

The Thought of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Poet of the East: Westernised Minds and the Crisis of Muslim Identity

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Published: Daily News, Pakistan, 24-04-2009

Revised: 2026

Abstract: This paper critically examines Western modernity through the philosophical and poetic vision of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, situating his thought as both an indictment of civilisational decline and a blueprint for Muslim revival. Iqbal regards the glamour of the West and its promise of progress not as genuine advancement but as a culture of spiritual and moral disintegration. He argues that the Muslim world's crisis is not primarily the product of foreign domination, but the consequence of internal decay driven by blind imitation of Western paradigms. The paper contends that Islam has suffered less from external hostility than from the complacency of so-called "moderate" Muslim elites who, detached from Qur'ān, Sunnah and Fiqh, advocate the reform of Shari'ah through borrowed liberal frameworks. Through close readings of Iqbal's key poetic symbols, the Shaheen, Chakor and Zāgh, the article reconstructs his compressed philosophy of history. The West emerges as a dazzling but spiritually captive civilisation: technologically expansive, yet ethically hollow. Scientific progress, unrestrained by revelation or Fiṭrah, produces material infinity alongside moral bankruptcy. Within Muslim societies, the same modernity manifests as psychological colonisation: Azkār yield to entertainment, education becomes an instrument of cultural erasure, and Nikāḥ is trivialised through media-driven liberalism that derides family, Hayā and inherited moral roles. The paper further analyses Iqbal's warning that a civilisation which converts existence into a marketplace ultimately commits "suicide by its own dagger." Concepts such as Aāb'e-Zar, Ayyār and Shākh'e-Nāzuk expose Western civilisation as structurally self-destructive-power without ethics, freedom without transcendence, and social orders that culminate in spiritual barrenness. Against this backdrop, Iqbal shifts the narrative from Muslim victimhood to moral accountability: political subjugation is shown to follow, not precede, spiritual collapse. Finally, the study argues that Iqbal offers not mere lamentation but a rigorous program of iṣlāḥ. He calls for the rise of a Shaheen generation anchored in prophetic character, Shari'ah obedience and intellectual independence, rejecting both palace-dependence and borrowed ideologies. In legal-moral terms, Iqbal relocates responsibility from abstract "history" to concrete communal negligence, affirming that Sunnat-Allāh does not spare any civilisation that violates its ethical grammar. Revival, in this vision, must proceed not from rhetoric but from restoring the Nūr'e-Ḥaqīqī of Islam as the operative source of law, culture and civilisational order.

Keywords: Dr. Muhammad Iqbal; Shariah; Western modernity; Muslim decline; Khudi; Shaheen; Sunnat-Allah; psychological colonisation; Farangi Muasharat; Islamic ethics; civilisational critique; Islāḥ.

It is an undeniable reality that Islam has not suffered greater harm at the hands of non-Muslims than from those so-called “moderate Muslims” who stand bereft of any true understanding of their own religious and cultural values. These pretenders have crossed all limits of ‘ilhād and Zandaqah, often acting at the behest of unseen patrons to accomplish indirectly what could not be achieved openly. Their monotonous refrain is that the Islamic Code requires “reformation” because it is, according to them, a supposedly outdated system of fifteen hundred years. Their understanding of Fiqh is equally confused: some reduce it to mere moral advice, while others trivialize it as nothing more than a handbook of domestic life. The Philosopher-Poet of the East, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, exposed such self-styled reformists in immortal words:

*“Shoor hai ho ga’ī dunyā se Musalmān nā-būd,
Ham yeh kahtay hain ke thay bhī kahīn Muslim maujūd?
Waz’e may tum ho Naṣrānī, to tamaddun may Hunūd,
Yeh Musalmān hain jinhen dekh ke sharmā’e Yahūd!
Yūn to Sayyid bhī ho, Mirza bhī ho, Afghān bhī ho,
Tum sab kuch ho-batāo to Musalmān bhī ho?”*

There is loud talk that Muslims have vanished from the world; we ask in response: did true Muslims ever meaningfully exist? In outward appearance you resemble Christians, in culture Hindus-so much so that even a Jew would feel ashamed at the sight of such a “Muslim.” You carry every identity, Sayyid, Mirza, Afghan, yet the most vital one, Muslim, remains in doubt.

1. Introduction: Internal Sabotage and Pseudo-Modern Muslims

It is an undeniable reality that Islam has not suffered greater harm at the hands of non-Muslims than from those so-called “moderate Muslims” who are bereft of any real understanding of their own religious and civilisational values. These pretenders, steeped in ‘ilhād and Zandaqah, often act at the behest of unseen patrons to accomplish indirectly what cannot be achieved openly. Their constant refrain is that the Islamic Code requires “reformation” because it is, according to them, an outdated system of fifteen hundred years. Their grasp of Fiqh is equally confused: some reduce it to vague moral advice, others trivialise it as a domestic handbook. Against this shallow discourse stands the Philosopher-Poet of the East, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, who exposed such self-styled reformists in immortal words:

*Shoor hai ho ga’ī dunyā se Musalmān nā-būd,
Ham yeh kahtay hain ke thay bhī kahīn Muslim maujūd?
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Tum sab kuch ho-batāo to Musalmān bhī ho?*

There is loud talk that Muslims have vanished from the world; Iqbal replies: did real Muslims ever meaningfully exist? Outwardly, they resemble Christians; in culture, Hindus; so degraded that even a Jew would feel ashamed at their condition. They carry every identity-Sayyid, Mirza, Afghan-yet the most vital one, Muslim, remains in doubt. Iqbal rejects the sentimental narrative

that laments merely political decline. What people call the “fall of Muslims” is, in his view, the collapse of a label whose reality had long been emptied. Islam survives in name, not in action; the charge is the loss of Islamic distinctiveness. In legal terms, Iqbal dismantles the defense of victimhood and places full liability for decline upon the Muslim community itself.

2. Self-Inflicted Decline: From Spiritual Collapse to Political Subjugation

From this opening, a clear bill of particulars emerges:

The downfall of Muslims is self-inflicted, not primarily imposed.

Imitation has replaced originality.

Lineage has replaced character.

Political decline followed spiritual and ethical decline.

Islam survives as a symbol, not as an operative norm.

Iqbal’s verses function as a prosecution, not a poem of consolation. He indicts a community that no longer lives by Islamic ethics nor builds an Islamic civilisation, but clings to the shell of identity while abandoning its substance.

3. Technological Advance and Moral Regression

If the Ummah is to survive with dignity, the malignant tumour afflicting Muslim society must be diagnosed and removed without delay. Its root cause is manifest: systematic neglect of the Sharī’ah in daily life. The true sources of progress-the Qur’ān and Sunnah-have been deliberately sidelined. Material advancement in the First World is undeniable. Distances of a thousand miles are traversed in hours; communication is instantaneous; events unfold before our eyes through television and the internet. A single computer performs the work of hundreds. Technology has expanded so rapidly that it has laid bare our backwardness, aggravated by illiteracy.

Yet this so-called progress has reduced human beings to virtual slaves. Moral values have collapsed; the culture of reading has withered; family life-especially companionship with elders, the living reservoirs of wisdom-has been gravely eroded. Everything is not found on the internet, nor can it ever replace books.

4. Progress without Fiṭrah: The Disfiguring of the Human

Scientific advancement, unmoored from moral restraint, has distorted ethical priorities. These changes were not shaped with Fiṭrah in view; hence they have inflicted severe harm on humanity. The Muslim mindset itself has been reconfigured. Azkā and Du’ā have been replaced by obscene entertainment. Educational institutions-often run by profit-hungry industrialists-have become slaughterhouses of young souls, promoting corruption, Westernisation and moral decay rather than ‘ilm and character. These are not centers of learning but graveyards of values. Westernised minds celebrate this degeneration because it advances a broader project of social corruption. Our people stand psychologically colonised by this modern world, abandoning the civilisational norms illuminated by the Nūr’e-Ḥaqīqī of Islām. The shameless lifestyle of the age has normalised moral corruption in private life. Worse still, slavish minds are more dangerous than physical slaves. Many now regard the West as the flawless model of existence.

5. “Chakoron kī Dunyā”: Western Dazzle and Spiritual Captivity

Dr. Iqbal foresaw this illness and warned future generations:

Yeh Europe, yeh Pachahim, Chakoron Kī Duniyā

Tere Nīlgūñ Asmān Be-Karānah.

This Europe, this West-this whole world of moon-struck admirers

(all of it exists) under your boundless blue sky.

At the surface level, Iqbal describes a vast, dazzling Western world beneath a boundless blue sky, inhabited by chakors—a bird in Persian-Urdu symbolism obsessively drawn to moonlight. The chakor lives in constant fascination with light, even to the point of self-destruction. By calling the Western world a “Chakoron Kī Duniyā”, Iqbal portrays a civilisation hypnotised by glitter, power, science, material progress and surface brilliance. They chase light, not truth; illumination, not guidance.

Tere Nīlgūñ Aasmān Be-Karānah

It evokes limitless horizons of science, technology and imperial reach. Iqbal acknowledges the West’s outward greatness, its apparent freedom and vast possibilities, but with a sharp implication:

The sky is infinite, but the souls beneath it are trapped.

Material infinity is paired with spiritual captivity.

This aligns with Iqbal’s broader critique:

Science without wisdom,

Power without morality,

Progress without purpose,

Freedom without transcendence.

The unspoken audience, however, is the Muslim. Iqbal warns: do not become a chakor yourself—do not abandon your own sun while chasing borrowed light.

6. Manipulated Reform and Assault on Nikāḥ

History records no civilisation that plunged into excess and vice yet continued to rise; it defies the immutable Sunnat-Allāh. The enemies of Islam know that only Islam dealt a decisive blow to unrestrained “free culture”. Hence crooks, usurpers and the agents of Shayṭān have always attempted to distort Islam through manipulative reinterpretation. The stability of any society rests upon the strength of its culture, and the perpetuity of nations is inseparable from their civilisation. Through electronic media, a culture is being promoted wherein Nikāḥ is devalued and the sanctity of marriage ridiculed, all to dismantle Islamic culture and normalise profligacy. They clamour for the “revision” of Divine Law, while it is they who stand in desperate need of self-reform.

7. “Kaun Hai Tārīk’e-Aā’in?”:

Iqbal rebukes the Moral Indictment of the Reformist Class with blistering clarity:

Kaun hai tārīk’e-ā’in’e Rasūl’e-Mukhtār?

Maslahat’e-waqt hai kis ke ‘amal kā miyār?

Kis kī āñkhoñ meñ samāyā hai shi’ār’e-agh’yār?

Ho ga’ī kis kī nigāh tarz’e-Salaf se bezār?

Qalb may soz nahīñ, rūḥ meñ eḥsās nahīñ,

Kuch bhī paighām’e-Muḥammad kā tumhāre paas nahīñ.

Who abandoned the law of the Chosen Messenger? Who made expediency the standard of conduct? Whose eyes are intoxicated by alien civilisations? Whose gaze has turned away from the path of the Salaf? Hearts without fire, souls without feeling-of Muhammad’s message, nothing remains with you. Here Iqbal exposes moral opportunism: ‘Amal judged by political convenience and social fashion rather than by Sharī’ah. Iqbal denounces intellectual slavery because Muslim ideals, heroes and standards of success are now drawn from alien value systems-this is mental colonisation.

Notes the psychological break with the Salaf: their model is deemed outdated and unsophisticated, so reverence turns to embarrassment. The inner disease is spiritual numbness:

No spiritual passion,

No moral pain,

No living awareness of right and wrong.

Faith becomes cold ritual, stripped of ethical urgency. Despite the name of Islam, the living essence of the Nabawi message-justice, courage, truth, sacrifice, spiritual freedom-has vanished. What remains is identity without content, form without spirit, name without reality. Iqbal thus argues that the crisis of the Muslim world is caused not primarily by foreign domination but by:

Abandonment of the Nabawi path,

Substitution of divine principles with expediency,

Intellectual slavery to alien ideals,

Rejection of early Islamic models,

Spiritual anaesthesia of heart and soul.

8. “Zaagh” and “Shaheen”: The Psychology of Decline

Iqbal captures the dynamics of moral environment through another poignant couplet:

Hui na zaagh may paida bulandī’e-parwāz,

Kharāb kar ga’ī Shaheen-bachche ko ṣuḥbat’e-Zaagh.

The crow can never attain the heights of flight; its company even ruined the young falcon.

The Zaagh symbolises a being habituated to low aims, scavenging, dependence and cowardice.

The Shāheen-Bachcha is youth with natural potential for greatness, born for height and struggle. Yet Suḥbat-company, environment, companionship-corrupts him.

Key principles of Iqbal emerge:

Potential can be ruined by a polluted environment.

Company is formative, not neutral; it shapes or destroys Khudī.

Low ideals are contagious: the crow never rises, but it drags the falcon down.

At the civilisational level:

Shāhīn-Bachcha = Muslim youth / Muslim civilisation.

Zaagh = decadent cultures and spiritually bankrupt value systems.

Şuḥbat = education systems, intellectual climates, alliances.

A civilisation with potential for leadership can be reduced to scavenging if it internalises the habits and dependencies of decayed cultures. Corruption is rarely imposed; it is internalised through imitation and misplaced loyalty.

9. “Diyār’e-Maghrib”: Civilisational Suicide by Its Own Dagger

Before leaving Europe, Iqbal issued a warning:

Diyār’e-Maghrib Ke Rehne wālo! Khudā Kī Bastī Dukān Nahīñ,

Kharrā Jise Tum Samajh Rahe Ho, woh Aāb’e-Zar Kam, Ayyār Hogā;

First, he rejects the capitalist reduction of existence to commerce: “Khudā kī bastī dukān nahīñ.” The universe is not a marketplace; truth, justice and destiny are not commodities. A civilisation that prices everything loses its soul.

“Kharrā jise tum samajh rahe ho;

woh āb-e-zar kam, ayyār hogā”

It deploys a devastating metaphor. Western progress and power, though dazzling, are likened to deceptive water-gold-āb’ezar-brilliant in appearance, hollow in substance. The term “Ayyār” exposes the civilisational project as morally fraudulent when divorced from revelation and ethics.

Tumhārī Tahzīb Apne Khanjar Se Aāp Hī Khud-Kushī Karegī,

Jo Shākh’e-Nāzuk Pe Aāshiyāna Banā,Nna Pāidār Hogā.

This verse is Iqbal’s central verdict. The West will not primarily be destroyed by an external enemy, but by its own:

Militarism,

Exploitative capitalism,

Technological domination without restraint,

Nationalism without ethics,

Desire without limits.

A nest built on a Shākh’e-Nāzuk-material appetite, power politics, profit motive, sensory pleasure, secular absolutism-cannot endure. When God is reduced to economics, brilliance becomes fraudulent, and power without morality becomes self-destructive.

10. “Mu’āsharat Kā Kamāl?”: Family, Gender and Social Order

Iqbal tightens his critique in the famous Rubā’ī:

*Ko’ī Pūchhe Hakīm’e-Europe se,
Hindū-Yūnān Haiñ Jin Ke Halqah’e-Bāgūsh Meñ,*

Yihī hai ma’āshrat kā kamāl?

Mard’e-bēkār aur zan’e-tahī-āghūsh?

The Hakīm’e-Europe is not a single person but the collective Western architect of social order-philosophers, sociologists, policymakers. Hindū-Yūnān-India and Greece-symbolise the ancient civilisations from which Europe claims intellectual descent. They hang as Halqah’e-Bāgūsh, ornamental rings in its ears. Iqbal asks, with icy irony: is this your “Mu’āsharat Kā Kamāl”-your highest social perfection-where:

Mard Bekār = men are jobless, idle, economically redundant,

Zan Tahī-Aāghūsh = women’s arms are empty, estranged from motherhood and stable family life?

The verse indicts a social model that, despite its philosophical heritage and technological prowess, yields unemployment, atomised individuals and the erosion of family. “Mu’āsharat kā kamāl” is pure sarcasm: if this is “perfection”, there is something fundamentally defective in the metrics of modernity.

For Iqbal, this is not a rejection of women’s education or dignity; it is a rejection of a civilisational philosophy that severs woman from her role as the moral and emotional heart of generations, while simultaneously rendering men economically and spiritually useless.

11. ‘Ulamā’, Media and the Formation of the Shaheen Generation

Today, dubious interpreters of Islam are projected as scholars through electronic media. The responsibility now rests squarely upon the ‘Ulamā’ to guide the masses steadfastly toward the Şirāṭ’e-Mustaqīm. Revival will not come through conferences, slogans or protests, but through sincere submission to the Qur’ān and Sunnah and the uncompromising rejection of false justifications.

Iqbal called the coming generations Shaheen with deliberate symbolism. The Shaheen:

Flies high and does not mix with lesser birds,

Has piercing vision,

Feeds only on fresh prey,

Soars into storms rather than fleeing them,

Trains itself through hardship,

Renews itself through painful regeneration.

Thus he teaches:

Nahīñ terā nashīman qaṣr’e-sultānī ke gumbad par,

Tu Shaheen hai, baserā kar pahāroñ kī chaṭānoñ meñ.

*Your nest is not upon the domes of royal palaces;
you are a royal falcon-make the mountain rocks your abode.*

The Qasr'e-Sultānī denotes political power, luxury and dependence on rulers. The mountain cliffs signify hardship, self-discipline, spiritual solitude and moral independence. Iqbal warns against selling one's independence for comfort, becoming an ornament of power, measuring worth by proximity to rulers instead of by integrity. In contemporary terms, the verse cautions against trading principle for promotion, sacrificing independence for status or compromising truth for favour. True success lies in ethical solitude if necessary, in professional integrity and intellectual independence. One was not created to live as an ornament of power, but to rise-alone if required-through struggle, with dignity.

In Iqbal's poetry, symbols are never decorative; they are instruments of reform. "Shaheen" is among his most influential symbolic poems, in which the falcon becomes a model for the kind of human being-and particularly the kind of youth-needed to revive a community that has grown accustomed to ease, imitation, and dependence. The poem is structured as a set of contrasts: desert and garden, altitude and nest, boundless sky and narrow horizons, discipline and indulgence. Through these oppositions, Iqbal builds a coherent philosophy of character. The poem opens with a decisive refusal. The Shaheen distances itself from a "dust-filled world" in which provision is merely "water and grain." This is not contempt for lawful livelihood; it is contempt for a life whose highest purpose is consumption. Iqbal identifies a subtle slavery: once a person's goals are reduced to comfort and routine, courage and imagination gradually disappear. The poem therefore begins with a moral declaration: the Shaheen will not measure existence by the stomach.

*Parindoñ kī duniyā kā darvesh hūñ main
Ke Shaheen Banātā Nahīn Ashiyāna*

*I am the dervish of the world of birds
Because the Shaheen does not build a nest.*

The signature idea: no "nest" means no attachment that turns into dependence-no settling into ease, no captivity to status, salary, or comfort. This is why the Shaheen becomes Iqbal's emblem of freedom, self-respect, and a self-built destiny (Khudi). Choose altitude over comfort: cultivate discipline, independence, and ceaseless striving-so your life is not reduced to Aab'o-Dana (mere survival), and your horizon is not reduced to "East/West." Iqbal deepens the symbolism by rejecting narrow categories of "East" and "West." He calls this the world of lesser birds, while the Shaheen claims a boundless sky. Here, Iqbal is not making a geographical point; he is attacking a limited imagination that allows identity to be decided by fashionable labels. The Shaheen stands for an expansive vision: higher aims, larger horizons, and a refusal to be contained by shallow divisions.

Conclusion:

Iqbal's project, taken as a whole, is not a romantic lament but a structured indictment and a program of Islāh. He prosecutes the Muslim community for self-inflicted decline: abandoning Sharī'ah in practice, normalising imitation of spiritually bankrupt cultures, and surrendering Khudī to Farangi Mu'āsharat. In legal language, he shifts the locus of fault from an amorphous "history" to concrete communal negligence before the court of Sunnat-Allāh. His critique of the West is not a call to ignorance, isolation or hatred. It is a warning that science without revelation, power without ethics and freedom without transcendence carry within themselves the causes of civilisational suicide-Aāb'e Zar progress wielding its own Khanjar. Any society, Muslim or non-Muslim, that converts existence into a marketplace and builds its nest on a Shākh'e-Nāzuk of desire cannot endure.

For the Muslim world, the greater danger is internal:

Sharī'ah reduced to slogan or legalistic shell,

Azkār displaced by entertainment,

Nikāh ridiculed,

'Ulamā' marginalised while media-made "experts" lead the discourse,

Youth-born as Shāheen-Bachche-immersed in Suhbat'e-Zaagh.

Iqbal's answer is a Shaheen of our generation must be decorate with the knowledge of Qur'ān and Sharī'ah. They must follow these canon sources in their lives to become intellectually independent, morally severe with itself yet just with the world. Such a civilisation refuses psychological colonisation, re-centers prophetic character in law, policy and culture, and measures success not by the domes of palace patronage but by the rocky heights of principled struggle. The critical lesson is stark: so long as Muslims plead victimhood while persisting in spiritual negligence, history will not reverse its verdict. Revival is contingent, not guaranteed. It demands that the Ummah rediscover Nūr'e-Haqīqī as the living source of identity, law and Mu'āsharat-and that a generation of Shaheen arise who prefer Pahāroñ Kī Chaṭāneñ to every Qaṣr'e-Sulṭānī of this passing world. In the final analysis, "Shaheen" is Iqbal's ethical program in miniature. It calls for Khudī-a self-built through restraint, struggle, and purpose. It warns that nations decline not only due to external pressures but also due to internal softness: the substitution of comfort for character. By presenting the Shaheen as a "Darvish among Birds," Iqbal merges spirituality with strength and reminds the reader that real elevation is moral, not merely material.

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