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NURSI AND IQBAL ON *MI'RĀJ*: THE METAPHYSICAL DIMENSION OF THE PROPHET'S ASCENSION

Mahsheed Ansari*

Abstract: Said Nursi (1877-1960) and Muḥammad Iqbal (1877-1938) constructed their prophetologies in light of *'aql* (reason), but they also considered the mystical and metaphysical sides of prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad as a major component of their prophetologies. Nursi's and Iqbal's approaches depict a thought-provoking modus towards *nubuwwa* (prophethood) in a highly rationalised climate. This paper critically examines Nursi's and Iqbal's discussions of the metaphysical dimension of Prophet Muḥammad's ascension, known as the *mi'rāj*. Nursi and Iqbal respond to the rationalists using *'aql* and *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) without compromising spirituality. Their choice of genre, methods and arguments in defending the spiritual dimensions of *mi'rāj*, as a second aspect, of *nubuwwa* will be examined. This paper highlights the creative use and interplay of rational and metaphysics in Nursi's and Iqbal's works (particularly *Ayat al-Kubra* and *Javidnama*) as a way to respond to a rationalised climate, but also to retain the spiritual aspects of their faith and *mi'rāj* in their writings. Both saw the limitations of *'aql* and therefore relied on the *kashf* of the literature and poetry to communicate their thoughts. Nursi's and Iqbal's discussions on the *mi'rāj* not only depict their contribution to the metaphysical aspects of prophethood, but also illustrate the variance of Muslim scholars' responses to rationalism and prophethood in the 20th century. The effect of Nursi's and Iqbal's contributions to the continuation of a belief and tradition of Islamic faith is staggering proof of their intellectual and spiritual capacity to defend an aspect of faith with *'aql* and *kashf*, and appeal to the heart and spirit.

Keywords: *Miraj, Javidnama, Risale-i nur, Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal, mirajnama, prophethood, Prophet Muhammad*

Criticisms of *nubuwwa* (prophethood) have not only been raised by Western Orientalist scholars, which could be written off as coming from outside Islam, but more seriously have also been advanced from within the Muslim tradition.¹ The modern period had a significant impact on Islam and Muslims. Reason (*'aql*) was a prominent intellectual theme of the post-

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¹ These were not criticisms of *nubuwwa* in its totality, but doubts about particular aspects of *nubuwwa*, such as miracles afforded to prophets and Prophet Muḥammad including the *mi'rāj* (ascension of Prophet Muḥammad) by some Muslim scholars who are predominantly influenced by the Orientalist discourse.

Enlightenment era, which also affected Muslim scholastic tradition.² In the post-Enlightenment scholarship that also dominated the Muslim world, there were generally two waves of censures launched against prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad. One was the reform movement that sought to abolish the prophetic *sunnah* (traditions) and to ‘downgrade’ Sharia (Islamic law) by questioning its rational validity.³ The contemporary challenge was to cast doubt on the notion of prophethood, its necessity, and rational precedence that led to questioning and doubting miracles and the prophet’s role as the true ‘envoy’ of God. The theological challenges were an over-rationalisation of faith and theology that led many to break away from tradition, particularly with the notion of prophethood. Many modernist scholars like Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Riḍā (1865-1935) were largely influenced by this mode of thought and became so focused on rational proofs that many theological aspects of prophethood and particularly the metaphysical aspects were rationalised or dismissed. In an attempt to prove the rationality of the role of prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad to modern critics, an unfortunate compromise was made on the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of prophethood and the Prophet. As part of the extreme rationalism that rejected what classical scholars accepted, the *mi‘rāj* (ascension) of Prophet Muḥammad became a contested area of debate that illustrated the struggle of Muslim scholars in the modern era.⁴ Modernist scholars like ‘Abduh and Riḍā were readily theorising and rationalising many aspects of prophethood, including traditions, *ḥadīth* and miracles, the *mi‘rāj* was easily dismissed or not considered at all. They represent the sort of extreme rationalism that started the move away from the traditional and spiritual aspects of Islam. It was at the height of this reason-based dominance that Said Nursi (1877-1960) and Muḥammad Iqbal (1877-1938) constructed their prophetologies in light of *‘aql* (reason). As we shall see, however, Nursi and Iqbal employ reason in order to defend rather than undermine prophethood.

The rationalist critique of prophethood focused in particular on the metaphysical and mystical dimensions of prophethood, which manifested as theoretical criticism of Sufī or mystical depictions of the Prophet. By focusing on Muḥammad’s ‘ordinary’, human aspects questions were asked of the notion of the Prophet as the perfect human or *insān-i kāmīl*. This led to the issue of the *mi‘rāj* becoming topical as it cut across these suspected metaphysical aspects of prophethood. The practical manifestations of this new trend of internal critique

² *Aql* literally means understanding, perception, sober-mindedness and prudence. Humans hunt and perceive through it the things they cannot perceive through the senses. ‘*Aql* is also defined as a divine light with which a person can perceive the things that cannot be comprehended with external senses.

³ Besides the modernists, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida, a host of prominent thinkers of a new reform movement were on the rise: Muhammad Shahrur (b. 1938), Ahmed Subhy Mansour (b. 1949), Gamal al-Banna (1920-2013), Ahmed Al-Gubbanchi (b. 1958), Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1945-1985) and Farag Foda (1946-1992).

⁴ The ascension story is detailed in *Sahih Muslim*. It outlines the Prophet’s night journey from Mecca to the Mosque of Aqsa in Jerusalem, where, after leading in prayer a congregation with all the prophets, Prophet Muḥammad continues on an ascension to the heavens. His observance of all the dimensions of the creation and universe is detailed as well as his unique presence to a station of ‘two bows’ length’ proximity to God. The *ḥadīth* also reports his encounters with other prophets – Jesus, Joseph, Enoch, Moses and Ibrahim – and his observance of paradise and hell. He is reported to have received certain revelations as well as the five daily prayers on his return. For further details, see Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, *Sahih Muslim*, (Karachi: Peace Vision, 1976), 314.

against the spiritual dimensions of *nubuwwa* were socially manifested in the political oppression of the Sufi houses, *zāwiyas* and *tekkes*. Aware of these trends, Nursi and Iqbal set themselves the task of defending the mystical and metaphysical side of prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad as a major component of their prophetologies.

Nursi and Iqbal present a thought-provoking approach towards prophethood in a highly rationalised climate. This article critically examines Nursi's and Iqbal's discussion of the metaphysical dimension of Prophet Muḥammad's ascension known as the *mi'rāj*. Their choice of genre, methods and arguments in defending the spiritual dimension of *mi'rāj* as an aspect of *nubuwwa* will be examined. The aim of this article is to highlight that, although Nursi and Iqbal valued reason, in their most inner private worlds and their more mystical works, the experience of the spirit was never undermined. Both saw the limitations of 'aql and therefore also relied on the *kashf* (unveiling).⁵ Their use of literature and poetry to communicate their views of *mi'rāj* will also be discussed.

MI'RĀJ: THE ASCENSION OF THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD

The Prophet's ascension or *mi'rāj* was a major part of the *dalā'il al-nubuwwa*⁶ in the Middle Ages and later on very prominent in the literary and artistic depictions of the *mi'rājnama* (ascension treatises).⁷ These reinforced not only the 'supreme miracle' of Prophet Muḥammad, but also highlighted his unprecedented prophetic experience of having an audience with God, making his prophethood special and unique. The *mi'rāj* in this way became a subject of fascination and also ridicule in the Middle Ages.⁸ The rationalisation of miracles in general and particularly the event of the *mi'rāj* were challenged in the centuries in which Nursi and Iqbal were living.⁹ Despite their particular ways of addressing the concerns of their time, both

⁵ *Kashf* is a term in Islamic science of *tassawuf* (Sufism) that literally means 'unveiling'. This type of gnostic knowledge seeks the unveiling of the 'Ultimate Reality'. Thus, it deals with knowledge of the heart rather than of the intellect 'aql.

⁶ The *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* or *Evidences of Prophethood* became an important area of scholarly discussion during the Classical period. There were many expositions of which Abu Bakr Ahmad al-Bayhaqī's (944-1066) famous *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* is very well known. Ahmad I.-H Baihaqī and Ahmad Saqar, *Dalā'il An-Nubuwwa: Wa-ma'rifat Ahwāl Sāhib Aš-Šarī'a* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006).

⁷ *Mi'rājnama* refers to the title of the books and treatises centred on the theme and story of Prophet Muḥammad's night journey and ascension. After their first appearance in the centuries immediately after the Prophet's death, Ibn Abbas' account of the event has been one of the earlier sources. Later sources differed in their content due to their artistic and literary depictions. These became popular during the Timurid dynasty. Scholars also started to write their own *mi'rājnama* not only an account of the prophetic ascent, but intertwined their own mystical and spiritual experiences as well. These were made popular in the Turkic sultanates of the 13th-15th centuries with earlier and later versions as well. See, Christiane J. Gruber, *The Timurid Book of Ascension: A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context* (Valencia: Patrimonio, 2008), and Christiane J. Gruber, "The Prophet Muhammad's ascension (*mi'rāj*) in Islamic art and literature, ca. 1300-1600" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2005).

⁸ Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, written between 1308 and 1321, uses the ascension story of the Prophet to criticise and mock his journey to God. By placing him in the 9th *Inferno* (Hell) of the 'Eighth Circle of Hell' and depicting him as disembowelled implicates Muhammad as a schismatic. Dante Alighieri, Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹ In the 19th and 20th centuries Muslim scholars such as Muhammad Abduh Rashid Rida emphasised reason over tradition in understanding prophetic miracles. Their interpretations of prophethood conceded too much

scholars included the *mi'rāj* as a dominant theme in their prophetologies, particularly in relation to its non-rational mystical aspects.

Nursi's Defence of the Mi'rāj

Nursi's views about the necessity, reality, wisdom and fruits of the *mi'rāj* are covered in the Thirty-First Word; they pertain to his conception of the Prophet as *insān-i kāmīl*. However, his discussions of the ascension are also found in other parts of the *Risale-i Nur*.¹⁰ Nursi vividly describes the *mi'rāj* as the Prophet's 'supreme miracle' due to his spiritual journeying in the metaphysical and spiritual realm.

The Eternal Power, Which does not leave ants without a leader and bees without a queen, does not certainly deprive humanity of a Prophet's leadership. Splitting the moon was one of his miracles shown in the visible, corporeal world. His Ascension (to God's Presence) was his greatest miracle shown to the angels and spirit beings in the World of Inner Dimensions, one that proved and showed his Prophethood's sainthood. Through that miracle, that most illustrious being extended and diffused his radiance, like a flash of lightning or a bright moon, in the World of Inner Dimensions.¹¹

Nursi also elaborates the sainthood (*wilāyā*) aspect of the Prophet's messengership (*risāla*) in the Thirty-First Word as well as how the ascension is directly related to the Prophet's mission, thus confirming the ascension marks the Prophet's sainthood and opening this door of 'ascent' to other potential realities of his metaphysical essence.¹² He elucidates the significance and truth of the ascension by addressing four questions that consider four key aspects of the event: Why was the ascension necessary? What was the reality of the ascension? What was the wisdom and purpose of the ascension? What are the fruits and benefits of the ascension?¹³ As Imaduddin Khalil and Shumaila Majeed have discussed, Nursi's addressing of these four key aspects of the ascension reflects his meticulous method of looking at a subject from various angles and through different lenses in order to reiterate a point and bring to light the certitude in meaning of what he is trying to convey.¹⁴ Similarly, his style addresses

to modernism. Nursi and Iqbal were also writing in such a scholastic context. In recent times, an example of the continuation of the ridicule of Prophet Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* is Richard Dawkins' statement in a televised interview on Al Jazeera, in an attempt to ridicule a British Muslim journalist for believing in the *mi'rāj*. Mehdi Hasan, "Mehdi Hasan vs Richard Dawkins: My Faith in God is not Foolish," *New Statesman*, December 19, 2012, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2012/12/god-best-answer-why-there-something-rather-nothing>.

¹⁰ Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans Ali Unal (New Jersey: Light Inc, 2009), 9th Word, 63; 12th Word, 4th Fundamental, 151; 16th Word, 3rd-5th Ray, 213-221; 19th Word, 253; 25th Word, 446; 29th Word, 3rd Fundamental, 531. Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 2002), 6th Ray, 118; 7th Ray, The Supreme Sign, 1st Chapter, 143; The Fruits of Belief, 11th Topic, 280; 14th Ray, 496; 15th Ray, The Shining Proof, 2nd Station, 609-614. Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans Ali Unal (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2009), 3rd Flash, 3rd Point, 33. Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans by Ali Unal (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2009), 19th Letter, 17th Sign, 220; 19th Letter, 1st Addendum, 243; 19th Letter, 3rd Addendum, 252-256; 24th Letter, 2nd Addendum, 358-364; 29th Letter, 518; 29th Letter, Seeds of Reality, 543.

¹¹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 447.

¹² Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004), 577.

¹³ *Ibid*, 579-603.

¹⁴ See Imaduddin Khalil, "God's Messenger (pbuh) in the Risale-i Nur," in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi the Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman*

‘realities’ and ‘wisdoms’ as well as ‘fruits’ and ‘spiritual benefits’ of the ascension. In his use of the sun analogy to explain the necessity of the ascension, Nursi shows the ascension is a depiction of the ‘universality’ and ‘supremacy’ of the Prophet’s sainthood in comparison to other saints.

A man holds up the mirror he is holding to the sun. According to its capacity, the mirror receives light. If he directs the luminous mirror towards his dark house or his tiny, private garden, which is covered by a roof, he cannot benefit in relation to the sun’s value, but only in accordance with the capacity of the mirror. A second man, however, puts down the mirror, faces the sun directly, and sees its majesty and understands its grandeur. Then he climbs a very high mountain, sees the brilliance of the sun’s broad dominion and converses with it in person and without veil. Then he returns and makes large window in his house and in the roof over his garden, and opens up ways to the sun in the sky, and speaks and converses with the constant light of the actual sun.¹⁵

By means of this analogy, Nursi achieved two results: first, he shows the difference between the ‘degrees of sainthood’ as depicted in the first man and ‘degrees of prophethood’ as depicted by the second man; second, through the notion of Divine proximity or ‘*aqrabiya*’ and ‘*qurbiya*,’ he affirms the role of prophethood in relation to the Divine as being superior to that of the spiritual perfection and journeying of the saint. Nursi expresses this point by stating that sainthood proceeds through shadow, “while in messengership there is no shadow, it looks directly to the oneness of the All-Glorious One”.¹⁶

As for the Ascension, since it was the greatest wonder of Muhammad’s sainthood and also its highest degree, it was transformed into the degree of messengership. The inner face of the Ascension was sainthood; it went from creation to Creator. While its apparent face was messengership, it came from Creator to creation.¹⁷

Therefore, just as the ascension was a manifestation of his sainthood, the Prophet’s return to humanity marks the *risāla* or messengership. In this way, Nursi explains the ‘reality of the ascension’ as ‘consisting of the journeying of the person of Muḥammad through the degrees of perfection, by showing that special servant all the works, spheres and levels of Almighty Allah’s dominicality’.¹⁸ This constitutes the conferment of the highest perfections bestowed upon the best of creation: ‘humanity’ and the ‘chosen among humanity the prophets’ and the ‘seal of all prophets’. Nursi argues that God’s various names and titles were manifested completely upon Prophet Muḥammad, to show His works to His ‘special servant’ or ‘*abduhu*’.¹⁹

Said Nursi (Istanbul: Sozler, 1995); Shumaila Majeed and Amjad Waheed, “The Miracle of Prophet Muhammad’s (Peace be upon him) Ascension: A Comparative study of the views of Said Nursi and Allama Iqbal,” in *International Bediüzzaman Symposium Papers in Turkey (English)* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat, 2013).

¹⁵ Nursi, *The Words*, 579-580.

¹⁶ Sainthood is spiritual journeying in the levels close to God; it needs a certain amount of time and many degrees must be traversed. In contrast, messengership, whose light is greatest, looks to the mystery of uncovering Divine immediacy, for which the passing instant is sufficient. *Ibid*, 580-581.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 588.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 582, 584, 593.

The elaboration of the word ‘*abduhu*’ is important because the verse that mentions the *isra*’ or night journey (Qur’ān 17:1) also uses this same adjective to refer to the Prophet.²⁰

In relation to the purpose and wisdom of the ascension, Nursi explains its incomprehensibility to the human intellect as being due to it being so exalted; he suggests, however, that certain indications enable it to be known.²¹ One such indication is when the Prophet passed from the realm of ‘multiplicity’ to the realm of ‘unity’. Due to the *nūr al-wahdat* (light of unity), he witnessed the realm of the *tajallī ahad* (manifestation of Oneness).²² Nursi describes the purpose and wisdom of the ascension in relation to the Creator and purpose of existence in the following two passages.

The Creator of the universe chose an eminent individual to represent all creatures, and took him by means of an Ascension that was like a link from the furthest levels of multiplicity to the source of unity.²³

Thus, the wisdom of the All-Glorious One of Beauty, Who opens the palace of the world as though it was an exhibition in order to see and display His own transcendent beauty and perfections, requires that He should inform someone of the meaning of the palace’s signs so that they do not remain vain and without benefit for conscious beings on the earth.²⁴

Nursi confirms the wisdom acquired by means of the ascension by enumerating various ‘fruits’ or gifts resulting from the return of the Prophet in his vocation of messengership (*risāla*). The five fruits include first, that the Prophet had ‘vision of the ‘truths’ from which the pillars of belief originate by seeing the angels, paradise and the hereafter, as well as the ‘Majestic Being’, and that the elevated status of humanity is shown as the ‘fairest composition’ and ‘creation’s best pattern’. Second, Nursi argues the ascension brought Islam’s essentials like the five daily prayers to humanity and jinn as well as other gifts. Through the ascension, humans learnt what pleased God, and also satisfied their human curiosity about the ultimate destination. Third, the Prophet saw the ‘hidden treasury’, the ‘eternal happiness – paradise,’ with absolute certainty. Fourth, the Prophet was specially honoured with the vision of God’s beautiful ‘countenance’ and stated others could also be honoured.²⁵ Finally, each person has the potential also to ascend and be a ‘valued fruit’ or ‘darling beloved’ of the Creator, if they also adhere to the blueprint left by Prophet Muḥammad.²⁶

Nursi includes his discussion of the Prophet’s ascension in bodily form right after the fruits of *mi’rāj*. By placing the physical aspect of the *mi’rāj* after the fruits, he is trying to illustrate the physical journey of *mi’rāj* is also a great bounty for the Prophet. He states in the Thirty-First Word that God “would make Muḥammad’s blessed body accompany his spirit in

²⁰ The exact verse is, “Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing”.

²¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 590-591.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 591.

²⁴ Ibid, 593.

²⁵ Ibid, 582.

²⁶ Ibid, 586.

ascending to the lote-tree of the furthest limit, the ‘trunk’ of the Garden of Abode”.²⁷ His stance regarding the real physical occurrence of the ascension is also reiterated in the Nineteenth Letter, where he recalls the ‘miracle’ of the Prophet’s explanation of his journey to Jerusalem to his opponents, who challenged his one night journey.²⁸ He briefly relates the incident as recorded in Muslim, Tirmidhi, Bukhārī and Ibn Hanbāl.²⁹ This shows Nursi’s emphasis of the incident as well as his confirmation of the mainstream view that the event of *al-isra’ wa’l mi’rāj* was a real and physical event.

The extent and reality of this ‘physical journey’ through the vast sphere of contingency in a small fraction of time is furthered by Nursi’s explanation of the Prophet’s ‘traversing the entire sphere of contingency like lightning’.³⁰ Fethullah Gülen alludes that Nursi is one of the first scholars to have said the Prophet reached a point between *imkan* (contingency) and *wujūd* (the world of real existence) on his journey of ascension,³¹ the former being the world where creation exists and the latter the world where God’s presence or *dhāt* (Divine Being or Essence) is.³²

Iqbal’s Defence of the Mi’rāj

Like Nursi, Iqbal held the theme of *al-isra’* (the night journey) and the *mi’rāj* to be important aspects of his prophetology. In the *Reconstruction of Islam*, Iqbal highlights the key role of Prophet Muḥammad as essentially ‘serving and guiding’ the early Muslim community.³³ He learns from the miracle of the *mi’rāj* of Prophet Muḥammad that ‘heaven’ is within the reach of mankind. According to Iqbal, the Prophet’s return from the highest heavens discloses the psychological difference between the prophetic and mystic types of consciousness. In lecture five of the *Reconstruction*, Iqbal, quoting Abdul Quddus Gangohi (1456–1537), discusses the

²⁷ Ibid, 588-589.

²⁸ Nursi elaborates in the Nineteenth Letter that “When God’s Messenger informed the Quraysh of this event, they refused to believe him, saying: ‘If you actually traveled to the Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, as you claim, describe its doors and walls.’ God’s Messenger would later say: ‘I was annoyed by their question and denial in a way that had never happened to me before. Suddenly, God lifted the veil between me and Bayt al-Maqdis (Masjid al-Aqsa) and showed it to me. I looked at it and described it as it stood before my eyes.’ Thus the Quraysh realized that God’s Messenger was giving the correct and complete description.” Nursi, *The Letters*, 201.

²⁹ Siddiqi, *Sahih Muslim*, 1:156-57; I. Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, vol. II (Beirut, Dar-al-fikr, 1931), 3133; Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 7 (Beirut: n.p., n.d.), 23, 5:66; Ahmad Ibn, *Musnad Imam Ahmad* (Beirut: Dar-al-fikr, 1993), 3:378.

³⁰ Nursi elaborates in the Thirty-First Word that “since time is like an aspect or a ‘ribbon’ of motion, a rule that is in force in motion is also in force in time. While we would see the same amount of things during an hour as the one mounted on the hour-hand, which moves in the smallest circle at the slowest speed, God’s Messenger, like the one mounted on the hand showing fractions of the hour to the tenth power, gets on the mount of Divine assistance and, in the same space of time, traverses the entire Sphere of Contingency like lightning. Seeing the wonders in the inner and external dimensions of contingent existence and rising as far as the Divine realm’s limits, he is honored with Divine conversation and vision of His Beauty, receives the decree, and returns to his duty. It was possible for him to do that, and he did it.” Nursi, *The Words*, 590.

³¹ M. Fethullah Gülen, “*The Essentials of the Islamic Faith*,” trans. Ali Ünal (New Jersey: Light Inc, 2014), 164-165.

³² Nursi places a disclaimer towards the end of this discussion stating “God has nothing to do with corporeality and is absolutely uncontained by time and space. So, all these examples and comparisons are aimed to make a very subtle matter understandable by human mind.” Nursi. *The Words*, 590.

³³ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2011), 54.

psychological meaning of the *mi'rāj* in the cultural history of Islam: "Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned".³⁴ Here Iqbal is showing the significant difference of the prophetic consciousness and 'sacrifice' in his wanting to return to his community, as opposed to the mystic's desire to remain alone in his communion with the Divine. The broader theme of the greatness of prophethood (*nubuwwa*) or even messengership (*risāla*) to that of the mystic or saint (*wali*) is discussed in relation to the prophetic psychological ability being apt to receive revelation and not the mystics.

The *mi'rāj* was a dominant theme in Iqbal's thought. He considered the ascension not merely on its own accord, but for the psychological, cultural and historical implications the concept had upon Muslim thought, culture and history. In other speeches and letters, Iqbal refers to the positive 'psychological culture' of Muslims and Islam by upholding this tradition. These interesting aspects of his view of the ascension are illustrated well in his address to the Fifth Indian Oriental Conference, held at Lahore in November 1928.

Professor Bevan has given us valuable historical discussion of the story of the *mi'raj*. To my mind, however, what is, culturally speaking, more important is the intense appeal that the story has always made to the average Muslim, and the manner in which Muslim thought and imagination have worked on it. It must be something more than a mere religious dogma, for it appealed to the great mind of Dante, and, through Muhyiuddin ibn-ul-Arabi, furnished a model for the sublimest part of the Divine Comedy, which symbolizes the culture of mediaeval Europe.³⁵

Iqbal's interest in the concept was also in relation to the physiological possibility of its occurrence within the confines of his own philosophical enquiry.³⁶ However, rather than emphasising issues in relation to the reality of the *mi'rāj*, he emphasises the impact and significance of the *mi'rāj* upon humanity and the socio-cultural and scientific possibilities that it presents to the human psyche. He states, "the ascension of Mustafa has revealed to me that the heavens are within man's reach."³⁷ Despite his interest in the physiological aspect of the *mi'rāj*, Iqbal's discussion of it is not rooted in theology. He carefully constructs his exposition in the discipline of sociology and history, and thus does not conform to traditional theological

³⁴ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 54. Fethullah Gülen says this is the difference between a saint and a prophet. A prophet would always think of his community even if he is in heaven. See Salih Yücel and İsmail Albayrak, *The Art of Coexistence: Pioneering Role of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014).

³⁵ Iqbal continues, "The historian may rest satisfied with the conclusion that the Muslim belief in the Prophet's Ascension finds no justification in the Quran; yet the psychologist who aims at a deeper view of Islamic culture cannot ignore the fact that the outlook given by the Quran to its followers does demand the story as a formative element in the world-picture of Islam. The truth is that it is absolutely necessary to answer all such questions, and mutually to adjust their answers into a systematic whole of thought and emotion. Without this it is impossible to discover the ruling concepts of a given culture, and to appreciate the spirit that permeates it. However, a comprehensive view of the culture of Islam, as an expression of the spiritual life of its followers, is easy of achievement," Muhammad Iqbal, "A Plea for a Deeper Study of Muslim Scientists," *Islamic Culture* 2 (1929): 210-229.

³⁶ See the notes on *Javidnama* in Syed Abdul Wahid, ed., *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 78.

³⁷ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 54.

arguments. One interpretation of the *mi'rāj* according to Iqbal is a change or revolution in consciousness, the 'prophetic consciousness' being totally different to the common consciousness.³⁸ In this way, he transfers the discussion of the physical journey to a psychological one. According to Abdullah, in Iqbal's rendition of the *mi'rāj* in the *Javidnama*, he does not follow the 'actual pattern of the journey' of the *isra'* and *mi'rāj* in his poem, out of respect for the Prophet, 'whose special privilege it was to have ascended the Heavens with prophetic dignity and sublimity', as 'no other human being according to Muslims can have that honour'.³⁹ Despite Abdullah's assertion, Iqbal pursued his own 'ascension' or an imagined one in the *Javidnama*.

This is consistent with Iqbal's interpretation of the ascension that signifies a higher state of ordinary human consciousness and not specifically a physical one. It is possible and tempting to read the Jungian philosophy of subconscious archetypes in Iqbal's *Javidnama*, but it suffices to say that Iqbal has also engaged this theory very well. For Iqbal, persons other than the Prophet can also attain some sort of super-consciousness, as exemplified in *Javidnama*. However, he also concedes the Prophet's ascension was a unique experience and without counterpart, due to his particular prophetic consciousness that distinguishes him from others.⁴⁰

Moreover, Iqbal engages creatively in the *Javidnama* with the notion of the *mi'rāj* in Islam, by addressing the need for man's soul to ascend. Nevertheless, due to the disparity in Iqbal's thought regarding the physical possibility of the *mi'rāj*, some 'aql scholars have inferred his acceptance of bodily ascension while others reject the physical journey.⁴¹ Qaiser Nazier interprets Iqbal's understanding of the *mi'rāj* to be a spiritual one, and suggests Iqbal, like Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), denies its physical occurrence. Rather, he sees this as a 'symbolic' concept relating perhaps to the spiritual reality of Prophet Muḥammad.⁴² Nazier's authority on this point is questionable as there is no evidence to suggest Rūmī ever denied the bodily ascension. I contend, however, in line with Iqbal's general approach of discussing Islam in the *Reconstruction*, where he considers a wider readership, with respect to the *mi'rāj* he also situates his exposition in the non-theological disciplines of sociology and history, and defends the *mi'rāj* by avoiding the polemics of its physical vs. spiritual possibility.

Iqbal believes in the *mi'rāj* and contemplates it as proof that man can conquer the whole of the universe. In *Bāl-ī Jibrīl* (Gabriel's Wing) he says, "I have learnt this lesson from the ascension of Muḥammad, that heaven itself is within the range of man".⁴³ It is therefore the accessibility of the entire cosmos to man that constitutes the greatest lesson of the prophetic

³⁸ S. M. Abdullah, "The Nature of Dante's Influence on Iqbal", *Iqbal Review* XXIV, no. 1 (April 1983): 25-31.

³⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 59.

⁴¹ Nazir Qaiser, *Rumi's Impact on Iqbal's Religious Thought* (Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1986).

⁴² He argues that reality is spaceless, for Iqbal the "*mi'raj* is a spiritual transformation both far and high, proceed from the consciousness, whereas the flight – means transformation of this consciousness, brought forth by the urge and zeal, liberating us from far and high". Ibid, 79.

⁴³ Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996), 364.

ascension.⁴⁴ Iqbal states this in the poem “Mi‘raj” in *Zarb-e-Kaleem* (The Blow of Moses by His Staff):

A mote endowed with strong desire for flight
Can reach the Sun and Moon with effort slight.

If chest of partridge fire and zeal emit,
My friends, in fight with hawk it can acquit.

Ascension means to gauge a Muslim’s heart,
The Pleiades are the target of his dart.⁴⁵

With the objective of using this great event with significance for ‘Muslim history and culture,’ Iqbal conveys this sense of exploration and drive in the poem “Shab-e-Meeraj” (Night of the Celestial Ascension) in his book *Bang-e-Dara* (Call of the Caravan Bell):

This call of the evening star is coming from the sky
This is the night before which the dawn prostrates

“For courage, the *Arsh-i-Barin* is only a pace away”
The *mi‘raj*’s night is saying this to the Muslim⁴⁶

The theme of the *mi‘rāj* in Iqbal’s works is beyond the discussion of the bodily or spiritual possibility of the prophetic event. Iqbal’s literary masterpiece, the *Javidnama*, is not only a literary exposition of his major philosophical outlook and thought,⁴⁷ but also a *mi‘rājnama*, similar in style to other comparable examples of the poet-philosopher’s mystical and spiritual experiences. Jilānī assumes the *Javidnama* positions the poem as a mystical or spiritual journey or experience including the intellectual and philosophical thought of the poet.⁴⁸ Jilānī notes the poet’s other works, particularly his presidential address and *Reconstruction*, depict his efforts to recreate Muslim thought and socio-political change, but the *Javidnama* is the essential transformation that he proposes for a spiritual change.⁴⁹

Like his predecessors who emulated the *mi‘rāj* story in their *mi‘rājnamas*, Iqbal “tries to follow and emulate the example of his ‘Master’ – the Prophet, when in the celebrated *Javidnama* he has unfolded the fascinating story of his poetic journey through the heavens, guided by his mentor ‘*Pir-i-Rumi*’”.⁵⁰ Zinda Rud (living stream) is the poet’s pseudonym as a spiritual traveller in this heavenly excursion and also a metaphor for ‘prophetic activity in

⁴⁴ See, Majeed and Amjad, “The Miracle of Prophet Muhammad’s Ascension, 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid, also see Iqbal, *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal*, 529.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 278.

⁴⁷ Schimmel argues the *Javidnama* is not a personal manifesto or reflection of the poet’s mystical experience or ‘ascension’ as previous works of the same genre, but rather his poetic ‘masterpiece’ that communicates his main thoughts and philosophy. Annemarie Schimmel, “Muhammad Iqbal 1873-1938. The Ascension of the Poet,” *Die Welt des Islams* 3 (1954): 145-157.

⁴⁸ S. M. Zaman, “Iqbal’s *Javidnama*,” *Iqbal Review* XXV, no. 1 (April 1984): 59-92.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁵⁰ S. M. Zaman, “Iqbal and The Fundamentals of Islam,” *Iqbal Review* 36, no. 3 (1995): 105-113.

Islamic mystical thought.’⁵¹ Iqbal practically discusses his own philosophical outlooks and influences in his life and times, which are indicated by the names and inferences given throughout this piece. Towards the end is a plea for the youth of the future through advice to his son Javid, a name that has the literal meaning of ‘eternal.’

THE AYAT AL-KUBRA AND JAVIDNAMA IN THE LITERARY TRADITION OF MI'RĀJNAMA

Nursi's *Ayat al-Kubra* (Supreme Sign) and Iqbal's *Javidnama* are not mere imitations or impersonations of the ascension of Prophet Muḥammad. They are better contextualised in contrast to the great literary genre of *mi'rājnama*. The *mi'rājnama* or ascension story became a dominant theme of Islamic literary art in the 1300s until the 1600s in Arabic, Persian and Turkic languages.⁵² The narratives and *na't* (poems in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad) about the *mi'rāj* were dedicated to honour the Prophet Muḥammad. They reinforced the significance of this event as well as his prophethood during the period of religious fluctuation in the 13th century.⁵³ Similarly, the *Ayat al-Kubra* and *Javidnama* continue this cultural and literary tradition in the 20th century. In this section, the *Ayat al-Kubra* and *Javidnama* will be considered in light of *mi'rājnamas* to assess the influence of the *mi'rājnama* upon Nursi and Iqbal. The similarities and differences between Nursi's and Iqbal's unique renditions of *mi'rājnama* in these volumes will also be examined.

Nursi's Ayat al-Kubra

Nursi's *Ayat al-Kubra* fits very well in the classical genre of the *mi'rājnama*, such as those of al-Qushayri's (d.1073) and al-Sulami's (d. 1021). As will be demonstrated, Nursi's key work inspired by the *mi'rāj* is the *Ayat al-Kubra* in the *Rays Collection*, which also bears a great resemblance to and may be comparable with Iqbal's *Javidnama*, which will be discussed later in the article. The first chapter of the *Ayat al-Kubra* is called the “Observation of the Traveller questioning the Universe concerning His Maker.”⁵⁴ The whole treatise is a reflective commentary on verse 17:44 from the Qur'ān, “the seven heavens and the earth, and all that is in them extol and glorify Him.” In a manner similar yet distinct from Iqbal's *Javidnama*, Nursi's narrative in *Ayat al-Kubra* is an emulation of the Prophetic ascension. The narrative style reflects the theologian's innermost spiritual experience captured in a theological narrative dialogue of the voyager across the cosmos and creation.

Although Nursi alludes to the event of the *mi'rāj* only a few times in this treatise, he takes the traveller through an imaginative mental journey that consists of a dialogue with the cosmos, testimony of the heavens, atmosphere, earth, seas and rivers, mountains, trees and plants, animal and bird realms. Then he proceeds to the realm of humanity, the prophets, exacting

⁵¹ Javed Majeed, *Muhammad Iqbal: Islam, Aesthetics, and Postcolonialism* (New Delhi: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 46.

⁵² Gruber, “The Prophet Muhammad's ascension (mi'raj) in Islamic art and literature.”

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Nursi, *The Rays*, 131-160.

scholars and spiritual guides, through to the testimony of the angels, spirit beings, upright testimony of Prophet Muḥammad, his context and the Qur'ān, right through to the Divine Presence—station of direct address.

Nursi's *Ayat al-Kubra* represents a creative narrative similar to other *mi'rājnamas*, particularly the more mystical ones like al-Qushayri's *Kitab al-Mi'rāj*,⁵⁵ where the motif of the ascension is used to explain mystical concepts through theme-specific sayings. Like Qushayri, Nursi also sees the Prophet's ascension as a blueprint for a spiritual voyage toward witnessing God (*mashahid al-haqq*).⁵⁶ Yet, Nursi's version does not engage more directly with the narrative of the Prophet's ascension, unlike other *mi'rājnamas*. He engages more closely with the key propositions about the Oneness of God and the Prophet as key signposts in all individual ascents towards the Divine presence.

Indeed, every voyager who comes to the hospice and the realm of this world, opens his eyes and wonders who is the master of this fine hospice, which resembles a most generous banquet, a most ingenious exhibition, a most impressive camp and training ground, a most amazing and wondrous place of recreation, a most profound and wise place of instruction. He asks himself too who is the author of this great book, and who is the monarch of this lofty realm. There first presents itself to him the beautiful face of the heavens, inscribed with the gilt lettering of the stars. That face calls him saying, "Look at me, and I shall guide you to what you seek." He looks then and sees a manifestation of dominicality performing various tasks in the heaven. There is within this dominical activity a truth consisting of subjugation, administration, revolution, ordering, cleansing, and employment. This truth, with its grandeur and comprehensiveness, bears witness to the necessary existence and unity of the Creator of the Heavens and testifies to that Existence being more manifest than that of the heavens. Hence it was said in the First Degree of the First Station: There is no god but God, the Necessary Being, to Whose Necessary Existence in Unity the heavens and all they contain testify, through the testimony of the sublimity of the comprehensiveness of the truth of subjugation, administration, revolution, ordering, cleansing, and employment, a truth vast and perfect, and to be observed.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, his 'narrative style,' may be well situated beyond *mi'rājnamas* since it contains creative elements and personal experiences similar to those found in Ibn al-Nafīs's (d.1288) theological novel *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah fil Siera al-Nabawiyyah* (The Treatise of Kamil on the Prophet's Biography or Theologus Autodidactus). The use and reference of the theological novel in this article is to unpack the meaning of *mi'rājnamas* and show other influences upon Nursi's work that distinguishes his treatise from the other *mi'rājnamas*, and in fact re-defines the genre in light of his work. Thus, Nursi's *Ayat al-Kubra* bears greater similarities to Ibn al-Nafīs' theological novel than Iqbal's *Javidnama* due to its heavy theological content. Just as Ibn al-Nafīs wanted to show human being's ability and limitations to find God, and also highlights the need for revelation, similarly Nursi's main theological concern is establishing the 'Necessary Existence' or 'Oneness' of the Creator through an exploration of questions and possibilities hypothetically raised by a person who may be

⁵⁵ Al-Qushayrī, Abū al-Qāsim. *Kitāb al-Mi'rāj*. (Bayrūt : al-Furāt, 2016).

⁵⁶ Nursi, *The Rays*, 131-160.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 131.

atheistically inclined. The ‘observer’ in the *Ayat al-Kubra* resembles the protagonist in Ibn Nafis’s *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah*, who traverses through the various spheres of the heavens each representing a stage in human conscious development of God as the sole and unique Creator of the heavens and earth. Nursi divulges his own *mi’rāj* as the *Ayat al-Kubra* represents the scholar’s most critical argumentation, logical and scientific worldview, intertwined with metaphysical ideals, contemplative exposition and theological defence of faith against modern scepticism.⁵⁸

Iqbal’s Javidnama

In *Javidnama* also, the influences of other *mi’rājnamas*, such as Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 878), Abdul Karim al-Jili (1365-1424) and Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), are evident in this rhythmic poetic masterpiece of Iqbal’s literary works.⁵⁹ After the first translation of the *Javidnama* into Italian by Alessandro Bausani, many scholars noted the great influence of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.⁶⁰ However, the historical accounts of *mi’rājnamas* that were available to Iqbal would have also prepared him for the task of communicating the knowledge of his time and expressing it in a creative, poetic and narrative way.

What makes *Javidnama* one of Iqbal’s masterpieces is the fact he was able to combine rational proofs, science and philosophy with his own theological outlook and present it in the narrative and literary style of *mi’rājnamas*. As has been established, he was certainly not the first; Dante was another example who resembles closely the thematic style of Iqbal’s *Javidnama*. Other theological novels even predating the *Divine Comedy* and Timurid *mi’rājnamas* were the theological novels of Al-Baghawi (d. 1122)⁶¹ and Ibn al-Nafīs (1213-

⁵⁸ Nursi’s discourse in the *Ayat al-Kubra* differs to his treatise on the *mi’rāj* in the Thirty-First Word. The latter being his theological discussions on based on *khasf* and the former (the *Ayat al-Kubra*) is a creative narrative of his own personal *mi’rāj* that is based more on logical and scientific observations.

⁵⁹ Abdullah discusses the undoubted claim of Dante’s influence on Iqbal particularly in relation to the composition of the *Javidnama*. He details at length the similarities, but highlights the important differences between the two literary works. Abdullah argues that Dante was influenced by the *mirājnamas* he inherited from the Muslim scholars and the actual theme of *al-isra’ wa’l mi’rāj* or night journey and ascension in Islamic belief. He assumes Iqbal had just as much access to those classical works as he did to Dante. Nevertheless, the historical date of the publication of Iqbal’s *Javidnama* depicts he wrote this ‘masterpiece’ after a thorough study of the *Divine Comedy* – and perhaps Miguel Asin’s research about the connection of the *Divine Comedy* and its Islamic origins. Evidently, Iqbal seems to have responded in a similar style purposively, like Dante; nevertheless, his response reflects his own intellectual and historical context, as he never departs from the scientific and rational realities even though he wrote in this ‘imaginary ascent of the heavens’. Abdullah, “The Nature of Dante’s Influence on Iqbal,” 25-31.

⁶⁰ Dante’s *Divine Comedy* became a masterpiece in Italian literature. Alessandro Bausani rendered in Italian the famous *Javidnama*, the ‘ascension to heaven,’ perhaps Iqbal’s most interesting and ‘most ambitious and most complex’ poem, which often is called his masterpiece. Fazlur Rahman, “Iqbal and Mysticism,” *Iqbal as a Thinker (Eight Essays)* (1944): 226.

⁶¹ Al-Baghawi (d. 1117 or 1122) was from the town of Bagh (also called Baghshur) near Herat, having trained in *hadīth*, *tafsīr* and hagiographical stories under his famed mentor al-Tha’labi (d. 1035). See, Gruber, “*The Timurid Book of Ascension*,” and Gruber, “The Prophet Muhammad’s Ascension (Mi’raj) in Islamic Art and Literature.”

1288).⁶² In my assessment, these two authors inspired Iqbal more than Dante.⁶³ It should be noted the discussion of the theological novel is used to unpack the narrative style of the *mi'rājnamas* and show either the thematic similarity or stylistic similarity to Iqbal's work.

Ibn al-Nafīs' work is particularly relevant, as Iqbal's methodology in the *Javidnama* has been influenced by and bears a great resemblance to Ibn al-Nafīs' theological novel, *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah* than the *Divine Comedy*.⁶⁴ Ibn al-Nafīs presents an even greater closeness than Dante to the aims and methods presented in Iqbal's *Javidnama*. One of the main purposes behind *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah* was to explain Islamic religious teachings in terms of science and philosophy through the use of a fictional narrative; hence, this was an attempt at reconciling reason with revelation and blurring the line between the two. Ibn al-Nafīs' response to Ibn Tufayl⁶⁵ is also arguably the first science fiction novel as well,⁶⁶ as he creatively includes his knowledge of the natural world and biology to speculate about what the future held for his protagonist Kamil, up to and including the apocalypse.⁶⁷ Similarly, Iqbal's poetical lines incorporate physics, philosophy, economics, sociology and psychology in the *Javidnama*. The guide Zinda Rud leads the protagonist through the heavens, in the section on the "Zarvan – the spirit of Time and Space," which demonstrates Iqbal's philosophical enquiry into the relation of the soul and how it traverses space and time as it leaves the body.⁶⁸

Although the protagonist in the *Javidnama* – Zinda Rud – is not a castaway like the protagonist Kamil (Perfect) in Ibn al-Nafīs' *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah*, nonetheless, they both use the narrative genre to convey philosophical and theological truths. Ibn al-Nafīs' work considers the biography and prophethood 'risāla' of Prophet Muḥammad, while Iqbal emphasises his 'wilāyā', through the adaptation of the prophetic ascension. Moreover, just as Ibn al-Nafīs upholds Ghazālī's position with regards to revelation and prophethood, and human beings' dependence upon both, through an emphasis of similar methods, and refutes Ibn

⁶² Ala-al-din abu Al-Hassan Ali ibn Abi-Hazm al-Qarshi al-Dimashqi, known as Ibn al-Nafīs, was an Arab physician who is mostly famous for being the first to describe the pulmonary circulation of blood. He was born in 1213 in Damascus.

⁶³ Al-Baghawi chose fictional narrative as his primary device for religious exposition. He realised that points of dogma could be best expounded through the joint efforts of proselytism and entertainment, while tales that inspire admiration or provoke fear afford a powerful introduction to the religious sciences. He understood that narratives can reveal the nature of God, reassert moral behaviour and solve ethical problems simply by drawing attention to the Day of Judgment and its consequences. Similarly, Iqbal has chosen this genre to communicate his understanding of phenomenon and theology to the people. See Gruber, "The Prophet Muhammad's Ascension (Mi'raj) in Islamic Art and Literature."

⁶⁴ See, Max Meyerhof and Joseph Schacht, eds., *The Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn al-Nafīs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

⁶⁵ Abubakar Ibn Tufayl (1105–1185) was an Andalusian Muslim Polymath and a philosopher novelist who wrote the famous treatise of the first philosophical novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan* also known as *Philosophus Autodidactus* in the Western world. Ibn al-Nafīs' work was a response in the same literary style to Ibn Tufayl's novel.

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Nafīs was a Syrian Sunni Muslim who followed the Shafi legal school of law. He disagrees with Ibn Tufayl's philosophical novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan* particularly on the issues of revelation, guidance and prophecy.

⁶⁷ See, Lenn Evan Goodman, *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Muhsin Mahdi, "Remarks on the 'Theologus Autodidactus' of Ibn Al-Nafīs," *Studia Islamica* 17 (1970): 197-209.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Iqbal, *Javidnama* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 36, stanza 395-340.

Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān*, similarly Iqbal also depicts the significance and 'sublimity' of Prophet Muḥammad in the *Javidnama*, through a juxtaposition of Dante's depiction of the Prophet in the *Divine Comedy*. Thus, Iqbal's *Javidnama* has been adopted from Ibn al-Nafis' *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyyah* not only in style but in argumentation as well. However, his is a modern rendition of the classical text, illustrating the continuity and change in the genre of *mi'rājnamas*.

The *Javidnama* is a break from Iqbal's previous Persian poems⁶⁹ as it is written in narrative style; it is a *mi'rājnama* (as established earlier). As Arthur J. Arberry notes in his introduction to his translation of the *Javidnama*, the poem is a description of a spiritual journey made by the poet from earth through the 'spheres' of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn – beyond the spheres to the presence of God.⁷⁰ Arberry also notes the prophet's *mi'rāj* naturally forms a theme of meditation and part of the '*imitatio prophetae*' or '*imitatio muhammadi*' for many pious Muslims and mystics throughout the centuries. Iqbal therefore had many models and precedents for this emulation of the ascension and chose this to express his doctrine of Muslim regeneration and self-realisation or *khudhi*.⁷¹

The *Javidnama* encompasses Iqbal's intellectual and philosophical enquiry. It is a fine expression of the poet's inward intellectual and spiritual journeying towards God in imitation of the prophet's *mi'rāj* through the spheres. For Iqbal too, in each sphere, space or station/planet, a significant personality emerges – the dialogues reflect his intellectual quest. In this emulation of the prophetic ascension, Iqbal seeks a revival and re-ignition of the Muslim *umma* (community).

The symbolic journey includes the '*Pir-e Rum*' or 'Sage of Rome' (Rūmī) as his guide. Iqbal has purposely aligned himself with the mystical 13th century Sufi poet Rūmī as a proponent of 'love', suggesting Iqbal envisaged his own 'ascension' as ignited by the sage. On his way, the different planets, stations and people depict Iqbal's intellectual academic awareness of these various theories, and the philosophies and personalities symbolise key themes in the *Javidnama* that dominate Iqbal's thought. The pattern of his ascent through different spheres depicts Iqbal's engagement with various Eastern and Western philosophies in his life. Iqbal is outlining his final conclusions about his intellectual and spiritual findings; he is also trying to provide a critique of European thought and its 'insufficiency.' By going through the '*Tasin* of Christ',⁷² he presents the gloomy reality of Europe caught in a web of its own greed of interest giving and taking, capitalism and 'Christ misunderstood'.⁷³ By incorporating various personalities from the ancient and modern East and West, he commends some streams of thought, such as Hallaj's mysticism that cost him his life, as praiseworthy, also of Rūmī and Mirza Asadullah

⁶⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Iqbal was reading and inspired by Mansur Al-Hallaj's *Book of Tawasin*. "*Tawasin*" is the plural of "*tasin*" which are the first two letters ("*twa*" and "*sin*") opening Surah Naml (27, The Ants). These letters are called the *muqattaat* (abbreviated letters) and no one can be certain of their meaning.

⁷³ Iqbal, *Javidnama*, 49.

Baig Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) and other heroes of love.⁷⁴ He also favours Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Said Halim Pasa (1865-1921) for their pan-Islamic outlook and particularly praises al-Afghani's anti-nationalism.⁷⁵ He is relentlessly critical of the Eastern 'imitation of the West,' suggesting the 'Turk, Persian, Arab' who are intoxicated with Europe are worse than Westerners.⁷⁶ Iqbal is basically suggesting, amid all these views and influences of East and West, the selfhood or *khudhi* must be retained – in this example, Prophet Muḥammad becomes the ultimate vicegerent or caretaker of earth that should be emulated, the 'Chosen One' as he describes him, or the one who sought to witness the 'Essence' and was not satisfied with the 'attributes of God only'. In this prolonged journey and dialogue of ascent through various ancient and modern theories, Iqbal finally reaches 'beyond the spheres' into the 'presence of God' in a similar fashion to the Prophet.⁷⁷ It may be added that a key theme in this magnum opus is the message that only through love, represented by Rūmī, can Zinda Rud enter the presence of the Divine, even though the journey may be long and tumultuous.

The similarities and differences between Ayat al-Kubra and Javidnama

The structure and style of *Javidnama* differs from that of *Ayat al-Kubra*, with the former being the magnum opus of the poet's most profound poetry written in Persian (original), while the latter is a narrative style and a masterpiece in its own right of the theologian's innermost spiritual experience 'penned' in a theological narrative dialogue of the traveller or voyager across the cosmos and creation. Both works are written in emulation of the epic prophetic journey through the spheres to the presence of God, known as the *mi'rāj*, and may be classified among other similar narrations in Islamic literary tradition known as *mi'rājnamas*.⁷⁸ Iqbal's poetical verses fit this genre more naturally than Nursi's exposition in the *Ayat al-Kubra*; however, Ibn al-Nafis' theological novel is more comparable to Nursi's narrative of the traveller questioning the universe.

The *Javidnama* contains Iqbal's main philosophical outlook and is said to be the "poetical version of his *Reconstruction*."⁷⁹ As Iqbal moves thematically from the modern plights and suffering of the 'humiliating state of the *umma*' to dialogues with historical personalities of the past like Mansur al-Hallāj (858-922), Rūmī, Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan Ghalib (1797-1869), al-Afghani and prophets, he also synthesises their works and builds his main climax of love knowing true Self, which in Iqbal's scenario takes him to the Divine Presence. For Nursi, the theme or discipline of his discussion is predominantly theology (*kalām*) and the struggles with the present age with causality, naturalism, existentialism and atheism. Through a question and answer dialogue with various parts of creation, he also alludes to scientific and rational

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 19-111.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 137.

⁷⁸ Gruber, "The Prophet Muhammad's Ascension (Mi'raj) in Islamic Art and Literature."

⁷⁹ There is a well-argued position about the internal consistency in *Reconstruction* and a parallel between *Reconstruction* and *Javidnama*. See M. Shabbir Ahsen, "Iqbal's Conception of God (review)" *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 4 (2012): 602-604.

possibilities, making it less fictional, to prove that only through an intellectual and spiritual examination of reality and truth can the Necessary Existent One be found in an unshakeable affirmation of His Existence and Unity by the testimony and witnessing of various aspects of the cosmos, earth, creatures, creation, prophets, scholars, revelation and God hierarchy.

Interestingly, *Ayat al-Kubra* was written in Kastamono in 1938, which was two years after the publication of *Javidnama*. There is, however, no evidence to date of any contact or access of one scholar to the other. This suggests both scholars foresaw an urgent inclination or need to respond creatively to the philosophical theological outlooks inspired by the Prophet's epic journey, and also by the abundant literature of *mi'rājnas*, the *mi'rāj* ascension theme that was so akin to both of their thoughts.

CONCLUSION

Nursi's and Iqbal's prophetologies were reconstructed with the continuing notions that had developed in the classical period, with a 'new methodology' of prominently adopting scientific and rational sciences. The uniqueness of their response and methodology was the inclusion of metaphysics as a response to their realisation of a gap in Western thought: that of the limitations of reason and materialism in addressing the eschatological and ontological needs of humanity. Nursi and Iqbal responded to the rationalists using 'aql and heart without compromising spirituality. They pursued an explanation of prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad with due reverence to the tradition of Islam (adopted from the classical scholars), as well as due regard to modern developments in science and philosophy. Nursi and Iqbal appealed to the rational mind and thoughts, and while explaining aspects of Prophet Muḥammad and prophethood, unlike their contemporaries, they equally engaged with the metaphysical aspects of prophethood and discussed notions such as the *mi'rāj*. They represent the category of Islamic scholarship that developed, rather than rejected, the traditions by using rational arguments. In the classical period, there was no need for 'aql and *mantiq* (logic) in discussions of the *mi'rāj*, and scholars heavily depended upon *naqilyat* (traditions) references to the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* as sufficient proofs for an already believing audience. The need to provide rational explanations compelled Nursi and Iqbal to be creative in their inclusion and discussions of the *mi'rāj*. Nursi in particular discussed the *mi'rāj* conceptually as well as theologically with compelling analogies and other 'proofs' to appeal to the rational mind. In this way, they added to or renewed the understanding of prophethood and Prophet Muḥammad in Islam.

Nursi and Iqbal gave prominence to the *mi'rāj*. Nursi focuses on the theological aspects connected with the personal aspects of the Prophet's prophethood and sainthood, while Iqbal addresses the historical, cultural and social ramifications of the event on the Muslim mind and thought. Iqbal elaborates these aspects of the *mi'rāj* in his *Javidnama*, in imitation of not only Dante, but other medieval scholars of the *mi'rājnama*, in the hope of using the symbolisms of this epic prophetic story to communicate his vision of greater possibilities for the Muslim community. Nursi's engagement with the *mi'rāj* primarily addresses the theological doubts of this significant Prophetic event. He emphasises the reason, purpose and wisdom of the

ascension, bringing to culmination not only *kalā m*, but also *taṣawwuf* (mystical literature) to show the conjunction of the prophetic as well as sainthood aspects of Prophet Muḥammad's *nubuwwa*. Iqbal's engagement with the *mi'rāj* details the sociological outcomes of the event in Muslim world history and in doing so, through the *Javidnama* and other poems, re-ignites a new creative force or direction for the *umma*. He predominantly relies on the mystical and literary genres of the *mi'rājnama* and its European counterparts like the *Divine Comedy* to infuse his philosophical outlook of *khudhi* (selfhood) to motivate Muslim Indians and others to go beyond the Pleiades, as their Prophet did.⁸⁰

Nursi also designs a successful way of preserving the mystical dimension of Islam and hence demonstrates *tajdīd* (renewal) in *taṣawwuf* as well as *kalā m*, by addressing the heart, mind, emotions and conscience in a way that is not contrary to *'aqīdah* (principles of faith) and Sharia, unlike other mystics of the past. He also develops and renews the literature about the Prophet, by effectively using different prophetic titles in the right places. Nursi's emphasis on the 'Muhammadan Truth' and 'Muhammadan Light' is intentional as he reiterates the higher meaning or significance of the ontological meaning of the Prophet beyond his human qualities. Thus, he adds a new dimension of sainthood to prophethood through his notion of *wilāyāt al-kubra* (greater sainthood), in Nursi's rendition the carrying forward of the 'prophetic duty'. Iqbal's prophethology resembles Nursi's in its inclusion of the literary and mystical dimensions of Islam, although Iqbal also uses an appeal to the heart, mind and emotions throughout his poetical verses. In this respect, he is more conversant than Nursi with the somewhat controversial aspects of Islamic Sufism, such as Mansūr Ḥallāj whom he quotes specifically. Like Ibn al-Nafīs, Iqbal has considered fictional narrations with rational and philosophical outlooks to illustrate his views of the *mi'rāj* and other aspects of prophethood, particularly in his *Javidnama*. Lastly, Iqbal's personal and devotional poetry for Prophet Muḥammad depicts not only his details of the Prophet's human excellence, but the 'greater in meaning' aspects of his being and also illustrates that Iqbal may not easily be placed among the modernist or traditionalist discourses prevalent at that time. Although his works cannot be considered as *tajdīd* in *kalā m* or *taṣawwuf*, they have arguably created a unique compendium of modern Muslim and Western philosophical thought.

Nursi's and Iqbal's discussions on the *mi'rāj* not only depict their contribution to the metaphysical aspects of prophethood, but also illustrate the variance of Muslim scholars' responses to rationalism and prophethood in the 20th century. The effect of Nursi's and Iqbal's contributions to the continuation of a belief and tradition of Islamic faith is staggering proof of their intellectual and spiritual capacity to defend an aspect of faith with reason and a *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) and appeal to the heart and spirit.

At a time when the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad was questioned, his Sharia challenged and his spiritual legacy of *zawiyas* and *tekkes* closed, Nursi and Iqbal closely considered Prophet Muḥammad's metaphysical and spiritual aspects to counteract this increasing trend. Nursi and Iqbal retain the Prophet's unique role in the legacy of prophethood, and both uphold

⁸⁰ See Iqbal, *Javidnama*.

the ‘Muḥammadan Essence’ even in an era where his human aspects were so emphasised the deeper meaning and mystical ontologies of the literary tradition were largely ignored and rejected. In this way, Prophet Muḥammad was seen as the epitome of human perfection. Nursi’s and Iqbal’s works illustrate Prophet Muḥammad as the ‘perfect man’ and ‘human ideal’. The Prophet’s perfections and legacy are further evident in their discussions of the significance, wisdom and meaning of the ascension in their works. The historical assessment of the *mi‘rājnamas* that were inspired by the *mi‘rāj* paved the way for the further contextualisation of personal mystical and literary depictions of the *mi‘rāj* in the *Ayat al-Kubra* and *Javidnama*. Lastly, these two Muslim scholars wove mystical and spiritual tradition along with rational thought, and used literary and spiritual notions, in an ingenious way to communicate their messages to their respective audiences, and made sophisticated truths available to the common people.

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