

Iqbal's Thesis on the Tragedy of Karbala

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No Muslim philosopher has gone without making an attempt to understand Husayn's point of view and commenting about it. Among them is Iqbal the famous thinker-philosopher poet of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. The essence of all his poetical work is said to be contained in the book known as the *Secret of the Self*, which was composed in Farsi. In this is included a long poem on Husayn. Iqbal has proposed a thesis in one of his long poems. The basis of that thesis is contained in the title of the poem. That, translated into simple English is *The Secret of the Tragedy of Karbala and its relationship with Islamic Freedom*. In essence, Iqbal is saying that if the tragedy of Karbala had not happened, Islamic concept of Freedom would have died. Husayn's sacrifice saved Islam.

Iqbal's introduction in that piece of work can be summarized as follows.

Man has two basic capacities: first, the ability to observe, think, decide and act using reason, wisdom and common sense. The second is the devotion to, and a passionate love for his faith, ideology or religion, and a certain recklessness of action due to his strong convictions.

In Iqbal's terminology, the former is identified as 'aql (reason) or intellect and the latter as 'ishq (love) or divine inspiration.

Iqbal introduces the theme in the form of a compare and contrast between 'ishq and 'aql in the following couplets:

در معنی حریت اسلامیہ و سیرِ حادثہِ کربلا	
ہر کہ با ہواالموجود بست	گردنش از بندِ ہر معبود رست
مومن از عشق است و عشق از مومن است	عشق را نا ممکن ما ممکن است
عقل سفاک است و او سفاک تر	پاکتر چالاکتر بیباک تر

عقل در پیچاکِ اسباب و علل	عشق چوگان باز میدانِ عمل
عشق صید از زورِ بازو افگند	عقل مگار است و دامے می زند
عقل را سرمایه از بیم و شک است	عشق را عزم و یقین لاینفک است
ان کند تعمیر تا ویران کند	این کند ویران که آبادان کند
عقل چون باد است ارزا در جهان	عشق کمیاب و بهای او گران
عقل محکم از اساسِ چون و چند	عشق عریاں از لباسِ چون و چند
عقل می گوید که خود را پیش کن	عشق گوید امتحانِ خویش کن
عقل با غیر آشنا از اکتساب	عشق از فضل است و با خود در حساب
عقل گوید شاد شو آزاد شو	عشق گوید بنده شو آزاد شو
عشق را آرامِ جاں حریت است	ناقه اش را ساریاں حریت است
ان شنیدستی که ہنگامِ نبرد	عشق با عقل ہوس پرور چه کرد

Summarized Translation: One who has severed relations from all other deities but Allah is the true believer. 'ishq is essential for a believer. What is impossible for me (Iqbal) is possible for 'ishq. 'aql is ruthless, 'ishq is even more so. 'ishq is bold and sanctified. 'ishq preys with power, 'aql lays traps and is deceitful. For 'aql, the greatest treasures are 'doubt' and skepticism. For 'ishq, determination and firm belief are essential. 'aql is cheap and available in abundance everywhere like wind; 'ishq is precious and hard to come by. 'aql is founded on 'why' and 'how many' while 'ishq is free from these limitations. 'aql dictates man to be a show-off, 'ishq insists on self-assessment and examination. 'ishq is another name for freedom. In each contest between the two, 'ishq has always overtaken 'aql.

After this argument in favor of 'ishq, Iqbal addresses Husayn as 'ishq personified and as a leader of all those who can be said to be truly inspired. The rest of the poem is quoted below with an English translation.

ان امام عاشقان پورِ بتول

سرو آزدے ز بستان رسول

He, the leader of all who personify Love, that son of Batoul/ He, a free cypress in the garden of the Prophet.

الله الله باء بسم الله پدر

معنی ذبح عظیم آمد پسر

How wonderful! Father is the 'B' of Bismillah while the son is the meaning of Zibhin Azeem.

Iqbal is referring to a famous saying by Ali Ibn Abi Talib that whatever is in The Qur'an, is in the first Sura, i.e., al-Fateha, and whatever is in al-Fateha, is in its first verse, Bismillah, and whatever is in Bismillah, is contained in the 'B' of Bismillah, and whatever is in 'B', is in its dot (see the Arabic letter 'B'), and I am that dot. The second line alludes to a series of Qur'anic verses (Sura 37) where the story of the sacrifice by prophet Ibraheem has been described. He puts is on face down and runs his knife on the son's throat. But the son is miraculously saved and a sheep is slaughtered instead of the son. Ibraheem wonders about his sacrifice as to whether or not it was accepted by Allah. Allah then re-assures him that that sacrifice has been postponed for a Greater Slaughter (*Zibhin Azeem*). We quote the actual verse after a few lines below.

بهر ان شهزاده خير الممل

دوش ختم المرسلين نعم الجمل

For that prince of the best of nations (that is Muslims), the shoulders of the Prophet became his steed.

It is reported that on an Eid day, everyone was proceeding to the mosque to offer the congregational prayers. Many children were riding on horses and camels with the elders. Husayn, being a child of four or so, was also going to the mosque with his grandfather, and very innocently asked him where his camel was. The Prophet, out of extreme love, put Husayn on his back and said: 'This is your camel'. Husayn then asked: "Where is its halter?" The Prophet handed him a lock of his hair and said: "Here it is." One of the Companions looked at this and

said to Husayn “What a glorious camel you have!” The Prophet interrupted and said: “No, say what a glorious rider.”

سُرخِ رو عشقِ غیور از خونِ او

شوخیِ این مصرع از مضمونِ او

That proud love is glorified with his blood, these verses are brightened with his mention.

The translation fails to convey the beauty of these lines. Iqbal has used the word Surkh-Roo, which literally means ‘red face’. This term in Farsi, is used for glory, dignity and exaltation. Consider the fact that blood is also red.

در میانِ امتِ ان کیوانِ جناب

همچو حرفِ قلِ هو الله در کتاب

Among all Muslims, this Prince of the Heavens, stands out like the Sura of ‘Qul-Huwallah’ in the book (the Qur’an).

This Sura in The Qur’an, is brief but most succinctly describes the concept of oneness of Allah.

موسیٰ و فرعون و شبیر و یزید

ان دو قوت از حیاتِ آید پدید

Moses and Pharaoh, and Shabbeer (Husayn) and Yazeed, these two forces (of Good and Evil) will fight for eternity.

زنده حق از قوتِ شبیری است

باطل آخر داغِ حسرتِ میری است

‘Good’ lives on by Shabbeer’s power (by his sacrifice), and ‘Evil’ at last, dies unfulfilled.

چون خلافتِ رشته از قرآن گسیخت

حریت را زهرِ اندر کام ریخت

Since Khilafat broke ties with the Qur'an, and Freedom was poisoned.

خاست ان سر جلوۀ خير الامم

چون سحاب قبله باران در قدم

He appeared on the horizon of Islam, and rained blessings like a cloud from Mecca.

بر زمين كربلا باريد و رفت

لاله در ويرانه با كاريد و رفت

It showered the plains of Karbala and moved on, it created blossoms in the desert and moved on.

تا قيامت قطع استبداد كرد

موج خون او چمن ايجاد كرد

He put an end to tyranny for all time to come, his spilt blood produced a blooming garden.

بهر حق در خاک و خون غلطیده است

پس بناے لا اله گردیده است

For Truth, he lay in the dust, drenched in blood, for this, he became the foundation of 'La Ilaha'.

Iqbal is alluding to a quatrain attributed to another scholar and mystic of India, Khwaja Muceen Uddeen Chishti, in which he says that Husayn did not give his hand in Yazeed's hand but gave his head instead, that is why he is the foundation of 'La Ilaha', (in other words he saved Islam from complete destruction. Given below is that quatrain:

دین است حسین، دیں پناہ ہست حسین

شاہ ہست حسین، بادشاہ ہست حسین

حقاً کہ بناے لا الہ ہست حسین

سر داد، نہ داد دست در دست یزید

.....

مدعائش سلطنت بودے اگر

خود نہ کردے با چنیں سامان سفر

If he had gone to wrest power, he would not have travelled with such a small entourage.

دشمنان چوں ریگ صحرا لا تُعد

دوستان او بہ یزداں ہم عدد

His enemies were as countless as the grains of sand, his friends counted with Yazdan (Allah).

The second line has dual meaning. Because Husayn was on the right path, he and his followers were being counted with Allah, i.e., Allah was on their side. According to Arabic science of numerology, the total numbers of the word 'YAZDAN' is 72, which was exactly the number of Husayn's companions at Karbala.

سِرِّ ابراہیم واسمعیل بود

یعنی ان اجمال را تفصیل بود

The secret of Ibraheem and Ismaeel, he was the elaboration of a parable yet unexplained.

In this couplet Iqbal is alluding to the Qur'anic verse as shown below. Iqbal has said the same thing in one of his Urdu couplets.

نہایت اسکی حسین، ابتدا ہے اسمعیل

غریب و سادہ و رنگیں ہے داستان حرم

وَفَدَيْنَهُ بِذِبحٍ عَظِيمٍ۔ (سورہ صافات، آیت ۱۰۷)

عزم او چوں کوہساران استوار

پائدار و تند سیر و کامگار

His determination steady as the mountains, swift, resolute and triumphant.

تیغ بهر عزتِ دین است و بس

مقصدِ او حفظِ آئین است و بس

The sword defends religion's honor and just that, its purpose is to protect principle and just that.

ماسوا الله را مسلمان بنده نیست

پیشِ فرعون سرش افکنده نیست

A true believer does not worship anyone but Allah, he does not submit to any Pharaoh (that is, any oppressive and mighty despot).

خون او تفسیرِ این اسرار کرد

ملتِ خوابیده را بیدار کرد

His sacrifice elaborated this principle, he awakened the nation (that is, Muslims) which had gone into a deep sleep (of worldly love).

تیغ لا از میان بیرون کشید

از رگِ اربابِ باطل خون کشید

He drew the sword of 'La', and drained the bad blood.

The Arabic word 'La' means 'no'. Iqbal has used it here in two meanings. First, Husayn said 'No' to Yazeed when he was asked for the oath of allegiance, and he fought for his rights.

Then, the beginning of the 'Kalamah' or the confession of the faith is also this word 'La'. His drawing the sword was nothing other than re-asserting the rule of true Islamic law. Note also the shape of the Arabic letter لا it looks like a sword.

نقشِ الا الله بر صحرا نوشت

سطرِ عنوانِ نجاتِ ما نوشت

He inscribed the 'Kalamah' on the sands (of Karbala), that writing was nothing but a title for our salvation.

رمزِ قرآن از حسین آموختیم ز آتشِ او شعله با اندوختیم

From his passion we have lit many a fire/ we have learned the secret of the Qur'an from Husayn.

شوکتِ شام و فرّ بغداد رفت سطوتِ غرناطه هم از یاد رفت

The glory and pomp of Granada has disappeared from memories/ The greatness of Damascus and Baghdad have gone away

تارِ ما از زخمه اش لرزاں بنوز تازه از تکبیرِ او ایماں بنوز

The echo of his Takbeer revives my faith/ the strings of my soul still vibrate by his strumming

اے صبا اے پیکِ دور افتاد گان

اشکِ ما بر خاکِ پاکِ او رساں

O breeze ! O you the messenger of those who are separated, take our tears to the sacred dust, where he rests.