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## Bridge between East and West - Iqbal and Goethe

**Samina Khan, M.Phil.**



Iqbal

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### Abstract

This article aims to present a comparative analysis of the poems of Iqbal and Goethe and the influence of the latter on the former. The introductory section gives a biographical sketch of the

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two poets and their literary accomplishments. Echo and tactical use of Goethe in Iqbal's texts are discussed with special reference to his *Paym-e Mashriq* (Message From the East, 1923) and Goethe's *West-Ostlicher Divan* (Divan of the East and West, 1819).

### **Allama Muhammad Iqbal**

Iqbal was born in Sialkot in 1877 where he received his early education. For higher education he went to Lahore (1895), and did M.A. in philosophy from Government College in 1899, he had already obtained a degree in law (1898). Lahore was a center of academic and literary activity where Iqbal established himself as a poet. In 1905 he went to Cambridge which was reputed for the study of European, Arabic and Persian philosophy. Iqbal obtained a B.A. from Cambridge (1906), became a qualified barrister from London's Middle Temple (1906), and earned a doctorate degree from Munich University (1908).

Iqbal returned to Lahore in 1908, and after teaching philosophy at Government College for a couple of years, started legal practice in 1911. What introduced Iqbal to the West was *The Secrets of the Self* (1920), the English translation of his Persian poem *Asrar-i Khudi* (1915). Then came *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* (1918), *Payam-i Mashriq* (1923), *Bang-i Dara* (1924), *Zabur-i 'Ajam* (1927), *Javid Namah* (1932), *Musafir* (1936), *Zarb-i Kalim* (1937), and *Armaghan-i Hijaz* (1938, published posthumously). Iqbal's doctoral thesis, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, was published in 1908, and his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* in 1934. Many of Iqbal's poetical works have been rendered into foreign languages, including English, German, Italian, Russian, Czechoslovakian, Arabic, and Turkish. His works have been translated into many South Asian languages as well.

Apart from being a poet, Iqbal was a political thinker concerned about the Muslims of India. He became a member of the executive council of Indian Muslim League in 1908 while he was in England. He was the representative of the Indian Muslims in the 1931 and 1932 Round Table Conferences held in England. In one of his lectures, in 1930, Iqbal voiced the need of a separate homeland for the Muslims of India. This great philosopher and poet died on April 21, 1938 and is acknowledged as the national poet of Pakistan.

### **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

Goethe, a German, was born on 28 August 1749 and died on 22 March 1832. Though Goethe contributed in different fields, namely, poetry, drama, theology, philosophy, and science, he is world renowned for writing *Faust* (a drama in two parts). Not only Goethe is acclaimed for his various poems, the Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* but also authored the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

The last half of 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is known for different worldwide movements; Enlightenment, Sentimentality, *Sturm und Drang*, Romanticism, and Goethe was an active figure of the movement of Weimar Classicism in German literature. Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, inspired many naturalists and he also worked as the Privy Councilor of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar.

After studying literatures of Greece, Persia, Italy, France, Arab countries and England, etc., Goethe presented the notion of world literature (*Weltliteratur*). In the fields of drama, poetry, philosophy and music, Goethe's influence is traceable in different cultures, especially the West.

### **Influences on Goethe and Iqbal**

Goethe lived in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Napoleon was waging war on Africa, Europe and India. The Persian writers Saadi, Fersowsi and Attar were among those who influenced Goethe but it was the reading of Divan of Hafiz, in 1812, that inspired him the most. Though Goethe was in his mid-sixties, the Persian poetry revealed the veracity of the Orient to him. Particularly, Hafiz's influence on Goethe resulted in the production of *West-Ostlicher Divan* (Divan of the East and West, 1819) which, after a century, was read by a man of East, Iqbal, who like Goethe, was also inspired by Hafiz and was familiar with the German language.

### **The Poet of the East**

In 1923, the 'Poet of the East' (Iqbal) sent greetings to the 'Poet of the West', (Goethe) in the form of his book *Paym-e Mashriq*. Its preface read, "Response to the German Poet Goethe" ..... "The purpose of *Paym-e Mashriq* is ... to present before the [people's] eyes those moral, religious and religio-national truths which relate to the inner education of the individuals and peoples" (1973, 181). Western knowledge played a vital role in shaping Iqbal's thought.

According to Dr. Ishrat Hasan Enver:

The thought of Iqbal seems to have passed through two stages – the Pre-Intuition and the Intuition. In the first stage, Iqbal follows the traditional ways of thought which, due to their affinity with Pantheism, appealed most to the broken and tottering society of the Muslims of the time, But his visit to Europe energized his spirits, strengthened his will, and brought in its wake a political reaction in him. He began to emphasize action, activity and self-assertion, rather than passivity, indifference and self-negation.

## Use of European Poetic Traditions

As to Iqbal's use of European poetic traditions, it is a fact that the German Romanticists, particularly Goethe, invented the technique of dramatic and dialogue poetry. Iqbal expresses subtlety of thought through dialogue poetry such as "ub-e aman" in *arb-e Kalm*, "Mu vara-e Ilm-o-Ishq", "Pr-o-Murd" in *Bal-e Jibril*, and *Javed Nama*. The Western epic technique is evident in "Rukhat Ay Bazm-e Jahān", "k rz" (*Baṅg-e Dara*) and are reminiscent of the Romantic era of England. Particularly the poems of *Zabr-e Ajam* and *arb-e Kalm* recall in our mind the romantic poet Shelley, whereas we are reminded of the West (Dante) and the East (Ibn-e Arab) while reading *Javed Nama*.

The trajectory of Iqbal's thinking is possible by considering his quotes. In *Stray Reflections* Iqbal says,

I confess I owe a great deal to Hegel, Goethe, Mirza Ghalib, Mirza Abdul Qadir Be-dil and Wordsworth. The first two led me into the "inside" of things; the third and fourth taught me how to remain oriental in spirit and expression after having assimilated foreign ideals of poetry, and the last saved me from atheism in my student days. (SR 61).

Iqbal frequently referred to Goethe, "Our soul discovers itself when we come into contact with a great mind. It is not until I had realized the infinitude of *Goethe's* imagination that I discovered the narrow breadth of my own." (SR 25).

## Retain the Essence of the East and Muslim Traditions

In spite of being aware of the values of the Western philosophy, Iqbal desired to retain the essence of the East and Muslim traditions through his feelings that was reflected in his writings. Iqbal was of the view that Western civilization is augmentation of Islamic civilization.

Iqbal writes about *Faust*, "Goethe picked up an ordinary legend and filled it with the whole experience of the nineteenth century - nay, the entire experience of the human race ... This transformation of an ordinary legend into a systematic expression of man's ultimate ideal is nothing short of Divine workmanship. It is as good as the creation of a beautiful universe out of the chaos of formless matter." (SR 74)

"From Goethe alone we get a real insight into human nature". (SR 120). "Shakespeare who as a realist Englishman "re-thinks the individual"... Goethe as the idealist German "rethinks the universal". "Faust is a seeming individual only. In reality, he is humanity individualized." (SR 122).

Iqbal goes on to write, "No nation was so fortunate as the Germans. They gave birth to *Heine* at the time when *Goethe* was in full-throated ease. Two uninterrupted Springs! ... Literary criticism does not necessarily follow the creation of literature. We find *Lessing* at the very threshold of German literature." (SR 126)

It is interesting to note Iqbal's reference to Goethe when he could have done without it. For example, in "The Revelations of Religious Experience," Iqbal says, "Perfection consists in the vaster basis of His creative activity and the infinite scope of His creative vision. God's life is self-revelation, not the pursuit of an ideal to be reached. The 'not yet' of God means unending realization of the infinite creative possibilities of His being which retains its wholeness throughout the entire process." He then quotes Goethe:

"In the endless self-repeating  
For evermore flows the Same.  
Myriad arches springing, meeting,  
Hold at rest the mighty frame.  
Streams from all things love of living,  
Grandes star and humblest cold,  
Is eternal peace in God."

### **The Resonance of Goethe's Poems in Iqbal's Poems**

The resonance of Goethe's poem *Wanderers Nachtlied* is evident in Iqbal's poem *Ek Shaam*. The similarity is apparent with respect to the tranquil, calm and peaceful mood:

#### **Ein Abend**

(In Heidelberg, am Ufer des Neckars)  
"Stille ist des Mondlichts Traum,  
Still ein jeder Zweig am Baum,  
Stumm des Tales Sanger nun,  
Stumm die grunen Hugel ruhn.  
Die Natur, ganz unbewut  
Schlummert an des Abends Brust.  
Schweigens Zauber wandelt nun  
Neckars Rauschen selbst in Ruhn.  
Zieht der stumme Zug der Sterne  
Ohne Glockenklang zur Ferne,  
Berg und Strom und Feld in Stille,  
In sich ruht der ew'ge Wille.  
mein Herz, sei still – auch du..."

Laß den Gram – schlaf nun in Ruh.”  
(translation in German by Annemarie Schimmel of *Ek Shaa*)

The English translation reads:

### **An Evening**

(On the banks of the river Neckar/Heidelberg)  
Silent is the moonlight,  
Silent the boughs of trees  
Silent are the music makers of the valley,  
And silent the green robed ones of the hills.  
Creation is in a swoon  
And asleep in the arms of the night.  
The stillness has cast such a spell  
That even the flow of the Neckar seems still.  
The caravan of the stars moves on  
In silence, without bells.  
Silent are hill and forest and river;  
Nature seems lost in contemplation.  
Thou too, o heart, be still!  
Hold thy grief to thy bosom, and sleep. (translator, Mumtaz Hasan)

Goethe's poem in German:

Über allen Gipfeln  
Ist Ruh,  
In allen Wipfeln  
Spürest Du  
Kaum einen Hauch;  
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.  
Warte Nur, balde  
Ruhest Du auch.

### **Comparative analysis of “Payam-i-Mashriq” and “West-östlicher Divan”**

"This is a bouquet presented by the West to the East as a token of high regard. The Divan bears testimony to the fact that the West, being dissatisfied with its own spiritual life, is turning to the bosom of the East in spiritual warmth." (Heine on *Divan*)

After the Mughal Empire came to an end in the Subcontinent, due to colonial expansion, nearly after hundred years, the dissatisfaction with the West was experienced in the East. “Payam-i-Mashriq” is dedicated to the king of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan. While in one of the poems Iqbal pays accolade to the wisdom of Goethe, at the same time he creates a dichotomy between the East and the West so that his poem becomes a reply to the Divan of the West. He refers to Goethe as “sage of the West”:

“Who lost his heart to the winning ways of Iran  
Who painted a picture full of the beauty of sweethearts young and saucy  
And sent salutations of the West to the East:  
The message of the East is my response to his greeting.”

### **Characteristics of These Two Poets**

It is important to mention the characteristics and to identify the two poets, beautifully done by Iqbal:

“He was one of Europe’s youthful ones, with the quality of lightning;  
While my love-flame is born of the breath of the wise men of the East.  
He was born and nurtured in a garden,  
While I sprang from barren soil.  
His melody was a paradise to the ear, as the song of the nightingale in the garden,  
While I am like caravan bells ringing tumultuously in the desert.  
The mysteries of the Universe have been revealed to both,  
Both are messengers of life in death.  
Both are like daggers, bright as the mirror and smiling as the dawn.  
He is unsheathed, but I am yet in the scabbard.  
Both are pearls of great price and lustre,  
Born of the shoreless sea.  
His insistent urge made him restless in the depths of the ocean  
Till he burst forth from his shell;  
While I am still striving in my shell’s confines,  
Undiscovered yet in the ocean’s abyss.”  
(translated by Mumtaz Hasan)

In the poem “Jalal-o-Goethe” from *Payam-i-Mashriq*, Iqbal paid homage to Goethe and maintained a melancholic tone due to the loss of power of the people of the Subcontinent.

Iqbal remained concerned with the revival and dissemination of the past glory of Islamic history.

### **Good and Evil**

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Both Goethe and Iqbal are of the view that evil and Iblees/Satan are useful for the progression of life. Iqbal says, "Evil has an educative value of its own. Virtuous people are usually very stupid".

(Stray Reflections)

How may I describe good and evil?  
The problem is complex, the tongue falters,  
Upon the bough you see flowers and thorns,  
Inside it there is neither flower nor thorn.

(Iqbal in "Payām i Mashriq")

### **Devil and the Doctor**

Iqbal describes the meeting of Goethe and Rumi in his poem when Goethe tells the story of the contract between the Devil and the Doctor to Rumi:

"O portrayer of the inmost soul  
Of poetry, whose efforts goal  
Is to trap an angel in his net  
And to hunt even God.  
You from sharp observations know,  
How in their shell pearls form & grow,  
All this you know, but there is more.  
Not all can learn love's secret lore,  
Not all can enter its high shrine,  
One only knows by grace divine,  
That reason is from the Devil,  
While love is from Adam."  
(*"Jalal and Goethe"*—*Payām i Mashriq*)

Iqbal concurs with Goethe's view that the struggle between Satan and Man brings out the best in a person.

He says:

I asked a sage: "What is life"?  
He replied: "It is wine whose bitterness is the best."  
I said: "They have put evil in its raw nature."



He answered: "Its good is in this very evil."  
(Payām i Mashriq)

In the "*Prologue in Heaven*" Goethe states that God has given an explanation for the creation of the Devil:

"Of all the spirits that deny,  
The Rogue (Devil) is to me least burdensome,  
Man's activity too easily runs slack,  
He loves to sink into unlimited repose  
And so I am glad to give him,  
A companion like the Devil, who excites,  
And works and goads him on to create." (*Faust*)

### **Representation of Evil**

For representation of Evil, Goethe has presented Mephisto, and Iqbal portrayed Shaytān. In *Faust* by Goethe, Mephisto represents hostility to existence. Initially Goethe deals with the conflict between good and evil on the subjective level and latter at the global. Goethe has dealt with human suffering, hate, desire, love and sin in his poem. For Goethe evil is the threshold to virtue and this is voiced by Mephisto:

"Part of that power, not understood,  
Which always wills the Bad,  
And always promotes the Good." (*Faust*)

The failure of Mephisto to tempt Faust into accepting conditions which could have been hindrance in the completion of the heavenly plan resulted in the elevation of Faust:

"To hear the woe of earth & all its joys,  
To tussle, struggle, scuffle with its storms,  
And not fearful in the crash of shipwreck." (*Faust*)

### **God and Satan**

Goethe refers to God as All-embracing and All-preserving who cannot be named. Faust says:

"Call it Bliss! Heart! Love! God!,  
I have no name thereof, feeling is everything,  
The name is sound & smoke, only to obscure celestial fire"

“Dear boy! What do we know of the idea of the Divine, and what can our narrow conceptions presume to tell of the Supreme Being? If I call him by a hundred names, like a Turk (Muslim), I should yet fall short & have said nothing in comparison to the boundlessness of his attributes.”

Iqbal portrays Satan as a deceitful, cunning, amazing planner, one who strives for his goal, qualities that befit “Khudi”. Similar to Goethe, Iqbal too believes in endless activity and constant effort for attainment of the objective:

“In a spark I crave a star,  
And in a star a sun.  
My journey has no bourn,  
No place of halting, it is death for me to linger.

In the same strain there is another verse:

“When my eye comes to rest on the loveliness of a beauty,  
My heart at that moment yearns for a beauty lovelier still.” (translation by Hasan)

Iqbal shared Rumi and Goethe’s belief that evil is essential for the development of man. In the absence of evil there would have been no conflict, struggle or striving. According to Iqbal:

“Waste not your life in a world devoid of taste,  
Which contains God but not the Devil.”  
(Payām i Mashriq)

### **The Address of Satan to God**

The address of Satan to God unfolds yet another characteristic:

“You bring stars into being,  
I make them revolve,  
The motion in your immobile  
Universe is as I breathe my spirit into it.  
You only put soul in the body  
But the warmth of tumultuous activity  
In life is from me.  
You show the way to eternal rest,  
I direct towards feverish activity and constant striving.  
Man who is short-sighted, clueless and ignorant,

Takes birth in your lap  
Attains maturity only in my care.”  
(translation of *Payām i Mashriq* by Hasan)

### **Courage and Pride of Satan**

Iqbal is fascinated by the courage and pride of Satan with which he confronts God:

“If reason remains under the command of heart, it is Godly.  
If it releases itself, it is Satanic.”

His Satan scoff at Gabriel’s piety when he states:

In man’s pinch of dust my daring spirit  
Has breathed ambition,  
The Warp and Woof of mind and reason,  
Are woven of my sedition.  
The deeps of good & evil you only see from land’s verge,  
Which of us it is, you or I, that dares tempest’s scourge?  
Ask this of God, when next you stand alone within his sight,  
Whose blood is it has painted Man’s long history so bright?  
In the heart of Almighty like a pricking thorn I live  
You only cry forever God, Oh God, Oh God, most high!” (*Payām i Mashriq*)

Like Goethe’s Devil, Iqbal’s too exhibit his repugnance for the weakness of his opponent. Echo of Mephisto is heard when Iqbal’s Satan complains to God in Javed Namah:

“O Lord of good & bad! Man’s company  
And commerce has degraded me. Not once  
My bidding dares he to deny; his “self”  
He realizes not. And never feels  
His dust the thrill of disobedience,  
His nature is effeminate  
And feeble his resolve, he lacks the strength  
To stand a single stroke of mine.  
A riper rival I deserve. Reclaim  
From me this game of chaff and dust,  
For pranks and impish play  
Suit not an aged one.  
Confront me with a single real man

May I perchance gain bliss in my defeat!”

Iqbal presents his Devil who is as miserable as man:

“From me convey the message to Iblis,  
How long he intends to flutter,  
Twist and scuffle under its net?  
I have never been happy with this world,  
Its morning is nothing but a prelude of the evening.”

He further writes:

“Come! Let us cooperate and lead the life of harmony.  
Our mutual skills can transform  
This wretched planet into a paradise  
Under the skies, if we together  
Disseminate love and healing,  
And banish jealousy, hatred, disease & misery.”  
(*Payām i Mashriq*)

Where Goethe stresses on man’s achieving higher approach of life, similarly, Iqbal also lays stress on reinforcing the ego. Both Iqbal and Goethe asserted that Man’s destiny lies in perpetual creative activity.

Iqbal says:

“When act performed is creative,  
It’s virtuous, even if sinful.”

Iqbal’s relationship to Europe is evident from his remarks about Goethe. The absorption of certain characteristics of European literature is revealed through his poems but we also see him in pursuit of the real spirit of Islam in his works, in words such as the following:

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میں نے از میخانہ مغرب ، چیشدم بجان من کہ درد سر خریدم  
نشستم با نکویان فرنگی ازاں بے سوز تر روزی مذیدم

*I draw my wine from the tavern of the West  
I purchase a headache for myself  
I have sat with the good men of the West  
But I have not seen a day more futile than that. (Iqbal)*

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