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Unveiling the Dichotomy: Exploring Iqbal's Concept of Khudi and Bekhudi

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Abstract

This article examines the complex philosophical dichotomy between *Khudi* (selfhood) and *Bekhudi* (self-effacement) in the poetic and intellectual legacy of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, a known poet in the literary history of the Indian subcontinent. While *Khudi* is frequently understood as a call toward self-affirmation, spiritual empowerment, and the actualization of one's inner potential, *Bekhudi* appears to advocate a surrender of the self—seemingly contradicting Iqbal's otherwise assertive vision of human agency. This paper investigates how Iqbal harmonizes these two notions within a coherent metaphysical and ethical framework, drawing on the rich traditions of Persian Sufism, classical Islamic philosophy, and Nietzschean ideas of self-realization. Through a close reading of Iqbal's major philosophical poems—*Asrar-e-Khudi* and *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*—the study reveals how these intertwined concepts inform not only personal spiritual growth but also the collective consciousness and moral evolution of the Muslim *Ummah*.

Keywords: Dichotomy, Self, Annihilation of self, Allama Iqbal

Introduction

Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), often revered as the "Poet-Philosopher of the East," stands as a monumental figure in both literary and philosophical domains of the modern Muslim world. Through his visionary poetry in Persian and Urdu, Iqbal grappled with profound metaphysical questions concerning identity, selfhood, moral agency, and the possibility of transcendence in the context of a decaying spiritual consciousness and the colonial subjugation of the Muslim *ummah*. Central to Iqbal's philosophical thought are the twin concepts of *Khudi*



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(selfhood) and *Bekhudi* (self-effacement), articulated respectively in his seminal Persian works *Asrar-e-Khudi* (1915) and *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (1918).

At first glance, *Khudi*—commonly rendered as “self” or “ego”—appears to stand in stark contrast to *Bekhudi*, which implies a state of self-negation, surrender, or even ego-annihilation. However, for Iqbal, these are not contradictory but complementary stages in the spiritual and ethical development of the individual and the collective. This article examines the philosophical roots, literary expressions, and theological implications of these two concepts, aiming to unveil the unity within their apparent dichotomy. *Khudi*, in Iqbal’s metaphysical framework, represents the awakening and cultivation of the divine spark within the human being—a call to self-realization, autonomy, and inner strength. However, this selfhood is not an end in itself; it reaches its highest expression through *Bekhudi*, wherein the individuated self, having attained spiritual maturity, transcends its egoistic limitations and merges into a higher collective purpose, often symbolized by the moral and spiritual solidarity of the Muslim community.

This article seeks to unpack the philosophical underpinnings, literary manifestations, and theological resonances of *Khudi* and *Bekhudi* in Iqbal’s thought. By tracing their roots in Persian Sufi metaphysics, Islamic ethical philosophy, and modern existentialist currents—including the influence of Nietzsche—Iqbal’s vision emerges as a deeply integrative paradigm. Ultimately, the study aims to reveal how these two concepts, rather than being contradictory, form an organic unity that underlies Iqbal’s vision of both individual transformation and collective regeneration in the modern Islamic world.

Iqbal and the Roots of Khudi

Iqbal’s concept of *Khudi* is deeply rooted in Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions. Drawing inspiration from renowned Sufi thinkers such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Mansur Hallaj, and Imam Al-Ghazali, Iqbal redefined selfhood not as a manifestation of egoistic pride, but as the unfolding of the soul’s innate spiritual potential. For Iqbal, *Khudi* represents the divine trust bestowed upon the human being—a journey toward self-realization that aligns the individual with the greater moral and metaphysical order of the universe. This vision of selfhood emphasizes inner strength, moral responsibility, and closeness to the Divine, all framed within the broader Islamic worldview. In *Asrar-e-Khudi*, Iqbal writes:

چون ز تخلیق تمنا باز ماند
شهرش بشکست و از پرواز ماند
آرزو بنگامه آرائی خودی
موج بیتابی ز دریای خودی
آرزو صید مقاصد را کمند
دفتر افعال را شیرازه بند
زنده را نفی تمنا مرده کرد
شعله را نقصان سوز افسرده کرد
چپست اصل دیده بیدار ما؟
بست صورت لذت دیدار ما



“When the heart ceases to create desires, know that its greatest wing has broken, and it is no longer capable of flight. Desire is what adorns the tumult of *Khudi* (selfhood); it is a restless wave in the ocean of *Khudi*. Desire is the lasso that captures the prey of great purposes. It binds together the pages of the book of deeds and accomplishments. When a living human being becomes devoid of desire, he is as good as dead. It is like a flame that, when it loses its intensity and heat, is extinguished. What is the reality of our wakeful, seeing eyes? It is simply that the delight of our vision has taken on the form of these eyes.”

In Iqbal's philosophy, the heart is not just a physical organ but a spiritual center—the seat of *Khudi*. Desire (*Arzoo*) is the creative force that fuels the heart's energy and movement. Without desire, the heart loses its capacity to "fly"—i.e., to aspire, to evolve, and to reach spiritual heights. The "broken wing" symbolizes lost potential. This line suggests that desire is essential for vitality and transcendence. but self-realization in the spiritual sense. This passage is a profound reflection on the nature of *ārzū* (desire) in the philosophy of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, particularly in relation to *khudī* (selfhood). For Iqbal, *desire* is not a base passion to be suppressed but a divine spark, a dynamic force that fuels the growth of the self and enables the soul to ascend toward its true purpose.

Khudi as a Creative Force

For Iqbal, *Khudi* is not static; it is a dynamic and creative force that evolves through struggle (*jihād*), love (*ishq*), and action (*amal*). The stages of *Khudi*'s development are:

1. **Obedience (Ita'at)** – alignment with divine law
2. **Self-control (Mujahida)** – mastery over one's desires
3. **Creative freedom (Ikhlaq)** – the ability to shape destiny

He challenges the passive mysticism prevalent in the Muslim world and urges a return to active selfhood, rejecting fatalism in favor of agency.

The Emergence of Bekhudi: Self-Effacement in Context

In *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, Iqbal turns his focus from the individual to the collective, shifting from the affirmation of self to the merging of the self within the ethical and spiritual community—the *Ummah*. Here, *Bekhudi* is not annihilation but integration.

اے فلک مُشتِ غبارِ کوئے تُو
اے تماشا گاہِ المِ روئے تُو
ہمچو موجِ آتشِ تہِ پا می روی
تُو گجا بہرِ تماشا می روی
رَمزِ سوزِ آموزِ از پروانہ



در شرر تعمیر گن کاشانه
طرح عشق انداز اندر جان خویش
تازه گن با مصطفی پیمان خویش

O Muslim Ummah! Bind your loyalty with people of excellence and become aware of your exalted status. The sky is but a handful of dust from the path you once walked.

O Muslim Ummah, the entire world is captivated by the radiant face you once revealed.

O Muslim Ummah, you are running restlessly in all directions—
Tell me, for whom are you running so desperately to see?

O Muslim Ummah, learn the secret of burning from the moth—
Build your nest within the very spark you borrow from people of excellence.

O Muslim Ummah, grasp within your soul the wisdom drawn from the sketch of
divine love—
This wisdom can only be attained through friendship with the people of
excellence; without it, the Ummah cannot regain its lofty position.

O Muslim Ummah, through the counsel of divine love, learned from the people of
excellence—
renew your covenant with the Prophet Muhammad once again.

The phrase urges the Muslim Ummah to learn true love for Allah and the Prophet (PBUH) by staying close to righteous and wise people. Through their guidance, the Ummah can revive its lost spiritual connection. By renewing this bond with the Prophet, the Ummah can regain its strength and honor.

Khudi vs. Bekhudi: A False Dichotomy?

Though *Khudi* and *Bekhudi* may appear to be opposites, Iqbal presents them as complementary phases of human development. *Khudi* is the means by which the individual awakens to his or her divine potential; *Bekhudi* is the culmination where this self-realized individual submits to a collective ethical order, ideally governed by divine principles.

This dialectic reflects Iqbal's deep engagement with Sufi metaphysics. Like in *fana* (annihilation in God) and *baqa* (subsistence in God), *Khudi* and *Bekhudi* describe a spiritual journey that begins with individual awakening and ends in divine immersion.

Theological and Ethical Dimensions

Iqbal reclaims the notion of *ego* from Western materialism and aligns it with the Islamic concept of *nafs*, but redefined through a prophetic lens. He writes in



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Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam:

“The ideal of Islamic mysticism is not self-negation, but the transformation of the self into a moral and spiritual force.”

In this light, *Khudi* is moral agency and ethical responsibility. It is the self that prays, resists evil, serves the community, and upholds justice. *Bekhudi* is the transcendence of selfishness for the sake of divine harmony.

Literary Symbolism and Style

Iqbal uses powerful and vivid poetic symbols to express deep and abstract ideas like *Khudi* (selfhood) and *Bekhudi* (selflessness). He does not explain these concepts in dry, philosophical terms—instead, he brings them to life through images from nature and the spiritual world. For example, he often uses the falcon (*shaheen*) to symbolize a soul that is strong, free, and aims high. The falcon flies alone, does not depend on others for food, and soars above the ordinary—qualities Iqbal believes a true believer should have.

In one of his famous verses, he writes:

تو شاہین ہے پرواز ہے کام تیرا

تیرے آگے آسمان اور بھی ہیں

Thou art a falcon—soaring is thy fate,

And countless skies await thy conquering flight.

Here, the falcon represents the self (*Khudi*) that is always rising, always striving toward higher goals both spiritual and intellectual.

Iqbal also uses other natural symbols like stars (to show the soul's brilliance), oceans (to represent depth and mystery), and mountains (to show strength and steadfastness). These metaphors make his philosophy more relatable and inspiring, especially for younger readers.

Moreover, Iqbal deliberately chose Persian as the language for his important works like *Asrar-e-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self) and *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (Mysteries of Selflessness). Persian was not just a poetic language—it was also the language of classical Islamic philosophy and Sufi thought. By using Persian, Iqbal connected his modern ideas with the deep spiritual tradition of Islam. The richness and elegance of Persian helped him express subtle feelings and profound spiritual truths more effectively.

For example, in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, he writes:



بیکر بستی ز آثار خودی است
هر چه می بینی ز اسرار خودی است
خویشتن را چون خودی بیدار کرد
آشکارا عالم پندار کرد
صد جهان پوشیده اندر ذات او
غیر او پیدا است از ثبات او

"The world of created beings is one of the many signs of Khudi (the self); whatever you observe here is connected to the mysteries of Khudi.

When Khudi awakened to itself, it unveiled the realm of Divine Majesty.

Within its essence lie hundreds of worlds, and it is through the 'other' that what is not the self becomes manifest. (*When Khudi defines itself and seeks affirmation and permanence, the concept of the 'other' comes into being.*)

Khudi has sown the seed of conflict in this universe by perceiving the 'other' as separate from itself.

It produces the existence of others from within itself so that the thrill of struggle may be intensified."

This passage explains that everything in the world is a reflection of *Khudi* (the self). When *Khudi* becomes aware of itself, it reveals divine truths. Inside *Khudi* are countless worlds, and it defines itself by recognizing what is not itself — the 'other'. This creates a sense of separation, leading to struggle. The presence of the 'other' gives life meaning and intensity through this struggle. This shows how he uses both the musical beauty of Persian and its spiritual depth to explore the journey of the self.

In short, Iqbal's use of poetic symbols and Persian language adds beauty, depth, and spiritual intensity to his message, helping readers not only understand his ideas but feel them deeply.

Modern Relevance

In today's divided and confused world—where materialism, selfishness, and identity crises are common—Iqbal's philosophy provides a powerful path toward spiritual awakening and meaningful living. His ideas of *Khudi* (selfhood) and *Bekhudi* (selflessness) help us find a healthy balance: *Khudi* teaches us to value and strengthen our individual identity, while *Bekhudi* reminds us to connect with others and serve a higher, divine purpose.

This balance creates individuals who are confident and self-aware, but not arrogant or self-centered. At the same time, it encourages social unity without forcing people to give up their unique identity or blindly follow the crowd.

For the youth—especially in post-colonial societies struggling with cultural



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confusion and lost pride—Iqbal's message is a call to rise, take responsibility, and rebuild their self-respect. His vision stands as a strong alternative to Western individualism, which often isolates the person, and blind collectivism, which can erase personal freedom. Iqbal invites young people to be spiritually strong, morally upright, and actively engaged in shaping a better future.

Conclusion

Iqbal's concepts of Khudi (selfhood) and Bekhudi (selflessness) are not opposing or isolated states, but interconnected phases of a profound spiritual and philosophical journey. Khudi represents the awakening and strengthening of the individual self—its realization of inner potential, divine spark, and moral agency. It is through Khudi that a person becomes aware of their unique identity, dignity, and purpose in the universe.

However, this journey does not end in the self alone. Bekhudi emerges as the next natural stage, where the perfected self willingly integrates into the collective whole—the community (*Ummah*) and, ultimately, into the Divine Will. Here, selflessness does not mean the annihilation of identity, but its transcendence, where the ego is not destroyed but aligned with a higher, communal, and spiritual goal.

Iqbal's vision, therefore, unites contemplation and action, individuality and unity, reason and love. He urges a balance between the development of the self and its dedication to a greater cause. When understood together, Khudi and Bekhudi form a dynamic cycle: realizing one's true self in order to give oneself to the Divine and to humanity.

This unity within apparent duality reveals that Iqbal's thought is not just poetic expression but a practical guide for moral and spiritual transformation. It calls for the emergence of individuals who are not only spiritually awakened and ethically conscious, but also deeply committed to the collective welfare of society.

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