Iqbāl-Nāmah

a publication about the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938)

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Islam as a Cultural Movement

[*With the following passage begins the sixth lecture, "The Principle of Movement in Islam," in Muhammad Iqbal's* The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Aademy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 116–117. The lecture deals with a key Islamic legal concept, that of* ijtihād*. The Arabic word literally means "endeavor," and, then, comes to signify, typically, the scholarly endeavor to arrive at a ruling in a case where specific guidance from the Qur'ān or the normative practice (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet is not available, though the endeavor is supposed to be made in light of, and with the intent of preserving the spirit of the teachings of, the Qur'ān and the* Sunnah*. The "modern historian of civilization" referred to in the passage is John Hopkins Denison, from whose book,* Emotion as the Basis of Civilization *(New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 267–268, Iqbal cites. The quote is from chapter VI, "Mohammedanism," where Denison has just discussed the failure of pre-Islamic emotional cultures—among them Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrian—to unify the world or serve as "unification cultures."*]

As a cultural movement Islam rejects the old static view of the universe, and reaches a dynamic view. As an emotional system of unification it recognizes the worth of the individual as such, and rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity. Blood-relationship is earth-rootedness. The search for a purely psychological foundation of human unity becomes possible only with the perception that all human life is spiritual in its origin. Such a perception is creative of fresh loyalties without any ceremonial to keep them alive, and makes it possible for man to emancipate himself from the earth. Christianity which had originally appeared as a monastic order was tried by Constantine as a system of unification. Its failure to work as such a system drove the Emperor Julian to return to the old gods of Rome on which he attempted to put philosophical interpretations. A modern historian of civilization has thus depicted the state of the civilized world about the time when Islam appeared on the stage of History:

> It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate. The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overarched the

> world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core, riven by the storms of war, and held together only by the cords of ancient customs and laws, that might snap at any moment. Was there any emotional culture that could be brought in, to gather mankind once more into unity and to save civilization? This culture must be something of a new type, for the old sanctions and ceremonials were dead, and to build up others of the same kind would be the work of centuries.

The writer then proceeds to tell us that the world stood in need of a new culture to take the place of the culture of the throne, and the systems of unification which were based on blood-relationship. It is amazing, he adds, that such a culture should have arisen from Arabia just at the time when it was most needed. There is, however, nothing amazing in the phenomenon. The world-life intuitively sees its own needs, and at critical moments defines its own direction. This is what, in the language of religion, we call prophetic revelation. It is only natural that Islam should have flashed across the consciousness of a simple people untouched by any of the ancient cultures, and occupying a geographical position where three continents meet together.

Iqbal's Persian Poem *Tanhā'ī* ("Loneliness") in Perspective

> I am the first-blown tulip of spring's dawn,
> Ever burning with the passion of the scar I bear;
> Cast not a slighting eye on my loneliness,
> As I contain in my bosom a hundred caravans of roses.
> (Iqbal, *Armughān-i Ḥijāz*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 969)

Nearly two-thirds of Muhammad Iqbal's (1877–1938) poetical output is in Persian. Iqbal himself explains why this is so: First, he wanted to reach out to a larger audience, particularly in the Islamic world, and, second, ideas and feelings often welled up in him with such abundance that a single language could not express them adequately, so he was compelled to move from one language to another, in many cases from Urdu to Persian. Of his masterly command of the Persian language Iqbal never boasted. He loved the language for its sweetness and suppleness, and he found it in complete accord with his sensibility and his lofty thinking, and yet he confessed in humility:

> I am an Indian, and do not know the Persian tongue;
> Like the new moon, my cup is empty.
> (Iqbal, *Asrār-i Khudī*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 11)

Notwithstanding this confession, Iqbal's poetical masterpieces are in Persian. These include*Javīd-Nāmah*, ("Poem of Eternity")—his greatest poem (he himself called it the work of his lifetime)—

Mathnawi-i Asrār-o-Rumūz (“Secrets and Mysteries”), and the lyrics, or *ghazals*, of *Zabūr-i ʿAjam* (“Psalms of Persia”) and *Payām-i Mashriq* (“Message of the East”). *Payām-i Mashriq* contains the remarkable quatrains under the caption of *Lālah*-i *Ṭūr* (“Tulip of Sinai”), the great five-piece dramatic sequence *Taskhīr-i Fiṭrat* (“Conquest of Nature”), *Ḥudī: Naghmah-i Sārbān-i Ḥijā*z (The Song of the Cameleer of the Hijaz”), *Muḥāwarah mā-bayni Khudā-o-Insān* (“Dialogue Between God and Man”), *Ḥūr-o-Shāʿir* (“Houri and Poet”) and *Tanhāʾī* (“Loneliness”) Iqbal’s poetical work gets a fitting conclusion in the form of deeply touching quatrains of *Armughan-i Hijaz* (“Gift of the Hijāz) especially the ones in the section entitled *Ḥuẓūr-i Risālat*, (“In the Presence of the Prophet”) which, to borrow, with a minor modification, from William Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, penetrate a reader’s being and are “Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;/And passing even into my purer mind . . .” (Wordsworth, p. 46, ll. 28–29).

Iqbal’s Persian poetry, like his Urdu poetry, leaves one with the impression of having encountered lofty and moving content. But this content gets its quality and its magnetic attraction from its elegant poetic mold. To be sure, the content of Iqbal’s *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* does not affect us in the same way as the content of his poetry. Iqbal’s poetic world is characterized by variety, color, music, and sweetness. In his vast-ranging and breathtakingly beautiful poetical corpus, there are some poems which stand out like summits. One such poem is *Tanhāʾī* (Payām-i Mashriq, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 288).

Tanhāʾī treats of a perennial theme which has engaged philosophers, poets, and common people alike—the theme, namely of a human being’s ultimate loneliness, which generates a sense of anguish, mystery, and wonder—and, of course, the related sense of enigmatic human existence. For literature, this syndrome of mystery, wonder, anguish, and, paradoxically, near-ecstasy, has been, at once, a liability and an asset. It has been a liability in the sense that it has sometimes led to morbid self-centeredness, solipsism, and even escapism. Generally, however, it has turned out to be an asset, primarily because one of the greatest triumphs of creative literature is to convert a liability into an asset. The syndrome accounts for some of the most abiding charms of the world’s great poetry—from Abū Ṭālib Kalīm’s Persian couplet (my translation; original verse in Browne, 4:262):

> We lack awareness of the beginning and end of the world:
> The opening and conclusion of this book is lost.

to Shakespeare’s comment on life:

> It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
> (*Macbeth*, V.v.26–28)

and from Ghālib’s description of an individual as an undecipherable page (*waraq-i nā khwāndah*) to Coleridge’s lines in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (ll. 597–600)

O wedding-Guest! This soul hath been
Alone on a wide, wide sea:
So lonely 'twas, that God Himself
Scarce seemed there to be.

and to Faiz's agonizing cry,

No one, absolutely no one will ever come here.
(*Naqsh-i Faryādī*, in *Nuskhah-hā'-i Wafā*, 71)

Loneliness has supplied poetry with one of its dominant keynotes. Notwithstanding Iqbal's public persona and social involvements, loneliness forms one of the main keynotes of his poetry right from its beginning to its end. His essentially lonely temperament is reflected in some of his anguished letters addressed to Atiya Faizi and Emma Wegenast, his German love. The solipsistic tendency pervades his early poetry so much as to remind us time and again of John Stuart Mill's definition of poetry as "of the nature of soliloquy" (Gibbs, 208). In an early Urdu poem entitled *Tanhā'ī* ("Loneliness"), Iqbal tries to assure himself of being in company:

Why feel gloomy in the loneliness of the night?
Don't you see, stars bear you company?
(*Bāng-i Darā*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū*, 129)

In another poem, *Ek Shām: Daryā-i Nekar, Hā'idalbarg ke Kināre par* ("An Evening on the Bank of the River Neckar in Heildelberg"), loneliness is presented as the way, the law of the universe to which the poet wants his heart to submit:

Silent is the light of the moon
And silent the branches of each tree.
The warblings in the vale have gone silent
And silence pervades the verdant hills.
The mountains, the moor, and the river are all silent—
Nature seems to be in deep meditation.
My heart, you, too, be silent,
And go to sleep in the embrace of grief.
(*Bāng-i Darā*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū*, 128)

In *Asrār-i Khudī* ("Secrets of the Self"), the note of loneliness is struck in Iqbal's melting prayer to the Creator:

It is not easy for a candle to burn and throb alone
Not a single moth worthy of me is there . . .
I am like a tulip cast in the desert—
Alone, all alone, though in company.
(*Asrār-i Khudī*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 77–78)

But this sentiment finds its best poetic expression in the poem *Lālah-i Ṣaḥrā* ("The Desert Tulip") in *Bāl-i Jibrīl*, in the quatrains of *Armughān-i Ḥijāz*, and in the poem under discussion here. *Lālah-i Ṣaḥrā* is a profoundly symbolic poem in which human existence merges with a burning tulip like a question mark in a vast, endless wilderness:

> The blue cupola above, the wide expanse of loneliness around—
> Frightening to me is the immensity of this desert;
> A lost and blundering wayfarer are you, and so I am.
> Where lies your destination, O tulip of the desert?
> (*Bāl-i Jibrīl*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū*,121)

The wonderment naturally develops into bewilderment in the face of the mysteriousness and inscrutability of existence where every grain seems to be a desert and every drop an ocean:

> May God protect the diver of love—
> Each drop of the ocean has the depth of the ocean.
> (Ibid., 122)

This infinite mystery and immensity is the source of the coexistence in man of existential anguish and miraculous heroism:

> Why did you sprout from your branch, and I fall off from mine?
> A passion for creative expression, a relish and zest for unique individuality . . .
> Man's passion lends life to the tumult of existence:
> The sun is only an onlooker, the stars are mere spectators.
> (Ibid., 122–123)

Armughān-i Ḥijāz may be called, from one point of view, the testament of loneliness, as the note of loneliness is heard distinct and clear in all its contexts:

> Early spring, and tulips have sprung in the meadows;
> Friends and mates have pitched their tents in the deserts
> But lovelier far it seems to me to sit alone
> On the bank of a rivulet tumbling down the mountains.
> (*Armughān-i Ḥijāz*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 910)

> I offer my heart in my palm but no heart-ravishing beloved is there;
> I have merchandise to lose but no takers are there to rob.
> Make you a resting place in my bosom
> As no Muslim is lonelier than me.
> (Ibid., 938)

I partook of the pain and passion of the tulip
And unmasked the inmost heart of life:
I know not to whom I addressed my subtle song of love,
As I lived alone and sang my song alone.
(Ibid., 940)

Tanhāʾī is a vibrating drama on the theme of loneliness executed in a few bold, masterly strokes in four stanzas of five lines each:

I went to the Ocean and asked a restless wave:
"You always writhe in quest. What dilemma is this?
A thousand shining pearls lie in your bosom, but
Do you, like me, possess a pearl called heart?"
It tossed and turned away from the shore and said nothing.

I turned to the mountain and said, "What apathy is this—
Unmoved you hear the wailing and whining of those in grief?
If one stone of yours contains the gem of the drop of blood,
Then, for once, converse with me—forlorn and woebegone."
It shrank within itself and held its breath, but said nothing.

Traversing a long distance I reached the moon and asked:
"You are fated to travel, but does your journey have a goal?
With your brow's light the world shines like a bed of white jasmines;
Does the sheen of your scar reflect the presence of a heart?"
It cast an envious look at the star, but said nothing.

Passing the sun and the moon, I reached God's own presence
"Not a single atom understands me in your wide world;
The world is bereft of heart, while this handful of dust is all heart!
Lovely, indeed, is your garden, but it does not deserve my song."
A smile quivered upon his lips, but He said nothing.

Neither the theme of loneliness nor the tracing of its origin to the existence of a sensitive heart is new in Iqbal. From his early days as a poet, we find him preoccupied with the idea that a sensitive heart is, at once, the special privilege of man and the source of his anguish and ecstasy. The idea recurs in a whole group of his early poems—*Gul-i Rangīñ* ("The Colorful Flower"), *Aftāb-i Ṣubḥ* ("The Morning Sun"), *Gul-i Pazmurdah* ("The Withered Rose") and *Sarguzasht-i Ādam* ("The Tale of Adam"). *Tanhāʾī*, too, has the heart at its center—the pulsating, conscious heart, which, in the ultimate analysis, is the source of man's loneliness. That, in brief, is the central theme of the poem. But theme, as all students of literature know, is not poetry. It is the treatment that theme receives from a poet that makes it, or fails to make it, poetry. Mark Schorer, in his 1948 article, "Technique as Discovery," in *The Hudson Review*, perceptively pointed out that, in poetry, what matters is not content but "*achieved* content," and that the difference

between the two is technique. What is the technique of *Tanhā'ī*? The poem employs the dramatic technique. It is a dialogue in which the spectator remains unchanged, whereas the addressee goes on changing. The dialogue centers on a profoundly significant question. The speaker is man, or the poet as the representative of mankind. Deeply rocked by a query, he turns to different objects to seek the solace of an answer but finds none. The ocean wave tosses to and fro but does not say a word; the mountain hangs its head in speechlessness; and the moon is dumbfounded. Finally, the protagonist reaches the presence of the Creator Himself and His response to the query is one of the greatest triumphs of poetic art:

> A smile quivered upon his lips but He said nothing.
> (*Payām-i Mashriq*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, 288s)

The world of art can proudly boast of two mind-baffling smiles—the smile on the lips of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and the smile of the Creator in Iqbal's poem *Tanhā'ī*. But the smile that plays on God's lips is far more enigmatic, far more ironic, and far more meaningful than the smile of *Mona Lisa*. Does it mean that the Creator is baffled by the riddles of his own creation? This question, like the question arising from the poem's concluding line, must remain unanswered:

> If I fly ahead by a hair-breadth hence,
> The dazzle of illumination will consume my wings.
> (*Bāl-i Jibrī*, in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū*, 129)

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Absolute Knowledge and Moral Growth

The result of all philosophical thought is that absolute knowledge is an impossibility. The poet Browning turns this impossibility to ethical use by a very ingenious argument. The uncertainty of human knowledge, teaches the poet, is a necessary condition of moral growth, since complete knowledge will destroy the liberty of human choice.

Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections,
ed. Javid Iqbal, revised and annotated by Khurram Ali Shafique
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2006), 142

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