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Why the West recognise poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal

By [Md Mahmudul Hasan](#) - February 19, 2023 @ 2:16pm



SINCE joining the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in June 2010, I have been teaching a subject which has now been renamed Islamic Literature in English.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) – famously known as the Poet of the East and Hakim al-Ummah (the Sage of the Ummah) – is an essential author for this course.

When I introduce poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal to my students, I often feel they have little prior knowledge about him while being familiar with comparable writers from Western traditions.

I would imagine that my students represent the societies they come from, and that there are innumerable educated people out there to whom Iqbal is still a stranger.

This observation partly led me to write this essay as a way to present Muhammad Iqbal to those not necessarily versed in literature or have not entered into any deeper discussion of his thought and philosophy.

I have an anecdote to start with.

I arrived in Heidelberg, Germany on the evening of Friday, July 31, 2009 to work as a postdoctoral research fellow. The University of Heidelberg arranged my lodging in a residential building at Bonhoefferstrasse 17 in the midst of some facilities of SRH University Heidelberg.

But, that accommodation would not be available until Monday, Aug 3. Therefore, I was given three nights' temporary accommodation at Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten (Four Seasons Hotel) on the banks of the Neckar River that divides the city of Heidelberg into two and augments its beauty.

After breakfast at the hotel, I went for a walk on Saturday morning. I also wanted to get a sense of the place I was in and to understand its surroundings.

Within a few minutes, I was struck by a street signboard that bore the following inscription: Iqbal-Ufer (Iqbal embankment). Underneath this, it said: Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938).

Why is such a prominent thoroughfare in Heidelberg named after the philosopher? That experience heightened my curiosity and thirst for more information about Iqbal.

Before long I discovered the connection between Heidelberg and the writer. About a decade later, I produced a research work titled "Iqbal's and Hassan's Complaints: A Study of 'To the Holy Prophet' and 'SMS to Sir Muhammad Iqbal'" (2020).

Both in British India and in Europe, Iqbal was privileged by the mentorship of the British educator and historian, Thomas Arnold (1864-1930). In British India, Arnold first taught at Aligarh, and in 1898 he joined Government College (now Government College University), Lahore, where Iqbal was a student.

Arnold tutored Iqbal both formally and informally, both course contents and subjects outside the curriculum. In 1904, Arnold left for England to join the University of London as a professor of Arabic. He motivated Iqbal to pursue further studies in Europe.

With Arnold's encouragement and support, Iqbal went to Europe. His student life there spanned from September 1905 to July 1908.

During this short period, he completed a BA from Cambridge's Trinity College, a barrister-at-law degree from London's Lincoln's Inn, and a PhD from Germany's Munich University; he informally studied at the University of Heidelberg and taught Arabic literature at the University of London for six months as a substitute for Arnold.

All these outstanding achievements were in addition to literary works that he produced during those 2 years and 10 months. His PhD at Munich was facilitated by

recommendations from Arnold and other scholars to exempt him from Munich's residency requirements.

Iqbal was at the University of Heidelberg most probably in July-August 1907. He had high admiration for his professors at Heidelberg in particular and for the education culture of Germany.

In fact, he "was all for German knowledge." His poem inspired by the Neckar River in Heidelberg – "Aik Shaam: Darya-e-Neckar ke kinare par" ("Evening on the Neckar") – is still a masterpiece.

Iqbal later reminisced about his happy times at Heidelberg: "My stay in Heidelberg was like a beautiful dream. How I'd wish I could repeat it!" In order to commemorate Iqbal's stay in Heidelberg, the city authority has named a prominent thoroughfare after him – Iqbal-Ufer.

Pension Scherer, the former boarding house in Heidelberg where Iqbal stayed, still has a sandstone plaque that reads "Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938), National Philosopher, Poet and Spiritual Father of Pakistan lived here in the year 1907."

Iqbal wrote in three languages: Prose and poetry in Urdu, only poetry in Persian, and only prose in English. Iqbal holds great fascination for me, as he studied and taught my subject – English literature. He benefited from the best literary traditions of the East and the West.

While he drew inspiration from Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi (1207-73) and Hafiz (c. 1320-1389), he was also influenced by English Romantic poets as well as German writers like Goethe (1749-1832), Georg Hegel (1770-1831), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941).

Iqbal was a multifaceted scholar and practitioner, whose studies ranged from Arabic, English and Persian literatures and Western philosophy to the practice of law.

Iqbal was a political thinker, concerned especially about the future of Muslims of British India. He regarded the British colonial occupation of his homeland as an attack on the dignity of Muslims, as he was opposed to a materialistic view of the world.

In the words of historian Barbara Metcalf, "Iqbal denounced the 'black' side of modernity: competitive nationalism and its resultant militarism, imperialism and consumerism."

A believer in the oneness of God and deeply immersed in Islam, Iqbal was a "modernist who argued in favour of going directly to sacred scripture" and "turned away from much of what was labelled 'the West', denouncing the nationalism, militarism and imperialism that the Great War had thrown into high relief" (Metcalf).

Iqbal's critical stance against the ideological and hegemonic forces of Europe didn't prevent him from being recognised by the West. In 1922, the British government decided to honour him with knighthood.

Iqbal refused to receive it without a proper recognition being awarded to his early teacher, Sayyid Mir Hasan (1844-1929). Asked about Mir Hasan's written contributions, Iqbal "replied that he himself was the book Mir Hasan had authored" (Mustansir Mir). Finally, on Jan 1, 1923, the British administration knighted him and conferred upon his teacher the title of Shams al-'Ulama' (Sun of Scholars).

Citing the case of Iqbal's wider appreciation in the West, I tell my students that in order to get recognition in this world, they need self-worth and sound academic rigour – not adaptation and capitulation to foreign cultural values.

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