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## **Dialogue of Civilizations:**

The Reconciliation of the East and West as Envisaged by

Mohammad Iqbal

### **Abstract**

The world has always suffered from strife, conflicts and violence arising due to differences of race, color, ethnicity, creed, religion and region. In today's world, many statesmen and political analysts have attributed conflicts and strife to 'Clash of Civilizations' particularly between the Eastern and Western world. Therefore, the world today desperately needs to talk about 'Dialogue of Civilizations' rather than 'Clash of Civilizations' to preserve peace and amity. One of the greatest philosopher-poets and a visionary of the 20th century, Mohammad Iqbal, has attempted such dialogue through his works specially poetry. This paper discusses how his critique of the West as well as the East was aimed at reconciliation of the two, and not rejection leading to conflicts.

**Keywords:** dialogue, civilization, reconciliation, East, West, Iqbal, ideal society, spiritual values.

### **Introduction**

Many admirers of Mohammad Iqbal and his uncritical readers carry the impression that the philosopher-poet has castigated and rejected the western values, thoughts and systems outright and has glorified those of the East envisaging a better human society. But a closer scrutiny of his

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life and works presents a different attitude and approach; Mohammad Iqbal adopted envisioning a universal value system for human society. Even if he condemned and criticized the ills of western political and philosophical systems such as Imperialism, materialism and Capitalism etc., he also did not spare many social, spiritual and political values of the East from his onslaught and disapproval. He even went to the extent of proposing “the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam”. Therefore, his conception of an Ideal man was not only based on the strong spiritual values of the East, but he also wanted his ‘Perfect Man (انسان کامل)’ to possess the virtues of the West, i.e. the quest for scientific knowledge, technology and domination of corporeal nature.



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Iqbal was a scholar and philosopher who had seen the West from close quarters. He not only visited many countries of the west and lived there but he also studied the thoughts and philosophy of the west

minutely as his own higher studies were completed there. He was immensely influenced by Western Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry Bergson, Hegel and Goethe, etc. In response to the Divan of Goethe, he wrote Payam-e-Mashriq and thus tried to enter into a dialogue with the West. It has been presumed that by this gesture he has attempted to bring the East and West closer to each other. Payam-e-Mashriq (Message from the East) has been very rightly acclaimed as "a genuine attempt by an eminent Eastern poet, endowed with knowledge of Western literature and thought....to enter into a dialogue with Europe. The opening lines of this poem verily convey such warmth and regard towards Goethe and the West:

پیر مغرب شاعر المانوی آن قتیـل شیوه های پهلوی

بست نقش شاهدان شوخ و شنگ داد مشرق را سلامی از فرنگ

در جوابش گفته ام پیغام شرق      ماهتابی ریختم برشام شرق

تا شناسای خودم خود بین نیم با تو گویم او که بود و من کیم

او ز افرنگی جوانان مثل برق شعله من از دم پیران شرق

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هر دو دانای ضمیر کاینات      هر دو پیغام حیات اندر ممات

( Iqbal, 2006:p.189)

When Iqbal picks up pen to diagnose and denounce the ills of his time in one of his poems, he criticizes both East and West in equal terms:

هر دو را جان نا صبور و نا شکیب      هر دو یزدان ناشناس آدم فریب

زندگی این را خروج آن را خراج      درمیان این دو سنگ آدم زجاج

این به علم و دین و فن آرد شکست      آن برد جان را زتن نان را ز دست

غرق دیدم هر دو را در آب و گل      هر دو را تن روشن و تاریک دل

(p.306)

Iqbal has indeed tried to identify the positive and negative elements of both civilizations:

شرق حق را دید و عالم را ندید      غرب در عالم خزید از حق رمید

(p.290)

And then sets out to explore how the positive elements of both civilizations could be reconciled to build better future for human beings:

غریبان را زیرکی ساز حیات	شرقیان را عشق راز کاینات
زیرکی از عشق گردد حق شناس	کار عشق از زیرکی محکم اساس
عشق چون با زیرکی همبر شود	نقشبند عالم دیگر شود
خیز و نقش عالم دیگر بنه	عشق را با زیرکی آمیز ده

(p.306)

Iqbal was very much aware of the achievements of the West particularly in the fields of science and education. Likewise, he was also well acquainted with the decadence, which had set in the once-glorious East resulting in its domination by the western powers. He bewailed the lost glory of the East as much as he deplored the negative effects of modern western civilization. He thought that the East has lost its way under the wrongful influence of the West and blind imitation:

ترک و ایران و عرب مست فرنگ	هر کسی را در گلو شست فرنگ
مشرق از سلطانی مغرب خراب	اشتراک از دین و ملت برده تاب

(p.304)

Iqbal wanted the East to adopt a moderated path and not to follow the West blindly because he could see the imminent dangers in the outright material pursuits of the West devoid of any spiritual essence:

شعله ی افرنگیان نم خورده است چشم شان صاحب نظر، دل مرده است

(p.306)

And he thought the path West has chosen is dangerous and it will eventually harm itself:

زخم ها خوردند از شمشیر خویش سمبل افتادند چون نخچیر خویش

(p.306)

Iqbal could see that greed and material pursuits of the west is not worth imitation and the East should not fall prey to its canopy. It should instead carve out its own way:

سوز و مستی را مچو از تاک شان عصر دیگر نیست در افلاک شان  
زندگی را سوز و ساز از نار تست عالم نو آفریدن کار تست

(p.306)

Critics would point out that the message of Iqbal was essentially intended to be conveyed to the Muslim world and utterly anti-western in its orientation, then how come his message could envisage a reconciliation of the East and the West or have a universal value. It is, therefore, pertinent to quote his own explanation while talking about the objective of his Persian mathnavis:

“The object of my Persian masnavis is not to attempt an advocacy of Islam. My real purpose is to look for a better social order and to present a universally acceptable ideal (of life and action) before the world, but it is impossible for me, in this effort to outlive this ideal, to ignore the social system and values of Islam whose most important objective is to demolish all the artificial and pernicious distinctions of caste, creed, colour and economic status .... When I realized that the conception of

nationalism based on the differences of race, and country was beginning to overshadow the world, and the Muslims were also in danger of giving up the universality of their ideal in favour of a narrow patriotism and false nationalism, I felt it my duty as a Muslim and a well-wisher of humanity to recall them back to their true role in the drama of human revolution. No doubt, I am intensely devoted to Islam but I have selected the Islamic community as my starting point not because of any national or religious prejudice but because it is the most practicable line of approach.”(Mohammad Iqbal, 1995: 29-30)

It is; therefore, wrong to label Iqbal and his message with tag of any community, nation, region or religion because he was truly an independent philosopher, enquirer and well-wisher of entire humanity and a well-wisher of the Muslims as well. He was a Muslim who wished the betterment of entire humanity. Because he was born a Muslim and belonged to the East and was pained to see that the East and particularly Muslims were suffering more in comparison to the West, he addressed his message mostly to the East and the Muslim world:

فکر شرق آزاد گردد از فرنگ      از سرود من بگیرد آب و رنگ

(p.391)

He was not satisfied with the prevailing conditions of his time over all:

عصر حاضر را خرد زنجیر پاست      جان بیتابی که من دارم کجاست

(p.284)

از فریب عصر نو هشیار باش      ره فتد ای راهرو هشیار باش

(p.78)

عصر من داندۀ ی اسرار نیست      یوسف من بهر این بازار نیست

(p.6)

And considered himself to be the poet of tomorrow envisioning a better future for all humanity:

نغمه ام، زخمه بی پرواستم      من نوای شاعر فرداستم

(p.6)

Iqbal had a thorough knowledge of the human history and knew very well that the East and Asia, particularly the Muslim world had once excelled in all fields of knowledge and human values . It was one a discoverer of the secrets of this universe:

سوز و ساز و درد و داغ از آسیاست	هم شراب و هم ایاق از آسیاست
عشق را ما دلبری آموختیم	شیوه ی آدم گری آموختیم
هم هنر هم دین ز خاک خاور است	رشک گردون خاک پاک خاور است
وا نمودیم آنچه بود اندر حجاب	آفتاب از ما و ما از آفتاب

(p.411)

But the East has lagged behind the West in scientific quest. However, at the same time he warns the East not to follow the West blindly because it was only pursuing material comforts dumping the quest for spiritual well-being altogether. He calls upon the East not to be intoxicated by the material achievements of the west and rediscover its own way:

خیز و از کار ام بگشا گره	نشئه ی افرنگ را از سر بنه
نقشی از کار امم خاور فکن	واستان خود را زدست اهرمن

(p.411)

It is not always that Iqbal has asked the East not to follow the West. He was very much appreciative of the constructive achievements of the west in the fields of science, philosophy and other domains of knowledge. He calls upon the East to benefit from it and writes in the preface to the Secrets of the Self:

“The western nations are distinguished in the community of nations by their capacity for action. To be able to understand the secrets of life, therefore, their thought and literature can serve as the best guide for the people of the East ...

Truly the nations of the world are indebted to the English empiricism and it has a more developed and sharper sense of reality than that of other nations of the world. That is why any sophisticated system of philosophy that can not stand the test of reality has never been popular in England. The writings of the philosophers and scientists of England, therefore, enjoy a privileged position in word literature. The spirit and mind of the East need to benefit from it and to revise its old philosophical traditions in that light.” ( Ansari, 1978: 309)

Therefore, Iqbal never tells the East to reject the West and its accomplishments but advises the East to be vigilant in its imitation of the west. In a beautiful poetry he asks the East to adopt a critical approach to the achievements of the West. He guides the people of the East to identify its real strengths of science, knowledge and technology and not to get swayed by superficial culture and gratifications of the West. The true appreciation and following of the West does not lie in its fashions but in its science and technology:

شرق را از خود برد تقلید غرب	باید این اقوام را تنقید غرب
قوت مغرب نه از چنگ و رباب	نی ز رقص دختران بی حجاب
نی ز سحر ساحران لاله روست	نی ز عریان ساق و نی از قطع پوست
محکمی او را نه از لادینی است	نی فروغش از خط لاتینی است
قوت افرنگ از علم و فن است	از همین آتش چراغش روشن است
حکمت از قطع و برید و جامه نیست	مانع علم و هنر عمامه نیست

(p.369)



He was appreciative of the fruits of western Renaissance and its results like emphasis on reason, inductive intellect, empiricism and scientific quest whose seeds, in his opinion, were originally sown by the Muslims and the Arabs in medieval times:

حکمت اشیا فرنگی زاد نیست	اصل او جز لذت ایجاد نیست
نیک اگر بینی مسلمان زاده است	این گهر از دست ما افتاده است
چون عرب اندر اروپا پر گشاد	علم حکمت را بنا دیگر نهاد
دانه آن صحرا نشینان کاشتند	حاصلش افرنگیان بر داشتند

(p.430)

But the over-emphasis of the West on reason and pragmatism was disliked by Iqbal because it had led to their spiritual degradation. The material pursuits of the West have meant the exploitation of the downtrodden and deprived people of the world under the twin devils of Imperialism and Capitalism. He bemoans that the West is completely lost in the material pursuits and denounces its complete separation of the spirit from the matter:

غریبان گم کرده اند افلاک را	در شکم جویند جان پاک را
رنگ و بو از تن نگیرد جان پاک	جز به تن کاری ندارد اشتراک

(p.305)

Iqbal was an independent thinker who did neither approve the absolute segregation of spirit and matter of the West nor the East's only reliance on the spirit. He never believed in the dualism of spirit and matter. Likewise, he propounded both Reason (Intellect) and Love (عشق). He did see the two as rivals but virtues which complement each other:

زیرکی از عشق گردد حق شناس	کار عشق از زیرکی محکم اساس
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عقل است چراغ تو در راهگذاری نه عشق است ایام تو با بنده ی محرم زن

(p.138)

But at the same time when it came to a situation of conflict between the Two, Iqbal did not hesitate to assign the supreme position to Love (عشق):

بگذر از عقل و در آویز به موج یم عشق که در آن جوی تنک مایه گهر پیدا نیست

(p.253)

عقل آدم بر جهان شبخون زند عشق او بر لامکان شبخون زند

(p.278)

One may argue that how could Iqbal be credited with reconciliation of the East and the West in face of his severe criticism of the West. Iqbal was very clear in his mind that criticism does not necessarily lead to total rejection. How could Iqbal preach total rejection of the West when some of his own philosophical mentors like Goethe and Hegel and others belonged to the west? It is important to understand that many of the western philosophers and thinkers have themselves criticized socio-political and spiritual systems and values of the West and have particularly bemoaned its spiritual decadence. Goethe, the famous German poet, by writing his West-Ostlicher Diwan lamented that the West had become too materialistic in outlook and looked towards the East for guidance in reviving spiritual values in western society. To quote a renowned expert of Iqbal "... there has been a strong tradition of Romantic criticism in the West, both intellectual and social. The Romantic Movement in English literature vividly records this protest against Reason by Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. It has not exhausted itself yet. Polarities like reason and energy, mechanism and organicism, intellect and love, mind and feeling are everywhere in evidence in Romantic literature. One comes across social criticism of industrial society among Victorians like Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Arnold and the moderns like Eliot and Lawrence...( Ansari, 1978: 318)

### Conclusions

Iqbal was an independent Philosopher-Poet and did not get swayed by the material and scientific achievements of the West. All his life he was in search of the 'Perfect Man (انسان کامل)'. In his opinion a materially successful individual- of the West or the East- can not achieve the higher dimension of human personality unless he learns of the nature of spirituality. He thought that the East has a lot to offer to the West in this regard. Likewise, he also called upon the East to learn about science, technology, and overall the spirit of action and experiment from the west. Thus, he neither rejected the West nor the East but indeed tried to reconcile the material and spiritual achievements of the West and the East respectively and present to humanity a better philosophical, spiritual, material and socio-political system.

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