Predicament: Iqbal or Iqbal's?

When Muhammad Iqbal passed away in 1938, he left behind a legacy that continues to perplex scholars working on different eras across the spectrum of Islamic intellectual history. Regarded by some as the most significant Muslim philosopher-poet of the twentieth century, Iqbal has been subject to what can only be described as hagiographic veneration in South Asian scholarship. This uncritical reverence is characteristic of intellectuals who, grappling with the stark realities of their postcolonial condition, were compelled to project or forge a stabilizing identity within geopolitical contexts of nationalist hostility and material scarcity. Yet this very adulation has, paradoxically, impeded serious critical engagement with his work.

In this context, Muhammad Faruque's contemporary intervention, "The Crisis of Modern Subjectivity: Rethinking Muhammad Iqbāl and the Islamic Tradition," represents a rare and necessary corrective to this unscholarly tendency. Faruque's examination of Iqbal's engagement with premodern Islamic thinkers (particularly his readings of ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, ʿAbd al-Qādir Bīdil, and Maḥmūd Shabistarī) reveals what he identifies as a pattern of philological error and anachronistic projection that calls into question Iqbal's credentials as a reliable interpreter of the Islamic intellectual tradition. The central thrust of Faruque's argument is deceptively simple but potentially devastating in its implications: Iqbal's much-vaunted "reconstruction" of Islamic thought is built upon systematic misreadings of the very tradition he claims to represent; these "misconstructions" are so fundamental that they undermine Iqbal's authority as a reformer altogether.

The evidence Faruque marshals is striking in its specificity. When Iqbal engages with al-Jīlī's concept of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), Faruque documents how he conflates distinct technical terms, mistranslates the fundamental Sufi concept of *tajallī* as "illumination" rather than "self-disclosure" or "manifestation," and imports Hegelian categories such as "Pure Thought" that have no basis in al-Jīlī's text (51–52). These are not mere quibbles about translation choices but categorical errors that fundamentally distort the metaphysical architecture of al-Jīlī's thought. Similarly, Faruque argues that Iqbal's reading of Bīdil through the lens of Bergson's philosophy of duration and *élan vital* imposes a framework so alien onto the text that what emerges is a figure barely recognizable as the historical Bīdil (71). Perhaps most problematically, Iqbal's characterization of the Sufi concept of *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self) as "self-negation" or "absorption in the Universal self of God" represents what Faruque identifies, through careful textual analysis, as a fundamental misunderstanding of terminology that is simply absent from the Sufi lexicon in this form (52). This is because concepts such as negation or absorption are hardly found in Sufi discussions of *fanāʾ*, which denotes a complex progressive process of spiritual transformation rather than a simple erasure of individuality (52; 67–68). When one considers that Iqbal's virtually eponymous philosophy of *khūdī* (selfhood) is constructed in explicit opposition to this particular construal of *fanāʾ* as ontological privation, the implications of Faruque's critique become clear: if his analysis is correct, the central pillar

of Iqbal's philosophical edifice, namely, the search for selfhood, rests upon a foundation of misunderstanding.

Yet Faruque's critique extends beyond identifying such conceptual errors to interrogating Iqbal's methodology itself. The predicament, according to Faruque's analysis, is Iqbal's consistent tendency to read premodern Islamic texts through the lens of modern European philosophy rather than attempting to understand them on their own terms (57; 71). This approach is not merely methodologically questionable but represents what might be termed "interpretive colonialism": a framework in which a premodern Islamic text is denied its own voice, conceptual apparatus, and internal logic, and instead conscripted into service as a mere anticipation of Western modernity. Faruque supports this charge by noting that Iqbal reads "Bīdil in light of Bergson, al-Jīlī in light of Hegel, selfhood and consciousness in relation to Einstein's physics, and Sufism in conversation with Nietzsche" (71). The irony that Faruque purports to identify is profound (and perhaps Shakespearean in its tragedy): writing explicitly to restore Muslim intellectual confidence in the face of colonial subjugation, Iqbal adopts a hermeneutic strategy that tacitly accepts the colonial narrative wherein "real" philosophy only happens in the West, and Islamic thought can only be validated by demonstrating that it somehow prefigured Western achievements (57). Faruque finds confirmation of this tendency in Iqbal's own admission that most of his "life has been spent in the study of European philosophy and that viewpoint has become [his] second nature" (qtd. in Faruque 49; see Iqbal, *Shikwa* 8). Crucially, Faruque is careful to note that his article "does not attempt to discredit all of Iqbal's intellectual achievements or dismiss them out of hand," but rather intends "to critically assess his ideas within the broader context of Islamic intellectual history" (49).

The implications of Faruque's critique, though rightfully provocative to a stagnant and one-dimensional Iqbalian scholarship, are perhaps not as far-reaching for the protagonist himself as they appear at first glance. If Iqbal indeed systematically misread the premodern Islamic tradition and his translations are philologically untenable, what remains of his mantle as the 'reconstructor' of Islamic thought? To secure the claim of his enduring relevance, one must recognize that Iqbal's work serves as a profound hermeneutic map of the anxieties and aspirations defining the colonized Muslim intelligentsia of the early twentieth century. It is precisely in this historical situatedness that his work offers its most potent guidance for the contemporary Muslim subject, whether situated within the Western metropole, the transnational diaspora, or the traditional heartlands of the East.

It is here that the distinction animating this article's title demands articulation. The phrase 'Iqbal or Iqbal's' embodies a substantive bifurcation of two discrete intellectual predicaments that are often conflated. The first—Iqbal Predicament—is the question Faruque addresses with considerable philological rigour: was Iqbal a competent and faithful reader of the premodern Islamic intellectual tradition that he claimed to re-construct? So, did he understand al-Jīlī on al-Jīlī's terms, Shabistarī on Shabistarī's terms, and *fanāʾ* as the Sufi tradition itself articulated it? Faruque's answer, as we have seen, is largely negative, and the textual evidence he adduces is not easily dismissed. His critical intervention performs a genuinely necessary service to a field long resistant to such scrutiny. The second predicament, however—Iqbal's Predicament—is the question that Iqbal himself was labouring to resolve: how does a colonized Muslim intelligentsia reconstitute philosophical selfhood when the very categories through which this selfhood might be articulated have been colonized in advance? In its *cor cordium*, my argument states that these two predicaments, each meaningful in its own context of production, become intelligible only when read alongside one another. Thus, the Iqbal Predicament, pursued without sustained attention to Iqbal's Predicament, yields an account of

the thinker that is philologically sharper but perhaps historically thinner, one better equipped to catalogue how Iqbal misread certain Islamic texts than explain why he bothered to read them at all.

At this juncture, I offer a framework that reviews Iqbal's relationship to his predecessors through a hermeneutic lens other than that of philological fidelity. Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence offers a suggestive analogy. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom argues that the history of poetry, and, by extension, of intellectual production, is not advanced by dutiful inheritors who reproduce their predecessors faithfully, but by 'strong poets' who achieve originality precisely through their acts of creative misreading. Bloom terms the foundational mechanism of this process *clinamen*, a 'corrective movement' or 'poetic swerve' in which the later poet departs from the precursor not out of ignorance but out of the necessity of clearing up an imaginative space within which something genuinely new might be thought (14; 19–49). To be sure, to read Iqbal through this lens is not to excuse the specific philological errors Faruque justly anatomizes (the mistranslation of *tajallī*, the Hegelian interpolation into al-Jīlī's metaphysics, the flattening of *fanāʾ* into mere 'self-negation') but rather to ask whether these departures might be understood as the conscious or unselfconscious swerves of a thinker who recognised, perhaps more acutely than his critics may allow, that a faithful reproduction of the Sufi tradition as received would not answer the socio-existential crisis confronting his audience. Had Iqbal rendered *fanāʾ* with the nuance of a Shāh Walī Allāh by translating it as a complex, progressive interplay of annihilation and subsistence across multiple *laṭāʾif* of consciousness (Faruque 67–68), he might indeed have produced a more accurate account, but it is far from certain that such an account would have possessed the rhetorical height and the philosophical depth necessary to galvanise a colonized Muslim population towards what he understood as the urgent work of self-reconstitution.

Crucially, this is not an a apologetical defence of an Iqbalian exceptionalism: precedents for such creative appropriation within the Islamic tradition are not too difficult to locate. As Frank Griffel has demonstrated, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's celebrated demolition of the Aristotelian philosophers in the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* was itself a profoundly transformative engagement: far from simply refuting Avicennan philosophy, al-Ghazālī retooled and reconfigured many of its core teachings within the apparatus of *kalām*, producing a new rationalist theology that the *falāsifa* he ostensibly dismantled would scarcely have recognised as a faithful account of their own positions (97–101). Again, Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical enterprise involved comparable manoeuvres; as Sajjad Rizvi has demonstrated, Ṣadrā engaged in what might be termed creative appropriation, by conducting an 'intimate and anxious dialogue' with his predecessors in which 'he boldly attacks every school while he employs all of them in the construction of his own' (20). The Islamic tradition, then, is not a static monolith but a living palimpsest: new threads are woven into its matrix in dialogical contestation with the preexisting fabric. So, if subjected to the same type of philological scrutiny Faruque applies to Iqbal, the writings of both these figures would reveal comparable tensions between prior source and contemporary appropriation vis-à-vis their own sociohistorical contexts. This is not to suggest that all such readings are equally productive, nor that philological accountability is dispensable. It is rather to observe that the Islamic intellectual tradition has never advanced solely by means of accurate transmission; it has advanced, in some decisive moments, through acts of interpretive audacity that transformed the inherited material into something its originators may not have consciously intended but their historical moment required. Therefore, to speak aphoristically, fidelity is not the sole criterion of faith.

However, even if one concedes that the Bloomian framework offers a partial vindication of Iqbal's interpretive liberties, there remains the more disquieting dimension of Faruque's critique: the charge that Iqbal's hermeneutical strategy constitutes a form of what we have termed "interpretive colonialism", i.e., the subordination of Islamic intellectual categories to European philosophical standards. Faruque quite rightly contends that Iqbal reads 'Bīdil in light of Bergson, al-Jīlī in light of Hegel, selfhood and consciousness in relation to Einstein's physics, and Sufism in conversation with Nietzsche' (71); the structural irony that an ostensibly anti-colonial thinker harnesses a thoroughly colonial hermeneutic remains stubbornly undeniable. What this framing does not sufficiently account for, however, is the question of audience. Iqbal was not writing for the *ʿulamā* of Deoband or Bareilly, or the Sufi masters of the *khānqāh*s; he was consciously writing in English for a Muslim intelligentsia whose intellectual formation was already, irreversibly, European. The *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (delivered originally as a series of lectures in English in Madras, Hyderabad, and Aligarh) addressed audiences for whom Bergson, Hegel, and Einstein were not foreign impositions but the very conceptual currency of educated discourse, the philosophical air they had been trained to breathe and inhabit. To read al-Jīlī through Hegel was, in this context, not necessarily to subordinate the former to the latter; it was a creative attempt to render the former *intelligible* to a readership that had lost—through no fault of its own, but through the systemic epistemicide undertaken by colonial education—the capacity to encounter al-Jīlī on his own terms. Iqbal himself seems to have understood this predicament with a lucidity that borders on anguish; his candid acknowledgment that the European viewpoint had become his 'second nature' reads less as an inadvertent confession than as a precise diagnosis of the very condition his philosophy was labouring to overcome. The question, then, is not whether Iqbal's distinctively European lens distorted the Islamic tradition, but whether any *undistorted* lens was available to a thinker in his position. Given that a translation is always-already an interpretation, the demand that thinkers in the past should have conducted the life of the mind with the vocabulary of our present may subtly enact a kind of anachronism: in this case, the expectation that an intellectual operating within the constraints of colonized milieus should have possessed, in 1926, the emerging decolonial methodological resources that yet remain underdeveloped in 2026.

There is a further dimension to this predicament that extends beyond Iqbal's particular historical circumstances and touches upon the conditions of interpretive possibility itself. Faruque's critique operates upon an implicit methodological premise—premodern Islamic texts possess a recoverable core of intrinsic meaning, and Iqbal's failure consists in his inability or unwillingness to undertake this excavation. The premise is not unreasonable; indeed, it underwrites the entire discipline of intellectual history, but it is perhaps more fraught than Faruque's analysis allows. Who should (or could) claim to have understood al-Ghazālī or Ṣadrā on their own terms, while presenting their cosmologies in the contemporary terms of our twenty-first-century English idioms? The hermeneutical tradition, from Schleiermacher through Gadamer, has long recognised that no act of interpretation proceeds from a position of methodological innocence; every reader brings to the text what Gadamer terms a *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, a historically-effected consciousness, that shapes the encounter before it begins (Gadamer 301–10). Iqbal's own historically-effected consciousness was quite European in its formation. But the question that follows is whether the historically-effected consciousness of contemporary Islamic studies—a discipline that emerged within the institutional structures of Western academia, relies upon categories of periodisation, genre, and intellectual genealogy developed within European historiography, and communicates its findings overwhelmingly in European languages—is as radically different from Iqbal's as the confidence of the corrective implies. This is emphatically not to suggest that Faruque's

readings of al-Jīlī or Shabistarī are themselves compromised by their Anglo-American institutional contexts; his philological work is meticulous and stands on its own merits. It is rather to observe that the demand to read premodern Islamic texts 'on their own terms' is itself a methodological aspiration shaped by particular intellectual conditions; however, these were conditions that Iqbal did not share and that were, in the 1920s, scarcely available to anyone. The discipline that now possesses the tools to identify Iqbal's errors is, in no small measure, a discipline that Iqbal's generation of thinkers helped to make necessary. To acknowledge this inheritance is not to diminish the corrective but to resituate it: to recognise that the Iqbal Predicament and Iqbal's Predicament are not only distinct but historically sequential: our contemporary capacity to delineate the first with scholarly rigour is itself a consequence of the historical fact that the second was inhabited in real-world conditions.

What, then, is the nature of this predicament? Faruque's article performs an indispensable service: it dismantles the hagiographic insulation that has for too long shielded Iqbal's engagements with the premodern Islamic tradition from the scrutiny they deserve. The Iqbal Predicament, as we have termed it, has been posed with a precision and scholarly integrity that the field of Islamic Studies cannot afford to ignore, and one hopes that future Iqbalian scholarship will take Faruque's findings as a point of departure rather than an occasion for defensive retrenchment. However, I have argued that the Iqbal Predicament, if pursued in isolation, produces a portrait that is significantly incomplete. It tells us what Iqbal got wrong about al-Jīlī, Shabistarī, and *fanāʾ*; crucially, it fails to tell us why these particular misreadings took the form they did, yet proved so generative for a colonized Muslim intelligentsia in search of philosophical self-reconstitution, or why the questions Iqbal was attempting to answer remain, nearly a century later, so stubbornly unresolved. So, Iqbal's own Predicament, namely, the enduring crisis of Muslim subjectivity forged under the conditions of epistemic modernity did not end with Iqbal. The Muslim intellectual, situated today in the Western metropole, who navigates the competing claims of an inherited tradition and a dominant secular epistemology, inhabits a version of the same predicament that drove Iqbal to his admittedly imperfect reconstructions. That the tools now exist to diagnose his errors more precisely than he himself could have done is a mark of genuine scholarly progress; but that the condition he was responding to persists largely unaltered is a reminder that diagnostic precision, however necessary, is not yet a cure. The title of this article poses a disjunction—Iqbal *or* Iqbal's—but its argument has been that the disjunction is ultimately false. We cannot fully understand what Iqbal got wrong without understanding what he was trying to get right, and we cannot responsibly set aside his answers without first reckoning with the enduring force of his questions. The predicament, in the end, belongs to neither Iqbal alone nor to his critics alone: it is the predicament of anyone who seeks to produce knowledge under conditions that they themselves have not produced.

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