

REIMAGINING GENDER ROLES: ALLAMA
IQBAL'S FEMINIST DISCOURSE WITHIN
AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of feminism and Islamic thought, particularly through the lens of Allama Iqbal's poetry and philosophy. It begins by defining feminism as a movement advocating for equal rights, bodily integrity, and protection from violence for women, highlighting the transformative impact of its core moral insights. The paper discusses the evolving perspectives on gender equality, emphasizing that thinkers like Germaine Greer view the concept as overly simplistic, advocating instead for an understanding of inherent gender differences. Margot Badran's notion of Islamic feminism is introduced, positioning it as a discourse that seeks gender equality within an Islamic framework. Iqbal's works are examined to demonstrate how he challenges traditional representations of women as weak, instead presenting them as powerful, capable figures integral to societal progress. Through selected poems, the study illustrates Iqbal's advocacy for women's education, freedom, and societal roles, arguing that his perspective is shaped by Islamic teachings that emphasize respect and dignity for women. Ultimately, the paper asserts that Iqbal's vision remains relevant, offering a path for modern women to reclaim their agency while navigating the complexities of contemporary society.

The term feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference aims at establishing equal rights to bodily integrity and autonomy, reproductive rights and legal protection for women from rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. It has altered the lives and minds of women forever with its core moral insight, that women are due the same rights and dignity as men and advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for their rights and interests.

As the feminist writer Carol Gilligan (2002) observes, ‘women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care.’ Men and women are neither equal nor unequal for intelligent thinkers such as Germaine Greer who no longer demanded ‘equality’. They knew that the awareness of the categoric difference between the sexes made the whole concept of ‘equality’ rather too simpleminded. To use the old language of ‘equality’ is in fact to be guilty of what the philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) called a ‘category mistake’ because we can no more say that men are better than women than we can say that ‘the rain is better than the earth’.

A combination of Islam and feminism has been advocated as “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm” by Margot Badran in 2002. Islamic feminists ground their opinions in Islam and its teachings, pursue the full equality of men and women in the private and public sphere, Islamic feminism really worth viewing is that it has the potential to play an extremely important part in improving the lot of women.

Allama Iqbal has discussed about women’s role and status in a society in his poetry, lectures, research papers and discourses. The stereotypical representation of women as the weaker gender has been challenged and given a new perspective by him as of strong and capable women. By doing so, he has made readers reflect on the current social and cultural norms, and to challenge, renew and redefine practices, which have become part of the then society. This study has set out to examine how he has employed the Islamic feminist thought in his selected poems and its role in contributing

to raising awareness and as an agent for change as well. I argue that his perspective is shaped by his religion Islam.

Islam worked on creating equality among people and tried to eliminate the different barriers created by people fourteen hundred years ago. History is witness that not a single religion or civilization of the world has endowed women their due status except Islam and woman has always been suppressed and deprived of their rights since ages. Allama Iqbal as Muslim feminists actively reinterpreted and contextualized woman's status according to Islam to make it relevant to their lives today. He had felt threatened by European culture to traditional arrangements between the sexes. In the West, feminism lagged behind religious reformation; in the East Islamic feminism affirm the dignity of Islam while at the same time bringing it more in line with modernity. Although West has attracted the eastern woman in the name of women's right but Western feminism does not take into consideration the needs and expectations of Muslim women.

Allama Iqbal assimilated the new insights insisting that the demand for 'equality' is less helpful than the demand for opportunity and respect and to know them as they are. After all, it's striking that Iqbal, who throughout his intellectual life had almost nothing to say to women, in his last volume *Zerb i Kaleem* actually created the specially titled little group of *ghazals* for women. In his poetry it's easy to feel how boldly Iqbal urged Muslims to reimagine and remake the world a proper abode for women. He felt troubled by the inspiration and aspirations of westernized women, and struggled to find worthy place for Muslim women in his view of society.

There were times in the human history when the center of creation and universe were only men, while the women only served as a means of sexual gratification and subservience to men and were considered lesser beings with no human or social rights. However, Islam hold great respect for woman and commends the followers to respect women in every role. Iqbal shares the same view and does not consider a Woman weak; rather he believes in her natural compassion, sympathy and feminine strength that has the capacity to create, recreate and move toward the goal to build nation.

Allama Iqbal has expressed the significance of women in his poem "aurat" as follows:

وجودِ زن سے ہے تصویرِ کائنات میں رنگ
اسی کے ساز سے ہے زندگی کا سوزِ دُروں

Color in the portrait of universe is from Woman
From her warmth is the inner warmth of life

شرف میں بڑھ کے ثریا سے مشیتِ خاک اس کی
کہ ہر شرف ہے اسی دُرج کا دُرِ مکنوں

In glory her dust is greater than stars
Each glory is the hidden pearl of her shell.

Her this potential inspired Allama Iqbal to discuss woman, her freedom and education in *Zarb-i-Kaleem*. He has not presented the traditional man with power, sovereignty, with princely accomplishment and woman as weak, submissive and indecisive rather his men and women are deviation from the prescribed gender roles. His woman is educated and has brilliant mind to turn the world around her into heaven with her beautiful colors.

According to Iqbal woman is the root of all civilizations (Mueene, 1963). Women role in nation building and development of a society is pivotal and peculiar. It should not be evaluated with reference to men's role. Women are the 'Creative Functionaries' (Dar, 1981). They are entitled with the sacred responsibility of procreation. They cannot get rid of it otherwise, life will cease to continue. Whereas In the industrial revolution, western culture used woman as a labor and destroyed the basic unit of its society i.e. 'home' to reach this target. Therefore their women are facing more psychological and social problems. He feels pity on their pathetic condition that they are not being given the status, consideration and freedom they deserve at home or in society. Although Islam, a religion of equality, has provided the social status to the women equal to that of men but in patriarchal society men don't like hearing and accepting the truth that their women are not only are not respected as they should be but they are even treated with contempt.

The same he expresses in his poem "*aurat*":

جوہر مرد عیاں ہوتا ہے بے مَنّتِ غیر
غیر کے ہاتھ میں ہے جوہرِ عورت کی نمود

The essence/quality of man is plain, without indebtedness to another,

The manifestness of the essence/quality of woman is in the hands of another!

راز ہے اس کے تپِ غم کا یہی نکتہ شوق
آتشیں، لذتِ تخلیق سے ہے اس کا وجود

Of her sorrow and grief, this is the point of ardor--

Her existence is inflamed with the relish of creating!

کھلتے جاتے ہیں اسی آگ سے اسرارِ حیات
گرم اسی آگ سے ہے معرکہ بود و نبود

They open out through this fire, the mysteries of life,
It is warm from this fire, the arena of existence and nonexistence!

میں بھی مظلومی نسواں سے ہوں غم ناک بہت
نہیں ممکن مگر اس عقدہ مشکل کی کُشودا

I too am very sorrowful at the oppression of women,
but it's not possible, the opening of this difficult knot!

He unveils the reality of the woman's exploitation and her condition that how she has not had the control over her life. It shows that although she has potential but still Men are reluctant to create an environment free of intellectual and emotional inequality and pressure to give her opportunity and right to explore and grow.

In modern times, women struggled for their emancipation and claimed for 'equality' and 'complete freedom'. In practice, the objective of women emancipation is to provide equal treatment to the women not just in politics and the work place, but in every sphere of life including access to education and financial security. Iqbal was against the 'equality' demanded by European women because he knew that the perceived roles of men and women and their natural responsibilities are different, how both can be evaluated by the same scale. It is said that the west champions the concept of gender equality and brings it to a desirable and ideal level but that concept of equality was not 'rational' in Iqbal's view. If we analyze the Islamic concept of equality we find that it does not affect the position of men or women as far as their responsibilities or accountabilities are concerned. Islam suggests a division of responsibilities for the survival and growth of its system. Individuals have to perform different roles as family is the corner stone of Islamic civilization. Islam gives woman the right of

property, trade and income-generation and the right to keep her profit to herself. Allama Iqbal shares the same view that Women's emancipation is not making women equal to men but it is to giving them the possibility to choose about their future, their jobs and their time.

He tries to show in his poetry that men could never understand women who had the confidence to do anything, and also showed how women can be strong and self-reliant. He maintains that it is only the women's intellect and vision that can clarify and explain the complex argument of 'women's liberation' in his poem *Azadi e Niswan*.

اس راز کو عورت کی بصیرت ہی کرے فاش
مجبور ہیں، معذور ہیں، مردانِ خرد مند

This secret, only the insight of a woman would reveal--

They are helpless, they are [to be] excused, the men of wisdom

کیا چیز ہے آرائش و قیمت میں زیادہ
آزادی نسواں کے زمرہ کا گلوبندا

Which thing is greater in adornment and value,
The freedom of women, or an emerald necklace?

The line shows that freedom and feelings of a woman's existence were unknown to men and when men tried to understand the worth of woman's freedom they never really understood why it could be so valuable. Iqbal wanted to consider the need to understand the women's need, only then can their condition be changed. He believed that since majority of men didn't take action to try to reveal the inner mystery of woman then it was crazy to believe only his voice would work to change the lot of women. Through the poem He wanted to illustrate that the beauty of a woman is not from her ornamental appearance but her beauty can be represented as the power, confidence, and the strength of woman when she has freedom to express her potential. The "secret" meant her inner beauty that can be seen by men who thought the beauty of woman was only from her attractive looks. Iqbal in the poem tries to show how the society sees a woman and her freedom, how the men is helpless to see her inside as a woman but still she has positive side which is unknown to men. The last line showed that just women knew how much it was necessary to have a choice and finally sing for their freedom.

The gender concept of Islam does not restrict women to progress rather outlines the roadmap to their higher status. When Iqbal points out woman as the more important component of society, he lays so much emphasis on the education of woman. Woman equipped with both religious and modern education can definitely lead the younger generation to better individual and community life. Iqbal, according to the teachings of Quran, has encouraged providing equal opportunities of getting education as provided to man. He was against western teachings because it provokes women to disregard their domain. He considers, for woman religious educations even more important than worldly education.

Women has the right to get education however, Iqbal in “aurat aur taleem” expressed his feelings like this:

Woman and Education

عورت اور تعلیم

تہذیبِ فرنگی ہے اگر مرگِ اُمومت

ہے حضرتِ انساں کے لیے اس کا ثمر موت

If from European civilization is the death of motherhood,

For the presence/dignity of man, the fruit of this is death!

جس علم کی تاثیر سے زن ہوتی ہے نازن

کہتے ہیں اسی علم کو اربابِ نظر موت

The knowledge through the effect of which woman becomes non-woman--

This knowledge, the possessors of insight call death!

بیگانہ رہے دیں سے اگر مدرسہ زن

ہے عشق و محبت کے لیے علم و ہنر موت

If the madrasah of woman would remain a stranger to faith,

Then for passion and love, knowledge and skill are death!

Iqbal as a great poet with vision had predicted about a century ago the situation of his nation sandwiched between the teachings of Islam and western culture and education. Western education and their culture is derided by him as anathema to Islamic precepts and concepts of womanhood in Muslim states. In the poem he addresses the women not to follow the western culture and warns

that he can visualise the nation facing a great disaster just because of following the western culture.

Iqbal recommended that as a nation our solidarity depends on our adhesiveness to the religious principles. The moment it weakens, we will stand nowhere among nations (Eijaz, 2011). Iqbal considers women the principal depository in a nation; that is why he wants woman to get excellent and consistent religious education because she is the real builder of the nation. As education is the solution to all ills education should be meaningful. He wanted to create a culture of education and civilisation in which we can learn values and ethics as well. Therefore Iqbal is not convinced of western system of education rather education system should be determined according to the needs of a nation along with other systems (Iqbal, 1961).

In one of his poems “*aurat*” he argues the women power were as same as men. Although they were not as philosophical as men but they had another positive side that can make them look special.

To reach this goal Iqbal wants woman to be well equipped with religious as well as modern education as being a mother she plays a very important role in family life. Family is the basic unit of society and women is an inevitable constituent of a family. Her position cannot be denied; it's not important for the elevation of soul and personality of woman herself but it is of great importance for any nation and when it comes to the Muslim nation a mother is a trainer of future generation. Therefore, it is only woman who knows how to move forward in the given circumstances and get the utmost benefits.

In the family system, male is responsible to meet the fiscal needs of the family and the household. If a husband is poor, even then he has no right to take possession of what belongs to wife, in the name of household expenditure. Iqbal says, “I openly acknowledge with reference to Quranic verse ‘men are protector of women’ therefore, I can never be a supporter of equality between men and women” (Mueene, 1963).

In Islam men have been given the role of protectors and maintainers that is pure responsibility, pure liability, and not so much a position of authority. He is responsible for the women under their care and held liable for handling the affairs of women. Allah has favoured men over women by making men more perfect in reasoning and running affairs, but it does not mean that he has the right to behave obstinately towards her, suppress her

individuality, compel her, subject her to his will, and thus heinously negate her identity. God has given them more strength and reason as he has the responsibility of taking care of his family, protecting them, defending their honor, and fulfilling their needs regarding religion and worldly life. Iqbal stated in his interview, published in Liverpool Post, “It is in Islam that husband is duty bound to provide for his wife’s maintenance, in addition to the payment of dowry. In order to enforce her above rights she can take full possession of her husband’s property” (Dar, 1981).

In one of his poem

The Protection of Woman

Iqbal says:

عورت کی حفاظت

اک زندہ حقیقت مرے سینے میں ہے مستور
کیا سمجھے گا وہ جس کی رگوں میں ہے لہو سرد

A living truth/reality is hidden in my breast,
How would he understand, in whose veins the blood is cold?

نے پردہ، نہ تعلیم، نئی ہو کہ پُرانی
نسوانیتِ زن کا نگہباز ہے فقط مرد

Neither pardah nor education, whether it be new or old--
The guardian of the femininity of woman is only man

جس قوم نے اس زندہ حقیقت کو نہ پایا
اُس قوم کا خورشید بہت جلد ہوا زرد

The community that didn’t realize this living truth/reality--
That community’s sun very quickly became yellow [and faded]”

It does not mean that Iqbal is indicating that there is some inherent preference of men over women, but the matter of the verse refers to the natural makeup of men and women, with respect to their natural strengths, their different manners of thinking and their intellect. He knows that men, by nature, are more hot-blooded, tending more towards strength and severity can better take care of women, can spend on women and provide for them while women’s natures are cooler, tending more towards gentleness and softness has the power to build nation as a mother. Since Iqbal perceived gender difference as a biological phenomenon and

nature's plan, he did not consider women inferior to men. He takes women as a distinct, different and discrete creature therefore education should not aim to transform them into men. She should take pride in her being woman as she has been entitled with the important duty to perform but with her own will. Over all the message of Allama Iqbal for women is the same as directed by Islam. Allah granted a high place for women, and they should share the responsibilities of upholding the truth and forbidding evil.

We can conclude from the poetry of Iqbal that some of Iqbal's views about women's role in society are culturally conservative but these views constitute a very small fraction of his total philosophy. For me, the most important reason Iqbal remains profoundly relevant and inspirational not only to men but also to women is that as a universal humanist philosopher he considered all human beings to be God's vicegerents who were called upon to develop their potential to the fullest. Iqbal has given, and continues to give, to millions of Muslims – both men and women – the vision and the energy to engage in a passionate quest for a new world “vibrant with hope and high endeavour”.

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