

Gabriel's Wing: Dr. Annemarie Schimmel's Masterpiece on Iqbal

By Dr. Ahmed S. Khan

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was one of the great thinkers of the 20th century. Dr. Iqbal was an amalgam of an oracle, a seer, a poet, a philosopher and a thinker. Dr. Ali Shariati describes him as “**a man of religion and a man of this world, a man of faith and knowledge, a man of intellect and emotions, a man of philosophy and literature, a man of God and people. A devotee during the night and a lion during the day**”. He further states that “**Iqbal is considered to be a contemporary thinker and philosopher of the same rank as Bergson in the West or the same level as Ghazali in Islamic history**”.

The message and the writings of Iqbal have many dimensions: literary, religious, political, social, educational, and economic. Iqbal's poetry and philosophy are aimed at humanizing the world. The central theme of Iqbal's philosophy is the concept of “***Khudi or Selfhood***”. It is the source of feeling and knowing one's inner capabilities and potential through contemplation, introspection, self-cognition, self-realization and determined action. It is the sense of human identity in the individual as well as the society. In the words of Iqbal:

When 'self' embraces the energy of life

The stream of life is transformed into an ocean

According to Iqbal science, culture, poetry, literature, and law - everything - is the product of human aspirations actualized through continuous struggle.

Dr. Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) was an internationally acclaimed scholar who dedicated more than fifty years of her life to explain Islam to the West. Her interest in Iqbal dates back to her student days at the University of Berlin. She says, “***My long lasting love of Iqbal has let me to publish a number of works which are more or less relevant for a study of his contribution to Muslim thought... In many articles I have tried to show Iqbal in context of Islamic modernism, or deal with his imagery***”. Her scholarship served as a bridge between East and West, cultures and religions. Dr. Schimmel was an avid scholar of the poetry and philosophy of Iqbal and Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi. She considered Iqbal as one of the greatest poets of the East. Dr. Schimmel served as the professor of religious studies at the University of Ankara, Turkey (1954-59). During her stay in Turkey her translation of Rumi's poetry furthered her interest in Iqbal. On the insistence of her Turkish friends she translated '***Jawednama***' into Turkish. This led to her first visit to Pakistan in 1958, which opened a new door in her scholarship and inquiry that ultimately took her to the Harvard University. During her tenure at Harvard (1967-1992) as professor of Indo-Muslim culture, she authored volumes of articles and dozens of books covering a wide spectrum of topics and issues related to Islamic studies, Sufism, Iqbal and Rumi. Dr. Schimmel wrote her first article on Iqbal in 1954, and later she wrote on Iqbal in various languages and on different aspects of his message and philosophy.

But her book ***Gabriel's Wing - A study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*** (E.J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 1963 & 1989) is considered a superb example of her scholarship and insight in Iqbal studies. In the foreword (1962) of *Gabriel's Wing* Dr. Schimmel writes, “***During the 25 years which have passed since the death of Muhammad Iqbal, hundreds of books and pamphlets, articles and poems in honor of the poet-philosopher of Muslim India have been published, most of them in Pakistan, the country which is proud of calling him a spiritual father. In the West, too, his fame has spread perhaps more than that of any other modern Muslim thinker and poet***”. Commenting on the approach and the style of the books, she states

that “although it would be easy to quote to a larger extent from earlier publications I have tried to avoid that, making rather Iqbal himself speak than his commentators. Since only part of his work is available in translation, full quotations were considered useful. I simply want to give a picture of Iqbal’s way of thinking, arguing, suffering, and again finding mental peace in the security of his religion - suspending judgment as far as possible though the book will be, in any case, an account of any personal experience with Iqbal’s work”.

Gabriel's Wing has five parts. In the first part she provides the historical background of Muhammad Iqbal, his life, the aesthetic side of his work, and his religious motives. In the second part she discusses Iqbal’s interpretation of the five pillars of faith. In the third part she expounds on Iqbal’s interpretation of the essentials of faith. In the fourth part she presents some glimpse of Western and Eastern influence on Iqbal’s thought, and on his relation to mystics and mysticism. And in the final and fifth part she sums up her work on Iqbal by synthesizing the poet’s message and philosophy. She regards Iqbal the spiritual father of Pakistan and the best example of a modern interpretation of Islam. His poetry was on everyone’s lips in India in the 1930s, for the largely illiterate masses could be reached only by the poetical word which could be memorized easily. She believes that *Iqbal had tried under the influence of Goethe and Rumi, to postulate a dynamic Islam; he was aware that the human being is called on to improve God’s earth in cooperation with the Creator, and that one should exhaust the never-ending possibilities of interpreting Qur'an in order to survive changing circumstances.*

Dr. Schimmel further observes that Iqbal also taught that one should never rely exclusively upon intellect, as much as modern technology and progress can be admired, and that man is called on to participate in it. In a central poem of Iqbal “*Message of the East*” (his answer to Goethe’s “*Divan*”) Iqbal writes that science and love, that is critical analysis and loving synthesis, must work together to create positive values for the future. Regarding the status of Iqbal, she states:

“Iqbal has been praised - to quote only one instance - by a leading Pakistani as ‘*the triumphant missionary, the high priest of humanity*’ (A. K. Bokhari, Iqbal Rev. April 1961) and one of the first authors in this field has held that *if the peacock throne is the cause of pride for Iran, and the Kooh-i-noor means glory and dignity for British crown, then is Iqbal, of necessity, the decoration and ornament of poetical court of every country*”.

In response to Iqbal’s critics regarding the difficulty in his expressions, Dr. Schimmel tells the story that after her publication of the Turkish-prose translation of the *Javednama*, she received a letter, in very bad Turkish orthography, revealing that the letter writer was an unlearned man; but he expressed his admiration for Iqbal’s work, and asked her for more books of his in Turkish translation. Dr. Schimmel writes that “the person wrote that he was a bearer in a restaurant in a small town of Eastern Anatolia - that seems to be sufficient proof for Iqbal’s unquestionable appeal to simple minds too, who do not grasp properly the philosophical implications of his poems but are moved just by the energy they feel, even through the medium of a translation.”

Commenting on the background of his philosophy, she writes: “No doubt, Iqbal cannot be understood without the religious background of his homeland. He’s firmly rooted in the prophetic tradition of Islam, and in the mystical thought of India. He has struggled against whatever he thought wrong in this mysticism and has rediscovered the personal, dynamic God of Prophetic revelation who is described best not in the abstract philosophy of the lectures but in the poet’s deep and pathetic prayers”.

Discussing the nature of Iqbal’s philosophy, she observes that “as to the question of this

philosophy, one should not forget that a difference exists between a scientific philosopher and a prophetic philosopher. Iqbal was certainly of the second type, endowed with an extraordinary capacity for assimilation, and for synthesizing seemingly divergent facts into a new unity that may look, at the first glance, surprising enough, but has, in any case, proved as stimulating formative of the *Weltanschauung* of Pakistan. Sometimes one gets the impression that his study of European philosophy leads him, in the course of his life, more and more to the conviction that all the good and appropriate ideas launched by Western philosophers had been expressed centuries ago in a somewhat more ideal from by Islamic thinkers". As he writes in 1916: Yesterday, I saw the *Mathnawi* of Rumi: Every thought devours another though, one idea grazes upon another idea - God gracious! In a special chapter he has put this idea that every being besides God Almighty is devouring and being devoured and has brought into consideration so beautifully Shakespeare's philosophy that Shakespeare's spirit itself would tremble!

Dr. Schimmel observes that "this way of interpretation provided him with new possibilities of combining harmoniously Islamic tradition with the most recent scientific research. Only thus, he thinks, Muslims can become interested in Western science and discover that Europe is indebted to Islam, and that therefore the adopting of recent scientific results from the West does not do any harm to primacy of Islamic thought". As Iqbal has said, "*If Muslim scholars were aware that Einstein's most thrilling ideas are already existent in Islam, they would like to take more interest in them and study them carefully*".

Einstein granted Iqbal the proof for his view concerning the relation of God and universe, that the universe is limitless but finite, and his theory of relativity has impressed Iqbal's theories of time and space. Thus, the European philosophy and scholarship becomes, in Iqbal's reading, a medium for leading back the Muslims to the sources of their own culture, and giving them the feeling that these conceptions are nothing but their own heritage. Interpreted in this way, European civilization is no longer a danger for the Muslims but a stimulant for their awakening. Dr Schimmel states that Iqbal has tried to answer in poems the claims of different philosophers and political leaders during the different periods of his life, and the *nasqsh-i-frang* (the picture of Europe) in the fourth part of *Payam-i-Mahriq* (message of the West) contains short poetical sketches, skillfully characterizing thinkers and poets of the West. The philosophers whose names have occurred most in Iqbal's prose and poetry are Hegel, Bergson, and Nietzsche.

In the concluding pages of *Gabriel's Wing* Dr. Schimmel remarks, "Whether or not the Muslim or non-Muslim readers will approve of Iqbal's ideas, or his way of expressing them, they will have to acknowledge that Iqbal, to quote Kenneth Cragg, was 'the spokesman of something deep within the contemporary soul...The age the must have felt its need of him.' Dr. Schimmel compares this sentence with Iqbal's words which he used to characterize the prophetic revelation: 'The world-life intuitively sees its own needs, and at critical moments defines its own direction. This is what, in the language of religion, we call prophetic revelation.'

Dr. Schimmel observes that "the similarity of the two sentences springs light in the eyes. It is this very kind of representing the needs of an age of a society which can be witnessed in Iqbal whose whole personality tended to a prophetical interpretation of religion. *Nobody will assert that he was a prophet, but we may admit that he has been touched by Gabriel's wing*".

Gabriel's Wing is a comprehensive study on Iqbal's thought and philosophy. It is an illuminating and fascinating read for all seekers of truth and wisdom. Today, the world needs people like Dr. Schimmel who can build intellectual bridges to promote global peace, harmony and coexistence.

Dr. Ahmed S. Khan (khan@dpg.devry.edu) is a senior Professor in the EET dept. at DeVry University, Addison, Illinois. He is the author of *The Telecommunications Fact Book* and the co-author of *Technology and Society: Issues for the 21st Century and Beyond*. (© <http://www.pakistanlink.com/Opinion/2007/June07/22/05.HTM>)