BOOK REVIEW

Studies in Iqbal’s Thought and Art. Select Articles from the Quarterly “Iqbal”. Edited by M. Saeed Sheikh, published by Bazm-i Iqbal, Club Road, Lahore 1972, 518 pages, price Rs. 20/-.

“There are some admirers of Iqbal who hold that he has said the last word on all philosophical problems. These enthusiasts misunderstand Iqbal and do a great disservice to him by discouraging a frank examination of his doctrine.”

These are the words of the late Professor M.M. Sharif, a former editor of the quarterly Iqbal, to whose memory this selection of articles is dedicated. His warning, issued in 1954, preceded the Catharsis of Pakistan by Hamida Khuhro in 1972, where she refers to Iqbal as one of the inviolable taboos. The Poet of the East, potentially a liberating force, has increasingly turned into an idol weighing heavy on the intellectual life of the young state. In retrospect it appears amazing indeed that once upon a time—in 1955—a sound criticism of Iqbal was possible. Dr. Fazlur Rahmân’s contribution to the present book, Iqbal and Modern Muslim Thought, is a superlatively significant analysis of the poet’s Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (Iqbal’s main prose work). Pointing out to the main difficulty for someone who attempts to understand and examine Iqbal’s philosophical theories, Dr. Fazlur Rahmân admits that this difficulty arises out of the fact that Iqbal is also a poet and as such lacks precision, definition, and formulation:

“He frequently uses phrases in which it is hard to discover any definable core of conceptual content. Secondly, in the whole book (Reconstruction) and especially in its first four chapters which are purely philosophical, there is no well-knit and reasoned-out argument. It is rather an ingenious statement indicative of a certain philosophical attitude and for that purpose coherent enough, but, when subjected to an analytical examination, full of irreconcilable contradictions, and logical anomalies.” (p. 45)

It goes without saying that the former Director of the Islamic Research Institute in Islamabad substantiates this criticism most cogently and, besides, even he cannot but conclude that this work by Iqbal constitutes so far the only really serious attempt on the part of any modern Muslim to restate the philosophical position of Islam. This inspite of the fact that “Iqbal’s appeals to the Qur’an are usually unconvincing.” (It may be worth our while to digress for a moment and to mention that while translating Iqbal’s Reconstruction the reviewer was confronted with an almost insurmountable dilemma, viz., how to render the Qur’anic verses cited by the poet-philosopher. Should they be translated strictly according to how the translator understands the Arabic scripture or should he follow Iqbal who, in his English rendering, interprets not only in a most liberal manner but, occasionally, seems to be on a wrong track. Madame Eva Meyerovitch, who translated the Reconstruction into French, followed the easy course by literally reproducing Iqbal’s English version of the Qur’an. For a translator familiar with the Arabic original this procedure can hardly be acceptable).
However, the crux of the matter is that a system of thought whose gospel is just pure dynamism wherein, as Fazlur Raḥmān has rightly pointed out, purpose can have no real place can, ex hypothesi, specify no moral imperatives.

The stark contrast to Fazlur Raḥmān’s illuminating analysis is provided by M. Raḥfuddin in his exasperating article on Iqbal’s Idea of the Self. This is a contribution one would like to pass over in silence. As a reviewer one has no other choice but to call it an amateurish attempt at a wholesale refutation of various philosophies and scientific theories, carried by a naive missionary zeal with nauseating conclusions, it reminds of pamphlets published by some rabid evangelical society such as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Hare Iqbal is converted into just another Mahdi and Masih Maw'ud:

“Signs of the emergence of Iqbal’s philosophy as a political force in the world are already visible…. Karl Marx is the intellectual king of the present Communist State of Russia. But Iqbal is the intellectual king of the future world-state which will endure forever”, etc., etc., etc., (p. 106).

M. Saeed Sheikh’s first article, too, starts with an array of superlatives, but it is extremely well-written and, as a summary of Iqbal’s cardinal tenets, a most useful introduction to the book under review. In his second contribution, Iqbal as a Modern Interpreter of Islam, he raises questions that are most pertinent and reveal a remarkably deep perception of the problems posed by modernity. The answers proffered are more or less a summary of the fifth and sixth lecture in Iqbal’s Reconstruction. There seems to be a flaw in argumentation because philosophy within the Islamic purview is warranted on the basis of the Qur’ānic concept of hikma, but in the following hikma is defined as something entirely different from philosophy. M. Saeed Sheikh enumerates a galaxy of Muslim modernists and says that none of them has had Iqbal’s rigorous formal discipline in western philosophy and other domains of modern knowledge, nor was any one of them fortunate enough to be possessed with his almost numinous poetic vision bordering on the metaphysical disclosure of reality. There is no gainsaying the fact that it is verily a biological necessity for the Muslim of today to have a reinterpretation of the teachings of Islam in the idiom and grammar of modern science and philosophy, for thus alone can they be communicative to others and have a meaningful international existence as well as an international message.” (p. 53).

Equally well-conceived is Maẓhar-ud-Din Siddiqi’s laborious but little integrated research on Iqbal’s Concept of Evolution, a painstaking investigation obviously written in an apologetic mood. Talking about McDougall, Professor Siddiqi writes: “In elaborating a well-reasoned theory of internal causation, he has done great service to religion and indirectly confirmed its conception of a creative God” (p. 151). This article was written in 1954 and it is rather surprising that by then a scholar of Maẓhar-ud-Din Siddiqi’s calibre should still be crusading against the autonomy of reason. In his considered opinion reason should not be allowed to have but an instrumental function. (p. 174).

The heart of the book, if one may say so, are the research papers by B.A. Dar, a former Director of the Iqbal Academy, Karachi. A shortcoming common to many of the Studies in Iqbal’s Thought and Art is that the authors present an excellent resumé of various western trends of philosophy and an equally profound description of Iqbal’s ideas.
But the two elements remain somehow separate, they do not really harmonize and often it is not so clear what is the relevance of the one to the other. This discrepancy is not felt with B.A. Dar and M.M. Sharif because there is uniformity in the categories of thought which they apply. B.A. Dar's article on Iqbål and Bergson has clarified once and for all which was the most decisive one among the manifold influences that held their sway over Iqbål during the different phases of his career. It is Bergson with whom Iqbål agrees in looking upon Reality as a free creative impulse of the nature of volition. But with the tradition of purely teleological evolutionary theory as evolved by Muslim thinkers before him, Iqbål could not conceive Reality to be an aimless and blind impulse, however vital and creative it might be.

M.M. Sharif emphasises that Iqbål has given us immortal poetry, the same, however, cannot be said about his theory of beauty. The Poet of the East differed from the subjectivist aesthetes insofar as his theory is essentially metaphysical while their theories are mostly psychological. In any way, the theories of beauty attributed to Iqbål in the different stages of his development are nowhere enunciated by him in a philosophical form. They are only implicit in his poetry, and one has to extract them from it. Such is not the case with his theory of art, which is the topic of M.M. Sharif's second contribution. On this part of aesthetics Iqbål is very explicit. He has something definite to say in criticism of some other hypotheses and has made positive observations even about individual arts. The poet-philosopher is strongly opposed to the view of Croce that art is an activity completely autonomous and free from all considerations of ethics. Iqbål makes art strictly subservient, or, at least, subordinate to morality. Again he agrees with Bergson rather than Croce in taking intuition as a higher form of the intellect, as something succeeding rather than preceding thought. But there is agreement with Croce that art is the self-expression of the artist. Prof. Sharif concludes that Iqbål’s expressionism, as a theory of art, however incomplete, must be accepted as a basis, and his functionalism, which now stands apart, must be subsumed under it to give his system a unity. “Purpose, which now lies outside, must be brought within the sphere of expression. Expressionism cannot find a place in functionalism; let his functionalism be brought under his expressionism.” (p. 473).

The book under review contains 25 papers on various aspects of Iqbål’s work written by eminent scholars. Iqbål’s Elegies highlights a hitherto neglected aspect of the poet’s literary activity. S.A. Vähid treads novel ground and with this piece of literary criticism he has proved that he can do more than mere compiling for which he is known. The two contributions by western scholars are general discussions. It would have been more appropriate to publish Iqbål and his Philosophy by Dr. L.S. May in a magazine abroad rather than in a journal devoted to specialized studies in Iqbål’yât. The same applies to Iqbål’s View of “Islamic Nationalism” in Javid Nûmah by James A. Prior. The title is misleading because only a minor portion deals with this subject, the major part of the paper is an introduction of the philosopher. On the other hand, Iqbål’s Revolt by Dr. Miss Kâzîmî is a most authoritative exposition, it captivates the imagination even of old-time Iqbalists. The author’s grasp of the philosopher’s verses is truly fascinating. She has moulded the poet’s message into a revolutionary stream with an eloquence and inspirational fieriness that is artistically superb. A vast knowledge and perfect command over the diverse strands in the fabric of Iqbål’s mind are combined with a language of limpid clarity and surpassing beauty.
The plethora of articles in the book under review reveals not only the man whom it is all about but also the many expectations of those who look up to him. Jamilah Khâtoon, understandably enough, wants a Perfect Man, Dr. ‘Andalib Shadâni is out for Beauty, and Ḥâfiz ‘Abbadullâh Fâroqî needs Time, no matter whether Iqbalian or Bergsonian; Muḥammad Munawwar is in quest of Harmony.

The usefulness of compiling these mostly valuable studies in one amorphous volume is questionable. We would have preferred to have a subject-wise publication of several collections. For instance, Iqbal’s Conception of Satan and His Place in Society by Tāj Muḥammad Khayāl, and The Idea of Satan in Iqbal and Milton by B.A. Dâr, could be published together with the pioneering research paper Satana nell’opera filosofica-poetica di Muḥammad Iqbal (Riv. degli Studi Orientali, XXX, 1957) by the renowned Italian orientalist Alessandro Bausani.

The controversy about Iqbal and socialism has found, strange as it seems, no reflection in the many, many pages of these Studies. The editor could be forgiven for the innumerable printing mistakes, not so for the absence of an index. Most perplexing is the lack of any information regarding the learned contributors. The reviewer is still searching for a clue as to who and where is Dr. Miss Kâzînî.

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