most philosophical work in modern Islam and it is quite accessible and it is even inspiring. In that book, he describes the challenge that modern Muslims face in this way:

Rethink(ing) the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past...The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teaching of Islam in the light of that knowledge, even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us. (Moosa 111)

The key point is "even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us." He is willing to rethink things and to reform things. Having studied both Western and Eastern thought, Iqbal was delighted to see the modern western culture had developed certain aspects in the Islamic tradition, aspects like freedom and equality. Nevertheless, he was also willing to acknowledge that Muslims could benefit from western knowledge and experience. As the American scholar Mustansir Mir has written in a recent study that Iqbal would seem to represent more crisply than any other modern Muslim thinker the attitude that today's Muslim might adopt, caught as they are, in the conflict between tradition and modernity (Mir).

Iqbal finds western notions of tolerance admirable but he is critical of the idea of restricting religion into the private sphere. He believes that religion should play a role in public life. For example, poverty is not just an economic issue; it is a moral issue as well. Iqbal thought tyranny of all kinds, both religious and secular as inconsistent with true Islam. Iqbal believed that human beings flourished in like-minded communities and he wanted to provide a strong social setting for Islam. Yet he urged respect for other ethnic communities with their own

customs and laws and religious beliefs. Accordingly, his idea of Pakistan is that it would be a Muslim state with room for non-Muslims but it would not be a theocracy. When he proposed a separate nation for the provinces of India of the Muslim majority regions he had in mind the state which would be an ally of India that would, in fact, protect the heart of India from the attacks of the North West that was the tradition throughout Indian history. Today, however, we find that instead of protecting India, the place (Pakistan) has become a source from where much of the external problems emanate from. But the writer also takes into account the fact that hardly any country lives up to the ideals of its founders. That is probably true of India as well, but that does not mean that those ideals are worthless.

He was a great poet, writing in a traditional Urdu-Persian style. He was knighted by the British in 1922, he became a provincial legislator in 1924 and then in 1930, he was elected as the President of the Muslim League in India. He was probably more important as a philosopher-poet than a politician and the issues that interested him the most were religion, modernization and human potential. Iqbal, like many people at the time keenly felt the injustices of colonization. Western science represented tremendous progress but in its wake, it had brought the exploitation of the weak and the poor. Iqbal also recognized that these were also problems that were part of Indian society as well. When he looked at the world around him and especially the new world of these dominant western powers he could see the divisions between nations and between races had brought a great deal of suffering. In response, he looked deep within his own tradition of Islam to find elements that he could build upon that could meet the challenge of the west. He was critical of those aspects of Islam that did not seem very helpful, like the kind of Sufism that preached renunciation, withdrawal from worldly affairs. He was not keen on that. And though he claimed to be simply returning to the roots of Islam he was drawn to ideas that had shown utility in the west. So he is categorized as an Adopter- someone who holds on to some traditions while selectively adopting from the West.

Iqbal has made a significant contribution to humanity especially with his writings and more so with concepts like *khudi* (selfhood), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), mysticism and a commitment to religious belief that strengthens the believers (Hillier: Iqbal). Iqbal stated that every religion, including Islam propagates freedom, equality and brotherhood. Iqbal made this segregation between what the Britishers are doing and what the Holy Books teach. According to Iqbal, religion is a crucial element of life. It is necessary for the realization of the development of all humanity. The cultivation of the individual self he thought is based on in relation to God and within a community. And as a devout Muslim, he believed that Islam was ideal for this. He saw the essence of Islam of freedom, equality and solidarity. This- freedom, equality and solidarity- may sound like what the west is talking about at this time.

Re-interpreting Iqbal Through Religious Lens

Iqbal taught the centrality of individualism. He did not seek religion as an instrument of conformity; rather he believed that people became more unique the closer they came to God. He was critical of pantheistic Sufism which pursued a loss of self and assimilation to God. So instead of proposing the notion of the soul being a drop of water that returns to the ocean, Iqbal proposed an alternative analogy of a soul being like a pearl in the ocean. Islam had long taught the equality of believers, and democracy seemed to offer advance over monarchy but there was still oppression in democratic societies based on race and class and religion. Iqbal was against all such practices. Besides historicizing the person, the other aim of this paper is to critically analyse the text and the context of Iqbal and his socio-religious ideas, especially through the poem 'That the Purpose of Muhammad's Mission was to Found Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood among all Mankind' (Allamaiqbal *Muhammad's Mission*).

The title of the poem is itself self-explanatory. It appears as the mirror image of the call of the French Revolution i.e., Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (*Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*). The

other thing to note is the use of the words “Purpose of Muhammad’s Mission”. In other words, these words represent the message of Islam. For Iqbal, Islam teaches these qualities i.e., Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood. For the modern-day fundamentalists, his poem comes as a tight slap to their ideologies that kill and maim people just because of simple, basic ideological differences. Iqbal begins his poem with some historical examples. One of the reasons he does this is to highlight the historical advancement of the people. The other reason could be that he wanted to show that the British rule of law was just a sham and that from the inside they were no less than tyrants, “Throughout the world man worshipped tyrant man” (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*). Iqbal goes on to state the fact as to how in the Medieval Ages some of the priests wanted to sell the Heaven of God:

The bishop, eager for this abject game,

Bartered God’s pardon with the penitent. (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

The rise of Protestantism is a well-documented fact. Christianity during the Middle Ages became too authoritarian and totalitarian. There was the hegemony of meaning and top-down control over the exegesis of the Bible. No common man could read the Bible because it was all documented in Hebrew and archaic Greek which only a handful of people knew then and today also. The Catholic Church made a public announcement that whoever wishes to save oneself from the fire of hell needs to pay a certain sum of money and the priests would then seek pardon to God because they are closer to God and since they are holy and the common people are not, God will quickly listen to them and that is why the common people need the whole system of priests for God to become accessible. In just a few words, Iqbal has highlighted the entire conflict between Catholics and Protestants. At the subtextual level, it can also be interpreted that those who were obedient under the British rule were “pardoned” and those who advocated and took part in civil disobedience were punished.

Iqbal goes on to highlight through his politico-religious poem the fact that there was hierarchy before the onset of Islam but Muhammad's message brought about a sense of equality and did away with any kind of hierarchy: "Until one faithful reassigned their rights"

It is to be noted that each and every word used by Iqbal is very crucial. The word "faithful" is the title given to the Prophet who is also known as Al Amin, the one who is faithful or trustworthy. The deep contextual background is hidden at the subtextual level in the poem of Iqbal. Each line of his can be taken individually and detailed analysis can be done on it. For example, Iqbal writes:

...brought dignity
To honest toil, and robbed the taskmaster
Of tyrant overlordship. (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

Iqbal here is rephrasing what the Quran stated, "O you who have believed, fulfill all contracts" (The Quran 5:1). and also what the Prophet stated in numerous hadiths (Prophetic sayings) of his. He stated: "Whoever employs someone to work for him, he must specify for him his wage in advance" (Khan). Then again the prophet said:

I will be the opponent of three on the Day of Judgment: one who makes a covenant in My Name and then breaks it; one who sells a free man as a slave and devours his price and one who hires a workman and having taken full work from him, does not pay him his wages.' (Sahih)

And another very important and oft-quoted hadith is "Pay the laborer his wages before his sweat dries" (Majah 2443). All these things and many others can be extracted from just one line of Iqbal. That is the power of his writing. Explicitly he does not state things. Iqbal's writing is for the knowledgeable and he has a lot of intertextual elements in his works. That is why one who is read the most learns the most from Iqbal. Iqbal is a champion of democracy. There is no unified concept of democracy in the world. Indian democratic system is different from the

American democratic system. So, stereotyping the concept and principle of democracy is a sign of dictatorship. Having different concepts of democracy is a true sign of democracy. Iqbal's concept of democracy is inspired by the democracy that is prescribed in the Quran and the Hadiths. According to Iqbal, Islam preaches equality of people because the Quran explicitly states:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (The Quran 49: 13)

Islam says that since we are all children of Adam and Eve, we are all equal in the sight of God but the way to increase closeness and love of God is to become pious i.e., to do good deeds and abstain from evil ones. Iqbal believes that Islam makes no segregation on the basis of colour, caste, creed, sex. The only way to increase the ladder of success is by doing good deeds because that is how one gains "honour" in the "sight of God". Iqbal, in the poem, goes on to describe that Muhammad's message of the abolition of slavery was not just a theoretical concept but it was practically implemented. The system of slavery that was present during the time of the beginning of Islam was slowly eradicated. The Quran recognizes that there was slavery in Arabia at that time but gradually it gave its followers the order of its eradication. Had there been an order to suddenly free all the slaves then the whole society would have collapsed because the majority of the economy and labour force were dependent on them. That is why the order came to free them. If a person commits any sin then the repentance would be to free slaves; not having a proper excuse to fast, the person had to free a slave daily till he starts fasting; slaves were to be freed with every breach of vow etc. So, gradually Islam ordered the eradication of slavery, in a smooth manner. Iqbal writes:

Redeemed the slave from bondage, set him free.

His birth was mortal to the ancient world. (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

Iqbal talks about the courage and the rock-solid determination of the Muslims of the time. The message of Muhammad was so powerful that it made the Muslims deaf to all but to the voice of God. And God's voice was: Be kind to parents, relatives, wayfarers, the needy, orphans etc; Be good to prisoners of war; Forgive the fault of others; Establish regular prayer and give charity; Be in peace; Seek knowledge and education; Not to have any compulsion in religion and many more. (The Quran)

He drew on being's page the new design,

Brought into life a race of conquerors,

A people deaf to every voice but God's,

A moth devoted to Muhammad's flame. (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

It is to be noted here that the word "conqueror" which Iqbal here uses is in the sense of winning the hearts and minds of the people and not to use any kind of physical force to make others believe; because the Quran says "There is no compulsion in religion, Truth stands out clear from error" (*The Quran* 2:256). In the concluding part of the poem, Iqbal beautifully writes that the soul and essence of Muhammad was filled with equality.

Impatient with discriminations all

His soul was pregnant with Equality (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

One can compare these lines with what the Quran says with regards to Prophet Muhammad that "For behold, you stand on the highest standard of character"(The Quran- 68:4) And quite transcendently Iqbal concludes his wonderful poem by implying that by bowing to God and to His will we will rise in our character. The more we submit to Him the better it will be for us.

Prostration unto God had marked his brow;

The Moon and stars bow down to kiss his feet. (Allamaiqbal *Mysteries*)

Conclusion

So, according to Iqbal anybody can gain in stature since we are all equal, but the criteria to advance is to be subservient and obedient to God. The more surrendering we are to Him the more respect and honour we will get. A song that he wrote “Saare Jahan se Achcha” (an ode to Hindustan) is still sung in India and not in Pakistan where it has become a non-official national anthem. At Iqbal’s passing he was mourned by both Muslims and Hindus alike including the poet Rabindranath Tagore who wrote:

The death of Sir Muhammad Iqbal creates a void in our literature that, like a mortal wound, will take a very long time to heal. India, whose place today in the world is too narrow, can ill afford to miss a poet whose poetry had such universal value. (Mc Dermott 320)

Iqbal in another piece talked about uniting the world through the concept of the unity of Love and God:

Love is the universal law of life
Mingling the fragmentary elements
Of a disordered world.
Through our hearts’ glow
Love lives, irradiated by the spark
There is no god but God. (Bary 757)

In this hate-mongering world, we need to unite on the principle of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Let love be the language that unites us all. And Iqbal’s poetry, if properly understood and implemented, then even in this “disordered world”, our “hearts” would “glow”.

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About the Author

Aiman Reyaz is an Assistant Professor of Literature at the Department of English, Ram Jaipal College, Jai Prakash University, Bihar, India. He has obtained his PhD from Indian Institute of Technology Patna on ‘James Joyce and Franz Kafka as Anti-novelists: A Postmodern Reading.’ His research interests are Literary Theory, Prose Fiction, Philosophy of Literature and Psychology of Literature. He is a Reviewer of International Journal of All Research Writings. His ORCID Id is 0000-0003-1707-6602. He may be contacted at aimanreyaziitp@gmail.com.