

“STRAYING IMAGINATION, RIGHTEOUS INTUITION”: THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT AND THE ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY OF MUHAMMAD IQBAL (1873-1938)

By
Aimillia Mohd Ramli
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

Although the philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal is highly original, it reflects a strong and pervading presence of Romanticism. Correspondingly, literary critics have drawn similarities between the English Romantics and Iqbal on a number of thematic concerns, in particular, their appreciation for nature. There is, however, a notable absence of discussions on the role that imagination in the two philosophies. This paper aims to discuss the ways in which Iqbal extends the primary position given by the English Romantics to imagination in order to assert the importance of intuition. In doing so, the Romantic ideal of the heroic person as one who has unattainable wants brought about by his imagination, is transformed in Iqbal's poetry into an individual's struggle to fulfill his almost impossible desire to have an intuitive closeness to and knowledge of Allah (s.w.t) and the resulting intensity of love that the narrator has for his Creator.

Introduction:

A vague reference to a personal crisis the great Islamic philosopher Muhammad Iqbal experienced in Europe in his journal entry, when he went there in 1905, has a direct reference the famous English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. The entry, which would later be published as *Stray Reflections*, mentions the latter specifically as having saved him “from atheism in [his] student days” (Iqbal,36) and rescuing him from further despondency. Despite this direct statement of the impact that Wordsworth, the philosophical founder of English Romanticism, had on the great Islamic philosopher Muhammad Iqbal and the unmistakable and pervading Romantic strain of the latter's own works, there are remarkably very few in-depth studies that have attempted a comparative analysis of their philosophies. So far, the connection between the two is frequently mentioned only as bibliographic references to his life in general with only a few lines suggesting, but never fully exploring, the impact the latter had on him in his early life and his experiences in England.

There are very few works that have tried to compare Iqbal's early poetry to the Romantics. *The English Romantics and Muhammad Iqbal* by Ghulam Rassol Malik (1988) is

so far the only work that has ever attempted to draw parallels between the thematic concerns that both philosophies displayed. According to Malik, they shared similar themes, such as man and society, the idea of revolution, religion and aesthetics. He delves into each of these by comparing how they are treated in Iqbal's writings and in the poems of many Romantic figures, such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and John Keats. While there is a profundity of references and observations regarding the two philosophies in Malik's work, its narrative stops short of exploring the role of imagination in both philosophies, downplaying aspects of Iqbal's writings that are connected to it, in particular intuition.

This paper, hence, is an attempt at critically analyzing the element of imagination in the Romantic poems, especially in relation to Nature, and then comparing this with Iqbal's stand on the matter. First, it shows how Romanticism had an impact on Iqbal's early life and personality. Then it explores the English Romantics' conception of imagination and illustrates the differences that exist between it and the Islamic philosophy's idea of imagination. It will argue that Iqbal's own conception of imagination diverged from the two philosophies even while retaining some of their aspects. This leads to an analysis on how Nature appears as a significant feature of Iqbal's imaginative output. Yet unlike the Romantics, whose adherents' imagination led them to believe that god himself is embedded in Nature and truth or Reality is only its beauty, Iqbal shapes Nature's majestic presence from its ideal state into a medium for his intense yearning and longing for a sight of Allah (s.w.t.), a desire for a divinely-inspired intuition and the resulting intense love for this Creator.

The Birth of the Islamic Romantic

Before subjecting both the Islamic philosophy of Iqbal and English Romanticism to a comparative analysis, it is essential to keep in mind the early influences that have played a major role in shaping Iqbal's thought and personality. It is in light of Iqbal's personality and environment that his philosophy can be understood. Even though there have been many works that compare Iqbal's works with both medieval influences – such as those of Dante and Jalalludin-al-Rumi – and modern, twentieth-century philosophies – ranging from nationalism to modernism, and its sub-genre, existentialism – his links with Romanticism is still an under-explored subject of analysis.

The Romantic strain was inborn in Iqbal as much as his education from the early life had set the stage for its development. Exposure to Persian poets, such as Sadi, Hafiz and Attar, whose poems had the Romantic strain and, later, a college education had exposed Iqbal to the famous English Romantic poets in his study on English literature. From 1901 to 1902, Iqbal was to teach English literature along with philosophy and economics at Oriental College and Islamia College at Lahore. From 1902 to 1904, he worked as an Assistant Professor of English at the Government College, Lahore and it was here that he showed in his teaching a remarkable passion for English Literature and his affinity with its Romantic poets. Likewise,

the poems he wrote during this period bear the strong imprint of Romanticism. Notable amongst these are “The Himalayas”, “The Cloud on the Mountain”, “The Aspiration”, “Man in the Company of Nature” and other poems (Malik,4). As the rest of this paper shows to you, Nature soon assumes a lesser significance to the more important role that imagination will play in depicting the intensity of Iqbal’s yearning to have intuitive knowledge of and establish intimacy with God that are prevalent in his later poems.

The Role of Imagination: The Romantics and Iqbal

The late eighteenth-century, like no other age before it, embodies the zenith of man’s devotion to the mysteries of his own mind in relation to its perception of the universe. It was an age that witnessed the birth and intense popularity of Romanticism along with its rejection of reason as the foundation for Reality, brought about by the Age of Enlightenment that had preceded it, in favour of the more “primal” faculty of imagination. A key concept of this movement is the belief that the reality of this world should be based solely on man’s imaginative perception of it, entailing amongst other things a further shift from science and Christianity to the internal workings of the mind as a means of making sense of this world, an idea that would be further developed by the modernists literary movement.

Wordsworth, the founding father of the Romantic literary movement, inscribes the importance of imagination when he details the vocation of a poet as one who should “choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (Wordsworth, 264). According to Wordsworth, this unusual aspect requires imagination from the mind of the poet that would transform Nature’s corporal figure into the Infinite, “a living soul”.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the co-founder of the English Romantic movement and whose friendship with Wordsworth is the most celebrated in the history of English Literature, however, offers a more defined concept of imagination. According to Coleridge, imagination can be divided into two components: primary and secondary imagination. In *Biographia Literaria*, he writes,

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. (Coleridge, 475)

The primary imagination involved the spontaneous creation of new ideas such as those inspired by dreams, as in the case of his poem, *Kubla Khan*. The secondary imagination is the more inferior type of imagination as it is alleviated by the conscious act of imagination, resulting not only in imperfect creation but also imperfect expression. Subdividing further this act of imagination, Coleridge introduces his concept of “fancy”. Fancy assumes the lowest

scale of imagination since it "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites" (475). No creation is called forth by fancy, just a reconfiguration of existing ideas by putting them in possibly fresh relationship with each other.

Following Coleridge, the later Romantic poet John Keats further extends this primacy given to primary imagination by arguing that imagination is supreme to reality. Without imagination, he argues, the real world would be ugly and that creations in the imagined world are as valid as in "the real world". Imagination should also be able to redefine human sensory experience that we experience in the real world by heightening joys and extending them forever. In "Ode to a Grecian Urn," Keats propounds his idea in the following lines as he describes a carved musical instrument around an urn, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;/Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,/Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." (Keats, Ode to a Grecian Urn, 11-14). The beauty produced by such products of imagination was for Keats as real as those in the real world. Abandoning any need for stimulants to the five senses in his perception of beauty, Keats is famously remembered for regarding anything beautiful, including his imagination, as the truth or Reality, "For truth is beauty and beauty truth".

It is, however, wrong to suggest that the Romantics, like Keats, did not try to explore or doubt the limits of the idealism represented by imagination. As Allen argues, Keats's poems, such as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Eve of Saint Agnes" has protagonists whose "figures are ambivalent, and to whom the reader experiences ambivalent responses...[they] are at once attractive figures yet the dupes of their own imaginations or their own idealism." Part of the problem, as Allen realizes, "is that in celebrating powers such as vision or the imagination, it suspends rational thinking." (Allen, 274).

Imagination is in Islamic philosophy, on the other hand, is as central to the concept of perception of Reality as Reason that exists based on what is comprehended by the human senses. Other than the five "external" senses from which people perceive the world, most Muslim philosophers argue that there are three types of internal senses: common sense, imagination and memory. Unlike external senses which can grasp one type of sensation, as sight grasps light and hearing grasps sound, the inner sense, in particular common sense, comprehends all the external sensations, such as the colour, texture and smell of a rose. Imagination is then the selection and combination of these sensations that has been retained by the representational power of the common sense. The role of the objects of imagination, however, remains unclear. Ibn Sina argues that these are preparations for the individual intellect to receive guidance from the Active Intellect, Allah (s.w.t.). Hence, he believes that only individuals with a strong imagination are capable of receiving prophecies. This is because prophetic knowledge can only be transmitted to others in the form of imaginative and figurative language that the community can understand (Leaman, 60-1).

Iqbal's position on the function of imagination generally leans towards those of the traditional Islamic philosophers. Nonetheless, he extends their argument to include the crucial role that intuitive knowledge has in this process of comprehending reality. Iqbal, though highly influenced by the Romantics, has always thought of truthful knowledge as "sense-perception elaborated by understanding", with the latter inclusive of not only reason but all non-perceptual modes of knowledge. He maintains that there are two sources of this knowledge – the inner consciousness of humankind [*anfus*] and the outer world of nature [*afāq*]. Hence, what is reality could be established in two ways, either by observation and sense-

perception or through direct association with this reality as it is revealed itself to the internal self of the person, or intuition (Riffat,1885) .

The role that imagination has to play within Iqbal's combination of sense perception and intuitive knowledge as a mode of knowledge of Reality is more limited than those accorded by the Romantics but different from its role in Islamic philosophy on two accounts. First, imagination is not treated in Iqbal's writing as something that strictly represents external senses, but is influenced by intertextuality. Second, it often leaves Iqbal's narrator nowhere closer to comprehending the Essence of Allah's (s.w.t.). This second aspect will be elaborated later in this paper.

Imagery in Iqbal's poetry are not strictly based on sense perception alone, although there are abundant Nature images in his poetry, since there is also an evident appearance of intertextuality in his works. In his poems, Iqbal was emulating and modifying sets of imagery used in both traditional Persian and Romantic poetry. In making such allusions and connections, Iqbal's use of images in his poems is closer to the term "fancy", as elaborated by Coleridge, which only requires a reconfiguration of exiting ideas and images by putting them in refreshing relationship to each other. Many of his poems, for example, makes reference to the Saki pouring wine into the inn guests' glasses, a traditional motif in Persian poetry. Some other images, however, bear resemblance to those employed by the Romantics. For example, tulips, roses and the eagle in Iqbal's poems mirrored the daffodils and albatross of the Romantics. These elements of Nature in Iqbal's poems, however, are not merely transformed to highlight their extraordinary aspects for the sake of imagination alone but are also known to symbolize certain abstract ideas that can be used to describe the relationship of the individual self to its Creator.

Nature and Its Creator: The Romantics and Iqbal

A point of reference in comparative studies between Iqbal's poems and those by the Romantics is their use of Nature imagery. Critics have remarked that Iqbal must have been influenced by the Romantics on this point because earlier Urdu or Persian poetry had never mentioned Nature in the same way as Iqbal has in his poetry. Only the huge impact, they argue, that the Romantics had on Iqbal could have explained his fascination with the subject.

No person in any age has ever exemplified this passionate belief of an omnipresent being in Nature than Wordsworth himself whose poetry celebrates its presence to the extent of worshipping it literally. This pantheistic view of Nature is clearly suggested in his most celebrated poem, "Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," as he joyfully detects a presence "Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, And the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: A motion and a spirit" (Wordsworth, 1798). Proclaiming himself to be more than a perceiver of this presence, Wordsworth styles himself as literally "a worshipper of Nature" with a "far deeper zeal / Of holier love". The pantheistic strain that runs through this poem could be mistaken for the poet's seeking a mystical intuition with the divine. Yet the rest of the lines suggests otherwise. Instead of experiencing

a communion with God, Wordsworth seems to celebrate the memories that he has of the beautiful surroundings of the abbey. Notable in the Romantic poems, hence, is its idolatry of these effects that Nature has on the narrator either for the beauty that they represent or their “intellectual beauty,” a type of beauty that results from the narrator’s experience of self-perception in which beauty of external elements of nature could only be appreciated by the narrator if he employs his intellect.

In his early poems, Iqbal departs from a similar attention to Nature even though he does not go to the extent of worshipping it. Himalaya’s represents this pantheistic strain, as suggested by the references to the mountain as the wise and honoured guide to mankind whose intimacy with man borders on access to his heart’s retreat, “You lead Man to the solitudes of his heart’s retreat, Snow has endowed you with the turban of honour, Which scoffs at the crown of the world-illuminating sun” (Iqbal, *The Caravan’s Bell*, 1924). How much this would be unfulfilling to the poet’s own intense yearning for the meaning of his own existence can be found in the next poem that follows this first one. “A Colourful Rose” would set the lines of Iqbal intense questioning into the mystery of life, which he would repeat numerous times in other collections. As he asks the rose,

What is the secret which is concealed in your bosom...
This torment a source of my intellectual illumination could be,
This very frailty of mine the means of strength could be,
This constant search is a world-illuminating candle
And teaches to the steed of human intellect its gait.

Thus begins a poetic journey into the recesses of man’s relationship with God, in Iqbal’s poetry, as he tries to unravel the mysteries surrounding man’s creation. Many of his later nature poems relate the intensity of such questionings into the nature of man’s creation as similar to Iqbal knowing God’s essence and being. In other early poems, the answers to these remain as hidden mysteries that even Nature cannot unveil. While Iqbal exults the beauty of nature and integrates them into his scheme of thought, Nature does not hold the answer to many of Iqbal’s enquiries. Lines from *Solitude* reads,

I left the moon and the sun behind,
And reached the presence of God.
I said, “Not one atom in Your world
Is intimate with me.
The world has no heart,
But I, though a handful of dust, am all heart.
It is a pleasant garden but unworthy of my song!”
A smile appeared on His lips –
He did not say a word.

The appeal to emotion as a prerequisite to intimacy to the desired object, here, is clearly unfulfilled by Nature or its creator, Allah (s.w.t). As with many other poems, this gives vent to tones of deep unhappiness, lamentations and dejection expressed by the narrator to his creator, Allah (s.w.t).

In later poems, this intense sadness will result in longings for God, taking in the forms of various metaphors that constantly engages the poet's imagination but all seek to serve one thing, momentary intuitive closeness and knowledge of Allah (s.w.t).

Intuition: From Yearning to Love in Iqbal's Poetry

Originating from the Latin word "intueri," often translated as "to look inside" or "to contemplate", the word "intuition" is used to describe "thoughts and preferences that come to mind quickly and without much reflection". Because of the modern day emphasis on empirical observations and replicable scientific testing, the beliefs resulting from such experiences are often thought to be unjustifiable and or generally considered to be emanations from the unconscious. It, however, had not always assumed that meaning since in the works of Descartes and Locke it used to mean the apprehension of indubitable, self-evident truths. Descartes explains how intuition is "not the fluctuating testimony of the senses, nor the misleading judgment that proceeds from the blundering constructions of imagination, but the pure intellectual cognizing so ready and so distinct that we are wholly freed from, doubt about that which we thus intellectually apprehend" (Descartes, 1942). Hence the traditional philosophical meaning of 'intuition' is knowing with absolute certainty, or knowing in such a way that there is no room for doubt.

Intuition from the Islamic perspective takes on a slightly different meaning as it has a strong connection to intellect. This link appears within the context of the undisputable knowledge brought by revelations from Allah (s.w.t.). According to Nasr, "The intellect is seen only in light of its ability to elucidate the verities of revelation. It is revelation that is the basic means of the attainment of the truth, and it is also revelation that illuminates the intellect and enables it to function properly" (Nasr, 95-96).

Iqbal's poetry makes use of the Islamic conception of intuition by turning it into the narrator's personal quest to gain knowledge and closeness to Allah (s.w.t.). The narrator in Iqbal's poems constant seeking for intuitive closeness from a distant and reserved "veiled" Allah (s.w.t.) is shown in his later poems to bear some results. These momentary moments of intimacy are describe most aptly as a dew. "Cup-bearer's bounty is like dew, heart's capacity demands oceans, I am always thirsty, ...If the Beauty was so short-lived in existence assembly, Why then do I keep such a boundless imagination?" (Iqbal, "The Unfaithful Lover" in *Persian Psalms*, 1924). Intuition, as is symbolized by a dew, is too momentary and too little to fully satisfy the poet, or his readers. Yet it is back to these moments of temporary closeness that the narrator returns to frequently in his poems. Lines from one poem illustrates this point,

In this lies the message of intuition,
Mind, that is ever questing,
And finding, without resting,
Fired by the joy of viewing
Was vision still pursuing.
Seek thou pure revelation
Past sun and moon's low station,
For all things here reported

By vision are distorted.
[*Persian Psalms* , Part II, Section 7]

Each moment appears to be unfulfilling for the narrator, as he continues to relate his constant yearning for an almost unattainable desire. Here, the narrator assumes the figure of the Romantic hero, whose character assumes heroic proportions because his ever present yearning and longing for the unattainable.

The product of intuitive moments that the poet experiences, however, does not lie with the attainment of an ideal to be reached. Unlike the Sufis, the intuitive knowledge of God's presence that Iqbal expresses in his poems is clearly devoid of its mystical dimensions by the poet's insistence that he remains separate from his Creator. It is from this separation that love emanates the poet's heart for his Allah (s.w.t.).

Love then becomes the ultimate culmination of Iqbal's search for the knowledge of Reality in general and Allah (s.w.t.) in particular. In one of his poems, Iqbal even rejects the use of reason if it impedes one's experience of intuition and the resulting love for Allah (s.w.t.).

The custom of Love is abandonment of all
Abandon temple, mosque, and church also
This is not business, this is 'ibadat of God!
O ignorant one, abandon the longing for
reward also
It is good to guard Intuition with Intellect
But sometimes you should let it go alone also
What life is that which is dependent on
others? (from "Ghazal" in *The Caravan's Bell*)

A quotation from Jamila Khatoon's *The Place of God, Man and Universe in The Philosophic System of Iqbal* (1963) provides a clear exposition of Iqbal's philosophy on this matter as she mentions,

Intuition, heart or love gives the direct perspective of the Ultimate Divine Reality, and reveals in its fullness, and completeness. ... It can serve as a light and a guide in this temporal existence, but it cannot lead to a vision of the Ultimate Supra-sensible and Ultra-rational Spiritual-Reality which stands above the differentiations and distinctions, all plurality and multiplicity. It is only love, intuition and heart which as a living, dynamic, spiritual and cosmic force serves as a passage between the Finite and the Infinite Self, between the Part and the Whole, between Man and God. (Khatoon,37).

In summary, while similarities exist between the Romantics and Iqbal's conception of Nature and imagination, the former had succeeded in avoiding the pitfalls of imagination, refashioning it to include the love for Allah (s.w.t.). Even though Romanticism was an eighteenth-century movement, Iqbal evidently saw in it some redeeming values such as a deep

appreciation for imagination and Nature. However, unlike the Romantics, he chose not succumb to the idea of pantheism and extreme idealization of imagination. Instead, he saw in imagination the significance of intuition in creating an intense love for Allah (s.w.t.) in the internal self of man.

References:

- Allen, Graham (1996). "Romantic verse narrative" in Stephen Bygrave (Ed.) *Romantic Writing*. London; New York: Open University.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (2006). "From *Biographia Literaria*." In Abrams, M.H. Greenblatt et al. (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th Ed.) Vol. 2. New York and London: W.W. Norton. Pp. 474-485. (The book was originally published in 1817).
- Descartes, Rene. "Intuitive Knowledge." In R. I. Aaron [Ed.] *Mind*, London, October 1942, Vol. LI, No.204, pp. 297-298.
- Kazmi, Syed Latif Hussain (1997). *Philosophy of Iqbal. (Iqbal and Existentialism)*. A.P.H. Publishing Corporation.
- Keats, John (1819). "La Belle Dame sans Merci".
- _____ (1819). "Ode to a Grecian Urn".
- Khatoon, Jamila (1963). *The Place of God, Man and Universe in The Philosophic System of Iqbal*. Lahore, Iqbal Academy Pakistan.
- Iqbal, Muhammad (1924). *Bang-i-Dara or The Caravan's Bell*.
- _____ (1961). *Stray Reflections*.
- _____ (1927). *Zabur-i-Ajam or Persian Psalms*.
- Malik, Ghulam Rasool (1988). *Iqbal and The English Romantics*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2006). *Islamic Philosophy From Its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*. New York City: State University of New York.
- Leaman, Oliver (2009). *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Riffat, Hassan. "The Meaning and Role of Intuition in Iqbal's Philosophy." In *Iqbal Review*, April 1985, 26:1. This article was retrieved on the 29th of April, 2010 from <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr85/5.htm>

Wordsworth, William (2006). “ From Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems.*” In Abrams, M.H. Greenblatt et al. (2006) (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th Ed.) Vol. 2. New York and London: W.W. Norton. Pp. 263-274. (The book was originally published in 1802).

_____ (1798). “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” in *Lyrical Ballads*. London ; Bristol: Biggs and Cottle, for T. N. Longman, Paternoster-Row. Pp. 201-210.