

Abstract

This dissertation is a study of Muhammad Iqbal's self-portraits. Though a function of poetic technique, self-portraits constitute in Iqbal's work a site where a novel kind of philosophical activity takes place. Foregrounding how they bring together the poetic and the philosophical in ways that blur, and render undecidable, even inconsequential, the disciplinary boundaries, this dissertation shows how self-portraits function as an important, hitherto underexplored, point of departure into Iqbal's complex body of work. It demonstrates how self-portraits function as the principal means of access not only to the ways in which Iqbal poses and pursues his key philosophical, metapoetic, ethical, and political questions, but, more importantly, to the philosophically significant ambivalences, ambiguities, and hesitations that mark Iqbal's engagement with them.

The dissertation takes up five key aspects of Iqbal's self-portraits - ambivalence about being, and being perceived as, a philosopher, divided persona as a poet, avowal of strangerhood, disavowal of gender identity, insistence on being a perpetual traveller - and demonstrates how they constitute an exemplification of the five key concepts posited in Iqbal's corpus respectively- reason, desire, selfhood, gender, travel. In doing so, it draws our attention not only to the extensive employment of figures in Iqbal's writings, or how these figures exemplify concepts, ideals and ways of life, but also to the ways in which Iqbal casts himself as a figurative embodiment of the key elements of his own conceptual repertoire.

The dissertation allows us to see how, in Iqbal's body of work, it is not only the concept of reason finding exemplification in the figure of the philosopher, but Iqbal playing the philosopher struggling to inhabit and abandon the station of philosophy in equal measure. Similarly, the concept of desire has its embodiment in the figure of the poet Iqbal models himself after; the concept of intractable, asocial, uncontainable selfhood is instantiated in the figure of the stranger enacted by Iqbal himself;

the concept of acculturated, gendered subjectivity is incarnated in the figure of the cultural diagnostician that Iqbal identifies himself with; the concept of selfhood as an onward movement towards, and past, various stations is embodied in the figure of the perpetual traveller played again by Iqbal himself.

Analysing the diverse tasks they perform in Iqbal's writings, the dissertation reads self-portraits as a toolkit, central rather than peripheral or incidental to understanding the fundamental questions Iqbal poses and pursues throughout his corpus. The figure of the philosopher acts as a focal point for the investigation of the rational mode of thought, its indispensability on the one hand and the possibility, even desirability, of its self-overcoming on the other; the poet serves as the site where the questions concerning passion, desire, and ethics of self-relation are asked and addressed; the stranger vivifies the tensions that mark the relation between selfhood and community; the issues of cultural crisis, patriarchy and feminism emerge through the figure of the cultural diagnostician; the questions of movement and stasis of thought are raised through the figure of the perpetual traveller.

The dissertation positions its reading of Iqbal's modes of self-presentation against the readings that reduce them to the generic requirements of Perso-Urdu poetry or to clues about the "character and personality" of a poet, and also underscores how Iqbal's self-portraits refuse to be integrated into a vaster discursive ensemble of autobiography. In redirecting us to the ways in which Iqbal's work provides the terms in which it is to be read, this study is a small step towards furthering the process of filling in the gaping holes that still remain in our engagement with Iqbal.