

Some Thoughts on Iqbal's Aesthetics

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For Iqbal, Art must add to the fulness and richness of life. Art is genuine and significant only when it impinges dynamically on life, deepening its appreciation, quickening its pulse and illuminating, its fundamental purposes with insight.¹

Iqbal has no use for a self- regarding Art which is divorced from the problems of living. Art must serve life in some way and not exist merely for its own sake. Unequivocally he says, "Art is subordinate to life, not superior to it. The ultimate end of all human activity is life-glorious, powerful, exuberant. All human art must be subordinated to this final purpose and the value of everything must be determined in reference to its life-yielding capacity. The highest art is that which awakens our dormant will-force, and helps us to face the trials of life manfully. All that brings drowsiness and makes us shut our eyes to reality around on the mastery of which alone life depends - is a message of decay and death. There should be no opium-eating in art. The disguise of art for the sake of art is a clever invention of decadence to cheat us out of life and power."²

Iqbal has placed great emphasis on the "life-yielding" quality of Art. Art which tends to take away from life its joy and zest, courage and enthusiasm, need not be at all.

افسردہ اگر اس کی نوا سے ہو گلستان
بہتر ہے کہ خاموش رہے مرغِ سحر خیز

With its singing if it makes the garden melancholy,
'tis better that the early-rising bird should silent be.

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 127)

اگر نوا میں ہے پوشیدہ موت کا پیغام
حرام میری نظروں میں نالہ چنگ و رباب

If in a melody the call of death does hidden lie,
that flute, that harp, that viol is unholy in my eye.

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 125)³

A great portion of Iqbal's writings on aesthetics deals with the subject of what he considers to be "decadent" Art. Like Plato, Iqbal too had once been susceptible to the charms of poetry which sapped the energies of human beings and lulled them into a barren - albeit a seemingly golden - dream of effortless existence. For Iqbal, Hafiz is the symbol of such life-stultifying Art. This is surprising,

for to the young poet Iqbal, Hafiz had meant much. Atiya Faizi tells us of Iqbal's great admiration for Hafiz and comments, "I felt that Iqbal believed more in Hafiz than in any other Persian poet."³ In his Notebook, Iqbal himself paid a glowing tribute to the perfection of Hafiz's poetic technique: "In words like cut jewels, Hafiz put the sweet unconscious spirituality of the nightingale."⁴

Iqbal's rejection of Hafiz was, in effect, also a rejection of a phase of his own youth, a phase when he could say:

زندگانی جس کو کہتے ہیں فراموشی ہے یہ
خواب ہے، غفلت ہے، ترمستی ہے، بیہوشی ہے یہ

That which is called living is but a forgetfulness,
a dream, a drowsiness, a drunkenness, unconsciousness.

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 95.)

In lines which caused great uproar, Iqbal attacked Hafiz in no uncertain terms:

هوشیار از حافظ صہبا گسار
جامش از زہر اجل سرمایہ دار
ناوک انداز کہ تاب از دل برد
ناوک او مرگ را شیریں کند

Beware of Hafiz the wine-drinker
his cup is full of deadly poison;
he is an archer who takes strength from the heart,
his dart makes death sweet.

(*Khayaban-e-Iqbal*, pp. 230-232)⁵

Iqbal went on to compare Hafiz unfavourably with 'Urfi, another Persian poet

حافظ جادو بیان شیرازی است
عرفی آتش بیان شیرازی است
این سوئے ملک خودی مرکب جہاند
آن کنار آب رکنا باد ماند!
بادہ زن با عرفی ہنگامہ خیز
زندہ از صحبت حافظ گریز

Hafiz the enchanting poet hails from Shiraz,
'Urfi emitting fire also hails from Shiraz,

'Urfi leads to the domain of Self,
Hafiz remained on the banks of Ruknabad.
Drink wine with 'Urfi the tumultuous,
If you have life run away from Hafiz.

(*Khayaban-e-Iqbal*, p. 232)⁵

Iqbal inveighed against Hafiz “for his quietism, his epicureanism, his libertinism, his indifference to the great historical events that were taking place around him and the soporific effect of his mystical eroticism.”⁶

Iqbal has painted a vivid picture of the harm that a poet who preaches death rather than life may do:

بوسه او تازگی از گل برد
ذوق پرواز از دل بلبل برد
سست اعصاب تو از افیون او
زندگانی قیمت مضمون او
نعمه هایش از دلت دزدد نبات
مرگ را از سحر او دانی حیات
حسین او را با صداقت کار نیست
در یمش جز گوهر تف دار نیست
در یم اندیشه اندازد ترا
از عمل بیگانه می سازد ترا

His kiss robs the rose of freshness,
He takes away from the nightingale the joy of flying.
The sinews are relaxed by his opium,
Thou payest for his song with the life.
His melodies steal firmness from thy heart,
His magic persuades thee that death is life,
He plunges thee in a sea of thought.
And makes thee a stranger to action.
His beauty hath no dealings with truth,
There are none but flawed pearls in his sea.

(*Asrar-e-Khudi*, pp. 39-40, translation by R. A. Nicholson, *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore, 1964, pp. 64 - 65).

Implicit in his rejection of Hafiz is Iqbal's rejection of a great portion of contemporary Persian and Urdu poetry. Perhaps the senses could luxuriate in such Art, but the soul could draw no sustenance from themes such as these

راہیے در حلقہٴ دام ہوس
 دلبرے با طائرے اندر قفس
 خسروے پیش فقیرے خرّقہ پوش
 مرد کوہستانی ہیزم بدوش
 ناز نینے در رہ بت خانہ
 جوگئے در خلوت ویرانہ
 پیر کے از درد پیری داغ داغ
 آنکہ اندر دست او گل شد چراغ

A monk caught in the snare of carnal lust;
 A beauty with a bird imprisoned in
 A cage, a king with folded knees before
 A hermit wrapped up in a patch-work cloak;
 A man from the hills with a firewood load;
 A lovelorn maiden going to a temple;
 A Yogi sitting in a wilderness;
 An old man tortured by the pains of age,
 Whose candle is about to flicker out.

(Zabur-e-‘Ajam, p. 254, translation by M. H. Husain, *Iqbal, on Poetry and the Poet*)

In *Asrar-e-Khudi* Iqbal bids us leave the “garden of Persia” and return to “the heat of the desert.”⁷ ‘Ajam was to become for Iqbal a symbol of Art which, though moving and beautiful in its own way, did not keep the ego in that state of tension or heightened self-awareness in which it was able to pervade reality and transcend all obstructing forces

ہے شعر عجم گرچہ طربناک و دل آویز
 اس شعر سے ہوتی نہیں شمشیر خودی تیز

Though Persian verse is gay, heart-ravishing,
 not sharpened by this verse is ego’s sword.

(Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 127)

Because Art is subservient to life which for Iqbal is the ego’s striving for perfection, it is necessary to move on from ‘Ajam to *Hejaz*. *Hejaz* now becomes, aesthetically, the symbol for that virile, life-yielding and life-enriching Art which unites Beauty and Power, and becomes an embodiment of Love. Iqbal says

دلبری بے قاہری جادوگری امت
 دلبری با قاہری پیغمبری امت

Charm lacking power is mere sorcery,
but charm with power combined is prophethood.

(*Zabur-e-‘Ajam*, p. 264)

An interesting question comes to mind here. Would Iqbal have denied the status of Art to the work of poets such as Hafiz? Iqbal had known that “the good in art is not necessarily identical with the good in life; it is possible for a person to write fine poetry, and lead his society to Hell.”⁸ Since it is possible for the good in Art to be separate from the good in life, Iqbal would not have denied the name of Art to that which was, in any way, detrimental to life. However, such Art he would have banished from his ideal society.

There are places in Iqbal’s works where he seems to denounce not only “decadent” Art but all Art. His words “convey the impression that he has no use for poetry of any kind.”⁹ To the Editor of *Makhzan*, the late Sir Abdul Qadir, he sent the message

جو کام کچھ کر رہی ہیں قومیں،
انہیں سداق سخن نہیں ہے

The nations which are strong in action
do not have a taste for verse.

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 144)

His words may be easily misunderstood. Here Iqbal is not saying that Art is useless. He is merely expressing his disapproval of the passivity in which his fellow countrymen were sunk, content with poetry which did not stir in them any longing for action, while European nations were struggling hard to build a better life for themselves.

On certain occasions Iqbal has even denied being a poet.

نہ بینی خیرازاں مرد فرودست
کہ برمن تہمت شعر و سخن بست
بکوئے دلیران کارے ندارم
دل زارے، غم یارے ندارم
نہ خاک من غبار راہگزارے
نہ در خاکم دل بے اختیارے

No good will ever come from any churlish boor
Who lays the charge of versifying at my door.
I do not know the alley where the poet’s sweet-heart dwells;
I have no lovelorn heart which someone’s coldness ails.
Mere humble dust, I yet do not lie on the street

To be a carpet under beauty's feet.
Nor is there in my dust
A heart made clamorous by lust.

(*Zabur-e-'Ajam*, p. 204, translation by M. Husain)

This disclaimer is, of course, an attack on traditional erotic poetry which abounds in lifeless images of servile adoration. Such poetry lacks dignity and sincerity and is unworthy of the fortified, self-respecting ego.

When Iqbal says

میری نوائے پریشان کو شاعری نہ سمجھو
کہ میں ہوں محرم راز درون میخانہ

Look not on my troubled song as poetry,
for I'm aware of the tavern's inside secrets

he does not mean to say that he is not a poet but that his song is not mere versification. Versification is a mechanical activity, whereas true poetry is organic to the poet's being and reveals to him the secrets of life. There we meet another significant idea from Iqbal's aesthetics, namely, that poetry is to be distinguished from versification. As Sir Philip Sidney wrote, "there have been many most excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

1. K. G. Saiyidain, *Iqbal's Educational Philosophy*, Lahore, 1965, p. 2.
2. S.A. Vahid, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, Lahore, 1964, pp. 85-86.
3. A. Faizi, *Iqbal*, Bombay, 1947, p. 15
4. Javid Iqbal (Editor), *Stray Reflections*, Lahore, 1961, p. 152.
5. Edited by M. T. Faruqi, and K. Ghaznawi, Peshawar, 1966
6. M. H. Husain, *Iqbal, on Poetry and the Poet*, (In manuscript, consulted by courtesy of the author).
7. R. A. Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self*, Lahore, 1964, p. 70.
8. *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, p., 84.

9. *Iqbal on Poetry and the Poet.*

10. J. C. Collins, (Editor), *Sidney's Apology for Poetry*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1955, p.12.

“Some Thoughts on Iqbal's Aesthetics,” in *The Pakistan Review*, Lahore, Pakistan, Volume XVI, No. 4, April 1968, pp. 18-20. A comprehensive article entitled “Iqbal's Philosophy of Art” which includes the material in this article was published in *Iqbal Review*, Volume CCV, No. 3, October 1985, pp. 19-44