"A Bundle of Contradictions: Notes on Identity and Authority in Readings of Iqbal", *Biblio: A Review of Books*, vol. 11, March-April 2006, pp. 30-32.

Notes on Identity and Authority in Readings of Iqbal

G.S. Sahota

1. The End of the Saidian Age?

Although it may be too early to declare the end of the Saidian Age, it is certainly not too soon to begin, like the old Orientalists that seem to be the bane of his entire oeuvre, to catalogue Saidianism's most prominent traits, specify its essential qualities, size up its strengths, diagnose its weaknesses, and measure, for various strategic purposes, its zones of influence. Such an activity could certainly provide some sense of the kinds of scholarly avenues Said's criticism opened up as well as the sorts of critical possibilities it foreclosed, and thus need not be undertook in a simply distanced, ironic, or whimsical fashion. Anyone who is familiar with the moral tenor of Saidian criticism will understand the irony to which one must resort in order to counter it. If, for example, one were to differ when it comes to his depiction of the value of colonial knowledge, one might very well be exposed to the accusation of being a proponent of Western imperial rule. If one were to criticize his handling of the media's representations of Islam, one might be suspected of supporting the dissemination and proliferation of stereotypes of that religion. If one were to think that particularly powerful intellectual establishments in the Western world could actually produce meaningful, effective and perhaps even institutionally antithetical styles of scholarship on the non-Western world, one might be dubbed a dupe, and perhaps even an apologist of Western domination. In other words, the extreme moral quality of Said's cultural criticism has a way of framing any attempt to differ and resituate the terms of the debate with the most noxious political and ethically suspect stances imaginable. This could explain what has often been recognized as the generally shrill, fractious and ultimately

unproductive nature of the debates between Said and his interlocutors. For this reason, a small dose of irony may go a long way toward signaling that it is certainly possible to be in spiritual alliance with Said about many things. We might begin with the need for new attunements and conceptual bases for producing knowledge of the non-Western world. And we would never wish to pass over the function of criticism in general as bringing to light the inevitable compromise of truth with the powers that be.

A little distance could certainly make a spiritual bond with Said's noble virtues possible. (To get a sense of the latter, one need only think of Said's courage in talking about pressing issues before deeply divided publics or the profound insights about hegemonic trends in cultural criticism he articulated provocatively in *The World, the Text and the Critic*.) And yet, at the same time, a touch of irony may allow one to beg to differ when it comes to some of his particular shibboleths. These have been recognized by many to be a monolithic and totalizing characterization of Orientalist knowledge as always ineluctably distorted by the colonial relationship, the singular function of Orientalist knowledge with respect to the establishment of imperial control, and the particular premium put on the voice of non-Western subjects when it comes to speaking truthfully about non-Western contexts. Furthermore, it may not be too far off the mark to suggest that the Saidian take on Orientalism, coming as it did after a long series of critiques of the institutionalization of Western imperial projects, has overpowered the other forms of Orientalism-critique over the last two and a half decades to become, in the American academy especially, the institutionally most dominant form for thinking about relations of knowledge and power configuring the relations between the East and the West. Considering that it is now Saidianism that is associated with power in the American academy, one could very well be more in the spirit of Said in bringing out the irony of this situation. This is best accomplished

by wondering whether Saidianism could not itself be subject to the same dogmatism, compromise and outright abuse that mark, according to his estimate, anything that comes into power and becomes institutionally most dominant.

Critical perspectives on Said's work have neither deterred Saidianism's rise to power nor has the combination of Saidianism and its critiques been successful in bringing about widespread rethinking and reorganization of the disciplinary system of the university such that more autonomous, rigorous, effective, and intellectually unsettling scholarship on the non-Western world can be more easily fostered. It would certainly be instructive to those who would like to produce just such scholarship on the non-West to see how so much has remained the same. Why is it that despite the putatively radical, even devastating, nature of Said's critique of Orientalism, in particular, and despite the fact that this critique is most widely espoused and taught, very little transformation has taken hold institutionally, conceptually or even tropologically when it comes to talking about the non-West? A body of secondary literature from a variety of institutional, ideological, and geographical locations has emerged that could be very useful for re-conceptualizing the field and for registering the kinds of stakes involved in that endeavor. My aim here is not to review this literature or to prescribe any such institutional changes. I have in passing indexed some of Saidianism's problems – incorrigible distortion and functionality of Orientalist knowledge, and Said's deeply, indeed overwhelmingly, moral perspective – in order to arrive at what I and some others before me have taken to be Saidianism's most salient result: the highlighting of the identity of the speaker as a key determinant of the truth-value of the discourse about non-Western phenomena. It would certainly be interesting to see what kind of purchase, if any, one particular identity has with respect to a figure such as Muhammad Iqbal,

whose own identity seems intractable and hardly containable for any particular identity-logic that emerged over the late twentieth century post-imperial world.

2. Iqbal's Selfhood and the Identities of Interpretive Authority

"If you cannot get down to the bottom of me, it is certainly not the fault of your omniscience. / I myself am also unacquainted with my own nature. The waters of the sea of my thought run deep. / I also desire to see Iqbal, and in this alienation I have shed many a tear. / Iqbal is also not acquainted with Iqbal. And that is no joke. By God it is not." These are the famous concluding lines of Iqbal's poem "Zuhd aur Rindi" (Piety and Profligacy) published initially in the journal *Makhzan* in 1903 and later included in his famous collection of Urdu verse entitled *Bang-e Dara* (The Caravan Bell). These lines, penned before Iqbal actually ventured West to further his education, emerge in dialogue with a particularly haughty maulvi, one who is known for giving accounts of his own miracles and whose "heart was overflowing with the wine of piety." These lines bring to conclusion in a somewhat ironic tone the maulvi's questioning of Iqbal's own religious credentials to be a poet of the community. The old man is reported to have asked one of Iqbal's acquaintances: "How committed is he to the ordinances of Islam? . . . / I hear that he does not regard the Hindus as infidels. Is such a belief the effect of his philosophizing? / There is also Shi'ism in his character. I have heard him give precedence to 'Ali from his own mouth." The maulvi goes on to cast further doubt on Iqbal's character to remark rhetorically at the end: "Isn't Iqbal really a collection of contradictions? His heart is a scroll of wisdom; his spirit in constant palpitation?" Iqbal's concluding lines, the ones about his own assessment of his own identity which I cited above, refuse the maulvi's interpellation and instead bring into further questioning his own self-conception, pushing to metaphorical and metaphysical extremes the question of selfhood altogether. These lines are perhaps the first, and

certainly not the last, in Iqbal's corpus of poetic and philosophical writings to articulate a notion of the self that defy any particularistic strategy of containment. Iqbal's own involvement in diverse intellectual currents and the legacy he left to different national traditions seem to unsettle any notion of a *sui generis* or singular nationhood, a pure communal identity, or even a hemispheric division of thought into East and West. The contradictions, paradoxes, incommensurable tendencies and mutually negating possibilities continue to amass over the course of Iqbal's life and become one of the most prominent themes upon which Iqbal himself will reflect in his own work.

For a poet who had such an acute sense of the social, cultural and political turmoil of the late imperial world and who practically invented a language for giving expression to such a state of affairs, it may not be too far off the mark to suggest that what Iqbal's sense of selfhood brought into focus are simply the larger contradictory dynamics of the imperial period itself. I have argued elsewhere that Iqbal's sensitivity to such dynamics provided the impetus to his Persian neo-epic magnum opus, *Javid-Nama*, and perhaps to the entirety of his sublime Persian *kalam*. It seems to me that one result of such works, and especially *Javid-Nama*, was the imaginary destruction of the political institutions, categories and identities in way of the radical reconstitution of all within a new subsuming harmony. Of course, the very antithesis of such a harmony actually transpired on the subcontinent after Iqbal's death in 1938 and elsewhere in the wake of imperial dissolution. Ever since then Iqbal's philosophical and literary legacy has fragmented according to a variety of political demands and exigencies. The result has been a whole lot of ambivalence, perhaps even silence, about some aspect or other of Iqbal's poetry, politics and thought on all sides – Islamic, Pakistani, Hindu, Indian, liberal-secularist, and Marxist, to name just a few. I will try to outline some of the dilemmas that a singular

appropriative logic must face vis-à-vis Iqbal's challenging notion of selfhood, the sorts of literary works it produced and the kinds of activities to which it conduced. It may be a little too early to say, but I have begun to suspect in my research around Iqbal's neo-epic productions that the silence, disinterest, and disinclination on the part of Urdu critics to deal with Iqbal's Persian masterpieces, and deal squarely with their dialectic of form and content can best be explained by the way in which these very masterpieces have the capacity to disintegrate the identity-base upon which these critics often rely for their very authority. In other words, it seems to me that no singular identity that has emerged in the postcolonial context has any particular purchase on works like *Javid-Nama*. On the contrary, the more the critic is able to put into abeyance and bring under question his or her own identity, the more promising the critical endeavor becomes with respect to Iqbal's Persian *kalam*.

First it may be helpful to begin with the sorts of resistances and dilemmas particularly positioned readings of Iqbal must face vis-à-vis his oeuvre if they wish to appropriate him for their own particular purposes. For a reading that seeks to contain Iqbal as a poet of Pakistan, with Pakistan being in this case an Islamic state, a process of distillation must be put into effect. What must be done away with or downplayed in Iqbal's oeuvre is not only poems such as "Aftab" ("Sun"), a translation of the Gayatri Mantra from the Rig Veda, "Ram", "Nanak" and "Naya Shivalaya" (The New Abode of Shiva), but a whole series of works that celebrate the geography of the Indian parts of the subcontinent and the qualities of its people, including his "Taranna-ye Hindi" ("The Indian Anthem") which has the status of a kind of national anthem of the Indian nation-state. Furthermore, for Pakistani nationalist and Islamicist appropriations of Iqbal alike, there seems to be some ambivalence about the respect that Iqbal gives to the Sanskrit philosophical tradition, and the reverence he has for figures such as Vishvamitra in works like

Javid-Nama. With respect to an Islamicist reading of Iqbal, it is interesting to note that although he was often called in his lifetime the "hakim-ul ummat" ("The Physician of the Muslim Community"), his philosophical and political positions would often contradict those of orthodoxy. For example, his original support of the Ahmeddiya movement as well as the non-rational and sometimes allegorical interpretations of the Quran were certainly frowned upon by the orthodox as represented by the maulvi in "Zuhd aur Rindi" above. Such interpretations have the potential to configure Islam according to secular schemata, as became clear in the debates between Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Iqbal's predecessor in the attempt to bring together modern science and the tenets of Islam, one the one side, and the proponents of Islamic revivalism, such as the Deobandi scholars Muhammad Qasim, on the other.

Beyond Pakistani and Islamicate contexts, the situation is not any easier when it comes to making Iqbal accord with frameworks and institutions of authority. On account of his association with the demand for Pakistan, many critics agree that post-partition India witnessed a virtual attempt to excise Iqbal from memory which lasted a couple of decades at least, though all the while his "Taranna-ye Hindi" resounded across the new nation-state. With this being the case, India-based Urdu critics have generally tried to resuscitate Iqbal's legacy by presenting him in an essentially secularist and revolutionary light, making the latter the ultimate ground by which Iqbal can be understood in his entirety. Otherwise, the strategy on the part of such critics has been of a milder more liberal humanist sort which circumscribes an ecumenical civilizational ethos in his oeuvre, generally downplaying the religiously inspired or prophetic quality of Iqbal's work or the fact that he came to support the political forces that ultimately demanded a nation-state with a clear Muslim majority population.

On a broader global, planetary or world historical plane, those who wish to regard Iqbal as a "Sha'ir-e Mashriq", or "Poet of the East", must figure out how to erase the impact that the West had on Iqbal's thought and thereby disentangle a quintessentially Eastern aesthetic from what are often patent elaborations of Western motifs, forms and styles, or re-workings of Western borrowing of originally Eastern forms, themes and ideas – in which case, what the genealogies amount to is a truly transnationalist or Euro-Asian, and not simply Eastern or Western product. And the very fact that Iqbal writes in Asian languages that are taught only in select universities, and generally only at the rudimentary levels, in the West, languages that have hardly any presence in comparative literature programs and are yet to be implemented in any regular or rigorous fashion in a general curriculum, it is not hard to see that his works almost completely fall beyond the purview of authority-granting institutions. Despite the valuable perspective that they could lend to even Western cultural forms, a domestic scene of literary study in the West, as the enduring fallout of imperial relations, seems to prevent engagement with the positional complexity of Iqbal.

A string of such observations could continue at some length. The point, though, should not get lost in such details, for it is actually a meta-critical one: a combination of institutions, political categories, disciplinary divisions, intellectual agendas and research paradigms – a combination that has as its products authoritative discourse and embodied authority – have made grappling with Iqbal's fraught and contradictory intellectual legacy a most difficult task. This becomes especially difficult to the degree that interpretive authority gets entangled with the particularly reified cultural identities of the postcolonial period. If the latter become the sole basis upon which one engages with Iqbal, some of the most powerful literary creations that Iqbal produced in Persian are lost for the field of literary criticism. These sublime, deterritorializing

and dislocating works now lie abandoned between identitarian political divides, fallen between the cracks of national traditions or are torn to shreds on account of recent artificial civilizational constructs. Is it possible that Saidianism, as it has come to institutionalize as necessary truth the voice of the postcolonial subject-scholar, unwittingly abets rather than counters this situation with respect to Iqbal's legacy? Is this especially the case considering that the postcolonial identities Saidianism enshrines, whether in Western exile or in the formerly colonized regions of the world, are granted little in terms of an immediate identity-basis for speaking authoritatively about such works? The cosmopolitanism that Said made such a prominent feature of his work is, in contemporary American Saidianism, restricted to the politics of domestic multiculturalism. In other words, it is not cosmopolitan enough. Confinement of cosmopolitanism to the identity politics of the domestic scene makes engagements with literary figures who do not come into easy alignment with established postcolonial identities rather difficult. Is it possible that the very fact that Iqbal's great Persian works, beautifully edited and translated by the venerable late Orientalists R.A. Nicholson and A.J. Arberry, make the idea of reading and assigning those works instantly unpalatable for the new postcolonial scholars? The most ironic aspect about the latter situation is that both Nicholson and Arberry were as iconoclastic about the stereotypes about the East as Said, and saw the task of scholarship to be a destruction of just such stereotypes.

3. Other Imperatives

Now once again I would like to remind you that the question I pose with respect to Saidianism is one that cannot be brought to naught by some citation or other of Said's diverse works, which are themselves often inconsistent, generally provisional, struggling toward something new and uncertain. The point is not about Said himself or his work, but rather about

the practical effect of the particular phenomenon of which Said's work was recognized as being symptomatic: the new emphasis placed on the identity of the speaker, and the potential for this emphasis to produce the reification of some colonial or national identity. Not only that. There is the vicious potential for this emphasized identity to sacrifice scholarship itself at the altar of a hollow possibility: the equitable representation of such identities in academic programs. In reviewing the criticism around the issue of Orientalism over the decades, one learns that the Orientalist tropes of difference, irrationality, particularity, ahistorical constancy and exceptionality of all sorts continue to live on, but now, it is argued, more on account of the self-proclaimed representatives of the colonized, or of the post-colonial populations, and not necessarily only on account of the colonizer, or neo-colonial regimes. The problem in this case would not be one of knowledge exactly, but of which identity is authorized or considered the proper one for conveying the same thing authoritatively. This suggests to me that the problematic that Saidianism gets caught up in is one that seems irresolvable if one remains confined to its own operating framework and its moral order.

Yet, in *Covering Islam*, as in a variety of his works, Said provides an exit from the framework which he putatively brought into being. Here he documents how none of the Orientalist experts of the day were capable, on account of disciplinary paradigms and ideological blinders, of seeing a revolution erupting in their very midst in the late 1970s in Iran. (The issue is not so much the ability – or lack thereof – to predict events but the rigidity and stagnation of the episteme through which the East is conceptualized – and how blinding that can be.) Just last year in this very room (Classics 10 at the University of Chicago) some of the most celebrated postcolonial thinkers assembled to talk about "the peculiarities of Indian democracy," just days after an election that was expected to go easily to the Right in India. The occasion would have

been most appropriate for a victory of the Hindu Right. The will of the people, or the degree of corruption embedded in the "culture," was understood to bring into power a neo-conservative regime by means of the spectacle of election. Exactly such a victory would permit the discourse of difference and particularity upon which the reigning combination of identity and authority could remain, as it were, enfranchised. A nativist stance as an epistemological one would all the more be justified by a democracy's willful espousal of neo-conservatism: culture and cultural belonging would be the deus ex machina for grasping social and political problems. That is, those putatively within or of the culture would hold the essential title to talk about it authoritatively. Yet, just days before the conference, India provided what struck everyone as a textbook example of a regular democratic election and the unexpected party was the victor. A centrist coalition supported in sizeable measure by the communist vote had begun to take shape by the time of the conference. (A lesson is to be learned here: the incorporation of a diasporic intelligentsia is itself not enough to mitigate against the politics of atavism in the homeland or against the ideological distortions in scholarship as well as in other arenas of knowledge and information.)

"India is too often contrasted against the US and the West as simply the particular: rather than ever being explicable by universal social science categories and methods, Indian culture supposedly only trumps them. A commitment to the particular means that no valid theoretical framework can ever attain formulation. In the context of contemporary democratic political cultures in a global framework, the logic of this discourse goes perverse. In the context of the US, this is because no legitimate democratic election has obtained for some time now. The particular and the universal, the norm and the exception, could not easily be reversed." The "democracy" of the US is now in fact most peculiar, if worthy of the name at all. The

embarrassment betrayed by some of the celebrated postcolonial figures with respect to this situation at the said-conference indicates perhaps that nothing much has changed in the field. Said's critique could apply to this situation as well. It would target even in this instance the reign of disciplinary and institutional code over emergent realities, the reign of ideological blindness buttressed by institutional clout, both leading to the wasting away of political possibilities. (At issue again is not the particular people involved but rather that the same rigid and stagnant episteme is still operative, often leading to an impoverishment of the vast variety of things that can be studied as well as how they can be understood.) A powerful, effective and even practical knowledge of the non-West could very well continue to be more the exception than the norm if one continues to abide by the institutional and political constraints of what is currently dominant in the university (and often passes as authoritative knowledge). The exit out of the identitarian framework would be to simply put other imperatives at work in scholarship. It may very well involve distinguishing Saidianism from the force of Said's spirit for the present context of cultural criticism.

Note

The term "Saidianism" has been employed here to designate a particular commonsense understanding that establishes facilely a genetic connection between the work that Said accomplished early on and the very sorts of postcolonial tendencies from which he sought to distance himself. In brief, the term "Saidianism" can be understood to signify those tendencies in cultural criticism that conflate the work of Said with the broad trends in poststructural and postcolonial thought and, in doing so, more often than not depart from the objectives that Said had established for his own work. The translation of Iqbal's poetry cited here is from D.J.

Matthews, *Iqbal: A Selection of the Urdu Verse, Text and Translation* (New Delhi: Heritabe Pulishers, 1993) 13.