

# Iqbal's Conception of a Poet

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In the history of literary criticism we often come across instances of a poet being regarded as a prophet. However, seldom has the word "prophet" borne so wide a connotation as it does in Iqbal's thought. A prophet builds up the character of people to whom he is sent. So must the poet, or else for Iqbal his art is trivial and of little significance:

If Art lacks the Self-building quality,  
woe to such Sculpture, Poetry and Music

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 112)

In those who lack courage a poet must infuse a spirit of resolve and courage:

Commence your singing nightingale that with your melody  
an eagle's heart is born within a pigeon's frail body.

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 300)

And if a poet succeeds in shaping human personality then he is accomplishing the task of a prophet:

If the purpose of poetry is the fashioning of men,  
poetry is likewise the heir of prophecy.

(*Javid Nama*, p. 46; translation by A. J. Arberry)

Like Blake and Shelley, Iqbal also believes that the poet is vouchsafed knowledge of what is yet to be - that is, he has the gift of foresight and prophecy. In the words of Blake:

Hear the voice of the Bard:  
Who Present, Past and Future sees.

Shelley's theory of poetry identifies poetry with prophecy and for him, poets are "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present." (*A Defence of Poetry*). For Iqbal:

The event that's yet beyond the curtain of the skies,

its shadow can be seen in my mind's mirror.  
Not in the star nor in the motions of the sky  
your destiny lies in my unfeared song.

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 54)

The true poet, like the prophet, is also an interpreter of Nature who reveals the secrets not known to humanity. "The world-spirit conceals the various phases of her inner life in symbol. The universe is nothing but a great symbol. But she never takes the trouble to interpret these symbols for us. It is the duty of the poet to interpret them and to reveal their meaning to humanity." (*Stray Reflections*, edited by J. Iqbal).

For Iqbal, as for Shelley, the poet-prophet is gifted with a particular insight into the nature of reality. He is a visionary and his poetry is the vehicle of his vision. With Wordsworth, Iqbal believed that the world of vision was at times more real than the world of sense-impressions and that visionary power was connected with the imaginative and creative process. However, for Iqbal the world of things is not less real than the world of his vision. (*Studies in Iqbal*, by S. A. Vahid)

Iqbal's poet-prophet is able not only to look into the future but also to inspire other individuals to greater striving in order to achieve their higher destiny. To the poet Sir Syed's spirit had said:

With the miracle of verse awakens those asleep,  
burn the seed of falsehood with the voice's flame.

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 41)

Through his words, then, the poet encourages others to translate the immense potentialities of the Self into action.

Iqbal's poet-prophet has the lineaments of Carlyle's Hero as Poet. In Carlyle's words, "the true poet is ever, as of old, the seer; whose eye has been gifted to discern the godlike mystery of God's universe and decipher some new lines of its celestial writings. We can still call him a Vates and Seer, for he sees into the greatest of secrets, 'the open secret', hidden things become clear; how the Future is but another phasis of the present; thereby are his words in very truth prophetic, what he has spoken shall be done." (*Collected Works*)

Iqbal's poet has a great social role to play. He is the "eye" of the nation:

The poet with the colorful song is the nation's eye,

if in pain is any limb, 'tis the eye that weeps,  
how great a sympathizer of the body is the eye!

*(Bang-e-Dara, p. 51)*

From history Iqbal had learnt that life-denying ideas could destroy a nation more surely than anything else. "The inspiration of a single decadent, if his art can lure his fellow to his song or picture, may prove more ruinous to a people than whole battalions of an Attila or a Changez." (*Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, edited by S. A. Vahid)

Iqbal believed in the truth of Tennyson's words:

The song that nerves a nation's heart is in itself a deed.

The art of a poet must be such that like the stroke of Moses - the symbol of Love and Power - it can work wonders in resurrecting a people's spirit:

In the world, without a miracle nations cannot rise,  
what kind of Art is that which lacks the power of Moses' stroke?

*(Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 117)*

For Iqbal not only is it true that "nations are born in the hearts of poets," but a poet whose art springs from his heart brings a message of life everlasting to the whole world:

To the world it is a way to everlasting life -  
that art of poetry-writing that is nourished by the heart's blood.

*(Bang-e-Dara, p. 230)*

And if such be a poet's art then it possesses a power and sanctity that does not belong to the word of common persons:

The poetry which is a message of eternal life,  
is either Gabriel's song or else the voice of Israfil!

*(Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 133)*

According to Iqbal the poet is a restless creature, possessed of an unbounded imagination which sets before him endless goals and desires to be attained. The fire of his passion consumes his very being and yet for him dreams are born every instant:

The poet's nature is all searching -  
the creator and nourisher of desire!

*(Javid Nama, p. 45; translation by A. J. Arberry)*

Since desire is the fountain head of Art, a desire which remains ungratified is of greater value to the artists than a desire which is lost in fulfillment:

In the world of passion and melody, separation is better than union,  
In union is desire's death; in separation the pleasure of yearning.

*(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 155)*

and so, a poet prays that the ultimate goal remain an ever-receding shore which one can never reach:

Each instant a new Sinai, a new flash -  
God grant Desire's journey never ends.

*(Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 126)*

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