

## Muhammad Iqbal's Philosophy of Selfhood and Self-Realization

Iqbal's concept of Khudi means selfhood as in both individuation and wholeness. It requires purposeful action and the strengthening of the self even as it expands the value of human existence by elevating it closer to the divine.

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Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877- 1938) was a Muslim poet, philosopher, and lawyer born in Sialkot, Punjab, India, now Pakistan. He wrote poetry in Persian and Urdu that is considered among the greatest in modern times and he is also known for his works on Islamic philosophy and political thought.

"Elevate yourself so high that even God, before issuing every decree of destiny, should ask you: Tell me, what is your desire?" — Dr. Allama Iqbal

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Muhammad Iqbal's thought is grounded on the inherent value and purpose of human life. A central aspect of his philosophy is the concept of the khudi or selfhood— somewhat synonymous with the concept of rooh (soul or divine spark) in the Quran.

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Iqbal proposes strengthening the khudi through the assimilation of divine attributes into a human being's personality. He believes the role of the human being is clearly defined in the Quran, which states that our sacred nature comes from God having breathed His own spirit into us (see, Quran 15:29; 32:9; and 38:72).

Furthermore, we were created to be representatives of God on Earth (see Quran 2:30, among other verses) and as such, we have great responsibility. Human beings willingly accepted a trust and a burden that all other creatures rejected: the trust of personality (Quran 33:72). As God's regents on Earth, we also have tremendous potential and it is our duty to actualize this potential by strengthening our selfhood— also understood as our singularity and uniqueness.

For Iqbal, the khudi is everything. The ideal for humanity is not the self-negation promoted by the Greek classics or some strands of Sufism, but self-affirmation. "[T]he idea of personality gives us a standard of value: it settles the problem of good and evil. That which fortifies [the self] is good, that which weakens it is bad. Art, religion, and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality."<sup>[1]</sup>

Based on this conception, Iqbal rejects any philosophy, system, or form of mysticism that promotes the dissolution of the self. He finds the consequences of this type of thinking devastating and believes that the idea of killing the ego— as divine self— results in the weakness and stagnation that have caused the downfall of men.

Iqbal is thoroughly disappointed by the inner state of Muslims as well, describing them as lacking *ishq*, or passionate love— that is the highest manifestation of God’s blessing, going as far as saying “Muslims are drained of blood...their inner feeling is dead.”[2] He concludes that this is because their *khudi* has become paralyzed as a consequence of a misguided view of selfhood.

This destructive conception of the self is partially caused by the influence of the “Sufism of dispossession,”[3] which in turn was influenced by Neoplatonism, a movement that Iqbal describes as a cult of passivity.

Iqbal considered Plato “one of that ancient flock of sheep” with a “dead spirit.”[4] In Iqbal’s opinion, these philosophies encourage the obliteration of the self and discourage people from engaging in the world. This attitude opposes the spirit of the Quran, which emphasizes action as the intentional and committed doing toward a higher aim.

Iqbal infers that because of “engagements with ancient Greek thought...[some] Sufis conceived the self as something that had to be overcome and ultimately annihilated.”[5] This has brought about the individual and collective entropy and atrophy of Muslims.

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The word *khudi* means “self-reliance, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, and even self-assertion when such a thing is necessary, in the interests of life...truth, justice, [and] duty.”[6] These traits are good because they strengthen the self, “hardening it...against the forces of disintegration and dissolution.”[7]

Moreover, *khudi* means the actualization of one’s own value, competencies, and potential through self-knowledge, reflection, and purposeful action. Iqbal’s poetry contains powerful imagery in order to vividly impress in the reader his idea of a strong *khudi*. The eagle is one such example: “Live in the world like an eagle and die like an eagle.”[8]

The eagle symbolizes desirable character traits such as courage, love of freedom, sharp vision, action, swift movement, daring, and “the ability to soar into the air, ruling the skies”[9]. A strong sense of self, however, is not to be confused with tyranny or self-centeredness, but rather with the highest degree of self-realization, justice, vitality, and individuality.

[The Three Spiritual Principles that Give Us Strength in Times of Crisis]

[Reclaiming an Egalitarian Understanding of Islam]

In striving to improve oneself, Allama Iqbal considers that every Muslim is helping to establish the kingdom of God on Earth.

Despite Iqbal’s criticism of certain types of Sufism, it is important to note that he is not against Sufism as a whole. He sees much value in experiential rather than mere intellectual knowledge of the Divine: “He [man] could not have tested the strength of his *khudi* or freed his own hands and feet from chains; Reason would have been chains to man, if he had not had a heart within him.”[10]

However, he despises inactive Sufism and advocates the “active Sufism of Rumi”[11] which does not promote an obliteration of the self, but instead encourages self-cultivation and high self-esteem as demonstrated by these lines:

You are more valuable than both heaven and earth.

What else can I say? You don’t know your own worth.

Do not sell yourself at a ridiculous price,

You who are so valuable in God’s eyes.[12]

Iqbal explains that in order to strengthen the self, we must take actions that integrate into our selves the Divine attributes. The more we assimilate these attributes, the more unique we become. The less we assimilate them, the more like sheep we become.

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Based on the Quran’s directive to human beings to use their intellect, Iqbal thinks that behaving like sheep and failing to think, decide, and act for oneself is a massive form of weakness. He considers that “asking” weakens the self tremendously. Asking means living in a state of passivity, without continuously creating purpose, desire, and ideals.

Iqbal’s ideas come directly from the Quran, which states: “God gives the example of two men – one dumb, powerless, and a burden to his master: to whichever task is he directed he brings no good. Can such a one be considered the equal of someone who commands justice and is on a firm path?” (16:75-76)

Iqbal’s concept of khudi has been criticized, misunderstood, and even assumed to be borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the uberman. However, Iqbalian scholars have concluded that it almost certainly originates in Maulana Rumi’s prose work Fihi Ma Fihi.

Rumi’s influence on Iqbal is well documented and clear and “Iqbal’s expressions strongly remind the reader of certain sayings of Rumi.”[13] According to Annemarie Schimmel, one of the most important scholars on Iqbal, it is evident that the word khudi was taken from Fihi Ma Fihi:

“Maulana tells of a king who had instructed his stupid son in all kinds of astrology, geomancy, and other secret sciences, and then asked him to tell what he had hidden in his fist. The boy described the qualities of the object as yellow, hollow, and round and then concluded that it must be a millstone. Thus, says Maulana, are the scholars of the age; they know all the details and forget the real self – and here he uses the word khudi. It is this khudi that remains when all the attributes of the round, hollow, golden ring disappear in the crucible. Whether Iqbal knew the passage or not – it is important to see that Rumi had used the term khudi in the sense of the spiritual, unperishable Self of the human being.”[14]

Schimmel further argues that the claim of Nietzsche’s influence on Iqbal’s “‘Secrets of the Self’ has been exaggerated due to the mental shock which followed immediately the publication of this book; its ideas were... too surprising for being taken as development of Islamic [seminal thoughts].”

One must also consider Iqbal's own assertion that his idea of the ideal human being was entirely Islamic and firmly rooted in the Quran, not Nietzschean even if Schimmel argues, "Nietzsche's super man may... have acted as a ferment in the formation of Iqbal's ideas." [15]

[1] Iqbal quoted in R.A. Nicholson's Introduction to Secrets of the Self. Middletown: Forgotten Books, 2008, p. 7.

[2] Iqbal, Muhammad. Tulip in the Desert, p. 150.

[3] Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. "Conversion between Bergson and Iqbal," in Muhammad Iqbal Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought. Ed. H.C. Hillier and Basit Bilal Koshur, Edinburgh University Press: 2015. Pp. 33-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt16r0jgm.6>, p. 40.

[4] Iqbal, Muhammad. Secrets of the Self, pp. 36-37.

[5] Azad, Hasan, Reconstructing the Muslim Self: Muhammad Iqbal, Khudi, and the Modern Self. Islamophobia Studies Journal, Vol. 2. No. 2., Fall 2014, p. 16.

[6] Iqbal quoted in R.A. Nicholson's Introduction to Secrets of the Self, p. 2.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Iqbal, Muhammad. Javed Nama 654 [773] quoted in Mustansir Mir's "The Eagle," in Tulip in the Desert, p. 92.

[9] Ibid, p. 93.

[10] Iqbal, Muhammad. Tulip in the Desert, p. 135.

[11] Azad, Hasan. Reconstructing the Muslim Self, p. 16.

[12] Rumi verses from the Masnavi, cited in Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn. Love is a Fire. Point Reyes Station: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013, p. 47.

[13] Schimmel, Annemarie. Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Iqbal Academy, Lahore: 1989, p. XIII.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 323.