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## ***The ontological and social status of Women in Ibn Arabi's work and life***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article deals with the works and life of the Great Master: Ibn Arabi. It tries to explore his works and life with a modern lens. His ideas about women their ontological and social status have been discussed along with scriptural references. Ibn Arabi has a distinct stance regarding females and their ontological status, as compared to other traditional Sufis who endorse the fundamentalist and conservative tenets about women and their status. He has different ideas about controversial problems like Purdah in Islam and competency of women in society as Imam and the spiritual teacher. He offers novel, dynamic and contextual solutions of these legal and fiqh issues. It also focuses on the modern feminist discourse by engaging with Islamic feminism which helps us redefining the status of women in Islamic thought. Along with this it sheds light on the relationship of the Great Prophet (S A W) with women as described by Ibn Arabi because he is the greatest inspiration of Ibn Arabi's works. It is an exploration of Ibn Arabi as the alternative theorist of gender relations in the Islamic sociological and philosophical thought by applying the dynamic framework of Islamic feminism. His own spiritual and life journey is a great inspiration and example for the Islamic intellectual tradition. So, his biographical analysis shows his relationship with the women of his times. It gives a sketch of his practical engagement with promoting gender equality.*

**Keywords:** *Ibn Arabi, Women, Islamic feminism, social status of women*



### **Introduction**

Ibn Arabi is among the pioneers of Muslim intellectual tradition. He is still regarded as the Great Master (Shaykh e Akbar) because of his exquisite exposition of Qur'anic knowledge and spiritual practices which still influence a large segment of Muslim mind. His most important work is about Oneness of being. It focuses on the theoretical exposition of metaphysical reality of universe and its relation with God, though his philosophical system has imprints of the Neo-platonic school of thought. But his extensive work masterly discusses philosophical and theological problems related to Reality and Qur'anic exegesis. He also explains complex phenomena of creation of this world in form of appearance through the ultimate reality by metaphysical participation.<sup>1</sup> The importance and impact of his work is evident in Muslim tradition, specially the land of Sufis (India) has a lot of teachings which comes from Ibn Arabi. His work on gender and gender relations holds a prominent position in his metaphysical system. His normative binary understanding of the world in active and receptive categories show its gendered tilt towards phenomenal explanation. The problem of ontological status of both sexes is a complex problem in modern times which he philosophically expounds and clears the theoretical shortcomings of the misunderstanding mostly attributed to Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Women as equal human beings in Islamic theology along with equal social rights are established in Meccan revelations and the bezels of wisdom. He does not altogether deny the patriarchal or traditional readings but strives to redefine concepts according to his perspective, because his task was not to make some modern form of islam. But he wanted to show the hidden meanings of the religious texts because those narratives are neglected by the common level understanding of the text.<sup>3</sup> So he provides a perfect example for Islamic feminist discourse in the classical tradition. This article argues that Islamic feminism could trace its source from Ibn Arabi.

### **Research methodology**

The research methodology is designed to systematically explore and analyze Ibn Arabi's perspectives on women their ontological status within the framework of Islamic thought along with the social level.

The primary method involves a qualitative textual analysis of Ibn Arabi's major works, particularly *Fusus Al Hikam* and *Futuhāt Al Makkiyah*. This analysis focuses on identifying key themes, concepts, and arguments related to women. A comprehensive review of existing literature on Ibn Arabi and other Sufi scholars will be conducted. This includes examining traditional Sufi views on women, particularly those of figures like Abu Hamid Al Ghazali and Data Ali Hujwari. The research situates Ibn Arabi's ideas within the historical and cultural context of

the medieval Islamic world. This involves exploring the socio-political environment during Ibn Arabi's lifetime and how it influenced his writings on gender and sexuality.

An exploration of Ibn Arabi's life, including his relationships with female spiritual teachers and mentors, has been undertaken. This biographical analysis approach aims to uncover how personal experiences and interactions with women shaped his views on their status and roles in society.

The implications of Ibn Arabi's teachings for contemporary feminist discourse in Islam. This thematic framework facilitates a structured discussion of the key insights derived from the analysis and employs an interpretative approach to analyze the implications of Ibn Arabi's teachings for modern discussions on gender equality and women's rights within Islamic contexts.

By employing this comprehensive research methodology, the article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Ibn Arabi's progressive views on women their ontological and social status, contributing to the broader discourse on gender in Islam and challenging prevailing orthodox narratives.

### **1. Islamic feminism**

Islamic feminism discusses the roles and rights of women in Islamic context, and tries to achieve equal gender rights in different spheres of life by advocating equal human rights and justice for women. It engages with the discourse and narrative of Islam, it deals with the religious texts (Quran and Hadith ). It also uses other sources of religion like Fiqh, Tafsir and Ijtihad for legal, textual interpretation, and opinion modification, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Islamic feminists are reevaluating, reinterpreting, and redefining Islamic sources for crafting the possibility of equal rights for women in the modern world within an Islamic background. They have challenged the traditional understandings and interpretations of Islamic scriptures. They hold notions and tenets of interpretative authority across the globe in Islamic scholarship. Their novel interpretations have contributed in the transformation of classical readings of the scriptures. They have also impacted the intellectual tradition by impacting social, political, religious, and legal authorities for achieving equal human rights for women in the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

#### **A. Orthodox View**

Ideas in Sufi tradition about females are influenced by fundamentalist understanding of Islam and an offshoot of patriarchal society. For them, women are hurdles for men in their journey towards God.

Women are considered less intellectual than men. Their main focus is to protect their asceticism, which is not possible otherwise. Famous example of such ideas is Abu Hamid Al Ghazali. He rejected all human pleasures and resigned from his

post in Baghdad for performing hajj in Mecca. Al-Ghazali's ascetic thought strongly demeans and devalues women. For al-Ghazali, women and their bodies are a threat to the religious devotion of pious men. In order to protect men's search for God and his bliss, he proposes the seclusion of women.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, he says that women should be restricted within their houses and they must not visit market places. He supports the legal system which places a married woman at the mercy of her husband. For him its crucial and necessary to preserve the devotion of Muslim men. Further argues that marrying a woman could make a man more patient and resolute Muslim because he will bear and endure the vicissitudes of an irrational woman.<sup>7</sup> Ghazali successfully rescued religion from philosophical heresies but he failed to accept the Prophet's (SAW) views about women. He never thought that Prophet (SAW) of Islam never used such words for women. This scholarly mistake has caused Muslim women a great deal.<sup>8</sup>

Famous Asian Sufi Data Ali Hujwari has also written about women in his famous book 'Kashf ul Mahjoob'. He writes that "in the eyes of Sheikhs exalted people restrain themselves from bodily pleasures". In his view, there are two significant calamities of marriage "it is a hurdle in the journey towards reality and body gets involved in corporeal needs and pleasures." Further, he mentions the famous incident which is often quoted to prove the evilness of women. He says that the first evil for Adam was a woman (Eve) and first dispute in the human history between brothers was also because of women.<sup>9</sup>

Abu Suleiman al-Darani often quoted that as soon as his disciples married, they regressed a few steps from the ladder of spirituality. Another celibate character named Ibrahim ibn Adham warned that excessive preoccupation and contact with women might result in the spiritual destruction of the Sufi.<sup>10</sup> Another Sufi Sufyan al-Thawri, cautioned his disciples, "It will never go well for one (sufi) who accustoms himself to the thighs of women."<sup>11</sup>

Such views about women in Sufi literature give a bleak and inhumane perspective. But every Sufi does not hold such objectionable opinions. There are people like Bayazid Bastami and Ibn Arabi who advocate women's equal rights and empowerment. Ibn Arabi's work in this regard is most interesting because it can be very helpful for Muslims in this modern world. He has unorthodox views about women and their role in society. Arabi's treatment of this highly controversial topic proves his contemporary relevance.

## **2. Ibn Arabi's view on Ontological Status of Women**

Ibn Arabi's thought is very dynamic his metaphysics and spirituality is intermingled. Likewise, his stance on women is connected with his metaphysical understanding about universe. His universe is a gendered space. He attributes

gender to entities in universe as per their efficient cause i.e. receptivity and activity.

“Everything that exercises an effect (*muaththir*) is a father, and everything that receives an effect (*muaththar fih*) is a mother. This is the general rule of this chapter. That which is born between the two from the effect is called a son (*ibn*) or a child (*muwallad*).”<sup>12</sup>

So Ibn Arabi confirms the binary structure and it could be traced throughout his Weltanschauung. The masculine aspect is the active part and the feminine is the locus of receptivity. He draws different analogies to explain this active-passive binary.

“Fathers are spirits, while mother is the Nature and Nature is the locus of change and transformation. When the spirits get motivated towards the parts of nature the elements which are receptive toward change and transformation like the children, animate, inanimate and jinn arise at the surface of Nature. Human being is the most complete creature.”<sup>13</sup>

The nous or the active intellect which participates in nature is the masculine part of universe and the receptive matter or the phenomenal world which he denotes as nature is feminine.

Ibn Arabi whirled with traditional narratives about women by transforming dominant gender tenets in novel and unexplored ways. Most of the times he used the established patriarchal images of female deficiency. But after that he skillfully turns them into the metaphorical stories of love, identity, and spiritual synergy among women and men. The problem related to the essence of male and female he clearly declares both equal who share the same essence.

“Humanity (*insaniyya*) is a reality that comprehends both male and female, so men do not possess a degree over women in respect to humanity.”<sup>14</sup> “The men have a degree above them (the women)”  
2:228<sup>15</sup>

In contemporary Qur’anic exegesis this verse has become very controversial. Specifically, the debate of gender rights has made it difficult for Muslim scholars to defend this verse which apparently and contextually is related to the topic of marital problems. Ibn Arabi has sought a different explanation for this verse. He does not deny it but explains it in context of creation and degrees of apparent existence.

“Yet it has been established that “the men have a degree above the women, just as it has been established that “the creation of the heavens and earth is greater than the creation of mankind” God also

said “you are stronger or the heaven he built? The degree by which heaven and earth are more excellent than the human being is exactly the same as that by which the man is more excellent than the woman.”<sup>16</sup>

Ibn Arabi defines this difference and degree by his metaphysical perspective of phenomenal appearance of the creatures and nature from The One. The earth and heavens came into existence before Adam. So they are a degree above humans similarly Eve (the women) is a degree lower than the man with respect to her coming into existence through the rib of Adam.

“Men and women are similar ‘Do you not believe in the emergence of Eve from Adam’s rib’ Thus, she is *mutashabih* (similar).”<sup>17</sup>

Even the appearance of historical Adam has even different degree as well. In the different registers there are three Adams.

First Adam is gender-inclusive androgynous creature who comprises both male and female realities. The second one appears after the separation and extraction of the female element and reality from the first androgynous being of Adam by God. The latter created Adam is male, the archetypal man who is the remaining relic of prior being after Eve has been separated from the compound whole being. This second Adam has the maleness which decides the gender between man and woman. Third account is about Adam, The Prophet which has a historical reality with essence of maleness.<sup>18</sup>

The degree of women also depends on her role as a receptive creature because in Arabi’s understanding she is dependent on the man for the activity. She does not possess the level of activity but she is the locus of receptivity. Womb is a very important metaphor in his works which appears as a symbol of receptivity and it is directly related the all-merciful god. Because womb is the branch of the god that’s why a name which is ascribed to God is Rahman (derived from Rahm/ womb).<sup>19</sup>

### **3. Role of Women in Society**

No other Sufi had such unorthodox ideas about women’s social status. By casting away most prejudices of tradition Ibn Arabi announces equality for women in social and spiritual realms. Women have the same essence of humanness in them and their capabilities are same as men. Ibn Arabi believes in the spiritual and social connectedness. He argues that women can lead mixed gatherings of men and women in prayer, can set legal precedents and have the freedom to

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<sup>1</sup> Sachiko has wrongly translated the word *Mutashabih* as “ambiguous”.

become masters and pathfinders of spirituality along with both men and women as students and cohorts. Women can achieve any level of spirituality. His stance about status of women in society is inspired by Prophet's (SAW) Seerah and his own life experiences. His opinion about the much general problems like pardah and female leadership is very different from the established scholars.

Though male and female are equal in their essence but their legal and social stations could be different because Shariah has specific conducts for important problems which provides the room for difference among both sexes. So regarding their legal differences he says that,

“And God has made men and women share in legal obligations.

Women are obliged just as men are obliged. Even if women are specified with rulings that are not for men, then men are also specified with rulings that are not for women.”<sup>20</sup>

#### **A. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and women**

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the perfect man for Ibn Arabi. His ideas about women and equity are based on Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) life and teachings. Following narration plays a pivotal role in structuring and defense of Ibn Arabi's stance regarding the status of women.

Hazrat Anas (RA) said:

“The prophet said that ‘In this world, women and perfume have been made dear to me, and my comfort has been provided in prayer.’”<sup>21</sup> This famous narration is often partially quoted and the part concerned with the respect and importance of women is ignored. Prophet (SAW) yearned for women like the whole is attracted towards its parts, because he was made to love women.<sup>22</sup>

Lord made him love women as Allah himself loves the one who is made up in His form. Love arises from the One to the being from which it has been formed. His love for women shows his love for Allah. This is the reason behind Prophet's (SAW) saying “He made me love...,” and he did not use the word, “I loved” as coming from himself. Because his love is connected to the creator in Whose form he has been created. His love for his wives contain the element of his love for God. So he loves her through his nature's divine part which connects him with his creator. Because he is the exalted Prophet and he knows the reality that whatever there is, is the Lord from which all existence proceeds.<sup>23</sup> In case of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) loving women is not any acquired ability but it is a part of his essence. The priority of loving women is evident from the narration's content, women have the foremost significant position in his love; second perfume,

whereas prayer is at last. So how can Muslims go against the Sunah of Prophet (SAW), when he loved women and was the most perfect man on earth.

### **B. Imamah / Leadership**

The spiritual stage and degree are very important in deciding the social and spiritual status of women. Ibn Arabi has expounded the issue of imamah in a very brilliant way by pointing out the weak opinions which mislead the masses. There are some scholars who permit the imamah of women before a mixed gathering of women and men during prayer. Ibn Arabi agrees with such opinions. On the other hand, some forbid her imamah absolutely and some scholars allow her for leading the prayer of an exclusively female gathering. Ibn Arabi answers this question by saying that the Prophet (SAW) has affirmed the spiritual perfection of some women in the same way through which men are considered perfect. Even though there is the possibility that more men are present at that point of perfection as compared to women. He claims that restraining women from Imamah is a highly regressive and depriving act for women. This has no religious bases. This perfection is prophet-hood which the Prophet (SAW) pointed out. And being a prophet means that they are being endowed with the responsibility of leadership. So as per Ibn Arabi's legal understanding women are allowed to lead the prayers.<sup>24</sup>

According to Ibn Arabi

“women and men share the level (daraja) of perfection (Kamal). But men are given priority with respect to superlative perfection (akmaliyya) which is prophet-hood (nubūwwa). However, the men are endowed with the opportunity of being messengers and with prophetic leadership. Women have not been gifted with the task of prophecy and leading as compared to men. Despite the fact that men and women share the particular spiritual station (*maqām*). God has also said: Indeed, we have given priority to some of the prophets over others.” (Q. 17:55).<sup>25</sup>

Those who use Prophet's sayings to justify their anti-women leadership agenda have misunderstood the narration. Arabi clarifies that : “prosper not those who give sovereignty to women” this narration is concerned about the God given sovereignty, it does not covers the arena of people given rights and sovereignty. So this particular saying was about those to whom people give sovereignty not by the God given duties and responsibilities. Prophet's (SAW) saying, “women and men are siblings” is sufficient for the defense of equality between men and women. Everything which is rightfully achieved by a man in terms of qualities, stations and degrees is also equally possible for women to whom god wills and commands.” Arabi also affirms the spiritual leadership of women as saint because



men and women cover all of the levels of existence and spirituality. Even that a worthy woman can qualify as the axial saint (Qutb). His famous concept of “Perfect Manhood” also encapsulates women because according to that the spiritual stage is for both males and females. Any man and woman can achieve that exalted stage by practicing the path which is defined by God.<sup>26</sup>

### **C. PARDAH**

The concept of Purdah in Islam is a deeply rooted practice with significant cultural, religious, and social implications. It involves the covering of the body, often including the face, by women as a sign of modesty and privacy. The practice is derived from Islamic teachings, where modesty is highly emphasized, and it is seen by many as a way to maintain dignity and protect moral values.

However, Purdah has also been a source of controversy and debate, both within Muslim communities and in broader global discussions. Critics argue that the practice can be oppressive, particularly when it is enforced rather than chosen freely, and that it may limit women's autonomy and participation in public life. There is also a debate over whether Purdah is a religious obligation or a cultural practice that varies across different Muslim societies.

Supporters of the veil, on the other hand, often view it as an expression of faith and identity. They argue that the veil empowers women by allowing them to define their own boundaries of privacy and by resisting the objectification of women in society. The discussion around Purdah reflects larger issues of gender, freedom, and cultural interpretation in Islam, making it a complex and nuanced topic.<sup>27</sup>

Gender politics is very relevant to contemporary Islamic world. The issue of dressing modestly has become an inevitable discussion for Islamic scholars. Ibn Arabi takes a very subtle position in this crucial matter by rejecting the fundamentalist and conservative stance on gender difference and their social responsibilities about apparent decency and modesty. He states there are scholars who consider that the whole female body except her face and hands is constituted of Awra (parts of body which should be covered), about which there is the command of Purdah. There is another group who excludes her feet from the Awra but retains the command of covering the remaining body parts. Apart from these there is a group who believes that female body without any exception is constituted of the Awra. This group sees women no more than a sexual object. The object whose being has no other predicate and its only essence and identity is her sexuality and no other quality should be discussed and considered worthy about her. Ibn Arabi says, “the only parts of her body which should be considered awra are her genitals”. God says in quran about Adam and Eve covering their genitals after eating the prohibited fruit. He believes that God put Adam and Eve on equal

level regarding the covering of their reproductive organs i.e. genitals. So now if someone says that she must cover her body because it is commanded that would be wrong. If she does so it is just for the sake of modesty and her personal preference rather than the embodiment of the idea that their bodies are shameful.<sup>28</sup> Islamic feminism searches ways to define and understand controversial topics in Islamic thought. The problem of veil being dealt by a religious and spiritual scholar in such an unusual manner provides the basis of alternative feminist discourse.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4. Women in Arabi's Life**

In the life of Ibn Arabi there were many spiritual teachers and lovers. They affected his works and philosophy; he has written about his spiritual masters. Thus, his relation with women in his life shows the socially different gender roles and their acceptance in the medieval era. Ibn Arabi used feminine symbols and word throughout his work. He mentions his mother, daughters and lover many times as the source of inspiration and power. There were many female masters with whom he engaged himself as a disciple in the spiritual path. His engagement with female mystics is also because of his mother who used to take him to a revered female mystic.

The most influential of the women in Ibn Arabi's life was Fatima bint al-Muthamma de Cordaba, a woman of gnosis from Seville. Ibn 'Arabi says that he 'served' her for two years, a longer period of time than he spent with any other Sufi master, male or female. Ibn 'Arabi served her and he considered her as his Shaikh, his spiritual master and guide. Therefore, Fatima al-Mathanna was the Shaikh for Shaykh e Akbar who cherished her by being a disciple (murid). Ibn Arabi took his spiritual silsilah from her and this status is not affiliated to any other spiritual masters he accompanied in his life. He was her disciple in "an intimate mentoring and nurturing teaching relationship."<sup>30</sup>

Yasmina Umm al-Fuqara (Shams) was an eighty year old woman who lived in Marchena. Ibn Arabi remembered her enigmatic personality in his works. He used to say that I have never found any Sufi like her, who has unbelievable control over her body and soul. She was among the greatest masters of spiritual activities which Arabi had encountered. She had a pure and ethereal soul with noble spiritual powers and a fine discrimination from the others which exactly suited her spiritual station. Her spiritual state was characterized by her god fearing attitude and His good will and bliss which he showered upon her. She revealed a glimpse of her spiritual attainment such as her ability to see events in faraway places, and the power to articulate the thoughts of others.<sup>31</sup>

A Persian Sufi, Nizam bint Makin al- Din is one of the most interesting character among the women mentioned in the writings of Ibn Arabi. Her account in the

works not only shows her as an important figure but also as a source of inspiration and impact on the author. Although he used to cherish the knowledge, wisdom and spirituality of his teachers, companions and students. Nizam appears to have had a unique, transformative and metamorphic impact on him during his spiritual journey. She proved to be the inspiration for Ibn Arabi's most spiritual and elemental love poetry which is compiled in *Tarjuman al ashwaq*. He wrote about her spiritual mastery, intellect, wisdom, beauty and sensuality as well as of her social behavior. She was unmarried, spoke in public, had friendships with unrelated males, didn't wear hijab and dressed in a way in which her beauty was apparent, yet was modest, independent and self-assured.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Ibn Arabi's appreciation of Sufi women was not specific to his teachers but at times he enthusiastically describes a number of his female cohorts. The text *Ruh al- quds* describes some remarkable personalities of his times. One of them is Qasim al Daula, an incognito slave girl whom he describes as the unique one of that time. According to the anecdote she was gifted with supernatural abilities. She was able to communicate with the trees and mountains, and had the ability to cover great distances in no time. She was arduous in self-discipline of spiritual practices, used to fast and chant verses for an unbelievable period. She earned the title of most spiritually chivalrous and pious lady of that time.<sup>33</sup> Ibn Arabi writes about a number of female students in the series of introductory short poems in his Diwan, Ibn Arabi quotes fourteen people by name to whom he had offered *khirqa* (Sufi cloak) as a mark of his spiritual successors. Interestingly there were thirteen women among the fourteen *khirqa* receivers.

These personalities in his time influenced him a lot. He was engaged with women who did not observe traditional veil. They spoke in public about religious matters because it was not a taboo for a woman to be knowledgeable and outspoken. Moreover, they played the role of spiritual masters. Ibn Arabi's engagement with such women and activities show his gender inclusive pattern. It provides us the margin to develop an alternative Islamic feminism.

### **Conclusion**

Every intellectual tradition needs its revival, modernity has massively affected the Islamic world. The initiation of Islamic feminism through Muslim women all over the world shows its intellectual and social need. Tradition has to maintain itself Arabi's works have very dynamic and innovative understanding about gender, women rights and religious authority in Islam. Moreover, he is situated with in the Islamic tradition along with his multilayered understanding of the religious texts and practices. Propagation of ideas against women and their human status affects our society badly. As we have discussed Ibn Arabi's opinion about *Purdah* and *Imamat*, it shows that there is evidently room for

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interpretation in such matters. Even the great law schools do not agree on such topics shows the insufficient rulings and tenets about these issues. Ibn Arabi's understanding will evidently help us resolving our social and gender problems. Because he believes that man and women are equal in their essence, both can achieve perfection and by no means we can regard women as incomplete. His personal life's incidents not only provide us the alternative feminist discourse but enlarges the scope of potential revision of western biases about the medieval Islamic world.

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