

Allama Iqbal's Courage of Refusal

Abstract: Some personalities are known by their city, some become associated with their country, but some personalities are so universal that they cannot be enclosed within some place, country, language, religion, race or nation. Allama Iqbal was also such a universal man, a great poet whose depth of thought and loftiness of imagination is acknowledged by the entire world. We are rightly proud that Iqbal was born on the land which is now known as Pakistan. It is also true that Iqbal presented the idea of Pakistan before the Muslims of India with great clarity; however the horizon of his thought and art was much vaster than this. The beautiful map of the universe, Man, his position and historical role, society and then its bright future which Iqbal has presented in his poetry uniformly invites the people of every religion, community, nation and country towards thought and action. Iqbal is not merely our poet, but the poet of the entire world. He is our first philosopher-poet who presented the idea of an evolving universe rather than a static idea of the creation of the universe. Whatever he wrote is an explanation of the philosophy of change; he further detailed the nature of this change as well. Based on selected, original translations of Allama Iqbal's poetry, the paper highlights these and other revolutionary aspects of Iqbal's thought like the rise and greatness of Man and his personal qualities; self-respect (*khudi*) and his (Iqbal's) aversion to slavery and submission of any kind; the courage of refusal; democracy; and the common man and revolutionary needs of society, which are vital for a lasting solution to the challenges of the contemporary world.

...when I see the poet who declared, in 'Rumuz-e-Bekhudī', the heavens, earth, air, rivers, mountains and valleys, the sun, moon and stars, fruits and flowers in fact the whole universe to be Man's inheritance, his ascetic poetry being controlled by a few self-serving custodians.

Iqbal had prayed to God: 'Spread the light of my vision everywhere.'

This prayer which issued from a humane heart will indeed be granted but upon seeing the name of this great poet affiliated with soaps, oils, hotels and laundries. Sometimes I feel that the light of his vision will keep wandering for a long time in the narrow and dark lanes of ignorance.

'A diamond's heart maybe cut by a flower petal

But a naïve man will be unmoved by verses soft and delicate.'

(Saadat Hasan Manto, 'On Iqbal Day')

Every year the speeches made on radio, television and ceremonies on the occasion of the birth of Allama Iqbal leave us amazed and one thinks repeatedly whether the sage being mentioned is the same great poet whose depth of thought and loftiness of imagination is acknowledged by the entire world.

Some personalities are known by their city, some become associated with their country, but some personalities are so universal that they cannot be confined within some place, country, language, religion, race or nation. Allama Iqbal was also such a universal man, but since the past four decades, some circles are trying to ensconce the eagle of Iqbal in a 'butterfly's net'. These quarter-length dwarves do not have the strength and ability to reach Iqbal, therefore they want to drag him from his high position down to their level. The more one feels sorry at these actions of the so-called devotees of Iqbal, the lesser it becomes.

We are rightly proud that Iqbal was born on the land which is now known as Pakistan. It is also true that Iqbal presented the idea of Pakistan before the Muslims of India with great clarity; however the horizon of his thought and art was much vaster than this. The beautiful map of the universe, Man, his position and historical role, society and then its bright future which Iqbal has presented in his poetry uniformly invites the people of every religion, community, nation and country towards thought and action. Iqbal is not merely our poet, but the poet of the entire world; just like Homer, Dante, Ferdowsi, Saadi, Goethe, Shakespeare and Ghalib are the poets of the entire world. To enclose them within miniscule jugs is to hurt both their personality and poetry.

The revolution which Iqbal wrought in the shape and meaning of Urdu poetry cannot be reviewed in a few pages. The service which he performed in awakening our intellectual consciousness, we cannot ever relieve ourselves from its favour. He is our first philosopher-poet who presented the idea of an evolving universe rather than a static idea of the creation of the universe.

The life perhaps is still raw and incomplete

Be and it becomes e'er doth a voice repeat

This philosophy of evolution is not new. Examples of it can be found in the Urdu and Persian poetry before Iqbal, but to label the world as 'a state of change' in a traditional and ecstatic manner is one thing, and to base the centre of one's entire system of thought and feeling on the philosophy of change is another. Whatever he wrote is an explanation of the philosophy of change; he did not rest on this alone but has detailed the nature of this change as well and has explained that this change passes the stages of evolution through the clash of opposing forces.

From eternity to the present day

The lamp of Muhammad has faced off with the spark of Abu Lahab

This constant struggle keeps nations alive

Such is the secret of the radiance of the Arab nation

The logical result of this philosophy is the image of the ascent and greatness of Man. This is the centre of Iqbal's thought and art. Iqbal is our first poet who directed us towards the personal attributes of Man and indicated the abilities which were hidden and impatient to emerge within him. Iqbal defines with great determination the miracles of the conquest of the universe which Man has shown; and with great courage and daring compares his achievements with the creations of the Creator. ('You created the Night, I created the Lamp.')

After all, how can the angels measure up to the creative abilities of Man? But the condition is that Man recognizes his self-respect (*khudi*) that this is the reality of his Divinity and brings his creative abilities into motion. If not for this self-respect, Man does not deserve to be called a Man, rather he becomes an animal; and if this self-respect is high, then even the worlds beyond the stars submit to him.

Allama Iqbal is an absolute opponent of the submission of worship and slavery because during slavery, Man's self-respect i.e. his personal attributes are lost. The death of self-respect is actually the death of Man.

'Why do your priests', said to me after prayers

A Turkish hero of the faith, 'drag out their genuflexions so?'

He little knew, that free-born Muslim, that plain warrior

What kind of thing slaves' prayers are!

In this world a thousand tasks lie ready for the free

In whom the love of high deeds burns

And forges the nations and their laws

But that fire never touches the slave's limbs

Whose nights and days stand still under an interdict

If our prostrations are long-drawn

Why should you wonder?

Today submission and worship are part and parcel of the mood of our society. This is the death of that feeling which teaches Man to be proud of his importance and greatness. In the present system, Man has to compromise at every step for the fulfilment of his personal desires. That is the reason the 'courage of refusal' is not born within him, and the lack of 'courage of refusal' has compelled him to adopt all that which is leading to his consistent descent. We find the expression of the 'courage of refusal' throughout Iqbal's poetry.

Iqbal is weary of his society because in this society, a vast majority of people do not find the opportunity to recognize their self-respect and to raise and polish their intellectual abilities. He believes that until feudalism, the capitalist system, monarchy and imperialism are destroyed, Man will continue to be an oppressed creature. The attributes of his self-respect will shine once the democratic system is established.

But alas, those in authority and the intellectuals associated with them have always tried to conceal the evolutionary aspects of Iqbal's thought. It is true that for the last 71 years, the poetry of Iqbal is broadcast on radio ad nauseam. The *ulema* who put fatwas of blasphemy and apostasy on Iqbal in his lifetime sway to his verses, *qawwali* gatherings boom with his poetry, commercial newspapers take out special editions on Iqbal Day, but all these people avoid those parts of his poetry like the plague, where Iqbal talks about the common man and revolutionary needs of society.

By drawing a cultural Chinese wall, we are further limiting the circle of our thought and art. We will have to pay a very heavy price for this mentality. If this tendency is not changed, the springs of our creative abilities and thought will dry up and we will limit our understanding of the world to the circle of the well like the proverbial frog. The attempts to reduce Iqbal by selectively pruning him, is also part of this mentality and if we keep on reducing Iqbal and his personality keeps on shrinking in this manner, the day is not far when Iqbal will be reduced to merely a poet of Sialkot rather than a universal man. And as Habib Jalib presciently noted in his brief poem on Iqbal's birth centenary in 1977,

When we arise to wake the poor, the have nots

A beeline to the police station they make, these wealthy sots

They say that God this wealth to them allots

Oh these trite excuses, oh these dusty plots

Night and day the working men's blood they suck, o poet of the East

These congenital liars, with the vileness of a beast

