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Iqbal's Quest for Synthesis: Intertextual Negotiations of Selfhood in Western, Islamic, and Hindu Traditions

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Abstract

This article examines Muhammad Iqbal's ambitious yet ultimately strained attempt to synthesize three major philosophical and religious traditions—modern Western thought, Islamic Sufism, and Hindu metaphysics—into a coherent vision of selfhood. Through a close reading of Iqbal's major works, including Asrar-i-Khudi, Ramooz-i-Bekhudi, and The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, the paper argues that Iqbal's project, though courageous and creative, remains internally unstable. The modern Western and Hindu traditions both affirm human autonomy and liberation often without reference to a transcendent God, while Islamic metaphysics grounds human dignity in servanthood before the Divine. Iqbal's valorization of Khudi, his rejection of traditional Sufi "technologies of the self," and his politicization of mystical concepts reflect the profound pressures of postcolonial identity formation. Using insights from intertextuality theory and Michel Foucault's analyses of spiritual technologies, the article shows how Iqbal's reconstruction navigated but also internalized the contradictions of modernity. His struggle reveals both the possibilities and the tragic limitations faced by Muslim intellectuals seeking to renew tradition amidst historical dislocation. Rather than a final synthesis, Iqbal's work remains an open invitation to reconsider the complex dynamics between tradition, freedom, and authenticity in the modern world.

Keywords: Islamic Sufism, Hindu metaphysics, tradition, freedom, authenticity, valorization of Khudi

Introduction

The intellectual ferment of British India at the turn of the twentieth century created a complex arena where three major philosophical traditions—Western modernity, Islamic spirituality, and Hindu metaphysics—contested and intertwined. In this historical moment, Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) emerged as a poet-philosopher whose works strived to navigate and synthesize these currents. Iqbal's project was not simply the defense of Islam against colonial domination; it was a creative and ambitious attempt to reimagine the vitality of Islamic thought in the face of profound civilizational crises. His poetry and prose, deeply aware of the modern Western emphasis on individual freedom and the decline of metaphysical certainties, the Islamic Sufi call toward ego-annihilation, and the Hindu metaphysical assertion of the self's divinity, reflect an intertextual negotiation among traditions that were, in fundamental respects, incommensurable.

Iqbal's engagement with these traditions illustrates a postcolonial intellectual endeavor characterized by both resistance and incorporation. While the dominant currents of Western philosophy—from Descartes' *cogito* to Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God—emphasized the sovereignty of the self,[1] and while Hindu metaphysics asserted the ultimate identity of Atman and Brahman,[2] Islamic spirituality, particularly in its Sufi expressions, foregrounded submission and the effacement of the self before the Divine. Iqbal, deeply trained in Islamic, Western, and Indic traditions, sought to forge a concept of *Khudi* (selfhood) that could reclaim human dignity and freedom within a theistic framework. Yet, as this paper argues, despite his sincere and profound efforts, Iqbal's synthesis remained structurally strained. The intertextual crossings that nourish his project also destabilize it, revealing the deep tensions inherent in a postcolonial consciousness struggling to rejuvenate its declining tradition while borrowing from philosophical grammars that were historically and theologically distinct.

The necessity of such a synthesis was, for Iqbal, both a historical and existential imperative. The decline of Islamic civilization under colonial subjugation demanded a rearticulation of Muslim identity that could compete intellectually and spiritually with the dominant Western and Hindu worldviews. Modern Western thought, particularly from the Enlightenment onward, had privileged the autonomy of human reason, culminating in existentialist and psychoanalytic traditions that saw the self as self-originating and fundamentally disconnected from divine authority.[3] Hindu metaphysical traditions, particularly Advaita Vedanta, had long posited the essential divinity of the human self, emphasizing liberation (*moksha*) through realization of this identity.[4] By contrast, mainstream Islamic theology emphasized the ontological separation between Creator and created, requiring humility, submission, and obedience.[5]

Iqbal's *Asrar-i-Khudi* (*The Secrets of the Self*) sought to respond to this challenge by affirming the strength of the self, urging Muslims to cultivate a

vigorous, dynamic individuality.[6] In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he attempted to provide a philosophical grounding for a renewed Islamic worldview, drawing from modern philosophy while remaining rooted in Quranic principles.[7] Yet, as we will see, this synthesis necessarily involved selective appropriations and transformations of ideas foreign to Islamic theology. His notion of *Khudi* echoes, at times, the Western valorization of individuality and even Hindu metaphysical assumptions about the self's centrality, despite his explicit theological commitments.

In literary theory, the concept of intertextuality—coined by Julia Kristeva[8] and developed through the dialogic imagination of Mikhail Bakhtin[9]—posits that every text exists within a mosaic of quotations, responding to and reshaping prior discourses. Iqbal's project, viewed through this lens, reveals itself as deeply intertextual: his philosophical and poetic constructions are woven from strands of Islamic mysticism, Western existentialism, and Hindu monism. This interweaving is neither accidental nor derivative; rather, it reflects a complex negotiation, a postcolonial strategy of survival and assertion. However, the very intertextuality that enables Iqbal's creativity also exposes the fractures within his synthesis. As Harold Bloom suggested in his theory of the "anxiety of influence," strong creators must wrestle with the weight of their precursors, often unconsciously internalizing and transforming them.[10] In Iqbal's case, the struggle is not only literary but civilizational.

Thus, this paper proposes that Iqbal's effort to reconcile these divergent traditions—though noble and imaginative—ultimately fails to achieve a coherent synthesis. The Western and Hindu traditions could, despite their metaphysical differences, converge on the primacy of human liberation, often independent of divine authority. Islam, however, as Iqbal himself recognized, insisted upon the absolute sovereignty of God and the ultimate servitude of the human self.[11] No philosophical rearticulation could efface this fundamental theological orientation. Therefore, Iqbal's reimagining of the self remains haunted by the very traditions he seeks to challenge: his *Khudi* stands at once as a revolt against Sufi annihilationism and as an unintended echo of Western and Hindu emancipatory discourses.

Sympathetically understood, Iqbal's project reflects the deeper dilemmas of postcolonial identity formation. In a world where inherited structures are destabilized and new ones are yet to be fully born, intellectual figures like Iqbal embody both the aspirations and the contradictions of their epoch. His attempt to craft a new Muslim subjectivity was animated by an urgent historical need, a creative philosophical ambition, and a profound spiritual yearning. Yet, as the following sections will show, the tensions inherent in the traditions he sought to synthesize rendered his project internally unstable, a noble but ultimately unrealizable vision of reconciliation.

Contextual Background: British India's Intellectual Crisis

The intellectual and political crisis of British India at the end of the

nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century shaped the consciousness of an entire generation of Muslim thinkers, poets, and reformers. The collapse of Muslim political power following the failed 1857 uprising left a profound scar on the collective psyche of the Indian Muslim community.[12] Once the dominant political and cultural force of the subcontinent, Muslims now found themselves marginalized, economically disadvantaged, and culturally disoriented under a new colonial regime that privileged Western values and favored Hindu majorities in emerging political structures. This historical rupture demanded a rethinking of Muslim identity, spirituality, and agency—a demand that would profoundly influence the intellectual project of Muhammad Iqbal.

British colonialism did not merely impose political subjugation; it ushered in a comprehensive civilizational challenge. The British Empire, inspired by Enlightenment rationalism and Victorian secularism, presented itself as the bearer of scientific progress, legal reform, and moral superiority. The epistemological foundations of colonial rule emphasized empirical reason, skepticism toward metaphysical truths, and a materialistic view of human nature.[13] In this new order, traditional Islamic educational institutions, jurisprudence, and cultural practices were increasingly seen as archaic remnants of a bygone era. The displacement of Islamic authority was not only external but internal: many among the Muslim intelligentsia began to internalize colonial critiques of their own tradition, creating a profound crisis of confidence.

Simultaneously, Hindu intellectual and religious movements experienced a resurgence under colonial modernity. Movements like the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Hindu Renaissance, inspired partly by Western ideals and partly by a reinvention of classical Hindu traditions, asserted a revitalized Hindu identity.[14] Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, and later Gandhi positioned Hinduism as a flexible, adaptive, and spiritually profound tradition capable of engaging with Western modernity on its own terms. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, quickly became a platform for Hindu-majority political aspirations, even as it professed an inclusive, secular nationalism. For Indian Muslims, this Hindu intellectual and political revival intensified feelings of marginalization and underscored the need for a distinct articulation of Muslim identity.

Thus, three powerful forces converged in British India: the secular, rationalist thrust of Western modernity; the spiritual and political revival of Hinduism; and the battered, self-questioning remnants of Islamic tradition. The Muslim predicament was doubly complex: Muslims had to resist the ideological colonization of the West while also negotiating their minority status within an increasingly assertive Hindu socio-political environment. The old certainties of Islamic metaphysics and political sovereignty could no longer be simply asserted; they had to be rethought, reformulated, and reenergized.

Iqbal's intellectual formation must be situated within this crucible of

competing ideologies and existential anxieties. His education in Lahore, Cambridge, and Munich exposed him firsthand to Western philosophical currents—from German idealism and British empiricism to modern psychology and existentialism.[15] At the same time, his deep immersion in Persian and Urdu literary traditions, his engagement with Islamic jurisprudence and mysticism, and his acquaintance with Hindu philosophical concepts positioned him uniquely at the crossroads of civilizations. Iqbal was acutely aware that a simple return to a romanticized Islamic past would be insufficient; nor could blind imitation (*taqlid*) of Western modernity serve Muslim renewal. What was required was a creative reconstruction of Islamic thought that could respond to the challenges of modernity without sacrificing the spiritual and theological core of Islam.

However, the very nature of the challenge made such a reconstruction perilous. Western thought, particularly in its post-Enlightenment trajectory, had increasingly moved toward secularism and the dethronement of God from public and philosophical life. From Descartes' methodical doubt to Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, Western philosophy progressively centered the autonomous human subject as the source of meaning and value.[16] Hindu philosophy, especially in its Vedantic expressions, while maintaining a metaphysical framework, posited a radical monism that identified the individual self with the universal divine essence (*Aham Brahmasmi*—"I am Brahman"). Both trajectories, despite their metaphysical differences, privileged human realization, freedom, and self-affirmation without necessitating a transcendent, commanding deity external to the self.

By contrast, the Islamic theological tradition, particularly as mediated through Sufism, emphasized the transcendence of God and the essential servitude of the human being. The journey of the self was not toward self-affirmation but toward *fana*—the annihilation of individual will and identity in the overwhelming presence of the Divine. As the Qur'an proclaims:"Say: Verily, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are (all) for Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds" (Qur'an 6:162).[17] Obedience, humility, and submission were not signs of weakness but of spiritual authenticity.

Iqbal was not blind to these tensions. His call for the strengthening of the self (*Khudi*) was intended not as a rebellion against God but as a means of cultivating the human soul so that it could fulfill its divinely ordained destiny. However, the historical situation in which he operated made the incorporation of certain Western and Hindu concepts of selfhood almost inevitable. As postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha have argued, the colonial encounter produces a profound ambivalence in the colonized subject, a simultaneous desire for and resistance to the cultural models of the colonizer.[18] Although Iqbal resisted the secularism of Western modernity and the monism of Hindu metaphysics, his project of reconstructing Muslim selfhood necessarily engaged with these discourses, resulting in a synthesis that bore the marks of

its multiple inheritances.

Thus, the intellectual crisis of British India was not merely external but internal, not merely political but existential. For Iqbal, the reconstruction of Muslim identity required not only philosophical ingenuity but also spiritual courage: the courage to affirm Islamic particularity while engaging with the universal aspirations of humanity articulated in other traditions. It is within this fraught context that Iqbal's poetic and philosophical project must be understood—a project at once heroic and haunted by the very forces it sought to transcend.

Western Tradition: From Descartes to Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung

The trajectory of Western thought from the seventeenth to the twentieth century witnessed a profound reconfiguration of the human self. Beginning with the rationalism of René Descartes and culminating in the existential and psychological revolutions of Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung, the Western intellectual tradition progressively elevated the autonomy of the individual while simultaneously diminishing, and eventually severing, the centrality of God. Understanding this philosophical evolution is crucial to appreciating both the affinities and tensions between Iqbal's reconstruction of the self and the modern Western conception of individual freedom.

René Descartes (1596–1650), often hailed as the father of modern philosophy, inaugurated a decisive turn inward with his famous dictum, *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am").[19] In an age of skepticism and epistemological crisis, Descartes grounded certainty not in external authorities—whether religious or empirical—but in the act of self-conscious thought. Although Descartes remained a theist, positing God as the guarantor of clear and distinct ideas, the methodological priority he gave to human reason laid the groundwork for a gradual displacement of divine authority. The self became the starting point, the indubitable foundation upon which knowledge and meaning would henceforth be built.

This Cartesian legacy found further elaboration in the Enlightenment's emphasis on human reason, autonomy, and progress. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), in particular, advanced the idea that moral law resided not in divine command but in human rationality itself.[20] His moral philosophy made the autonomous will the center of ethical life. In this framework, obedience to a higher authority was no longer the ultimate good; instead, self-legislation and moral autonomy became the highest virtues.

However, it was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) who would push the Western exaltation of the self to its most radical conclusion. Nietzsche declared the "death of God," not merely as a theological proposition but as a recognition that the traditional moral and metaphysical frameworks had collapsed under the weight of modern skepticism.[21] In the absence of divine absolutes, Nietzsche called for the creation of new values by the "Übermensch" (Overman), a figure who would affirm life and impose meaning through sheer creative will. The self, in Nietzsche's vision, was no longer accountable to any

transcendent source; it was sovereign, autonomous, and responsible for generating its own purpose.

The psychological sciences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further internalized and complicated this picture of the self. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, shattered the Enlightenment ideal of a transparent, rational self by revealing the unconscious as a realm of repressed desires and irrational drives.[22] For Freud, the self was a battleground between the id (instinctual desires), the ego (the conscious self), and the superego (internalized social norms). Human autonomy was thus fractured, and the ego was seen as precariously balanced amidst powerful, unseen forces.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), initially a disciple of Freud, diverged by emphasizing the positive, integrative aspects of the unconscious. Jung's theory of individuation proposed that psychological health required the integration of the conscious and unconscious selves into a harmonious whole.[23] He introduced the idea of the collective unconscious, populated by archetypes shared across humanity, and suggested that the human journey was one of self-realization and psychic wholeness. Though Jung retained a deep respect for religious symbols, his psychological framework effectively psychologized spirituality: the divine became a metaphor for inner psychic processes rather than an external, commanding reality.

Taken together, the Western tradition from Descartes to Jung charted a course wherein the self emerged as the central locus of meaning, agency, and liberation. While the path was neither linear nor uniform, the overarching movement was clear: from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, from obedience to autonomy, from divine law to human self-legislation. The modern Western self, at its most developed, saw no necessity for submission to a transcendent God; rather, it sought fulfillment through self-assertion, self-creation, and self-realization.

For Iqbal, this Western celebration of human autonomy presented both a model and a warning. On the one hand, he admired the dynamism, creativity, and vigor that modern Western civilization had achieved through its affirmation of the human self.[24] He recognized that the lethargy and fatalism that had paralyzed much of the Muslim world needed to be overcome through a reinvigoration of personal agency and selfhood. Iqbal's concept of *Khudi* was, in part, a response to this need: an exhortation to Muslims to reclaim their spiritual dignity and assert their creative will in the world.

Yet Iqbal was also deeply wary of the path that Western individualism had taken. In the absence of a transcendent moral order, he saw the danger of nihilism, self-destruction, and spiritual alienation. As he observed in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, the human ego, when disconnected from God, risked becoming tyrannical, arrogant, and ultimately self-defeating.[25] Iqbal's *Khudi* was not the Nietzschean will to power; it was a theomorphic self, nurtured and elevated through submission to God's creative purpose. The ego was to be strengthened, yes, but strengthened for service, not

for self-idolatry.

Thus, while Iqbal's reconstruction of the self bears striking resemblances to the Western tradition's emphasis on human freedom and creativity, it remains fundamentally distinct in its theological orientation. The Western self, emancipated from divine authority, became the architect of its own values; the Iqbalian self, while dynamic and assertive, remained anchored in divine will and cosmic responsibility. This distinction underscores the complex intertextual dynamics at work in Iqbal's project: he engaged with Western thought, absorbed its energies, but reoriented its trajectory toward an Islamic vision of spiritual fulfillment.

In light of this analysis, Iqbal's project can be seen as both an appropriation and a critique of Western modernity. His *Khudi* draws vitality from the Western affirmation of human agency while rejecting its descent into existential isolation and moral relativism. Yet, as subsequent sections will argue, the very act of borrowing from the Western tradition introduced tensions into Iqbal's synthesis—tensions that reflected the broader dilemmas of postcolonial identity and spiritual renewal in a rapidly changing world.

Hindu Tradition: Aham Brahmasmi and Moksha

The Hindu philosophical tradition offers a radically different vision of selfhood and liberation compared to the Islamic and Western paradigms. Rooted in the ancient Upanishads and elaborated through centuries of metaphysical speculation, Hindu thought presents a cosmology in which the individual self (*Atman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) are not separate but fundamentally identical. The Upanishadic proclamation *Aham Brahmasmi* ("I am Brahman") encapsulates this central insight: the realization that one's deepest self is, in truth, the infinite and eternal essence of the universe.[26] Unlike Western individualism, which often posits the self in isolation, or Islamic theology, which asserts the ontological distinction between Creator and creation, Hindu metaphysics proposes a non-dualistic vision in which selfhood and divinity converge.

In this framework, the ultimate goal of human existence is *moksha*—liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). This liberation is not achieved through obedience to a commanding external deity, nor through self-assertion in the Western existentialist sense, but through a transformative realization of the true nature of the self. As long as the individual identifies with the transient, conditioned ego, it remains bound by illusion (*maya*) and subject to suffering. The path to freedom lies in piercing the veil of ignorance and recognizing that one's true identity is none other than Brahman itself.[27] Liberation, therefore, is a metaphysical awakening rather than an act of willful self-construction or submission.

This metaphysical orientation profoundly influences Hindu religious, ethical, and social practices. While Hinduism encompasses a vast diversity of beliefs and rituals, the philosophical core articulated in Vedanta remains deeply influential. The human self is not regarded as fundamentally fallen, sinful, or

rebellious against a sovereign God; rather, it is seen as divine by nature, obscured only by ignorance. Ethical behavior, devotion (*bhakti*), and meditative practices (*dhyana*) are means of purifying the mind and dissolving the false ego, leading to the recognition of the self's inherent divinity.

In the context of British India, this Vedantic vision of selfhood found powerful articulation in the works of figures like Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, sought to reinterpret Hindu spirituality in a modern idiom, presenting it as a rational, universalist, and empowering philosophy capable of standing alongside Western science and philosophy.[28] His speeches at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) emphasized the dignity of the human soul and the unity of all existence, drawing explicitly on the Upanishadic affirmation of the divine self. In doing so, Vivekananda offered an alternative model of selfhood—rooted in ancient Hindu wisdom yet dynamically responsive to the challenges of modernity.

The Hindu emphasis on the divinity of the self offered certain resonances with Western modernity's celebration of human autonomy, albeit through a different metaphysical route. Both traditions, in different ways, affirmed human dignity, freedom, and the capacity for self-realization without necessitating submission to a transcendent, commanding God. The human being, whether as rational agent (in the West) or as divine essence (in Hinduism), was seen as sufficient unto itself. Liberation, whether framed as existential self-assertion or metaphysical self-realization, was achievable without the need for external divine sovereignty.

It is important to recognize, however, that the Hindu vision of selfhood was not identical to the Western one. Whereas Western philosophy often emphasized the autonomous ego constructing its own values, Hindu thought aimed at dissolving the ego altogether—not through annihilation before a separate divine other, but through the recognition that the ego was an illusion masking the true divine self. In this sense, Hindu metaphysics sublated the personal self into a universal essence, transcending individuality in a way that differed both from Western existentialism and from Islamic personalism.

For Iqbal, this Hindu metaphysical orientation posed a particular challenge. On the one hand, the affirmation of human potential and the call for spiritual awakening resonated with his own desire to revitalize the Muslim self. On the other hand, the fundamental metaphysical assumptions of Hindu thought were incompatible with Islamic theology. Islam, particularly as articulated in the Qur'an and developed through Islamic philosophy and mysticism, insists on the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. While Sufi traditions explored the depths of mystical union (*tawhid*), mainstream Islamic theology never dissolved the human self into the divine essence. Even in states of spiritual proximity, the human being remains a servant (*abd*) of God, not identical with Him.[29]

Iqbal, in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, critiques pantheistic and monistic tendencies precisely for their failure to preserve the

individuality and dynamism of the human ego. He acknowledges the insights of Indian metaphysics into the illusory nature of the empirical self but rejects the ultimate conclusion that the self must be extinguished or dissolved into a formless absolute. For Iqbal, the self is a purposeful, evolving reality, destined not for dissolution but for creative participation in the divine act of becoming.[30]

Thus, while Hindu philosophy offered a profound vision of spiritual liberation through self-realization, its fundamental metaphysical assumptions placed it at odds with the Islamic conception of a dynamic, responsible, and God-oriented self. Iqbal's project of reconstructing Muslim selfhood could not simply appropriate the Upanishadic affirmation of self-divinity without betraying the theological foundations of Islam. Nevertheless, the intertextual dynamics of his thought—subtle echoes, engagements, and transformations of Hindu ideas—testify to the complexity of his intellectual negotiation.

In the broader context of colonial India, Hinduism's affirmation of human divinity and liberation offered an empowering narrative for a society seeking to assert its spiritual and political agency in the face of Western domination. For Muslims, however, the task was more complicated: affirming human dignity without collapsing into either Western secularism or Hindu monism, maintaining the delicate balance between freedom and obedience, selfhood and servanthood. Iqbal's philosophical and poetic efforts must be seen within this intricate landscape of competing visions of the self and its ultimate destiny.

Islamic Tradition: Sufism and Annihilation of Ego

At the heart of Islamic metaphysics lies the doctrine of *Tawhid*—the absolute oneness of God. This central tenet emphasizes the radical transcendence of the Divine, asserting a fundamental ontological gap between Creator and creation. Unlike the Hindu identification of self with the divine (*Atman* as *Brahman*), or the modern Western assertion of autonomous selfhood, Islamic thought insists that the human being, though honored as God's vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth, remains a dependent and contingent existence. Submission (*Islam*) is thus not merely a religious act but a recognition of ontological reality: the human being flourishes not through self-assertion or self-deification but through humble obedience to the will of the Almighty.[31]

This theological orientation finds profound expression in the mystical traditions of Islam, particularly Sufism. Sufi metaphysics, deeply rooted in Quranic revelation and early Islamic spirituality, centers on the annihilation of the ego (*fana*) as the path to true knowledge and union with God. The self, in its empirical, worldly attachments, is seen as a veil (*hijab*) that obscures the Divine. The journey of the mystic entails a progressive stripping away of the ego's illusions until nothing remains but God's presence. As the famous Sufi maxim declares: *al-fana fi Allah* ("annihilation in God")—the self is effaced in the overwhelming reality of the Divine.[32]

Classical Sufi thinkers such as Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Rumi (d. 1273), and Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) developed intricate doctrines of spiritual ascent,

emphasizing stages of purification, detachment, and mystical absorption. Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din* presents the idea that true happiness (*sa'ada*) lies in aligning the soul's will with the will of God, culminating in existential surrender.[33] Rumi's poetry, especially the *Masnavi*, is replete with images of the self's dissolution in divine love:"Be like melting snow—wash yourself of yourself."[34]

In these traditions, ego-assertion is not a virtue but a barrier. The human being's greatness lies not in autonomous self-construction but in recognizing its utter dependence on the Divine source. The Qur'an consistently frames human beings as servants (*'ibad*) whose highest destiny is realized through worship and submission:"And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." (Qur'an 51:56) [35]

This emphasis on *'ubudiyyah* (servanthood) fundamentally distinguishes Islamic anthropology from both the Western secular and Hindu monistic visions. While humans possess dignity—having been created in the best form (*ahsani taqwim*, Qur'an 95:4)—this dignity is inseparable from their orientation toward God. Independence from God is not a triumph but a fall, as exemplified in the Qur'anic narratives of Satan's rebellion.

Iqbal's relationship with the Sufi tradition was complex. On the one hand, he deeply admired the spiritual intensity and inwardness cultivated by Sufi masters. His early poetry, especially in *Bang-i-Dra* and *Asrar-i-Khudi*, is suffused with mystical imagery. Yet Iqbal was also sharply critical of what he perceived as the passivity and world-renunciation that had crept into later Sufism. He argued that excessive emphasis on *fana* had led Muslims into a kind of metaphysical quietism, incompatible with the dynamic, action-oriented spirit of early Islam.[36]

In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal sought to reinterpret the Sufi path in more dynamic terms. He acknowledged the necessity of ego-purification but rejected the idea of total annihilation as the end goal. For Iqbal, *fana* must be followed by *baqa*—subsistence in God. The self, once purified, is not dissolved into formless being but elevated to a new mode of existence where it participates consciously and creatively in the divine will. As he puts it: "The ideal self is not the ego which claims to be absolute and self-sufficient. It is the ego which is fully conscious of its dependence upon God."[37]

Thus, Iqbal's notion of *Khudi* transforms the Sufi emphasis on annihilation into a philosophy of creative servanthood. The self must first annihilate its false autonomy, its selfishness, its heedlessness; but having done so, it must rise, invigorated by divine love and guidance, to shape history, culture, and destiny. The mature *Khudi* does not vanish into nothingness; it becomes an instrument of God's creative purpose in the world.

However, the underlying metaphysical structure of Islam remains resistant to any blurring of the Creator-creation distinction. Even at the highest stages of spiritual realization, the human self retains its status as servant, not as

a coequal or an emanation of divine being. The Qur'anic worldview permits intimacy with God (*qurb*), even love for God (*mahabbah*), but not ontological unity that erases the distinction between the worshiper and the Worshiped.

This theological commitment profoundly shaped Iqbal's philosophical reconstruction. While he creatively engaged with Sufi ideas and sought to energize the Muslim ego, he never surrendered the core Islamic principle of divine transcendence. His project, therefore, fundamentally differed from both the Hindu affirmation of the self's divinity and the Western secular exaltation of the autonomous ego. Iqbal's self was free, dignified, and creative—but always within the orbit of God's sovereign will.

In the broader context of colonial India, this theological stance carried important implications. Where Hindu philosophy could frame human liberation as self-realization, and Western thought could celebrate freedom as emancipation from divine authority, Islamic thought, as interpreted by Iqbal, proposed a model of freedom through servanthood. True liberty was not the abandonment of God but the realization of one's divinely bestowed potential through conscious submission and dynamic action.

Iqbal's reimagining of Sufi ideas thus highlights both his indebtedness to Islamic tradition and his creative response to the challenges of modernity. His critique of passive Sufism and his reconstruction of *Khudi* demonstrate a profound awareness of the need for renewal without severing the roots of faith. However, as the next section will show, the very intertextual negotiations that enabled Iqbal's dynamic vision also introduced tensions that complicated his project of synthesizing Islamic, Western, and Hindu conceptions of selfhood.

Iqbal's Effort at Synthesis: Poetry, Prose, and Philosophical Strategy

Iqbal's ambitious project of synthesizing Islamic, Western, and Hindu conceptions of selfhood finds its fullest expression in his poetry, particularly *Asrar-i-Khudi* and *Ramooz-i-Bekhudi*, and in his philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. His endeavor reflects a profound creative energy, a postcolonial urgency to rejuvenate Islamic civilization, and a sincere aspiration to affirm human dignity within a theistic framework. Yet, a closer examination of his philosophical strategy reveals deep internal tensions—between metaphysical traditions, between spiritual disciplines and political needs, and within his very conception of selfhood itself.

Iqbal's primary innovation lay in his redefinition of *Khudi*. Against the backdrop of Western individualism and Hindu monism, and responding to the perceived passivity of traditional Islamic mysticism, Iqbal sought to reclaim selfhood as a positive, dynamic force. *Asrar-i-Khudi* presents a powerful narrative of the ego's development through struggle, love, and self-transcendence, culminating in a self that is both spiritually aware and historically potent.[38] In contrast to the traditional Sufi view that the self (*khudi*) is an obstacle to divine realization and must be annihilated (*fana*), Iqbal proposed that the self must be cultivated, strengthened, and affirmed—so that it may consciously participate in God's ongoing creative activity.

However, this valorization of selfhood introduces a significant metaphysical complication. Classical Sufi metaphysics had long debated the relationship between human selfhood and divine reality through two major conceptual frameworks: **Wahdat al-Wujood** (Unity of Being) and **Wahdat al-Shuhud** (Unity of Witnessing). Wahdat al-Wujood, associated with Ibn Arabi, posits that only God truly exists; creation is a manifestation of divine attributes, and mystical realization dissolves the illusion of separateness.[39] Wahdat al-Shuhud, a later reaction against perceived pantheistic tendencies, emphasized that the unity experienced by the mystic is not an ontological merging but a phenomenological witnessing: the distinction between Creator and creation remains intact.

Iqbal clearly aligned himself more with the Shuhudi perspective. He criticized Wahdat al-Wujood for fostering metaphysical quietism and undermining the dynamism necessary for cultural and political renewal.[40] Yet, despite his Shuhudi inclination, Iqbal's own concept of *Khudi*—particularly its emphasis on creative participation in divine activity—sometimes blurs the careful distinction between Creator and creation. His self, once elevated and perfected, assumes quasi-divine functions, shaping destiny and commanding reality. Thus, even as Iqbal sought to maintain theological orthodoxy, the exaltation of the human ego risked collapsing into a subtle anthropocentrism that classical Islamic metaphysics had carefully guarded against.

Another layer of complexity emerges when we consider Iqbal's treatment of Sufi spiritual practices. Drawing upon insights from Michel Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self," we can recognize that pre-modern religious traditions—including Sufism—developed elaborate practices aimed at caring for, disciplining, and transforming the self.[41] Techniques such as *dhikr* (remembrance), *muraqaba* (meditative vigilance), and *riyada* (spiritual exercise) were not merely ritualistic; they were structured programs for cultivating presence, humility, and alignment with divine reality. These practices constituted sophisticated "technologies" for producing ethical, spiritually attuned selves.

However, Iqbal, under the immense pressure of Western critiques of Islamic tradition as stagnant and irrational, largely rejected these Sufi disciplines as relics of a medieval mindset. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he portrays much of Islamic mysticism as having degenerated into otherworldly escapism.[42] Rather than reforming or reinterpreting these technologies for a new age—as Foucault might have suggested—Iqbal dismissed them wholesale, seeking instead to construct a model of selfhood based on action, creativity, and historical engagement.

This rejection represents a significant missed opportunity. A reformed engagement with Sufi practices could have offered powerful tools for cultivating spiritual presence without necessarily leading to political passivity. By discarding this rich heritage, Iqbal inadvertently impoverished the available repertoire for Islamic spiritual renewal, focusing almost exclusively on

historical action and political mobilization at the expense of inner disciplines that could anchor and sustain genuine transformation.

The problem is further compounded by Iqbal's choice of terminology. In classical Sufi literature, *khudi* is overwhelmingly portrayed negatively: it is the veil that separates the human being from God, the egoic illusion that must be transcended for true spiritual realization.[43] By choosing *khudi* as the term to represent his ideal of a strong, dynamic self, Iqbal enacted a radical semantic reversal. Rather than dissolving *khudi*, he sought to exalt it. While rhetorically powerful, this choice introduced a profound conceptual confusion. Readers steeped in Sufi tradition could hardly reconcile Iqbal's valorization of *khudi* with the long-standing mystical imperative to annihilate it. A more prudent strategy might have been to coin a new term, thereby signaling a creative rearticulation rather than an apparent betrayal of spiritual orthodoxy.

Furthermore, Iqbal's project encounters an irresolvable tension between the autonomy of the self and the sovereignty of God. He insists that the self must be free, active, and creative. Yet he simultaneously affirms the existence of a transcendent God who commands obedience and who alone is the source of all reality. How, then, can the *khudi* be truly free if it remains bound by divine command? Traditional Sufi thought resolved this tension through the concept of servanthood: freedom was found in the willing surrender to God's will, a surrender that paradoxically liberated the self from its own illusions. Iqbal, however, sought to preserve both the freedom of the self and the supremacy of God, leading to a conceptual strain that his philosophical system never fully overcomes.

The tension is not merely metaphysical but also psychological and ethical. In traditional Sufism, the belief that "God is the Doer of everything" cultivates awe, humility, and an acute sense of human limitation.[44] This theological anthropology generates ethical attitudes of gratitude, patience, and trust—qualities essential for spiritual growth. By contrast, Iqbal's heroic self risks fostering a self-glorifying attitude, even as it claims to be oriented toward divine purposes. The balance between self-assertion and humility, so delicately maintained in classical Sufism, becomes precarious in Iqbal's vision.

A final dimension of Iqbal's reworking of Sufi tradition can be seen in his treatment of selflessness in *Ramooz-i-Bekhudi* (*The Secrets of Selflessness*). Here, Iqbal advocates for the sublimation of individual ego into the collective identity of the Ummah. Selflessness is no longer about mystical dissolution before God but about political solidarity with the Muslim community.[45] The ultimate aim is not union with the Divine but the construction of a strong, ethically unified Muslim society capable of resisting colonial domination.

This shift marks a profound politicization of Sufi concepts. Traditional Sufism emphasized individual spiritual realization, often in tension with worldly power structures. Iqbal, responding to the existential threat posed by Western imperialism and the decline of Muslim political power, reinterprets selflessness as loyalty to a collective political project. While understandable in

its historical context, this move transforms the nature of spiritual aspiration: from inner purification to outer mobilization, from divine proximity to communal identity.

Thus, under the pressure of modern colonial and intellectual forces, Iqbal reworked Sufi ideas to serve the needs of a wounded, striving community. His reconstruction is brilliant, courageous, and imaginative—but it also introduces profound tensions and ambiguities. By valorizing *khudi*, politicizing selflessness, rejecting traditional technologies of self-care, and attempting to affirm both freedom and divine sovereignty simultaneously, Iqbal produced a vision of Islamic selfhood that is inspiring yet internally strained.

His synthesis, therefore, stands as a monumental creative achievement, but also as a testimony to the deep contradictions of the postcolonial Muslim intellectual condition. In striving to bridge Islam, Western modernity, and Hindu metaphysics, Iqbal illuminated both the possibilities and the limits of intellectual reconstruction in an age of dislocation and transformation.

Why the Synthesis Ultimately Fails: A Postcolonial Analysis

Muhammad Iqbal's project of synthesizing Islamic, Western, and Hindu visions of selfhood stands as one of the most courageous intellectual endeavors in the modern Muslim world. His effort to reclaim the vitality of Islamic thought in an age of civilizational dislocation reflects a profound creative energy and a deep existential urgency. Yet, despite his sincerity, philosophical brilliance, and poetic imagination, the synthesis he attempted ultimately fails to achieve a stable, coherent form. The reasons for this failure lie not merely in external historical pressures, but in deep structural tensions between the traditions he sought to reconcile, and within the very conceptual strategies he employed.

At the most fundamental level, the failure stems from the irreconcilable metaphysical orientations of the traditions Iqbal engaged with. Both Western modernity and Hindu Vedantic philosophy, despite their profound differences, converge on a critical point: the affirmation of human autonomy, dignity, and liberation without the necessary mediation of a sovereign, commanding God. In Western philosophy, from Descartes through Nietzsche and Jung, the human being emerges as the center of meaning, value, and creative power. In Hindu metaphysics, the realization that the self is identical with Brahman allows for spiritual liberation through self-knowledge rather than submission to an external divine will.[46] Both trajectories, therefore, permit human flourishing independent of an omnipotent, commanding God.

Islamic theology, by contrast, insists upon the radical transcendence of God and the essential servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) of the human being. The Quranic vision does not conceive human freedom as autonomy from God but as fulfillment through conscious obedience to divine command.[47] Any conception of selfhood that severs itself from God's authority is not liberation but delusion. Thus, Iqbal's attempt to affirm both the autonomy of the self and

the sovereignty of God encounters a deep theological contradiction. His *Khudi* cannot be fully free in the Western or Hindu sense while remaining authentically Islamic.

Moreover, as earlier sections have shown, Iqbal's redefinition of *Khudi* further complicates his project. By appropriating a term traditionally associated with egoistic illusion and spiritual obstruction in Sufi thought, and by reversing its meaning to signify strength, dignity, and creative agency, Iqbal introduced a semantic and conceptual dissonance.[48] This dissonance is not merely a matter of terminology; it reflects a deeper philosophical struggle to sustain the self's dignity without collapsing into either self-idolatry or mystical dissolution.

The tension becomes even more pronounced when considering Iqbal's rejection of traditional Sufi "technologies of the self." As Foucault's analyses suggest, pre-modern religious traditions developed elaborate disciplines—rituals, meditations, ethical exercises—designed to cultivate self-awareness, humility, and spiritual presence.[49] Sufism, with its practices of *dhikr*, *muraqaba*, and rigorous self-purification, constituted a profound tradition of caring for and transforming the self. These technologies offered pathways for internalizing divine presence and aligning human will with divine will.

Yet, facing the Western critique of Islam as stagnant and irrational, Iqbal dismissed much of Sufi practice as medieval escapism. Rather than reforming and revitalizing these spiritual technologies for a new age, he largely abandoned them in favor of a model of selfhood geared toward historical action and political agency. In doing so, he deprived his reconstruction of deep, practical mechanisms for spiritual transformation. His heroic *Khudi* was exhorted to achieve greatness, but was not equipped with the inward disciplines necessary for sustaining humility, presence, and ethical maturity.

Iqbal's political reinterpretation of Sufi concepts further exacerbates the tension. In *Ramooz-i-Bekhudi*, selflessness is no longer about mystical dissolution into divine reality, but about submission of the individual ego into the collective identity of the Ummah. The goal shifts from inner spiritual realization to outer political solidarity.[50] While understandable in the context of colonial subjugation, this move transforms Sufism's interior quest for God into a communal project of empowerment. Spiritual selflessness becomes political loyalty. Thus, the very meaning of spiritual practices is reoriented toward historical ends, subordinating metaphysical concerns to socio-political imperatives.

This instrumentalization of spirituality reflects the deep pressures of the postcolonial condition. Iqbal, like many intellectuals of colonized societies, faced the double burden of resisting Western domination and reconstructing a wounded cultural identity. His creative engagement with multiple traditions was both a strategic necessity and an existential gamble. Yet, as Homi K. Bhabha's insights into postcolonial mimicry suggest, such engagements often produce hybrid formations that are neither fully authentic nor fully assimilated.[51] Iqbal's synthesis, for all its brilliance, bears the marks of this

hybridity: borrowing from Western individualism and Hindu spiritual liberation while seeking to remain grounded in Islamic theocentrism.

At the psychological level, Iqbal's exaltation of the self, risks undermining the very humility and awe that classical Islamic spirituality cultivated. By encouraging the self to see itself as a partner in divine creativity, he flirts with a subtle anthropocentrism that weakens the sense of human contingency before God. The classical Sufi ethos that "God is the Doer of everything" generated an ethical and spiritual climate of gratitude, patience, and reliance on divine mercy—qualities essential for true spiritual transformation.[52] Iqbal's dynamic *Khudi*, while inspiring in its call to action, risks fostering arrogance or despair when confronted with the inevitable limits of human agency.

Thus, the failure of Iqbal's synthesis is not a failure of imagination or sincerity, but a failure dictated by the very contradictions he sought to transcend. The metaphysical incompatibility between theocentric servanthood and autonomous selfhood, the semantic confusion surrounding *khudi*, the neglect of spiritual technologies for self-care, the politicization of mystical concepts, and the psychological risks of self-glorification—all these factors coalesce to undermine the stability of his reconstruction.

Yet, it is important to recognize that this failure is itself deeply instructive. Iqbal's struggle illuminates the profound challenges faced by postcolonial intellectuals who sought to navigate between fidelity to tradition and responsiveness to modern historical conditions. His work embodies both the creative possibilities and the tragic limitations of postcolonial synthesis attempts: the risks of selective borrowing, the tensions between spiritual authenticity and political necessity, and the difficulty of sustaining a coherent vision of selfhood in a world fractured by colonization and cultural dislocation.

In this sense, Iqbal's unfinished synthesis remains a testament not only to his own genius and courage but also to the tragic dilemmas of modern Islamic thought. His work invites not dismissal but deeper reflection: a reflection on how traditions can be renewed without being betrayed, how spiritual disciplines can be adapted without being instrumentalized, and how the human self can find its true freedom not in autonomy from God, but in conscious, creative participation in divine reality.

Conclusion

Muhammad Iqbal's philosophical and poetic project represents one of the most audacious attempts in modern Islamic thought to reconcile the demands of tradition, modernity, and spiritual authenticity. Operating in the crucible of British India's colonial pressures, Iqbal sought to synthesize the affirmations of Western individualism, the metaphysical insights of Hindu philosophy, and the spiritual legacy of Islamic Sufism into a coherent vision of selfhood and communal renewal. His intellectual journey was animated by a profound awareness of the crisis facing the Muslim world and a sincere desire to restore dignity, agency, and creative vitality to a community in decline.

Yet, as this paper has argued, the synthesis Iqbal envisioned remained structurally strained and ultimately incomplete. The traditions he sought to bring together harbored deep metaphysical divergences that could not be easily harmonized. Western and Hindu frameworks affirmed human sovereignty and liberation without necessitating submission to a transcendent, commanding God. Islamic theology, by contrast, rooted human dignity precisely in servanthood before the Divine. Iqbal's valorization of *Khudi*, his rejection of traditional Sufi "technologies of the self," and his politicization of mystical concepts reflect the profound pressures of postcolonial identity formation and intellectual survival.

Moreover, Iqbal's semantic reversal of *khudi*, traditionally understood in Sufi thought as an obstacle to divine realization, generated conceptual confusion. His dismissal of practices developed to cultivate humility and spiritual awareness deprived his model of the deep interior formation necessary for sustainable transformation. By reorienting spiritual disciplines toward political solidarity, Iqbal shifted the goal of selflessness from divine intimacy to communal empowerment—a move historically understandable but philosophically fraught.

These contradictions are not merely intellectual or theoretical; they reflect the profound existential dilemmas of postcolonial identity formation. Iqbal's struggle mirrors the broader predicament of Muslim intellectuals caught between fidelity to tradition and responsiveness to modern historical conditions. His work embodies both the creative possibilities and the tragic limitations of postcolonial synthesis attempts: the dangers of selective borrowing, the tensions between spiritual authenticity and political necessity, and the difficulty of sustaining a coherent vision of selfhood in a world fractured by colonization and cultural dislocation.

Yet, it would be unjust to dismiss Iqbal's project as a failure. His work remains a monument of intellectual courage and creative ambition. It opens critical pathways for rethinking the relationship between freedom and obedience, between spiritual inwardness and historical engagement, between tradition and reform. Even in its incompleteness, Iqbal's vision challenges us to confront the perennial question of how religious traditions can be renewed without being betrayed, how selfhood can be affirmed without succumbing to self-idolatry, and how spiritual vitality can be sustained amidst the demands of modern historical existence.

In this sense, Iqbal's unfinished synthesis is not a closed chapter but an ongoing invitation: an invitation to continue the difficult, necessary work of navigating the tensions between history, spirituality, and human aspiration in a world that remains, as in Iqbal's own time, in search of authentic renewal.

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