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Iqbal's Critique of Persian Mysticism: The Debate Revisited

Sir Muhammad Iqbal's sharp criticism of what he preferred to call *ajmi tasawwuf* or Persian mysticism has invited a lot of critical debate which now forms a significant part of the Iqbalian studies. Ever since Iqbal expressed his opinions on the subject, scholars have grappled with the problem offering different explanations. What, however, gets overlooked is that for Iqbal the issue was not as complicated as it is made out to be. A group of critics thinks that Iqbal changed his views subsequently, another group finds an unresolved tension in him, yet another finds a stark contradiction between his prose and poetry as the latter is thought to be deeply coloured by Sufism. The present paper seeks to revisit the debate in order to show that, contrary to some opinions, there is no evidence that Iqbal gave up his earlier position, or moved significantly away from it. Whether Iqbal was justified in his opinions or not remains outside the purview of this paper as it only aims at an exposition of Iqbal's

position which has been somewhat obfuscated by the ever-increasing commentaries and interpretations. It contends that the scholars who hold that Iqbal turned away from his earlier stance to accommodate the doctrine of wahdatul wujud or ontological monism seem to have adopted an unwarranted stance.

In his prose works, letters, speeches and essays, Iqbal emerges as a thinker with a strong conviction that mysticism, especially the kind enshrined in Indo-Persian poetry, has been immensely detrimental to the spiritual, political and moral fabric of the Muslims. Iqbal's works, beginning with *Asrare Khudi* in 1915, show a remarkable consistency on the question of mysticism. *Asrare Khudi*'s first edition had a preface attached in which Iqbal aimed to build a case against mysticism in general. That Iqbal's criticism is not merely aimed at certain extreme types of *tasawwuf*, but is directed against the very worldview underlying most mystical schools, is amply borne out by his discussion of the Hindu philosophers and sages. He admiringly mentions *Shri Krishna* for what he terms as his great contribution to his religion. Krishna, he thinks, preached the doctrine of action and warned against inaction. He laments, however, that the good work done by Krishna was largely nullified by the pervasive influence of *Shankara*, the impact of whose philosophy was highly detrimental to the

community. Iqbal also discusses what he calls a similar fate of the Hindu and Islamic traditions in the fact that what Shankara did to Hinduism, Ibne Arabi did to Islam. He holds both responsible for a negative influence due to their teachings that presumed 'the self' to be an illusion, to be negated rather than reckoned with. Deeply averse to the non-dualistic metaphysics of both Shankara and Ibne Arabi, Iqbal tries to draw a causal relation between their philosophies and the religious life of the two communities, contending that the tendency to negate the self is one of the main causes of decadence of both Hindus and Muslims.

Iqbal thinks that Ibne Arabi's *wahdatul wujud*, in essence a false doctrine, was assimilated by the Persian consciousness to such an extent that it became a matrix of their thought deeply colouring all their religious and literary expressions. Poetry, in effect, became the principle medium through which these unislamic ideas gained wide publicity. Iqbal's remarks about Hafiz Shirazi, arguably the greatest ghazal poet of a times, can be an appropriate starting point in the present discussion. In fact, the verses have an almost enchanting ring to them and, rather paradoxically, seem to partake of the charming quality of Hafiz himself:

*Hushyaar az Haafize sahaba gusaar
Jaamash az zahre ajal sarmaaya daar*

Rahne saaqi khirqae parhize u
May ilaaje haule rastaakhize u

Neest ghair az baadah dar baazaare u
Az du jaam aashufta shud dastaare u

Aan chunaan maste sharaabe bandagi ast
Khwaaja wa mahrume zauqe khwaajagi ast

Aan faqeehe millate may khwaargaan
Aan imaame millate bichaargaan

Gusfand ast u fanaa aamukht ast
Ushwa u naaz u adaa aamukht ast

Zuf ra naame tavaanaai dihad
Saaze u aqwaam ra ighwaa kunad

Een fusun khwaan zindagi az ma rabud
Jaame u shaane jamee az ma rabud

Mahfile u dar khure abraar neest
Saaghare u qaabile ahraar neest

*Bi niyaaz az mahfile Hafiz guzar
Alhazar az gusfandaan alhazar*

(Asraare Khudi, First Edition)

*Beware of Hafiz, the perennial drunkard
Whose cup holds nothing but poison in plenty.*

*Whose mantle of piety is pledged to the saki
Who takes to wine to benumb his awakening .*

*Nothing but wine sells in his bazaar
He stakes his honour on two cups.*

*Drinks deep on the wine of servility
Is called 'the master', knows nothing of mastery.*

*He, the patron of wine-lovers
He, the leader of a hapless lot.*

*A sheep preaching self-extinction
And tricks of coquetry and deception.*

*Meekness he labels as courage and strength
His tunes have misled many a nation.*

*This enchanter has sapped us of the spirit
His cup has robbed us of our knightly glory.*

*His assembly ill-suits the pious
His goblet holds nothing for free men*

*Pass by Hafiz's assembly with disdain
Beware of sheep, beware, beware.*

No sooner were these lines published than a diatribe was launched against Iqbal. For many in India and outside, Hafiz was not just a great poet but also a great Sufi who communicated profound mystical truths in a highly symbolical language. It was believed that in the garb of wine, women and song, Hafiz was actually revealing the esoteric or the inner dimension of religious truths and taking him literally betrayed an incompetence to understand the real Hafiz. Iqbal thus invited accusations not only of misunderstanding the great master but also of intellectual hubris.

Iqbal's response to these attacks, some of which came from his friends such as Akbar Allahabadi and Khwaja Hassan Nizami, forms an interesting story. He offers an incisive rejoinder to his critics, stating quite emphatically that his opinions about Hafiz are fully justified. Iqbal contends that in criticizing Hafiz he has criticized the whole tradition of Persian

mysticism which drew sustenance from the ideas enshrined in his poetry . He maintains that the poetry of this kind had enervated the vitality of the Muslims and contributed to their spiritual, moral and political decadence. He expands the canvass of his attack to include all forms of Sufism which have departed from the pristine teachings of Islam. Iqbal feels no hesitation in pointing out the fallacies of such highly revered divines as Ibne Arabi and even goes to the extent of saying that his ideas are plainly blasphemous. Stubbornly refusing to retract, Iqbal wrote to many of his critic-friends that he had arrived at these conclusions after long and serious deliberations. He is very clear about what he finds most objectionable in Sufism. Sufism, Iqbal holds, cannot be taken as an autonomous metaphysics and hence such a doctrine as wahdatul wujud, being no more than extremely speculative in character, has no religious sanction. It is interesting to note that Iqbal admits that he was personally inclined towards wahdatul wujud but had sacrificed his predilection for the sake of the Quran. A very important letter in this regard, written to Khwaja Hassan Nizami

I still believe that you will finally agree with me. You know me quite well and are also aware of all my ties. Because of my ancestral influence and personal temperament, I had a strong inclination towards Sufism. And this personal inclination

was further strengthened by my study of the Western philosophy because taken as a whole, the Western thought inclines to wahdatul wujud. But a deep study of the Quran and Islamic history alerted me to my mistake and I gave up my long-cherished ideas only for the sake of the Quran. I thus had to wage an intense battle against myself on both intellectual and emotional fronts.

(December 30, 1915)

Iqbal is careful to differentiate between Islamic and Persian mysticism, stating that he has no quarrel with the former which rightly insists on the values which form the core of Islam. He argues that Islam implies an enormous creative and intellectual freedom and urges man to explore the physical world and look outside himself to find the signs of God. Self-annihilation and world-negation, the two most pernicious ideas Iqbal posited at the heart of Persian Sufism, were thus inimical to the very spirit of Islam. In one of his philosophical lectures, he defines the Quranic spirit as essentially anti-classical owing to the 'inward turning' tendency of the Roman-Hellenistic thought. It is not out of place here to mention that in *Asrare Khudi* Iqbal was no less sparing of Plato whom he denounced as vehemently as Hafiz. Plato with his belief in the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and a complete distrust of sense-perceptions, was the mainstay of

most mystical schools. For Iqbal, however, not only is the self a reality but the phenomenal world is real too, to be explored and mastered.

Iqbal's discussion of how the decadent Sufism has impacted upon Muslims becomes particularly intense as he tries to explain how the meaning of certain important religious terms has been distorted by some Sufis. In a letter to his friend Sirajudin Pal, Iqbal quotes a few verses of a Persian poet to substantiate his view. Jihad or striving against all evil forces had a special meaning in Islam and invariably denoted an unrelenting struggle to subdue the negative forces in life. A Sufi poet, by twisting the meaning of the term, robs it of its vitality and dynamism and thus of its very essence:

Ghazi zi paye shahaadat andar tag u pust

Ghaafil ki shaheede ishq faazil tar azust

Dar ruze qayaamat een ba u kay maanad

Een kushtaye dushman ast aan kushtaye dust

For the sake of martyrdom the warrior fights

Ignorant that the love-slain is far superior to him.

On the Judgement Day, how can the two be equal?

One was slain by the enemy, the other by the friend.

The quatrain is beautiful poetry, Iqbal adds, but distorts the simple meaning of jihad. It is not difficult to see how a fatal poison

has been administered in the garb of beautiful poetry and the poor reader silently consumes it, thinking it to be elixir. In one of his write-ups titled 'Islam and Mysticism' published in The New Era, Lucknow on 28th of July, 1917, Iqbal offered a very clear picture of his views. It would be worthwhile to follow him in his detailed discussion:

The present-day Muslim prefers to roam about aimlessly in the dusky valleys of Hellenic-Persian Mysticism, which teaches us to shut our eyes to the hard Reality around, and to fix our gaze on what it describes as 'Illuminations'-blue, red and yellow Reality springing up from the cells of an overworked brain. To me this self-mystification, this Nihilism, i.e. seeking Reality in quarters where it does not exist, is a physiological symptom which gives me a clue to the decadence of the Muslim world. The intellectual history of the ancient world will reveal to you this most significant fact that the decadent in all ages have tried to seek shelter behind self-mystification and Nihilism. Having lost the vitality to grapple with the temporal, these prophets of decay apply themselves to the quest of a supposed eternal; and gradually complete the spiritual impoverishment and physical degeneration of their society by evolving a seemingly charming ideal of life which seduces even the healthy and powerful to death. To such a peculiarly constructed society as Islam the

work of these sentimental obscurantists has done immense harm. Our birth as a society, repudiating the ideas of race and language as principles of social reconstruction, was due only to our subjecting ourselves to a system of Law believed to be Divine in origin; yet the old Mystic frankly held and secretly preached it to be merely phenomenal; nothing more than an outer husk of the Real which is to be attained by means other than the Law of God. In most cases the observance of the Law, even though held to be phenomenal, was retained to avoid social odium; but no student of Muslim thought and literature can deny that the tendency to ignore the Law---the only force holding together Muslim society---was the direct consequence of a false Mysticism born of the heart and brain of Persia. Thus Muslim Democracy was gradually displaced and enslaved by a sort of spiritual aristocracy pretending to claim knowledge and power not open to the average Muslim...

Remember that Islam was born in the broad day-light of history. The great democratic Prophet lived and worked among the intelligent men who have transmitted to posterity every word that dropped from his sacred lips. There is absolutely nothing esoteric in his teachings. Every word of the Quran is brimful of light and joy of existence. Far from justifying any gloomy, pessimistic mysticism, it is an open assault on those religious teachings which have for centuries mystified mankind.

Accept, then, the reality of the world cheerfully and grapple with it for the glorification of God and His Prophet. Do not listen to him who says there is a secret doctrine in Islam which cannot be revealed to the uninitiated.

(Iqbal: 1917)

One can hardly ask for a more lucid exposition of the poet-philosopher's views on the subject. As is clear, Iqbal strongly denounces any attempts to distinguish between the exoteric and esoteric Islam and calls it one of the most serious fallacies of Sufism. The law of Islam is not an outer husk to be discarded as a dispensable element but constitutes the very core of the Islamic religion. One needs to remember, however, that Iqbal was no obscurantist denying the importance of legal reforms in Islam. In fact, as many of his prose works testify, he was one of the first Muslims intellectuals to recognize the need for reinterpreting the Islamic legal framework according to the demands of the altered historical conditions. He strongly believed that Islam contains within it a dynamic principle of adjustability to any circumstances and opposed those who refused to acknowledge the fact of historical change. Thus, while Iqbal fully agreed with those liberals who called for revisiting the shariah to make it compatible with the needs of modern life, he denounced vehemently the Sufistic tendency to disregard the law.

Iqbal's stance on Sufism in general and Sufi poetry in

particular is strongly rooted in his concept of khudi or self. His poetry can be read as a sustained assault on all those habits of thinking which tend to undermine the self or encourage a withdrawal from strife.

He advocated a selfhood that is at once ethically, socially and politically engaged and also strong enough to resist the pull of anarchy. Rejecting the Sufi ethos implied, among other things, rejecting the stance of passive acceptance of circumstances in favour of an energetic grappling with them. It is notable that Iqbal believed most of the Sufi poetry to be the product of the age of political decadence of Muslims and found nothing surprising that it was so. It was only natural that Muslims, having lost political power to their enemies, suffered a deep psychological crisis which manifested itself in various forms of decadent poetry. Political subservience transformed their very conscience and they found consolation in a willful negation of the concrete reality. Weakness and inferiority became a virtue and withdrawal from the worldly strife concealed an essentially defeatist psyche. The fact that the elegiac poetry of Lucknow was generally regarded as the zenith of Muslim poetry in India was for Iqbal an ample proof of this.

An important question that may never be quite satisfactorily answered is this: why does Iqbal single out Rumi

among the Persian Sufi-poets, not only eulogizing him but declaring him to be his guide? In other words, is Iqbal's excepting Rumi from all other mystic poets warranted when there is hardly any suggestion that Rumi did not subscribe to the common Sufi worldview? As is well known, Iqbal was highly impressed by Rumi's idea of Ishq or 'love' and thought it be invaluable for rejuvenating the decadent Muslim consciousness. Whether Rumi's doctrinal inclinations tended towards wahdatul wujud or not, Iqbal reads him to serve his own ends. His projecting Rumi as the sure-footed guide in the path of spirituality in no way suggested that Iqbal finally came to see the truth in wahdatul wujud or any of its corollaries like 'the doctrine of emanation'. On the converse, Iqbal finds in Rumi a sage who quite brilliantly lays bare the dangers inherent in the teachings which he attributed to mysticism in general. Rumi's *ishq* is for Iqbal a cure to simultaneously two fatal diseases afflicting modern man's consciousness: the fallacy of the self-sufficiency of reason unguided by revelation, and the tendency to negate the reality of the self and the physical world.

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