

Research Article

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Iqbal, Nietzsche, and Nihilism: Reconstruction of Sufi Cosmology and Revaluation of Sufi Values in *Asrar-i-Khudî*

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Abstract: While the problem of nihilism is derived from a particular historical and intellectual context in Western philosophy, i.e., the pantheism controversy in modern German philosophy and the ideas of Nietzsche, non-Western thinkers also engaged with it and developed responses to it. In this article, I am interested in analyzing Muhammad Iqbal's (1877–1938), a leading Muslim thinker (a Sufi) from India, engagement with the problem of nihilism and his response to it from a Sufi perspective. Arguing that the existing literature on Iqbal fails to understand the deeper impact of Nietzsche's ideas on Iqbal's philosophy and the dramatic role “the problem of nihilism” played in causing changes in Iqbal's philosophy, or on Iqbal's intellectual development, in this article, I analyze how Iqbal's encounter with the ideas of Nietzsche during his study period in Europe between 1905 and 1908 has introduced him to the problem of nihilism in its Nietzschean form, how this led Iqbal to a nihilistic mood/crisis from 1909 to 1913, and then how he later developed a response to nihilism by reconstructing the Sufi cosmology and by reevaluating the Sufi values of the pantheistic/Persian type of Sufism – the outcome of which is found in his philosophical poem *Asrar-i-Khudî* (1915).

Keywords: nihilism, Sufism, pantheism, cynicism, pessimism, Iqbal, Nietzsche, Rumi, overman, perfect man, revaluation of all values, cosmology

1 Introduction

While the problem of nihilism is derived from a particular historical and intellectual context in Western philosophy, i.e., the pantheism controversy in modern German philosophy and the ideas of Nietzsche, non-Western thinkers also engaged with it and developed responses to it. An early prominent non-Western example in this respect is the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) who studied with Martin Heidegger in Freiburg from 1937 to 1939 during which he had the opportunity to listen to Heidegger's lectures on nihilism. Nishitani approached nihilism from a Buddhist perspective.¹ In this article, however, I am interested in analyzing Muhammad Iqbal's (1877–1938), a leading Muslim thinker (a Sufi) from India, engagement with the problem of nihilism – probably the first non-Western thinker to do this – and his response to it from a Sufi perspective.

¹ In 1949, Nishitani gave “a series of talks on the subject of nihilism to a small group of scholars and students in Kyoto,” and the “text of those lectures, originally published under the Japanese title *Nihirizumu*,” was translated into English and was published in 1990. See, Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming*, xv.

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Although there is significant literature on how Iqbal's philosophy is related to Nietzsche's, these studies are generally limited to analyses of comparisons between Nietzsche's and Iqbal's ideas² or are interested in showing how certain Nietzschean concepts, such as "overman"³ and "eternal recurrence,"⁴ have influenced, or not influenced, Iqbal's ideas on "immortality,"⁵ his concept of "the perfect man,"⁶ and so on. In these studies, one can find different interpretations varying from "Iqbal has just copied Nietzsche" to "Iqbal was not influenced by Nietzsche at all." For instance, while Reynold A. Nicholson argues that Iqbal's "philosophy owes much to Nietzsche,"⁷ Edward G. Browne goes to a more extreme position and claims that Iqbal's philosophy is merely "an oriental adaptation" of Nietzsche's philosophy.⁸ Others like R. Bilquees Dar and Nazir Qaiser argue the opposite. While Dar argues that Iqbal's perfect man was in no way Nietzsche's superman,⁹ Qaiser's general conclusion is that "the frames of references of both Iqbal and Nietzsche were qualitatively different."¹⁰ Annemarie Schimmel offers a more nuanced position when analyzing Iqbal's thought in relation to Islamic tradition,¹¹ but her view also seems closer to those who situate Iqbal's ideas in the Islamic tradition. Opposing Schimmel, Stephan Popp claims that Iqbal's thought cannot simply be explained through the Qur'an and Islamic tradition since some of Iqbal's ideas were "novel to Islamic thought but quite common in the West."¹² Some others, like Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, argue that Iqbal synthesized both Islamic and Western worldviews,¹³ while Jason Freitag "submits that Iqbal's primary focus is on a spiritual examination of Islam. Nietzsche is present to the degree that his thought fits within that spiritual frame."¹⁴ Concerned with all these wide-ranging and extreme interpretations regarding Iqbal's engagement with Nietzsche's ideas, Subhash C Kashyap argues that "the truth, in all probability, lies somewhere in between these two extremes."¹⁵ After that, he pursues his own "objective evaluation" of the relations between Iqbal's and Nietzsche's ideas which is one of the best analyses done on the issue in terms of its philosophical depth and the quality of analysis. While these are valuable studies in contributing to our understanding of the similarities and differences between Iqbal's and Nietzsche's ideas as well as adding to our understanding of Iqbal's philosophy in general, they are insufficient in clarifying the role Nietzsche's ideas played for Iqbal's intellectual development – particularly how Iqbal came to learn about the problem of nihilism in its Nietzschean version and the subsequent "nihilistic mood/crisis" he experienced after returning to India in 1908.¹⁶ The literature on Iqbal's intellectual development is also not very helpful in this respect. Various scholars writing on this issue generally claim that Iqbal's ideas and philosophy have gone through significant changes as a result of his studies in Europe between 1905 and 1908. More specifically, they claim that Iqbal had a pantheistic worldview before going to Europe, and after he returned from Europe, he started defending a theistic worldview. Furthermore, they claim that before going to Europe, Iqbal was more of a supporter of Indian nationalism, but then after Europe, he started defending

2 For instance, Qaiser, *Iqbal and the Western Philosophers*, xiv; Maruf, *Iqbal and His Contemporary Western*, viii; Iqbal, "Iqbal's Concept of God," 48–51; Weischer, "Some Remarks," 4–7; Riffat, "The Concept of Time," 103–28; Muhar, "Political Philosophy," 176.

3 For various views on this point, see, Dar, *Letters of Iqbal*, 139–40.

4 Dar, "Iqbal and Nietzsche's," 281–305.

5 Ahmad, *Iqbal's Concept of Death*, 99–164.

6 Singh, *The Ardent Pilgrim*, 39; Esposito, *Voices*, 176; Kiernan, *Poems*, xv.

7 Nicholson, "Introduction," x.

8 Browne, *A Literary History*, 431.

9 Dar, "Iqbal and Nietzsche," 449–50.

10 Qaiser, "Was Iqbal Influenced by Nietzsche," 25–96.

11 Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*.

12 Popp, "Muhammad Iqbal," 201–29. In another place, Popp comes closer to Schimmel's position by saying that "it is, above all, this process of creating the pleasure of reading that manages to make the reader accept Iqbal's philosophy as "originally Islamic," although Kant, Nietzsche, and Vivekanda play a crucial part in it." Popp, "How to," 72.

13 Haddad-Adel, "The Influence," 91–108.

14 Freitag, "A Nietzsche for India," 89–102.

15 Kashyap, *The Unknown Nietzsche*, 191–209.

16 For an analysis of Iqbal's engagement with the problem of nihilism before 1908, see Yilmaz, "Overcoming," 69–96.

Muslim nationalism.¹⁷ Again, these are important contributions to understand Iqbal's intellectual development; however, they do not offer sufficient analysis regarding the underlying processes and factors that led to these changes other than arriving at conclusions based on the comparisons of Iqbal's poetry written before going to Europe and after returning from Europe as the evidence of these changes. Consequently, while I agree with the existing literature that one can observe significant changes in Iqbal's ideas before and after the Europe periods, I argue that it was Iqbal's encounter with the ideas of Nietzsche during his stay in Europe that was the most important factor in leading to these changes.

I argue that the existing literature on Iqbal fails to understand the deeper impact of Nietzsche's ideas on Iqbal's philosophy and the dramatic role "the problem of nihilism" played in causing changes in Iqbal's philosophy or on Iqbal's intellectual development. At this point, I agree with Schimmel that the "tragic figure" of Nietzsche "has occupied Iqbal's mind ... more intensely than any other Western philosopher"¹⁸ or that "Nietzsche was the thinker with whom Iqbal wrestled the most."¹⁹ Accordingly, in this article, I analyze how Iqbal's encounter with the ideas of Nietzsche during his study period in Europe between 1905 and 1908 has introduced him to the problem of nihilism in its Nietzschean form, how this first led Iqbal to a nihilistic mood/crisis from 1909 to 1913, and then how he later developed a response to it from a Sufi perspective. Following Bernard Reginster's systematic analysis of Nietzsche's uses of nihilism in all his writings, here I use his terms "nihilism as disorientation" and "nihilism as despair" to analyze Iqbal's nihilistic mood/crisis. "Nihilism as disorientation" is related to the objective standing of values. Reginster states that "for human beings who need their lives to have meaning, this lack of normative guidance spawns nihilism, understood as *disorientation*."²⁰ In this respect, I think that the madman's depiction of the implications of the "death of God" can illustrate nicely this feeling of disorientation. Likening the "death of God" to the earth being unchained from its sun, thus losing its orbit, orientation, and all sense of direction (back, front, right, left, up and down, etc.), the madman asks: "Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing?"²¹ This is also similar to the conception of nihilism David Storey arrives at after surveying "the most important narratives of nihilism" in the literature. In his article, he attempts "to show how commonly the advent and spread of nihilism is linked with changing conceptions of (humanity's relation to) nature."²² Consequently, he argues that "at root, nihilism is a problem about humanity's relation to nature, about a crisis in human freedom and willing after the collapse of the cosmos, the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature in which humans have a proper place."²³ "Nihilism as despair," however, is "the conviction that our highest values cannot be realized in this world, and that there is no other world in which they can. The ensuing condition is best described as *despair*."²⁴ This feeling, I think, is very well reflected in Nietzsche's definition of nihilism, that is, "the aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer."²⁵ In this respect, Nietzsche attempts to make us aware of the despair emerging from the realization that certain worldviews, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Plato, as well as the culture, values, and human beings that emerge out of such worldviews are not suited to this life since their highest values cannot be realized. Iqbal, on the other hand, believes that Islam as a religion²⁶ can still provide human beings with such highest values that can be realized. For this, however, the influence of "Persian Mysticism," which is pessimistic, which idealizes negation of life and promotes self-annihilation – in

¹⁷ See for instance, Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*, 39–40; Iqbal, "Religious Philosophy," 6–16; Mir, *Iqbal*, 8; Koshul, "Muhammad Iqbal," 61; Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, 57–8; Aqeel, *Iqbal*, 44–5; Beg, *The Poet of the East*, xv; Rahman, "Muslim Modernism," 93–4; Bowering, "Iqbal," 12–21; Singh, *The Ardent Pilgrim*, 48–51; Nix, *The Integration*, 63; Qaiser, "Was Iqbal a Pantheist?," 52–62; Wasti, "Dr. Muhammad Iqbal," 35–45.

¹⁸ Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*, 323.

¹⁹ Schimmel, "Iqbal and Germany," 71.

²⁰ Reginster, *The Affirmation*, 8.

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120.

²² Storey, "Nihilism," 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴ Reginster, *The Affirmation*, 8.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 9.

²⁶ When discussing Islam, however, Iqbal generally refers to Sufi interpretation of it.

this respect, it is similar to Christianity, Buddhism, and the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Plato – on Islam should be removed, and the true Islam should be brought to light. In other words, Iqbal thinks nihilism can be overcome by a reconstruction of a Sufi cosmological theory which is unsuited for “the hard Reality” of life and a revaluation of Sufi values that led to the degeneration of the Muslims and the decline of Muslim culture. Accordingly, I analyze how Iqbal felt both disoriented and in despair after the Sufi cosmological theory which provided Iqbal with a conception of the cosmos, “a hierarchically ordered nature in which human have a proper place,” went through erosion and collapsed, and how this led to the emergence of nihilism for Iqbal as “a problem about humanity’s relation to nature, about a crisis in human freedom and willing.” After this, Iqbal started developing a new cosmological theory as a response to nihilism by reconstructing the Sufi cosmology and by revaluating the Sufi values (“pantheistic,” or “Persian Mysticism,” as Iqbal calls it) – the outcome of which was his philosophical poem *Asrar-i-Khudî* (1915).²⁷

To support my argument, I must accomplish several goals in this article. First, I must show that Iqbal started reading Nietzsche during his studies in Europe between 1905 and 1908 to establish the view that Nietzsche’s philosophy played certain roles in affecting Iqbal’s philosophy and ideas after Iqbal went to Europe. In doing this, I will elaborate on the existing evidence and suggest that before going to Europe, Iqbal most probably did not read anything about, or from, Nietzsche. After establishing that he first started reading Nietzsche during his studies in Europe, probably in 1907, I will then analyze how his reading of Nietzsche became more systematic and more comprehensive after his return to India in 1908. By analyzing Iqbal’s writings after 1908, I will show how we first see the emergence of certain Nietzschean themes and concepts, and then direct references to Nietzsche by name.²⁸ Second, I must show how this process led Iqbal to a nihilistic crisis/mood which lasted roughly from 1909 to 1913. In this respect, I will analyze Iqbal’s letters and poems to show the dramatic change in Iqbal’s mood shifting into pessimism, sadness, and cynicism along with two themes that emerge in his writings in this period – his questioning and daring attitude against God and his concern regarding his freedom and willing. Finally, I must show how Iqbal got out of this crisis/mood by developing a response to nihilism, the outcome of which is found in his *Asrar-i-Khudî*. In doing this, I will first discuss Iqbal’s usage of the term “nihilism” from which we learn more about his understanding of the problem and then analyze his reconstruction of Sufi cosmology and his revaluation of Sufi values in *Asrar-i-Khudî*. Chronologically, this amounts to analyzing Iqbal’s ideas and his intellectual development from 1909 to 1920. I consider 1909–1913 as the “nihilistic mood/crisis” period which is also the period when Iqbal’s engagement with Nietzsche’s ideas intensifies. Then comes the period of going out of the crisis which culminates in the publication of *Asrar-i-Khudî* in 1915 in Persian, and then in 1920 in English. In between, Iqbal writes two short articles on Sufism in 1917 which help us understand his understanding of nihilism as well as how he thinks that a particular type of Sufism – “Persian Sufism,” or “pantheistic Sufism” – is what leads to nihilism, and how a different strand within Sufism – the one that is inspired by the ideas of Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (1207–1273) and Ahmad Al-Rifai (1119–1183) – can provide a solution to the problem of nihilism.

With this article, I aim to make two contributions to the existing scholarship on nihilism and the literature on Iqbal. First, I aim to expand our understanding of the problem of nihilism and responses to it by analyzing another non-Western approach to it (Sufi approach) in addition to the Buddhistic approach of Nishitani. Second, I aim to improve our understanding of Iqbal’s ideas in *Asrar-i-Khudî* itself by situating it in this context of the problem of nihilism and as a response to it, and his intellectual development during the post-1908 period, particularly the process leading to the writing of the *Asrar-i-Khudî*.

²⁷ *Asrar-i-Khudî* (1915) receives a special attention from Iqbal scholars since it is believed to be the poem where such changes in Iqbal’s thinking and philosophy are first seen after his return to India in 1908. The book was later translated by Reynold A. Nicholson from Persian to English and published in 1920.

²⁸ Such as, “Islam as a Moral” (1909), “The Muslim Community” (1910), and “Political Thought in Islam” (1911).

2 Nietzsche and Iqbal: 1905–1908

When did Iqbal first read Nietzsche? Was it before he went to Europe in 1905, during his studies in Europe between 1905 and 1908, or after he returned to India in 1908? There is no evidence to suggest that he was exposed to the ideas of Nietzsche before going to Europe. Against those who “would suggest that he [Iqbal] might have read Nietzsche in his M.A. classes,” Muhammad Maruf says that in India “courses in the history of Philosophy in those days practically went up to Hegel, and post-Hegelian thinkers, including Nietzsche, were not taken seriously.”²⁹ This claim might be true when we look at an article Iqbal published in 1900³⁰ – one year after receiving his MA degree in India. In this article, we see that Iqbal discusses the ideas of various German philosophers, including Kant, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer; however, there is no mentioning of Nietzsche. Atiya Begum gives us the earliest evidence to figure out when, possibly, Iqbal first started reading Nietzsche. She tells us that when she met Iqbal in London – April 1907 – they had a discussion on Plato and Nietzsche. At that time, Begum had just completed her readings on ancient and modern philosophy, and she saw that they had “a divergence in [their] views and interpretations of these philosophers.” Begum tells us that since Iqbal was not satisfied, he continued the discussion in letters later.³¹ We can infer that to have views about Nietzsche and to continue these conversations, Iqbal must have read Nietzsche during his studies in Europe.³² We also know that while in Germany during 1907 and 1908, Iqbal was not only learning German from his German tutors, but also studying with them German philosophy.³³

After his return to India in 1908, however, we see clear signs of Iqbal’s engagement with Nietzsche’s ideas. He starts employing certain Nietzschean themes, concepts, and ideas – such as emphasis on will, power, and freedom – in his writings first without directly referring to Nietzsche. For instance, in an article published in 1909,³⁴ he takes Nietzsche’s idea of “transvaluation of all values” and applies it to Islam. He writes “It is, therefore, evident that Islam, so to speak, *transmutes* the moral values of the ancient world, and declares preservation, intensification of the sense of human personality, to be the ultimate ground of all ethical activity.”³⁵ In the same article, he also writes that “man is a free responsible being; he is the maker of his own destiny, his salvation is his own business”³⁶ and claims that the essential nature of man consists in *will*, not in intellect or understanding.³⁷ Accordingly, he argues that “a strong will in a strong body is the ethical ideal of Islam.”³⁸ One year after this article, Iqbal refers to Nietzsche directly. In his article entitled “The Muslim Community – A Sociological Study” (1910), Iqbal writes that “we must criticise ourselves, perhaps transvaluate them [existing values of the community]; and, if necessary, create new worths; since the immortality of a people, as Nietzsche has so happily put, depends upon the incessant creation of worths.”³⁹ The same year, he adds two entries on Nietzsche in his *Stray Reflections*.⁴⁰ The first is an entry

²⁹ Maruf, “Iqbal’s Criticism,” 64–74.

³⁰ Iqbal, “The Doctrine,” 237–46.

³¹ Begum, *Iqbal*, 11.

³² Kashyap also writes that “during his sojourn (1905–8) in Europe, Iqbal was much impressed by the philosophy of Nietzsche,” Kashyap seems to think that Iqbal must have read Nietzsche in this period because “the intellectual atmosphere of Europe was then surcharged with Nietzsche’s thoughts. Nietzsche-cult was at its zenith.” Kashyap, *The Unknown Nietzsche*, 192.

³³ Dar, “Introduction,” 6.

³⁴ Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral – I,” 29–38; Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral – II,” 166–71. These articles can also be found in Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral,” 97–117.

³⁵ Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral – I,” 34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹ Iqbal, “The Muslim Community,” 121.

⁴⁰ Iqbal’s private notebook, which he kept between 1910 and 1917, and on which he wrote short entries about different thinkers and subjects. Iqbal called his entries “stray reflections,” and therefore these were later published with the same title in a book format. Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*.

entitled “The Madness of Nietzsche” where Iqbal, implying that he is among the few who were really able to understand Nietzsche’s ideas, argues that “only a few have realised the meaning of his [Nietzsche’s] madness.”⁴¹ The other entry is called “The Worth of Things” where Iqbal argues that according to Nietzsche, “the immortality of a people depends upon their incessant creation of ‘worths’.”⁴² There are also various parts in *Stray Reflections* where one can see the traces of Nietzsche’s influence on Iqbal’s thinking through the emphases on the importance of power and strength, continuous struggle for life, and criticism of certain moral values, such as self-negating values.⁴³ For instance, in one entry, Iqbal must be referring to “the slave morality” and “master morality” of Christianity and Romans in Nietzsche’s writings when he writes “You must give up all those modes of activity which have a tendency to dissolve *personality*, e.g. humility, contentment, slavish obedience, modes of human action which have been erroneously dignified by the name of virtue.”⁴⁴ As Kashyap also states “both for Nietzsche and for Iqbal self-denial is the morality of the slaves.”⁴⁵ Echoing Nietzsche’s “overman,” in another entry, Iqbal writes “Give up waiting for the *Mehdi* – the personification of *Power*. Go and *create* him.”⁴⁶ In a way, this sounds like Nietzsche’s idea that man must be overcome. Similarly, “Mehdi” must not be waited idly and in a lazy way but must be created. Similar thoughts appear in the reader’s mind when one reads Iqbal’s entry entitled “To Revitalise the Dying Organism.” In this entry, Iqbal writes “A diseased social organism sometimes sets up within itself forces which have a tendency to preserve the health of the organism – e.g. the birth of a great Personality which may revitalise the dying organism by the revelation of a new ideal.”⁴⁷ These bring to mind similar thoughts because here one can see the influences of Nietzschean ideas of “overman,” overcoming the cultural decline and cultural decadence and creating a new world with new values and the importance of a great personality in doing these things. After referring to indirect and direct references to Nietzsche and his ideas and concepts in Iqbal’s writings after 1908, I will now analyze the pessimist, sad, and cynical mood that is found in Iqbal’s writings in the same period.

3 Iqbal’s Nihilistic Crisis: 1909–1913

Change of mood and sudden appearance of intense despair, cynicism, distress, and pessimism can be seen in Iqbal’s writings beginning in 1909 and continuing up until 1913. Regarding tracing the change of mood in Iqbal after his return to India in 1908, Bashir Ahmad Dar suggests that we should analyze his letters to Atiqa Begum after 1908. According to Dar, these are “letters written during this most critical period of his life when he [Iqbal] was under great emotional stress.”⁴⁸ He argues that it was “unsuccessful love” that was at the root of this “great emotional stress.” According to Dar, during his studies in Europe, Iqbal “was under the spell of love for a type of a woman who was highly educated, well versed in subjects in which he was interested, in whose company he could discuss problems of life and death, ... and was able to get emotional satisfaction in the bargain.”⁴⁹ However, when he returned to India, he was not able to attain these in his life due to his family’s “lower middle-class” and “too conservative and convention-ridden” background.⁵⁰ Hence, Dar believes that “it was this contradiction in the situation which became the cause of Iqbal’s

⁴¹ Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Kashyap, *The Unknown Nietzsche*, 195.

⁴⁶ Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, 85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸ Dar, “Introduction,” 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8–10.

anguish.”⁵¹ I also consider Iqbal’s letters to Atiya Begum as an important source of information to understand Iqbal’s feelings and his psychological mood after his return to India, especially between 1909 and 1911,⁵² since in these letters, Iqbal seems to be talking openly about his feelings and thoughts.⁵³ Regarding the cause and the meaning of this change of mood Iqbal went through, however, I disagree with Dar. He argues that it was “unsuccessful love” that was at the root of this “great emotional stress.” While I also think that such disappointments and failures related to love and romance may have played some roles in causing sadness, I believe that the emergence of “this great emotional stress” requires deeper forms of pessimism and despair. For instance, writing in 1910 in his *Stray Reflections*, Iqbal tells how he was on the verge of atheism during his student years.⁵⁴ Accordingly, looked more carefully, there is more evidence in Iqbal’s letters to Atiya Begum that help us understand the deeper dimensions of his intense despair, cynicism, distress, and pessimism. I argue that there are three important and persistent themes that are found in all of Iqbal’s writings in this period (1909–1913) which are the emergence of his questioning and daring attitude against God which questions his position *vis-à-vis* God in the cosmos, his concern regarding the value, meaning, and power of his freedom and willing, and his pessimism and despair about not being able to find an answer to his questions and complaints. I say persistent because Iqbal discusses them in his articles and poetry written in this period as well. For instance, both his *Shikwa* (1909) and in *Jawab-i-Shikwa* (1913), poems which I will also briefly analyze in the following pages revolve around these themes. Moreover, unlike Dar who thinks that this mood lasts for two years between 1909 and 1911, I suggest that Iqbal’s “nihilistic crisis/mood” lasts roughly from 1909 to 1913 since the effects of this mood in his writings can be seen between these years. I believe that it can be extended until 1913 when *Jawab-i-Shikwa* was published since it is in this poem, we see the first evidence of the beginning of Iqbal’s reconciliation with God. This period also coincides with the first appearance of references to Nietzsche’s name and ideas in Iqbal’s writings, and therefore, I draw a correlation between Iqbal’s starting reading Nietzsche and the change of mood in his writings. Crucial to note here is that such a pessimist mood cannot be seen in any other period of Iqbal’s life; therefore, I believe that it is legitimate to make this correlation. Now, I will analyze the change of mood and the appearance of intense despair, cynicism, distress, and pessimism that can be seen in Iqbal’s writings beginning in 1909 and continuing up until 1913.

The first signs of the psychological and metaphysical distress Iqbal was going through are seen in the second letter Iqbal sends to Atiya Begum – dated April 9, 1909, i.e., approximately eight months after his return to India in 1908. After referring to his life as “extremely miserable,” and complaining that his father is forcing him into an arranged marriage which Iqbal does not want, he writes:

As a human being I have a right to happiness – if society or nature deny that to me, I defy both. The only cure is that I should leave this wretched country for ever, or take refuge in liquor which makes suicide easier. Those dead barren leaves of books cannot yield happiness; I have got sufficient fire in my soul to burn them up and social conventions as well. A good God created all this, you say. Maybe. The facts of this life, however, tend to a different conclusion. It is intellectually easier to believe in an eternal omnipotent Devil rather than a good God. Please excuse me for these utterances. I do not want sympathy. I wanted only to disburden my soul.⁵⁵

At first, we may think that these words are triggered as a result of the physical, social, and psychological displacement Iqbal experienced following his return to India from Europe. However, closer attention paid to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵² The total number of letters Iqbal sent to Atiya Begum is not known for sure, but in her book on Iqbal, Begum published eleven letters from Iqbal which were sent to her between April 1907 and December 1911. In this article, I referred to the letters from Bashir Ahmad Dar’s collection of letters. Dar, *Letters*, 1–56.

⁵³ In the letter dated 9th April 1909, Iqbal writes “You know all about me and for this reason I have ventured to give expression to my feelings. This is a confidence: please do not tell anybody.” *Ibid.*, 22. In a letter that is dated 8 days later (17th April 1909) Iqbal writes: “Your letters to me are always kept in a safe chest; nobody can see them. And you know I withhold nothing from you and I believe it is a sin to do so.” *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, 53.

⁵⁵ Dar, *Letters*, 21–2.

these statements can show us greater problems and issues occupying Iqbal's mind and soul – problems that led him to bigger and deeper metaphysical questions regarding God, universe, the meaning/purpose/goal of existence/life, meaning of freedom, will, and morality for human beings. For instance, he feels that his freedom and will being crippled by his authoritarian father's decisions determining major issues of his life. He feels that very fundamental but simple rights he thinks he deserves to enjoy, i.e., "right to happiness," is denied to him by the suffocating norms and values of the Indian society. What makes the situation more dramatic is that Iqbal is unable to find a plausible way out of these problems. He mentions "leav[ing] this wretched country for ever," "tak[ing] refuge in liquor," or committing suicide; however, he cannot do these because firstly he feels he is morally indebted to his brother,⁵⁶ and secondly, probably it would feel like escaping from the reality or from the problems themselves without trying to deal with them. He cannot be satisfied with that can be found in "dead barren leaves of books" because the problems that bother him are not merely some intellectual problems. They are problems about life. In other words, the problem for Iqbal is not merely an intellectual or a theoretical problem; therefore, he cannot simply find an intellectual solution to the problem and be content with it. For instance, he cannot just accept the explanation that "a good God created all this" because when he looks around to "the facts of this life," he sees enough pain and suffering to become convinced that it is actually "an eternal omnipotent Devil" that is the real force in life and existence rather than "a good God." The problem is probably not that there is misery, pain, and suffering in life, but that it is difficult to answer the question of why. "Nihilism as despair" emerges not simply when there is pain, suffering, and misery, but when "the aim is lacking" and when "why finds no answer." Especially, it is difficult to explain and find a justification for why is one suffering when these are not caused by the decisions and choices of one's own making, but some other force's – father's, or God's. It seems that the issue is the problematic relationship between a child and an authoritarian father, or a human being and an unquestionable God.

In these desperate times when Iqbal cannot find answers to his questions, he writes to a close friend to "disburden [his] soul." Although Iqbal says that he finds consolation in Begum's words, and her letters bring him "great relief,"⁵⁷ his cynical and pessimist mood continues to haunt him. In the next letter to Begum, Iqbal writes that his own "wretched self is a mine of miserable thoughts which emerge snake-like from the deep and dark holes of [his] soul."⁵⁸ Although he does not want to be seen as a "pessimist," his words contribute to that image. He writes "Don't think that I am pessimist. I tell you misery is most delicious; and I enjoy my misfortune and laugh at those who believe they are happy. You see how I steal my happiness."⁵⁹ Iqbal's demand for an answer to his questions becomes more visible in his next letter which is dated 17th July 1909 – approximately 3 months after the previous letter. We have seen that he was deeply troubled by an authoritarian father who just gives commands and expects absolute obedience. This time his questioning and daring attitude is directed against God, and we see this strongly and clearly expressed in his language. He writes:

Of course, everybody is waiting patiently for the place of rest. I am anxious to go to that place because I shall like to meet the Creator and call upon Him to give me a rational explanation of my mind which I think is not an easy task for Him to do. I am incomprehensible to myself – you should not complain.⁶⁰

In a way, he thinks that even God will have difficulties in providing him with plausible answers and explanations regarding why things are in the way they are, or they have been in these ways. He does

⁵⁶ In this letter, we also learn that Iqbal rejected job offers from the Lahore Government College as the chair of History department as well as the Aligarh Chair of Philosophy because he does not wish to enter any service and wants to run away from India as soon as possible. He adds "My object is to run away from this country as soon as possible. You know the reason. I have a sort of moral debt to my brother which detains me." *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

not show a passive, humble, and obedient character *vis-a-vis* God, and as Begum says, he “even challenges the Creator blaming Him for those mysteries of Creation which remain hidden from him.”⁶¹

In fact, Iqbal does what he says. That year (1909), he writes a poem in which he hypothetically meets God and calls upon him to give him a rational explanation for why things in the world are as they are. Expectedly, a similar questioning and daring mood can be seen in this poem. The poem is entitled *Shikwa* (Complaint), and Iqbal recites it to a wide audience at a gathering of the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam in Lahore.⁶² The theme of the poem is that Iqbal presents his complaints and protests against Allah for having been unfair to the Muslim community.⁶³ According to Naveeda Khan, the poem created a sensation among Muslims in India – especially among the conservative religious scholars and leaders – and shocked many since “in it Iqbal addresses God directly, daring to blame him for bringing Muslims to their current pitiable condition.”⁶⁴ Apart from Iqbal’s direct confrontation with God, Khan adds that Iqbal’s choice of words was also criticized – for instance, his use of the word “harjaee” (unfaithful) for God.⁶⁵ Speaking to God, Iqbal begins his poem by saying:

Why must I forever lose, forever forgo profit that is my due,
Sunk in the gloom of evenings past, no plans for the morrow pursue.
Why must I all attentive be to the nightingale’s lament,
Friend, am I as dumb as a flower? Must I remain silent?
My theme makes me bold, makes my tongue more eloquent.
Dust fills my mouth, against Allah I make complaint.⁶⁶

Even after two years, Iqbal’s similar pessimist and cynical mood continues. In the letter dated 7th July 1911, Iqbal explains to Begum why he was not able to respond to her letter in time: he has been “very much upset during these days.” He again talks about his “misfortune,” and this time he likens it to a “faithful dog” that has been following him all the time. Now, it seems that Iqbal has accepted this situation and learned to live with it.⁶⁷ Consequently in those days, Iqbal does not even want to do the things he normally would enjoy doing such as writing poetry. Responding to Begum’s request to send her his poems, Iqbal says in a pessimist and cynical mood: “But what will you do with these poems – these wailings of a bleeding heart? There is nothing of cheerfulness in them.”⁶⁸ Finally, four years after the recitation of *Shikwa*, Iqbal composes a new poem in 1913, entitled *Jawab-i-Shikwa* (Answer to the Complaint), which is supposedly a reply by Allah to Iqbal’s complaint.⁶⁹ In a way, the poem is an illustration of Allah giving Iqbal a rational explanation for why things are as they are. And this can be seen as an initial step on Iqbal’s behalf toward a new reconciliation with God. At the beginning of the poem, Allah says to Iqbal:

Your tale is indeed full of sorrow;
Your tears tremble at the brim and are ready to flow.
Your cry of lament the sky has rung;
What cunning your impassioned heart has lent your tongue!
So eloquently did you word your plaint, you made it sound like praise.
To talk on equal terms with Us, man to celestial heights did rise.⁷⁰

⁶¹ Begum, *Iqbal*, 87.

⁶² Iqbal, *Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa*, 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25. According to Schimmel, Ziya Pasa in Turkey had also written a poem that was similar to *Shikwa*. See, Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing*, 39–40.

⁶⁴ Khan, *Muslim Becoming*, 64.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁶ Iqbal, *Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa*, 28.

⁶⁷ “The reason is that I have been very much upset during these days – my misfortune has been following me like a faithful dog; and I have learnt to like the Dame for her untiring loyalty to her miserable king.” Dar, *Letters*, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁹ Iqbal, *Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa*, 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

Throughout the poem, Allah explains to Iqbal why the Muslims are in such a backward situation with respect to other peoples in the world. The main crux of Allah's response is that man should take the initiative and do things and that God will also act and help man in his efforts in achieving his goals. This means that the reconciliation between man and God is established by both parties accepting their responsibility and role in doing things in the world. It seems that Allah accepts Iqbal's criticisms and complaints and takes responsibility for half of the problem, and he calls Iqbal to accept his responsibility for the other half. Accordingly, if a man does his own share, this will be complemented and supported by God, and in this way, man and God become co-workers.

So far, I have analyzed Iqbal's correspondences with Atiya Begum and his poetry to show the dramatic change in Iqbal's mood shifting into pessimism, sadness, and cynicism from 1911 up until 1913. In addition to this, I analyzed two main themes – his questioning and daring attitude against God and his concern regarding his freedom and willing – that are found in Iqbal's writings in this period as a sign of his nihilistic crisis. In the next part, I analyze how Iqbal describes nihilism in his two short articles published in 1917.

4 Nihilism and Iqbal: 1917

Although intensely preoccupied with Nietzsche's ideas and terms after his return to India in 1908, Iqbal used the term "nihilism" only in one of his writings, and this is a short article, entitled "Islam and Mysticism," that was published in July 1917.⁷¹ Here, I will first analyze Iqbal's usage of the term in this article so that we can understand where it stands in relation to Nietzsche's conception of nihilism as well as what the problem is really in relation to nihilism. After that, I will analyze his article entitled "Nietzsche and Jalal-ud-Din Rumi"⁷² – again published in 1917 – to understand how a different version of Sufism through the ideas of Sufis like Rumi can help us develop a solution to the problem of nihilism.

To begin with, like Nietzsche, Iqbal also relates nihilism to decadence and the inability of particular worldviews, or religions, in dealing with life and reality. While for Nietzsche, it is Buddhism, Christianity, and the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Plato that are unsuited in dealing with life and reality because they are pessimistic; they idealize negation of life; and they promote self-annihilation,⁷³ Iqbal adds to this list the English Neo-Hegelianism, and a type of Sufism which was influenced by neo-Platonism and which he calls as "Hellenic-Persian Mysticism."⁷⁴ Although Iqbal traces the emergence of this type of Sufism, "Persian Mysticism," to the tenth century when Persia was conquered, he thinks that it is still an important influence on the nineteenth-century Muslims considering that "the present-day Moslem prefers to roam aimlessly in the dusky valleys of Hellenic-Persian Mysticism."⁷⁵ According to Iqbal, this type of Sufism is unable to deal with the totality of reality which includes both good and bad sides, happy and sad moments, and pleasure and pain. Due to its inability to cope with reality as a whole, this type of Sufism teaches Muslims "to shut [their] eyes to the hard Reality around, and to fix [their] gaze on what it describes as 'Illuminations'."⁷⁶ These could also be understood as some kind of mental images which have nothing to do

⁷¹ Iqbal uses the terms "mysticism" and "Sufism," or "saint," "mystic" and "Sufi" interchangeably in his writings. For him, Sufism is the name of the mystical tradition in Islam. In this article, I am also following Iqbal's usage of the terms and using them interchangeably. Iqbal, "Islam and Mysticism," 154–6.

⁷² Iqbal, "Nietzsche and Jalal-ud-Din Rumi," 161–2.

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 46–7. Also, see *Will to Power*, 15–6, 43, 232, 308.

⁷⁴ Iqbal, "Islam and Mysticism," 154–6. In *Asrar-i-Khudî*, Iqbal explains how Plato's philosophy, which prefers "the world of ideas" to "the material universe," thought to deeds, has influenced Sufis, and how people should be on guard against such poisonous ideas. See, 56–9.

⁷⁵ Iqbal, "Islam and Mysticism," 154.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 154. Nietzsche discusses Plato's thinking in a similar way. He refers to it as an "noble way of thinking" which "consisted in its opposition to precisely this empiricism," see Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 15–6.

with reality because for Iqbal, they are products of “of an overworked brain.”⁷⁷ Trying to approach and understand reality in this way, through such “illuminations,” is called by Iqbal “self-mystification,” and this for Iqbal is something identical to “nihilism,” that is, “seeking Reality in quarters where it does not exist.”⁷⁸ In this respect, nihilism for Iqbal, like Nietzsche, “is a physiological symptom which gives ... a clue to the decadence of the Muslim world.”⁷⁹ In other words, certain worldviews or religions, such as British Neo-Hegelianism or “pantheistic Sufism,” instead of teaching people how to strengthen themselves, their personality, their psychology to deal with all aspects of reality, teach them ways of escaping from it. They promote an ascetic life and a spirit of radical otherworldliness, value contemplation, and call people to seek refuge in self-denying acts, such as renouncing their power, will, freedom, and ego and the world here in this life for the sake of a better life in the world to come.⁸⁰ In doing this, these preachers of “Persian Mysticism,” “obscurantists,” and “these prophets of decay” “gradually complete the spiritual impoverishment and physical degeneration of their society by evolving a seemingly charming ideal of life which seduces even the healthy and powerful to death!”⁸¹

For Iqbal, this “self-mystification,” “this nihilism,” has certain implications on society and politics. For instance, these “false mystics,” “the old Mystics,” develop a conception of law based on the misleading distinctions of “Phenomenal and Real” or “inner and outer.”⁸² Deriving from these distinctions then, they argue that what people see as law out there is “merely Phenomenal; nothing more than an outer husk of the Real which is to be attained by means other than the Law of God.”⁸³ By developing these distinctions, they prepare the ground for the idea that “truth,” or “reality,” cannot be known, accessed, or understood by everyone, by the ordinary people, and that it is only those select few, “the old Mystics,” that can understand the reality, the real meaning of the law, access the truth and then convey it to others, to ordinary people. In this process, Iqbal believes that “the Moslem Democracy” also disappeared and a kind of “spiritual Aristocracy,” or clericalism “in the spirit of Roman Christianity” took its place.⁸⁴ By this, Iqbal means that Muslims were living in a society where everybody was equal and had access to the law. In this society, there was no privileged class, or priest class who could claim to have access to the real message or the aim of the law. According to Iqbal, this equality of the people and equal access to the law were the factors that made the political structure in early Muslim society democratic. However, following the emergence of “false mysticism” after the conquest of Persia, i.e., “Persianisation of Islam,” Iqbal argues that a countering process developed by which “Moslem Democracy was gradually displaced and enslaved by a sort of spiritual Aristocracy pretending to claim knowledge and power not open to the average Moslem.”⁸⁵

As opposed to the threat of clericalism or what he calls the “Persianisation of Islam,” Iqbal reminds Muslims that “Islam was born in the broad day-light of history. The great democratic Prophet lived and worked among intelligent men who have transmitted to posterity every word that dropped from his sacred lips. There is absolutely nothing esoteric in his teachings.”⁸⁶ In Muslim society, “every word of the Quran is brimful of light and joy of existence. Far from justifying any gloomy, pessimistic Mysticism, it is an open

⁷⁷ Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 154.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 154. In his *Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes nihilism as a psychological state that “will have to be reached, first, when we have sought a ‘meaning’ in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged,” 12.

⁷⁹ Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 154.

⁸⁰ Siddiqi, “A Historical Study,” 412–3.

⁸¹ Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 154. Nietzsche also relates nihilism to physical degeneration. He says: “The nihilistic movement is merely the expression of physiological decadence.” Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 24. For an analysis of how nihilism is related to decay and decadence, see *Will to Power*, 25–7.

⁸² Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 155.

⁸³ Ibid., 154–5.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 155. Nietzsche discusses this issue when explaining how “superiority of the soul” as claimed by “the priestly caste” is related to their claim for “political superiority.” He refers to them “priestly aristocracies.” See, Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, 31–2.

⁸⁶ Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 156.

assault on those religious teachings which have for centuries mystified mankind.”⁸⁷ What should be done, according to Iqbal, is to accept “the reality of the world cheerfully and grapple with it for the glorification of God and His Prophet.”⁸⁸ The Muslims should not “listen to him who says there is a secret doctrine in Islam which cannot be revealed to the uninitiated [because] herein lies the power of this pretender and [their] thralldom.”⁸⁹ Iqbal argues that these people, that is, “the prophets of decay” or “false mystics” enslave Muslims by exploiting their ignorance of the history of Islam. So, Muslims should be aware of these “false mystics,” and instead of believing in their mistful teachings, they should pay attention to their senses and learn the history of Islam more properly. This way “the regeneration of the Moslem world” can be achieved.⁹⁰

Although Iqbal criticizes mystics/Sufis, or Sufism/Islamic mysticism, he does not blame or criticize the whole tradition of mysticism in Islam or all mystics. As mentioned above, he distinguishes between “false mystics” and others. For instance, while he criticizes “Persian Mysticism” as “false Mysticism,” he presents Ahmad Al-Rifai⁹¹ as an example of good/true mysticism and refers to him as “the great Moslem saint” who struck “at the very root of Persian Mysticism, i.e. the distinction of inner and outer, Phenomenal and Real.”⁹² As opposed to these false mystics, and in addition to Ahmad Al-Rifai, Iqbal thinks that there are also other types of Sufis to learn from, such as Jalal-ud-Din Rumi. Writing an article in 1917 which is entitled “Nietzsche and Jalal-ud-Din Rumi,” Iqbal presents Nietzsche and Rumi as “two great poet-philosophers [who] seem to be in perfect agreement with regard to the practical bearing of their thought on life”⁹³ and argues that the comparison between them would be “exceedingly instructive.” In this respect, Iqbal thinks that both thinkers lived in societies which were going through cultural decline, weakening of the self, and spread of life-negating tendencies. In a way, they both recognized the emergence of nihilism in their societies and offered their solutions to it. Nietzsche, for instance, according to Iqbal, considered “the decadence of the human type around him”⁹⁴ as the cause of nihilism and cultural decline and accordingly argued for the emergence of a new type of human being as the solution. In Iqbal’s words, “‘not how many is preserved, but how man is surpassed,’ was the keynote of Nietzsche’s thought.”⁹⁵ Rumi too, according to Iqbal, who was “born to the Moslem world at a time when enervating modes of life and thought, and an outwardly beautiful but inwardly devitalising literature had almost completely sucked up the blood of Moslem Asia and paved the way for an easy victory for the Tartar – was not less keenly alive than Nietzsche to the poverty of life, incompetence, inadequacy, and decay of the body social, of which he formed a part and parcel.”⁹⁶ Similarly, Rumi too argued that “the corroding disease of his society,” and the weakening of the individual could be overcome through the cultivation of a new “ideal type of Moslem manhood.”⁹⁷ In a way, both thinkers argued that first a new type of self/human needs to be developed, and then, this will be followed with the emergence of a new type of morality, a new culture, society, and politics. In this respect, Iqbal’s solution to the problem of nihilism is also related to these three dimensions: the creation of a new type of human/manhood/self whose lives will be based on a new type of morality that is suited to life in all its dimensions and who will thus create a new society, culture, and politics that will be strong, stable, and enduring.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ For further details about Ahmad Al-Rifai, see Al-Rifai, *The Biography of Imam*.

⁹² Iqbal, “Islam and Mysticism,” 155.

⁹³ Iqbal, “Nietzsche and Jalal-ud-Din Rumi,” 161.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 161–2.

5 *Asrar-i-Khudî* and a Solution to Nihilism: 1915/1920

Generally, *Asrar-i-Khudî* (The Secrets of the Self) is considered the expression of Iqbal's new theory of the self, and here "self" is generally understood to refer to human beings. However, Iqbal's usage of the term "self," or "khudî," is more comprehensive and fundamental than this. It refers to the main constituting element of the universe, and in this respect, it refers not only to human beings but also to God and nature/matter. In this respect, *Asrar-i-Khudî* should be considered as the initial outcome of Iqbal's attempt of developing a new cosmological theory by describing the main constituting element of the universe, i.e., "self," or "khudî," that is, human beings, God and nature/matter, and analyzing how they are all related to each other in space and time.⁹⁸ As part of this new cosmological theory, Iqbal also discusses various issues and concepts related to the life of the "self," such as freedom, immortality, personality, or individuality. Finally, he also offers some theoretical ideas, albeit brief, on the problem of good and evil, and how the selves form social, moral, and political orders. In this respect, *Asrar-i-Khudî* was Iqbal's solution to the problem of nihilism in an attempt "to answer the question of why," to offer an aim for life and to restore humanity's relation to nature by resolving the "crisis in human freedom and willing after the collapse of the cosmos, the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature in which humans have a proper place."⁹⁹ In other words, it was the initial version of a new cosmological theory Iqbal was trying to develop following the failure of the Sufi cosmological theory, to which he previously relied upon, in providing answers to his most fundamental metaphysical questions. This was a conscious effort on behalf of Iqbal as he says in the introduction of the *Asrar-i-Khudî* that the view of man and the universe he proposes there was obviously "opposed to that of the English Neo-Hegelians as well as to all forms of pantheistic Sufism."¹⁰⁰ In order to show the differences of his ideas, Iqbal presents his views by comparing them with the ideas of various Neo-Hegelian philosophers, such as Bradley and McTaggart, and pantheistic Sufis, such as Hafiz.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Iqbal presents his ideas in contrast to Nietzsche as well. While some of these can be found in *Asrar-i-Khudî*, others are explained by Iqbal in a letter to Nicholson. In presenting Iqbal's ideas here and to emphasize their differences, I will also follow his style of making comparisons with other thinkers.

Iqbal begins his analysis by discussing the main constituting element of the universe. While he first mentions that Bradley uses the concept of "finite centres of experience" to refer to this, which can also be understood to mean "self" or "soul,"¹⁰² Iqbal prefers the terms "self," "ego," individual, or more specifically "khudî." While the term "khudî" refers to all selves, i.e., God, human beings, and nature/matter in the universe, this does not mean that all selves, or khudîs, are the same. They are different from each other with respect to their level of individuality, or perfection of their personality. For instance, God is "the most unique individual" while man and nature/matter have lower levels of individualities due to the perfection of their personality being lower. What distinguishes man from nature/matter, however, is that man has the capability to improve his individuality and move closer to God while nature generally stands as an "obstacle" in front of life. However, Iqbal does not necessarily consider this "obstruction" in a negative

⁹⁸ I call this "the initial version" because Iqbal later develops this theory into a more systematic and comprehensive one which is found in his later book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.

⁹⁹ Storey, "Nihilism," 6.

¹⁰⁰ Iqbal, *The Secrets*, xviii.

¹⁰¹ In relation to forms of pantheistic Sufism, Nicholson writes that while Iqbal "dislikes the type of Sufism exhibited by Hafiz, he pays homage to the pure and profound genius of Jalaluddin." Iqbal, *The Secrets*, xiv. He adds that Iqbal "appeals from the alluring raptures of Hafiz to the moral fervour of Jalaluddin Rumi, from an Islam sunk in Platonic contemplation to the fresh and vigorous monotheism which inspired Mohammed and brought Islam into existence." *Ibid.*, xiii. However, one cannot today find the passages in *Asrar-i-Khudî* today where Hafiz is criticized by name because, as Nicholson says, Iqbal's "criticism of Hafiz called forth angry protests from Sufi circles in which Hafiz is venerated as a master-hierophant. Iqbal made no recantation, but since the passage had served its purpose and was offensive to the many, he cancelled it in the second edition of the poem." Those were also omitted in Nicholson's translation, xiii.

¹⁰² T. Stearns Eliot argues that "it is very difficult to keep the meanings of 'soul,' 'finite center,' and 'self' quite distinct." See 573 in Eliot, "Leibniz's Monads," 566–76.

sense. As he says, “Nature is not evil, since it enables the inner powers of life to unfold themselves.”¹⁰³ In a way, nature provides the necessary challenges for human beings to overcome them, and in doing this, human beings develop their inner powers, potentials, and most importantly their “freedom.” Since “life is a forward assimilative movement,”¹⁰⁴ Iqbal believes that “we should not run away from matter (nature) – the greatest obstruction to life – instead, we should absorb it, assimilate it.”¹⁰⁵ This way, ego also strengthens his freedom. According to Iqbal, “the Ego attains to freedom by the removal of all obstructions in its way. It is partly free, partly determined, and reaches fuller freedom by approaching the Individual who is most free – God. In one word, life is an endeavour for freedom.”¹⁰⁶

While presenting his ideas, Iqbal also points to his disagreements with the views of English Neo-Hegelians, including Bradley, and pantheistic strands of Sufism. One of these disagreements is regarding the objective reality of the self. While Bradley believes that “the finite centre is only an appearance,” or “a mere illusion,” and he eventually finds it “inexplicable,” for Iqbal, “this inexplicable finite centre of experience is the fundamental fact of the universe.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, Iqbal assigns objective reality to the selves with their own individual existence and lives. Other issues on which Iqbal shows his disagreement are about the final destiny of the self, or goal of the self, and their distinctness from each other. According to Iqbal, English Neo-Hegelians, including Bradley, and pantheistic strands of Sufism “regard absorption in a universal life or soul as the final aim and salvation of man.”¹⁰⁸ For instance, in Iqbal’s interpretation, Bradley thinks that the life of these “finite centres” “ends in a unity which he [Bradley] calls Absolute and in which the finite centres lose their finiteness and distinctness.”¹⁰⁹ In contrast, Iqbal emphasizes the distinctiveness of the life and character of each self by arguing that “all life is individual.” For him, “there is no such thing as universal life.” So much so that even “God himself is an individual” according to Iqbal, with perhaps the only difference that “He is the most unique individual.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, in contrast to pantheistic Sufism, Iqbal argues that “the moral and religious ideal of man is not self-negation but self-affirmation, and he attains to this ideal by becoming more and more individual, more and more unique.”¹¹¹ So, although man is a “self-contained exclusive centre” – both physically and spiritually,¹¹² he is still not “yet a complete individual.”¹¹³ In other words, to develop for human beings means to improve one’s level of individuality, or to become further individuals. And how does one achieve becoming more and more individual and more and more unique? To do this, Iqbal believes that one should follow the Prophet’s saying, that is, “*Takhallaqu bi-akhlaq Allah*,” which Iqbal translates as follows: “Create in yourselves the attributes of God.”¹¹⁴ In other words, according to Iqbal, “man becomes unique by becoming more and more like the most unique Individual,”¹¹⁵ i.e., God. In the end, “he who comes nearest to God is the completest person.”¹¹⁶ As opposed to the doctrine of fana, Iqbal argues that the goal is not finally to be absorbed in God; on the contrary, the goal is to absorb God into one’s own self.¹¹⁷

After discussing “the finite centres of experience,” or selves, Iqbal goes on to discuss “the universe.” Here, while he agrees with McTaggart that “the universe ... is an association of individuals,”¹¹⁸ i.e., selves,

103 Iqbal, *The Secrets*, xx.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid., xxii.

106 Ibid., xxi.

107 Ibid., xvii.

108 Ibid., xviii.

109 Ibid., xvii.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid., xviii–xix.

112 Ibid., xix.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid., xvii.

such as God, human beings, and nature, he disagrees with him regarding the nature of the seeming orderliness of the association. According to Iqbal, this orderliness neither emerges by itself, nor is it complete, or nor eternally achieved.¹¹⁹ It is an ongoing process; it is not yet complete, and it is not predetermined. The order requires the “instinctive or conscious efforts” of all individuals, “*khudîs*,” and they all contribute to this process with respect to their capabilities and powers. While God contributes to this process by creating things, human beings also do their part “to bring order into at least a portion of the chaos.”¹²⁰ In this respect, Iqbal refers to human beings as “helpers” and considers their contribution, in a way similar to God’s contributions, as a kind of “creation.” He attempts to justify this view by referring to a verse in the Qur’an which states that “Blessed is God, the best of those who create,” which according to Iqbal, “indicates the possibility of other creators than God.”¹²¹ In addition to acknowledging the objective reality of the self, ego, or “*khudî*,” this shows how much importance and value Iqbal attributes to the choices, decisions, actions, freedom, and will of human beings. As Nicholson also rightly states, this capacity for action depends “ultimately on the conviction that *khudî* (selfhood, individuality, personality) is real and is not merely an illusion of the mind” contrary to idealistic or Neo-Hegelian philosophers like Bradley.¹²²

Iqbal’s reconstruction of Sufi cosmology goes hand in hand with revaluation of Sufi values. Accordingly, he discusses a new type of morality that is suited to life in all its dimensions, that enables human beings to cope with “the hard Reality” around them, and thereby create a new society, culture, and politics that will be strong and enduring. Beginning with morality, Iqbal argues that whether egos, or *khudîs*, in their lives will acquire freedom by absorbing and assimilating the obstructions they encounter with, and whether they will be able to become more and more unique and individuals like God depends on the strength of their “personality” which Iqbal defines as “a state of tension.” Accordingly, if the state of tension is maintained, this strengthens the personality. However, if there is relaxation, then this weakens the personality. Thus, Iqbal says, “the idea of personality gives us a standard of value: it settles the problem of good and evil. That which fortifies personality is good, that which weakens it is bad.”¹²³ In this respect, Iqbal believes that “art, religion, and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality.”¹²⁴ Maintaining this tension is so important for Iqbal that it can make us immortal. However, not all individuals can achieve immortality. It is rather an aspiration, and only those who make the necessary efforts may achieve it. The likelihood of human beings making the necessary efforts “depends on [their] adopting in this life modes of thought and activity which tend to maintain the state of tension.”¹²⁵ According to Iqbal, “Buddhism, Persian Sufism, and allied forms of ethics will not serve our purpose.”¹²⁶

After setting the moral principle stating that man should refrain from doing actions which weaken the personality and should do those actions which strengthen the personality, Iqbal needs to explain which actions weaken and strengthen the personality. He states that “the ego is fortified by love (*ishq*).”¹²⁷ He uses this word in a wide sense to refer to the desire to assimilate and absorb other things into one’s personality.¹²⁸ The highest form of love, according to Iqbal, “is the creation of values and ideals and the endeavour to realize them.”¹²⁹ As love fortifies the ego, asking weakens it. Iqbal argues that “all that is achieved without personal effort comes under *asking*.”¹³⁰ Thus, Iqbal adds that “in order to fortify the ego we should

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid., xviii.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid., xi.

123 Ibid., xxii.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid., xxv.

128 See, *ibid.* where Iqbal explains how “the Self is strengthened by Love,” 28–37.

129 Ibid., xxvi. See, *ibid.* where Iqbal explains how “the Self is weakened by asking,” 38–42.

130 Ibid., xxvi.

cultivate love, *i.e.*, the power of assimilative action, and avoid all forms of ‘asking, *i.e.*,’ inaction.”¹³¹ Iqbal seems to give so much importance to strength, self-respect, and personality that therefore he criticizes all actions that weaken one’s personality as morally wrong. In this regard, he even goes on to express his admiration for Satan who refused to kneel down in front of man because Satan really thought that Adam was his inferior. By doing so, Iqbal thinks that Satan “revealed a high sense of self-respect, a trait of character which in my opinion ought to redeem him from his spiritual deformity.”¹³² Accordingly, Iqbal believes that “God punished him [Satan] not because he refused to make himself low before the progenitor of an enfeebled humanity, but because he declined to give absolute obedience to the will of the Almighty Ruler of the Universe.”¹³³

Iqbal believes that democracy is the best form of government suited for such a community consisting of morally developed and strong individuals because first, democracy allows the free development of the individual. In Iqbal’s view, the ideal of democracy is “to let man develop all the possibilities of his nature by allowing him as much freedom as practicable.”¹³⁴ Second, democracy is suitable for this community because it is not based on the rule of some privileged class while maintaining the principles of equality before the law and the rule of law. He states “that the Muslim Commonwealth is based on the absolute equality of all Muslims in the eye of the law. There is no privileged class, no priesthood, no caste system.”¹³⁵ However, it should be added that Iqbal’s conception of democracy is not the modern democracy which Nietzsche criticizes as “the rule of the herd.” Writing about the origins of democracy in modern Europe, Iqbal arrives at the conclusion that democracy as it emerged in Europe was motivated and brought about by economic considerations, interests, and concerns. As modern European societies became wealthier and richer, the lower classes demanded more share of the wealth or wanted to have a rather equal share of the economic development and wealth, and democracy emerged as a result of this process. Iqbal, on the other hand, believes that democracy is a political regime of higher and morally developed individuals, not only of equal numbers, or equal stomachs. In a way, he believes in a more qualified form of democracy where individuals are free and equal to work on their inner potentials and become better individuals morally and politically.

While Iqbal is on the same page with Nietzsche in criticizing modern democracy, he disagrees with Nietzsche on the issue of how modern democracy will be superseded through morally developed or superior individuals. Nietzsche, according to Iqbal, lost his faith in democracy and his hopes on the plebeian, the ordinary people, and envisioned an aristocratic form of political order to replace modern democracy. Consequently, Iqbal thinks that Nietzsche “bases all higher culture on the cultivation and growth of an Aristocracy of Supermen.”¹³⁶ Iqbal, on the other hand, asks “Is the plebeian so absolutely hopeless?,” and he answers it in the negative. He defends the value and importance of the plebeians and believes that the democratic ideal of the equality of all can become a reality. In this respect, Iqbal even thinks that the early Muslim social and political life was an empirical refutation of Nietzsche’s ideas about the value of the plebeian and democracy as “the rule of the herd.” Accordingly, Iqbal claims that democracy did not grow out of economic considerations in early Muslim society. Instead, it emerged as a result of a spiritual principle which is based on the assumption that “every human being is a center of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character.”¹³⁷ This new culture sees and accepts every human being as equal to others and accepts that every human being can be developed into the noblest of the men. In fact, Iqbal thinks that this is what Islam did in history. He argues that “out of the plebeian material Islam has formed men of the noblest type of life and power.”¹³⁸ This in

131 Ibid.

132 Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral – I,” 36–7.

133 Ibid., 37.

134 Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral – II,” 169.

135 Iqbal, “Political Thought,” 251.

136 Iqbal, “Muslim Democracy,” 157.

137 Ibid., 157.

138 Ibid.

turn brings the rise of a new and higher type of culture with its higher level of principles, such as equality and liberty of all.

Iqbal defines this new form of democracy as “spiritual democracy” which is closely linked to the ethical progress of the individuals. The goal of ethical progress through strengthening one’s own personality, according to Iqbal, is to achieve the level of “divine vicegerency,” – in other words, the level of “the Perfect Man,” (al-Insanul Kamil). In this process, Iqbal argues that the ego has to pass three stages which are “obedience to the law,” “self-control” and “divine vicegerency.”¹³⁹ The “divine vicegerency” is the highest and the last stage of human development on earth both individually and collectively. The vicegerent is God’s vicegerent on earth, and in this regard, he is the goal of humanity. In this respect, the Perfect Man is the real ruler of mankind, and according to Iqbal, his kingdom is the kingdom of God on earth.¹⁴⁰ Humanity aims at the emergence of the Perfect Man; however, Iqbal does not think that this is an exclusive level of ethical progress. On the contrary, Iqbal believes that all individuals can rise in the levels of ethical progress and become perfect men. The society in which these perfect men live will be a democracy of them. Hence, Iqbal thinks that “Nietzsche had a glimpse of this ideal race, but his atheism and aristocratic prejudices marred his whole conception.”¹⁴¹ Thus, the Kingdom of God on earth does not mean an infallible human being ruling the rest of the people, but rather it means “the democracy of more or less unique individuals, presided over by the most unique individual possible on this earth.”¹⁴² In other words, Iqbal differentiates his theory of democracy of an ideal race by claiming that the plebian material, the ordinary individuals can also become this ideal race; that they are capable of that; that they have the potential of developing their personality through these three stages and become unique individuals on earth and then be the members of that democratic society.

Commenting on the *Asrar-i-Khudî*, Schimmel argues that Iqbal’s ideas in this poem were “a shock therapy for almost all of Iqbal’s friends and admirers”¹⁴³ because Iqbal takes the Persian word *khudî*, self, which has highly negative connotations and meanings, such as selfishness and egotism, and gives it a new meaning and turns it into a positive word.¹⁴⁴ However, what was more shocking was Iqbal’s reinterpretation of the goal of the human beings in their lives/existence. In doing this, Iqbal significantly elevates the condition of human beings in their whole existence, especially *vis-a-vis* God. One significant difference of this theory is that the final destiny of the selves and the universe is not predetermined. It is an open-ended process. Also, it is not a process that is completely dominated, controlled, or determined by God. Human beings are also creators in this process, and they contribute to the final destiny of the universe in accordance with their own capabilities. In this new conception of the self, man is understood as the vicegerent of God, who has to strengthen his personality and cooperate with his Creator.¹⁴⁵ According to Atiya Begum, Iqbal’s *Asrar-i-Khudî* shows that Iqbal went through such a period where he “fully realized the greatness of the complete freedom given to man on Earth, by virtue of which he tried to snatch the power the Creator wields over His Creation, which he considers his own and falls short in his achievement.”¹⁴⁶

6 Concluding Remarks

In this article, I analyzed how Iqbal’s encounter with the ideas of Nietzsche during his studies in Europe from 1905 to 1908 was the main cause for Iqbal’s nihilistic mood/crisis after 1908, and the beginning of the

¹³⁹ Iqbal, *The Secrets*, xxvii.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., xxviii–xxix.

¹⁴² Ibid., xxviii.

¹⁴³ Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing*, 42.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Begum, *Iqbal*, 87.

transformation of Iqbal's ideas in the post-1908 period. Accordingly, I argued that a crisis in human freedom and willing, the consequent collapse of the cosmos, and the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature, where humans have a proper place, were the initial triggering factors for the nihilistic crisis Iqbal went through from 1909 to 1913. Then, I showed how Iqbal made various attempts in dealing with this crisis, such as reconciling with God, developing a reinterpretation of Sufism and the ethical ideals of a particular type of Sufism, developing a new conception of a man with strengthened powers, will, and freedom *vis-à-vis* nature and God, thus creating a new conception of cosmos, or a new metaphysical orientation. In general, these were some of the key elements to understanding Iqbal's solution to the problem of nihilism, his overcoming of nihilism, which Iqbal presented in their initial forms in *Asrar-i-Khudî* in 1915/1920. In this respect, it can be said that from 1909 up to 1920, Nietzsche's ideas are the biggest source of influence and challenge for Iqbal to deal with which in the end leads to fundamental and significant changes and transformations in Iqbal's thinking and philosophy. Later, Iqbal brings together his scattered ideas and writings from 1909 to the end of the 1920s and creates a more systematic and comprehensive response to the problem of nihilism in its different dimensions, such as epistemological, metaphysical, moral and political, and the outcome of which was his latest philosophical project, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.

There are a few conclusions that can be drawn from the analyses made in this article, and these in turn enable us to make several contributions to Iqbal literature and to the literature on nihilism. First, analyzing *Asrar-i-Khudî* by situating it in this context would help us understand Iqbal's criticisms of neo-Hegelianism, pantheistic Sufism as well as Nietzsche, and understand the philosophical value and importance of Iqbal's arguments as a response to the problem of nihilism. Without this perspective, it would be difficult to explain why Iqbal decided to write *Asrar-i-Khudî* at all. While doing this improves our understanding of Iqbal's intellectual development during the post-1908 period, it also contributes to our conception of nihilism from a non-Western perspective, i.e., Sufism. Analyzing another non-Western approach to nihilism, Graham Parkes describes Nishitani's approach as "a spirited defense of Nietzsche's solution" which, however, is based on "the application of Buddhist conceptual tools to the problem, and a critique of atheistic positions such as those of Stirner, Marx, and Sartre."¹⁴⁷ While Iqbal's approach to nihilism was also inspired by Nietzsche's solution, it was based on the application of Sufi conceptual tools to the application problem, such as the reconstruction of Sufi cosmology and the revaluation of Sufi values of pantheistic Sufism. In this respect, similar to Nishitani, Iqbal's solution can also be considered a critique of atheistic positions.

Contextualizing Iqbal's ideas also improves our understanding of Iqbal's intellectual development which enables us to explain the factors that have caused changes in his ideas, and how these changes/transformations took place. Consequently, we can also develop a historically more accurate periodization of Iqbal's intellectual development. In this respect, the analysis in this article may have broader implications for Iqbal scholarship, particularly about the claim that Iqbal has changed his ideas in Europe and that this was seen in his writings written/published after his return to India in 1908. While the current literature lacks any sufficient analysis or considers "unsuccessful love" as a possible reason, I analyzed how a "nihilistic crisis/mood" triggered as a result of encountering Nietzsche's ideas during his studies in Europe was the main catalyst for the transformation of Iqbal's ideas. Similar to Iqbal's experience of traveling to Europe, Roxanne Euben, in her *Journeys to the Other Shore*, analyzes how traveling to "to worlds less familiar" is related to theory and knowledge production. Some of the examples she focuses on in her book are the travels of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) from France to America and Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) from Egypt to France (Paris).¹⁴⁸ Consequently, she finds that "what is crucial to the 'journey' is not the mobility of the body but rather the dislocating character of the encounter."¹⁴⁹ Hence,

¹⁴⁷ Storey, "Nihilism," 9.

¹⁴⁸ In the book, Euben mentions various modern Muslim thinkers, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani [al-Asadabadi] (1839–1897), Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shari'ati, Rachid Ghannoushi, Muhammad Arkoun and Riffat Hassan, and analyzes how spending some parts of their lives in foreign countries transformed their ideas. Interestingly, she does not analyze, or even mention, Iqbal's travel to Europe as an example of *rihla*, travel in pursuit of knowledge. Euben, *Journeys*, 26.

texts can also cause dislocating encounters. While Iqbal's three-year stay in Europe was important with respect to "the mobility of the body," "exposure to what disturbs, provokes, and dislocates," i.e., "the dislocating character of the encounter" with Nietzsche's ideas, added to this process. As Euben states "the capacity for imagination, reflection, and judgment is cultivated not by reading to affirm what one already knows but by exposure to what disturbs, provokes, and dislocates."¹⁵⁰

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