

Iqbal and Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi in the Light of Letters of Iqbal

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Late Prof. Muhammad Amin Andrabi's present paper is published posthumously. It is sad to note here that Prof. Andrabi passed away on Dec., 29, 2001 and in him we have lost an outstanding scholar, a charismatic teacher and a generous human being. Having served for about two decades in this university's prestigious academic centre, Iqbal Institute, side by side with the great luminaries like Prof. Aale Ahmad Suroor (d. 2002) Prof. Sabih Ahmad Kamili (d. 1995), and Prof. Kabir Ahmad Jasi, Prof. Andrabi made up his mind to delve deep into Sufism during his later years of life. It was his dream that unfortunately could not materialize fully during his lifetime. Earlier he had worked on the letters of Iqbal (*Mutalah Makatib-i Iqbal*, Srinagar) and authored a score of scholarly articles on Iqbal and Urdu literature, touching various themes like Iqbal and *ijtihad*, Iqbal and humanism, Iqbal and the Qur'an, Iqbal and Azad, and Iqbal and the West in addition to his editing regularly the Institute's annual journal, *Iqbaliyat*. The present article is actually the author's lecture, organised by Iqbal Institute in our Institute hall a few months before his passing away. It depicts the author's critical insight into Ibn Arabi's doctrine of *wahdatul wajud* (unity of Being) and Iqbal's true position about it and it can be of great interest to the researchers on the subject. We express our special thanks to Dr. (Mrs.) Nusrat Andrabi, the wife of the author, who provided us the draft version of the lecture to publish it for a wider readership (A. Editor)

Along with Rumi, Ibn ‘Arabi was the only other mystico-intellectual personality to which Iqbal was always attracted but to which his responses varied and underwent tremendous change with the passage of time. Among the Muslim

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spiritual authorities, few are so famous and well known in the West as Ibn 'Arabi. Numerous studies and translations of his works have appeared in the Western languages over the past one hundred odd years. For the Western academic circles Ibn 'Arabi is, more or less, a well known figure. Iqbal, though translated in more than a dozen of western languages, is relatively less known to the Western scholars and much less to the general readers in the west.

It is very difficult to classify Ibn 'Arabi. Even within the folds of sufism he lands over and above all the great figures. No one else has exercised deeper and more pervasive influence on the intellectual life for the Islamic community. It is not my intention to attempt a comparative study of the two great minds of Islamic history—Iqbal and Ibn 'Arabi, as that would be hardly possible since it would require both the figures to belong to the same domain or to possess certain common denominators which could facilitate a varitable comparative study.

Iqbal's earliest encounter with the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi seems to have been in the sessions of discussions that were held in his father's house. He describes this early encounter in his childhood as follows:

... My father had a profound attachment to *Fusus al-Hikam* and *Al-Fatuhāt al-Makkiyah*. Since the age of four my ears were acquainted with the name and teachings of Ibn 'Arabi. For years to end both the books mentioned above were studied in our home. I had but little understanding of these doctrines in my childhood days but I, nevertheless, regularly attended these study circles. Later when I studied Arabic, I tried to read myself. As I grew in experience and knowledge, my understanding and interest also increased.¹

It may be pertinent here to mention that no biographer of Iqbal—including his son, Justice Javid Iqbal—has attended to his self-study of the works of Ibn 'Arabi after the period mentioned above, nor do we find any evidence that he had the chance to study the works of Ibn 'Arabi under the guidance of an orthodox master or with the help of traditional commentaries which are indispensable for an understanding of such works of gnostic and esoteric nature.

In 1900, Iqbal wrote an article on Abd al Karim Jili's *Al-Insān al-Kāmil* under the title "The Doctrine of Absolute Unity as expounded by Abd al Karim

Jili." It was published in *Indian Antiquary*, Bombay. It was an attempt to present the doctrines of Al-Jili in the form of Western philosophic positions, perhaps to bring these doctrines closer to the modern readers. Ibn 'Arabi is mentioned thrice in the article and it is evident from the context that Iqbal recognised his status as a thinker of the highest calibre.

In his doctoral dissertation, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, he again mentioned Ibn 'Arabi and presented his teachings as "an all embracing exposition of his principle of Unity and as someone whose profound teaching stands in strange contrast with dry as dust Islam of his countrymen."²

Here I would like to make two observations which seem pertinent from the point of view of our study. Firstly, Iqbal has not taken into consideration an important factor which played a vital role in the spread of metaphysical thought in the Persian speaking world. Ibn Arabi's foremost disciple and stepson, Sadruddin Qunawi was a Persian. It is through him that several important lines of influences of Ibn Arabi's doctrines in the East can be traced. Sadruddin was himself a master of sufism and an authority on various religious sciences, especially Hadith. He not only commented on the works of Ibn 'Arabi but wrote many of his own. He was also instrumental in influencing many important figures like Maulana Rumi, Qutb ud din Shirazi, Tusi, Iraqi and down to Nablusi, Kashani, Sili, Jami and Shaistari. It was Sadruddin who systematised Ibn Arabi's teachings and what is more important from our point of view, it was he, who placed emphasis upon those dimensions of his thought which would easily be reconciled with the philosophic approach, thus initiating and establishing a tradition of interpretation of Ibn Arabi's doctrines for successive generations.

The second observation that I want to make here is that it was the same tradition—the tradition of interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines which proved seminal in the efforts at synthesis made by the later sages in Persia to whom Iqbal refers in his work but does not seem to have taken into account this all important aspect of the intellectual activities of Muslims in the Eastern part of the Islamic world. This fact is not altogether unconnected with a complete absence of works of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers in the bibliography which Iqbal cited in the beginning of the dissertation.² This fact leads us towards as somewhat plausible explanation

of the apparent hostility and the ambivalent attitude which Iqbal maintained respect of Ibn ‘Arabi and his doctrines in the subsequent years.

Iqbal started composing *Asrar-i-Khudi* around 1911 at the behest of his father, Shaikh Noor Mohammad. There were, however, more profound reasons which prompted him to express his views on the decadent state of the Muslim Ummah and to analyse the causes of its state of decline. It was precisely in the identification of these causes where his differences with the supposed teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi surfaced for the first time.

The problem of the decline of Muslims and the waning of their world glory— its historical causes and their possible remedies were central to his intellectual concerns during this period. Iqbal wrote a preamble to the *Mathna* (*Asrar-i-Khudi*) which was intended to clarify certain notions which might have been difficult for his readers to grasp fully or else which needed an introduction for the beginner. This preamble, however, became the starting point of a controversial debate that reverberated for many years and in various circles. Many critiques both sympathetic and disparaging were written that tried to defend the conventional position. Iqbal issued many rejoinders and clarified his position. Most of the letters that he wrote during the period (1915-18) attended to the debate.³

I now come directly to the objections raised by Iqbal to the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi. It will not be possible to present these objections in an elaborate form in a single lecture, I will therefore, restrict myself to only a few objections and that, too very briefly.

1. The doctrine of pantheism teaches that human individuality is an illusion. Belief in the illusive nature of human self leads to passivity and collective inertia.
2. Ibn ‘Arabi’s interpretation of the Qur’an is similar to Shankara’s interpretation of Gita.
3. Pantheism influenced Persian poets and through the medium of their literature it reached the masses, turning them into a passive collectivity. Hafiz is the foremost example of this kind of poetry.
4. Philosophizing of the sufis thereby bringing into the fold of sufism issues that are not mystical but philosophical.

5. Ibn 'Arabi believes that the spirit of the perfect men (saints and prophets) are eternal (*qadim*).
6. Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Jawzi, Zamakhshari, Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, Sultan Aurangzeb, Shah Waliullah and Shah Ismail have opposed pantheism and its exponents follow in their footsteps.
7. Persian sufis (followers of Ibn 'Arabi) ignore the Islamic law.
8. "Known and known are one"; outward knowledge and inward knowledge diverge. These doctrines had very harmful practical consequences for Islamic sciences, literature and culture. It is the basis of all monosticism.
9. Gnosis of inward knowledge is something which was transmitted secretly to some Companions by the Prophet (ﷺ). This is a false belief since it undermines the Prophetic message.
10. Followers of pantheism are spiritually affiliated with the batini sect.
11. Quranic hermenautics of Ibn 'Arabi is largely incorrect though it may be found acceptable by standards of logic and transmitted knowledge (*manqul*).
12. Sufis have been mistaken in identifying Unity (*Tawhid*) with pantheism (*wahdat al-wajud*). The former is a religious term whereas the latter pertains to philosophy.
13. As far as I know, *Fusus* contains nothing but heresy (*ilhadi*) and deviation (*zandaqa*).
14. No doubt, the very phenomenon of sufism is a foreign thing implemented on the body of Islam and nurtured by the Persians.
15. Saints (*awliya*) are higher in ranks than the prophets.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of objections. Many more objections have been raised but they have no direct bearing on Ibn 'Arabi. Before we consider the foregoing objections as enumerated above I would like to make a few observations. Firstly it should be borne in mind that in the context of Iqbal and sufism, Iqbal's criticism of sufism and of Ibn 'Arabi, remains within the bosom of sufism of which he himself was a great champion and ample evidence can be adduced from his poetry and prose-writings. Even during the days of the heated debate on *Asrar-i-Khudi*, he paid glowing tributes to sufism and even to Ibn 'Arabi.⁴ In one of his letters he even claimed that the philosophy of *Asrar* was a

direct development out of experience and speculation of old Muslim sufis and thinkers. Thus one would search in vain to find a general condemnation of sufism in the works of Iqbal.

In these objections there is hardly any direct philosophic critique of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine. The real brunt of Iqbal's criticism is against the practical repercussions that supposed were a result of Ibn 'Arabi's influence. The case of two exceptions that have been enumerated at Nos. 13 and 14 would be explained shortly.

Next point that should be kept in mind is of special importance is as much as it takes as to the core of the problem. Iqbal has identified *wahdatul wajua* (transcendent oneness of Being) with pantheism throughout these writings and his objections are directed perhaps rightly against this philosophic system. Writing to a friend in 1925, he commented on his own mental make up. This comment is very important as it provides us a clue to understand as to why did he identify *wahdatul wajūd* with the metaphysical doctrine of pantheism which is a philosophic system, arising in the West in post-renaissance period.

Iqbal's statement runs as follows:

I have spent most of my life in the study of Western philosophy and this style of thinking has become a second nature to me. Consciously or unconsciously I study the realities of Islam from this very point of view. I have often experienced that during conversation, I cannot express myself successfully in Urdu.⁵

First generation orientalist and some of the later scholars as well, confused pantheism with *wahdatul wajūd*. I cannot improve upon what Syed Hossain Nasr has said on the subject. He says:

They mistake metaphysical doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi and do not take into consideration the fact that the way of gnosis is not separate from grace and sanctity.⁶

The pantheism accusations against sufis and especially against Ibn 'Arabi are doubly false. Firstly, as we have pointed out earlier, because in the words of Nasr:

Pantheism is a philosophic system and that even of a recent origin, whereas Ibn 'Arabi and others like him never claimed to follow or

create any system whatsoever; and secondly because pantheism implies a substantial continuity between God and the Universe, whereas the Shaikh would be first to claim God's absolute transcendence over every category, including that of substance.⁷

The terms pantheism and "existential monoism" though somewhat less distasteful are still very inappropriate as a description of the doctrine of *wahdatul wajūd*.

Iqbal was using these words almost exclusively during all these years and the confusion seems to have crept in through these words. His training in the Western modes of thinking, as pointed out by himself, may also have contributed to it.

There was another factor which made it difficult for anybody in a similar situation to form an exact idea of Ibn 'Arabi doctrines. The original works of the Shaikh as well as the traditional commentaries were very hard to come by. Pir Mehr Ali Shah, the foremost exponent of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines around the turn of the century has been reported to have found, after great difficulty, a copy of *Fatuhāt* with a leather merchant of Lahore, the only one that was available in Lahore. There is no evidence to show that Iqbal had the chance to study the original works of Ibn 'Arabi all these years. Pir Mehr Ali Shah is the same person to whom Iqbal addressed his queries about Ibn 'Arabi much later in life in 1933. A few centuries earlier the situation was no better for Ibn Taymiyyah who due to lack of authentic reports and reliable texts, in all sincerity denounced Ibn 'Arabi on various points. As could be seen from a comparison of Ibn Taimiyyah's attacks with *Futuhāt*, Ibn Taimiyyah does not seem to be well informed about the works and doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi. For example compare Ibn 'Arabi's position on question of *itihad* (unity) and *halil* (absorption) with the ideas attributed to him by Ibn Taimiyyah in his *Fatawa*.

Now let us consider the objections enumerated earlier. The first objection deals with pantheism (*wahdat al wajūd*) which is supposed to teach that human individuality is an illusion which leads to passivity and inertia. This is an oversimplified statement. The sufis do not regard the individual self or the microcosm an illusion in the literal sense. Only God is absolutely real. Everything else, since it exists, has a reality on its own level. To quote Ibn 'Arabi الرب الحق والعبد حق (God is the Truth and the servant is also the truth)

It is God Himself Who has given the name *wajud* to the cosmos so how can Ibn 'Arabi ascribe to a view that posits an illusory status for the cosmos and the human self. To quote Ibn 'Arabi again:

Just as God gave the cosmos the name *wajud* which belongs to him in reality so also He gave it the most beautiful names through its preparedness and the fact that it is a locus of manifestation for Him.⁸

As for the objection regarding Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of the Qura'n, it is now established that his commentary of the Qur'an has been lost. The work which is generally attributed to him is most probably written by Abd al Razzaq Kashani. Even if it is understood as pointing towards the Quranic hermeneutics of Ibn 'Arabi, it still remains unresolved as to how it can have any affinity with Shankera's interpretation of *Gita*. Iqbal did not know enough Sanskrit to use the original texts directly and Kanhaya Lals' Urdu translation, if he used it, was misleading and substandard. It may be borne in mind that English translation of *Gita* by Edgerton, Radha Krishnan and R.C. Zaehner had not yet been published. Faizi's Persian translation was not reliable in Iqbal's view. He himself wanted to translate *Gita*—but how, this is still to be resolved.

Another objection which declares followers of *wahdat al wajud* to be spiritually affiliated with the Batnis or the Qaramatah goes wide the mark. As for as Ibn 'Arabi himself is concerned—those who have gone through *Futuhat* know it that 'Ibn Arabi mentions the sect always with a certain amount of hostility and generally disapproves of it. How can he therefore, be affiliated with it.

As for as the objection that the very phenomenon of sufism is a foreign thing implanted in the body of Islam is concerned, it presents an interesting issue that all research scholars of Iqbal should take note of. The objection gives us to understand that Iqbal regarded sufism as a foreign importation in Islam. This is a blatant contradiction of what Iqbal has said about sufism at numerous other places. The letter published in *Iqbal Namah* reads as under:

تصوف کا وجود ہی سرزمین اسلام میں ایک اجنبی پودا ہے جس
نے عجمیوں کی دماغی آب و ہوا میں پرورش پائی ہے۔

Tasawwuf is a foreign importation in the land of Islam. Its plant has been nurtured in the intellectual climate of the East (Persia).⁹

The original letter preserved in the manuscript in Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad gives the following reading:

تصوف وجودی سرزمین اسلام میں ایک اجنبی پودا ہے، جس
نے عجمیوں کی دماغی آب و ہوا میں پرورش پائی ہے۔

Wajudi tasawwuf is a foreign importation in the land of Islam. Its plant has been nurtured in the intellectual climate of the East (Persia).¹⁰

It is not difficult to understand what difference occurs with the slight change of phrase.

There is an underlying idea in Iqbal's statement and writings which is reflected here as well. He had his own misgivings about the origins of sufism in that period though he appreciated its positive contribution. Later, perhaps under Massignon's influence, he changed his views.

As far as his statement regarding Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus* wherein he says that it contains nothing but heresy (*ilhad*) and deviation (*zindqah*) is simply inexplicable. It is the only example in all his writings where he has descended very harshly on Ibn 'Arabi and the general tone and content of his statement goes against all his other statements.

During the period when an intense debate was going on *Asrar-i-Khudi* and its preamble, Iqbal never expressed himself in such disparaging terms. This is simply inexplicable— however only one probable explanation can be offered for this pejorative and dismissive comment. Iqbal had quoted and used D.B. Macdonald's works. And Macdonald has extensively quoted from Ibn Khaldun, especially his views on sufism. Iqbal might have been informed that Ibn Khaldun has denounced Ibn 'Arabi and declared his books as "full of heresy and deviation". The same report was reflected in Iqbal's letter though the manuscript appeared in print in 1957—almost twenty years after Iqbal's death.

References & Notes by A. Editor

1. Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Anwar-i Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Lahore, 1977, p. 177.
2. S.M. Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, p.
3. Haq Nawaz's book *Iqbal aur Laadhit-i Paykar*, treats this debate on Iqbal's views about *tasawwuf* at length. See also Abdul Gaffar Shikeel, *Iqbal Kay Nathri Afkar*, Anjuman Taraqi Urdu Hind, Delhi, 1977.
4. This contention of the author is borne out by the letters of Iqbal which he published around the year in *Wakil*. etc. in response to the queries about *tasawwuf*. However so far his attitude towards Ibn 'Arabi is concerned no marked change is found in his letters but his lectures, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, the former is presented with admiration (see its Chap. III and VII). This is why some scholars have tried to reply the objections made by Iqbal vis-a-vis Ibn 'Arabi and contented that Iqbal tended to devise an alternative system of the doctrine. See Ahmad Javid, "Wahdat al-Wajud", *Iqbaliyat*, Jan-March, April, June, July, September (3 issues) 1997, Iqbal Academy, Pakistan and Prof. Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui, "Fikr Iqbal Par Ibn 'Arabi Kay Atharat Ka Tajziya" *Tahqiqat-i-Islami*, Aligarh, July-Sept, 1987, pp 85-70.
5. Shaikh Atta Allah, *Iqbal Namah*, Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, p.47.
6. S.H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1964, pp 104-105.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuh al-Makkiyah* and S.H. Nasr, *op. cit*, chap. Ibn 'Arabi.
9. Shaikh Atta Allah, *op.cit*, p. 78.
10. It is difficult to trace the reference as one manuscript of it was found in Iqbal Museum, Lahore and later compiled and translated by Prof. Sabir Kalaurvi. The author probably refers to this manuscript. However Ahmad Javid's article (supra n. 4) also quotes the statement in his article on "Wahdat al Wajud" *Iqbaliyat*, Iqbal Academy, Pakistan, Jan-March, 1997 but surprisingly the reference portion is not found there.