

Tulip in the Desert:

A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal

Mustansir Mir. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press. 158 pages.

The poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) of the Indian subcontinent, who has been called the most serious Muslim philosophical thinker of modern times by Fazlur Rahman, does not occupy the place he deserves in the memory of the 'Umma of Islam today. For this fallen 'Umma which has not produced world-class thinkers for centuries, this state of amnesia cannot be afforded if the desire for revival is genuine. To this end, I believe, the recent book of Mustansir Mir, *Tulip in the Desert: A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal* is a very timely contribution.

The book consists of twelve short chapters preceded by an introduction on the life, poetry and philosophy of Iqbal. The author, who edited and translated this selection from Urdu and Farsi, is a professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Youngstown State University, Ohio. His book is more than a collection of Iqbal's poetry. He puts his own background to the service of the reader. Each chapter starts with a commentary on the poems selected according to a theme. Each poem is supplied with extensive explanatory notes, which sometimes take more space than the poem itself. As the author rightly states, these commentaries and notes elucidate Iqbal's use of historical, religious, philosophical and literary resources of the Islamic tradition. The book is a comprehensive introduction to various aspects of Iqbal's ideology and art in his poetry. Considering that the number of existing books on Iqbal is far less than sufficient as compared to the magnitude and importance of his work, the present one is a significant contribution to commemorate Iqbal, and teach lay people, as well as the learned, his recipe for overcoming the problems that Muslims have been facing for centuries.

In the five poems of Chapter 1, "Being Fresh with God", Iqbal addresses or converses with God in a manner that appears to be audacious. He asks God "Whose World is This – Yours or Mine?", tells God to "Do One of the Two" proposed options in each of the several different scenarios. When he says "Speak to Us Face to Face", he asserts the intrinsic worth and the nobility of the human being. "To Iqbal, God is not simply an object of mindless worship and unqualified praise; it is also possible to hold a dialogue with Him," as he does in "Listen to Me" and "A Dialogue Between God and Man".

Chapter 2, "Paradise Lost and Regained", is devoted to the poem "Conquest of Nature", which consists of five parts. In it, Iqbal retells and interprets the well-known story of the fall of Adam by employing his own metaphors. Adam, on the Day of Judgement, argues before God that it was necessary for him to fall victim to Iblis's machinations, for this was the only way by which he could conquer nature – which, in turn, was his only chance of bringing Iblis low.

The two poems in Chapter 3, "Satan's Viewpoint", are devoted to illustrate some aspects of Iblis. A hypothetical conversation between Gabriel and Iblis is presented in the poem "Gabriel and Iblis", in which Iblis takes pride in his defiance of God, as a result of which the clash between good and evil started.

"The Human Condition" is the title of Chapter 4, in which four poems are collected representing Iqbal's reflections on the situation of human beings as compared to objects of nature. While all things delight in their very existence, the urge for knowledge gives people no rest. Despite subjugating the world through discoveries of the laws of nature, people still remain ignorant of the secret of their existence, which dwells in the heart, and their own eyes are the main obstacles to this secret. The manuscript of the poem "Man" in Urdu is depicted on page 46 in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, "Head and Heart", two poems in the form of a dialogue between reason and heart, and knowledge and love, are presented. Reason praises itself by saying, among other things, that it interprets the book of life and tells heart that it is no more than a drop of blood. Heart answers back by saying that reason penetrates the secret of existence while it sees it with its eyes; that it is the throne of the God of Majesty. In the second poem, love tells knowledge that it fell into Satan's trap and offers it to be friends and build together an everlasting paradise.

Chapter 6, "The Poet", comprises three poems. Iqbal calls the poet "The Nation's Eye", who also suffers if just one limb of the nation should suffer pain. In the poem "The Night and the Poet", the night asks the poet how he eluded its spell and remained awake while everything else is asleep. The poet answers that he cannot get the people to hear the cry inside him and when he no longer can keep the message of love for himself, he tells it to the stars of the night. The *hourī* asks the poet why he is not attracted to her and wine in the poem "The *Hourī* and the Poet". He replies that he is always in search of something more perfect and seeks the end of what has no end.

Some of the poems Iqbal wrote about the distinguished people of world history have been presented in Chapter 7, "Personalities". The poem "Abu Bakr the Truthful" tells the well-known story of the desire of 'Umar to outmatch Abu Bakr when the Prophet (s.a.s) asked the affluent Muslims to spend their wealth in the way of God. The title of the other poems are "Nanak", who is considered the founder of the Sikh religion, "Shakespeare", "Rumi and Goethe", "Locke, Kant and Bergson", and "Petofi", a Hungarian poet-soldier.

One of the most important chapters of the book as far as the present situation of Muslims is concerned is Chapter 8, "Slave Culture". In "The Psychology of Slaves", Iqbal says, "They seek to make the slaves at ease with their slavery/Pretending to expound and reason things out." The poem "Mastership" makes the point that when the people are used to slavery there is no difficulty about being a master. "In the satirical poem "The state of *Barzakh*", Iqbal, using resurrection as a metaphor, says that death puts an end to the life of slaves only, and that living nations triumph over death-and are resurrected." In "Scorpion Land", Iqbal asserts that slavery makes the man of truth wear a *zunnar* (the ritual thread worn by Hindus), implying that slavery turns a monotheist into an idol worshipper. "Advice to Slaves" states Iqbal's view – "The words that a nation speaks are dead and its actions are futile/If its heart is bereft of firm beliefs."

"The Eagle" is the title of Chapter 9. Iqbal employs the eagle motif to elucidate certain aspects of his philosophy and to motivate his readers to action. There are three poems in this chapter. Chapter 10, "Fables and Aetiologies", contains seven poems, the first five of which are fables in the form of dialogues between two animals. They address aspects of *khudi* (selfhood), which occupies a central place in Iqbal's philosophy. "Literally 'selfhood' *khudi* may be described as self-affirmation, self-reliance, self-

expression, self-discipline and self-fulfillment." The story of a *khouri* who wondered about the world of humans and came to the world as a waft of perfume in a flower is told in "The Perfume of the Flower". The last poem in this chapter, "Love", is one of the most important and beautiful poems in the book. Iqbal suggests that love weaves the heavens and the earth into a unity. It is like the soul to the body of the universe.

The first two poems of Chapter 11, "Miscellanea", are about the past glory of Islam in Sicily and Spain. In the fourth poem, "Prayer", Iqbal prays to God that the heart of the Muslims be filled with a desire so fervent that it will set their hearts aflame, that their goals be as high as the Pleiades, that we foresee the calamity that is coming. While the fifth poem, whose manuscript is given on page 124, "The Pen of Fate", presents a pessimistic mood, the last poem, "Vision of a New World" presents an optimistic mood in regard to the world.

Finally, in the last chapter, "Quatrains", some poems of the *ruba'i* (with the rhyme scheme aaba) and *qit'ah* (abab) types are collected according to the themes of "Existence", "The Human Being", "*Khudi*", "Freedom and Determinism and the Philosophy of History", "Criticism of the Modern Age", "Muslims", and "Self-Portrait". Some books for further study are recommended on page 158.

More works of Iqbal need to be introduced to the West. *Tulip in the Desert*, I hope, will be followed by other books by Mustansir Mir and other authors so that Iqbal's wish in the last poem of the book will soon be realized – "Give to the youth my sighs of dawn. Give wings to these eaglets again. This, dear Lord, is my only wish. That my insights should be shared by all!"

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