

# The dramatist, the poet and the critic

Mohammad Asim Siddiqui

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People's poet: Muhammad Iqbal; Maqbool Hasan Khan

The death anniversary of Shakespeare, observed on 23 April, and that of Muhammad Iqbal on 21 April, are big international events. In fact, the 400th death anniversary of Shakespeare in 2016 was commemorated all over the globe with great fanfare. Interestingly, Shakespeare's actual death in 1616 was not noticed at all and it was only after few years later that his anniversary acquired some significance. Stephan Greenblatt, the father of new historicism and one of the most important Shakespeare critics, calls his death "an entirely local English event, and even locally it seems scarcely to have been noted." The death of Richard Burbage, a very important actor in Shakespeare's theatre company, three years after Shakespeare's death, on the other hand, was a much bigger affair. But that is hardly surprising as the actor whose performances bring the audiences to the theatre or the cinema halls, then and

now, is always considered more important than the writer who works on his script invisible to the public eye.

Muhammad Iqbal, a twentieth century Urdu poet and thinker, always lived in public eye and his death was a big event in undivided India. His death anniversary is an occasion for many seminars, conferences and discussions in Urdu literary circles because of his unquestioned poetic genius. While he will remain a much discussed figure because of his political beliefs, his focus on Muslim identity and his celebration as the national poet of Pakistan, his big corpus of poetry, which also celebrates Ram, Gautam Budhha,

Guru Nanak and the everlasting civilization of India, has ensured his place in the canon of world literature.

While Shakespeare and Iqbal continue to be feted and celebrated, rarely a thought is spared to acknowledge the role of readers and critics who contribute in their own ways to bestow immortality to them. The death of a critic who may have spent a lifetime writing on literature may not even cause a ripple.

One such unsung critic is Maqbool Hasan Khan (1938-2018), who died recently in Aligarh. Khan lived and breathed Shakespeare, lecturing on him, watching the performance of his plays, and writing on Shakespearian critical history. Equally well versed in Urdu literature, and a bilingual scholar in a real sense of the word, his writings on Iqbal's poetics and philosophy also reveal his deep understanding of not only the world of Iqbal but also of the canon of Urdu poetry.

His work on Shakespeare includes "Edward Dowden's Shakespearean Criticism", annotated editions of *Tempest* and *Hamlet* with long introductions for Orient Longman (BlackSwan) Drama Classics, and scores of interesting essays on Shakespeare's art and the orientation of Shakespeare criticism. Shakespeare criticism is a vast, fascinating and addictive field. Khan's addiction to Shakespeare criticism made his lectures and conversation a very enriching experience. His critical and perceptive analysis of Edward Dowden's biographical approach, A.C. Bradley's philosophically coherent character studies, Walter Raleigh's 'humanizing' of Shakespeare, E.E. Stoll's historical perspective on Shakespeare's technique especially stage conventions, together with his intelligent observations on the work of numerous other Shakespeare critics—among others, Coleridge, F.R. Leavis, Granville Barker, Wilson Knight, L.C. Knights, Derek Traversi, Kenneth Muir—make for very stimulating reading.

His essays on Iqbal are full of very interesting insights and are informed by his own interest in Western philosophy. He considers Ghalib a poet of the divided self and Iqbal that of the exalted self. For him Iqbal's poetry "is not a versification of his philosophy, nor is his philosophy the product of a purely speculative concern with the Absolute." He also links Iqbal's philosophy with currents of voluntaristic and vitalistic thoughts in Europe. Time, growth and optimism are important concerns in Iqbal and hence the poet was not impressed by Kant and Schopenhauer but has high regard for Nietzsche. Khan also explains how in Iqbal's poetry the "near total absence of the erotic is highlighted by a marked predilection for the vaguely 'philosophical', deriving in the main from conventional literary mysticism." He also finds parallels between Iqbal and Sri Aurobindo.

Death unites all and there is a reason why death and death anniversaries can be celebrated. In the immortal words of the Bard, "If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride, And hug it in mine arms."

(The writer teaches English at Aligarh Muslim University.)