

Symbolic Portrait of women in Iqbal's Poetry

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Abstract

In the long history of humanity, women folk have always been considered as an inferior creature. They have been looked upon mere non-entity. It was questioned that whether she has got a soul or not? If having a soul, whether it is human or animal?-----However the answer to all such question have been so funny that a common man today cannot help but to laugh. Contrary to this, Islam for the first time in the history gave recognition to women as human being, having the same rights as of man. But during the present time some people still consider that Muslim scholars and especially Allama Iqbal has mentioned about her in a casual manner. In this article, an effort has been made to study that how Allama Iqbal has highlighted the women folk in his poetry. Further she has also been symbolically given a very high and creditable status.

Key-words: Human history, inferiority of women, Islam, High status, Iqbal's poetry, Symbolic portrait of women

Introduction

During the present time the debate about the status of women in Muslim society has become an important issue. It has been argued that many Muslim scholars verbally admit the rights of women in Islam but commit double standards when they develop their serious views. They have been relegating her to inferior position without announcing it loudly. (Arifa Farid, 2006)¹. It has further been said that in Pakistan, women question has either been ignored or handled in a conservative spirit. They have included Allama Iqbal in this category also and claim that he has dealt with women issue in a 'casual manner'. It is further said that he has expressed women issue in a vague manner without specifying what he meant by "women's liberation". In this article, we intend to show that what Iqbal has said in his poetry

¹ Arifa farid, 2006.ppxx

(Urdu & Persian) as well as in English prose. Allama Iqbal in his poetry has discussed the fair sex in a symbolic manner, giving her the highest esteem and respect. We have tried to show that Iqbal, not only had been very clear about this issue but talked quite emotionally in his poetry. However, it may be pointed out at the outset that it seems funny to consider someone as “Modern Scholar and Philosopher” in the present age, if he /she does not say something about the women issue. It is strange that how the plight of women could escape from Iqbal? We wonder that how the gigantic academic work of Iqbal on this issue was over looked by the feminists/ liberals. Total blackout of such literature from the work of modern writers talk much about the claim of “Objectivity” in their books.

As a matter of fact the feminists in the west have been successful to achieve “some relief” to women folk but unable to solve all the miseries and problems of western women. It is due to not having any ideological base. So far as Pakistan (and many Muslim majority countries) the feminists have viewed liberation and emancipation of women in a very limited and confined meaning and scope. They have never discussed the problems of women belonging to poor strata of villages and towns. They have least idea about the most miserable conditions of health and living. Millions of women are suffering from malnutrition, non-availability of clean water and un-hygienic environments. It is not only in villages and small towns but could be seen even in Lahore, Karachi & Islamabad. According to a gynaecologist, 90% of women from the lower strata of society are suffering from anaemia. Only 250ml pack of milk is available for a family of two children and four other members of the family. (Amina Aftab, 2023).²

Here we shall not go into the details of those factors that how the women folk in the west were mistreated and suffered in the hands of a Trio of Landlords, Industrialists and Clergy. All such factors prompted and charged western women with the additional responsibility of earning her own bread and butter along with home chores and child bearing. This resulted in the total disruption of the family system which ultimately culminated in sexual anarchy. The decline of marriage institution (unwed mothers), a rising rate of illegitimate children as well as divorce rate and the occurrence of Aid's are some of the bitter fruits of free intermingling of the sexes in the west!

² Amina Aftab, Personal communication.

Iqbal's perception of gender issue has been so novel and unique aspect in the literary history of Ummah that it is impossible to get such example. A cursory look on the topics dealt with in his literary works (Urdu, Persian & English) shows his farsightedness about many aspects of this issue. While Iqbal is well aware of the significance of women folk in sustaining human race on the earth, he also seems to be quite well versed about the intricacies of this issue. Keeping in view the miserable status of women in the long human history and highlighting her role in human life, let us study how beautifully Iqbal has complimented women folk and also brought out her sorrows and grievances (as well as his "own inability" to solve the problems of this gender) in a practical way. Under the title of عورت (Aurat) Iqbal in the Rod of Mosses³ says:

Man's worth is brought to light
Without aid from the rest,
But woman's worth depends
On others at

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

Her pain and fret for breed
This joyful fact proclaim
That procreation is
Her first and foremost aim

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

The self-same fire reveals
Hid secrets of this life
This fire keeps aflame
Life and Death's deadly strife

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

The oppression of fair sex
Has cast me down a lot
I cannot think of means
That can resolve this Knot.

میں بھی مظلومی نسواں سے ہوں غمناک بہت
نہیں ممکن مگر اس عقدہ مشکل کی کشود

³ M Iqbal, 1995

In 1929, "Anjuman Khawateen Madras"⁴ (undivided India) presented a welcome address to Iqbal and used a word (اسیرانِ قفس) (prisoners of cage) for themselves. Iqbal promptly took notice of these two words and observed that "You have used the word (اسیرانِ قفس) for yourselves in the address which reminds me of the "emancipation movement" of Turks or western women's claim of total liberation from men. In order to see whether the words used by the Turkish women for their emancipation do carry the sense of limitation in reality and further what are the implications of this emancipation/liberation of women in Turkey as given to womenfolk by Kamal Attaturk?". _____. It is no more a secret now that after this liberation of women in Turkey, there occurred, a rise in the rate of suicide by women. On examining this matter critically, the researchers attributed it as the result of 'emancipation', since the concept of total liberation led to sexual anarchy being contradictory to the nature of women as such womenfolk started killing them. As a matter of fact, it was a revolt against the nature of woman, whose objective is to refrain, them from being the mother of future generation and as a result of which she loses her womanhood and becomes 'Nazin' (Negations of womanhood - نازن). The climax of this dilemma was that the Turkish government requested the conservative scholars who had been accused of their 'conservatism' to make it clear to women through their sermons that suicide is forbidden (*haram*) in Islam.

Symbolic Character of women in Iqbal's poetry

Iqbal has portrayed in many of his poems various characters of women in different ages. For example, he has discussed various aspects of women like Laila (لیلی), Salma (سلمی) and Fatima bint-e-Abdullah and so on. We shall study some of these aspects of women in the following lines.

1. **Fatima bint-e-Abdullah:** In Libya (Tripoli) there had been a strong Muslim tribe. Fatima was the daughter of chief of the tribe, namely Abdullah. She was brought up in the open environment of the dessert. In 1912, Italy invaded Tripoli. Grand Mufti declared war against Italy, in which the whole tribe of Abdullah along with so many other Muslims tribes fought. Fatima at the age of eleven years also participated by providing water to injured soldiers. In a heavy gun fire, she heard the cry of a soldier asking water. When she attended to him she became the target of heavy gun shells and died. Iqbal being

⁴ Inayat Ali, 2017

impressed by this act of gallantry, selfless devotion and sacrifice wrote this poem. He very rightly declared her as the honour and pride of the ummah (آبروئے ملتِ مرحوم)⁵ in the first verse of this poem (M Iqbal, 1995). Paying further tribute to her Iqbal exclaimed over the presence of such a brilliant spark in the ashes of Ummah (ایسی چنگاری بھی یا رب اپنے خاکستر میں تھی)⁵. Iqbal has shown us a very bright picture in the death of Fatima by indicating the sign for Renaissance of Islam emerging from her grave! In the following couplets, Iqbal has foreseeing some important events emerging from her grave. It seems that a new generation of Ummah is being produced in her lap⁵.

بے کوئی بنگامہ تیرے تربت خاموش میں پل رہی ہے ایک قوم تازہ اس آغوش میں

This whole poem signifies the lofty status of a young and brave girl in the eyes of Iqbal. Various couplets of the poem are a glaring proof of the highest position ever assigned to womenfolk in whole of the literary and religious literature at global level. In another poem حضور رسالت مآب میں (Attendance before the Prophet), Iqbal again mentioned about Tripoli/Libya in connection with Fatima⁶

حضور! دہر میں آسودگی نہیں ملتی تلاش جس کی ہے وہ زندگی نہیں ملتی
ہزاروں لالہ و گل ہیں ریاضِ ہستی میں وفا کی جس میں ہو ہو، وہ کلی نہیں ملتی
مگر میں نذر کواکِ آبگینہ لایا ہوں جو چیز اس میں ہے جنت میں بھی نہیں ملتی
جھلکتی ہے تیری امت کی آبرو اس میں طرابلس کے شہیدوں کا ہے لہو اس میں

Here, it may be seen that while addressing the Prophet (in a very submissive and respectful manner), he said that the universe, being devoid of peace and tranquillity, I could not find some worth presenting gift for you. However, I have succeeded in bringing the blood of the martyrs of Libya (including Fatima bint-e-Abdullah), which they gave during Jihad against the enemy, _____ further signifying it as the grace and lofty status of womenfolk of Ummah.

2. **Laila:** As indicated that Iqbal has not only touched the issue of this gender (womenfolk) in a “casual manner” but has also used it in a symbolic way in his poetry. One such example is the character of Laila (للی), having been repeated more than a dozen time in his poetry. Iqbal has used this character as a symbol of

⁵ M Iqbal, 1995

⁶ M Iqbal, 1995

steadfastness towards achieving the goal of Renaissance of Islam, thus emphasizing the emotional attachment of *Majnu* (مجنون) or Qais (قیس) as Ummah. It needed not to be point out here that the revival of Islamic tradition is the goal and mission of this last Ummah. Many verses of Quran (**Al Baqara: 143; Al Imran: 110; Al Haj: 41**)⁷ and the whole life of the Prophet (PBUH) tends to emphasize this aspect only.

Iqbal has portrayed this mission of Islamic Renaissance in almost all his Urdu/Persian and English literary and academic writings. One of the poem in Bang-e-Dara entitled صقلیہ (the island of Cecily, which once used to be a part of Islamic civilization). At so many other places, Iqbal has summed up this objective of Islamic Renaissance and reminded Ummah to regain its past position in the world as enunciated in Quran. Just see how beautifully he has highlighted this objective.

افرنک زخود بے خبرت کرد وگرنہ اے بندہ مومن تو بشیری تو نذیری!

In this couplet, while addressing the present day Muslims that they have been betrayed by the West, otherwise their status in this universe is that of a person who gives good tidings of Allah's Mercy and Benevolence (Bashir). Similarly, Muslims are also bound to remind fearing from disobeying Allah's Commandments (Nazir). These two concepts of بشیر and نذیر have also been assigned for striving hard by the Muslims to establish Islamic Order in a literary way⁸.

Similarly, Iqbal in زبورِ عجم⁹ says:

مغرب ز تو بیگانہ، مشرق ہمہ افسانہ وقت است کہ در عالم نقش دیگر انگیزی!

Here Allama has pointed out the most important weak points of the West and the East. He has indicated that West has gone far away from the Divine Guidance (Christianity / Judaism) and the East has become a hotchpotch of imaginary and self-made rituals. Thus, it is the high time for Ummah to strive for the Islamic Order in the world"! _____ it may be pointed out that in both the above couplets, Iqbal has addressed both genders simultaneously!

3. **Saad and Salma:** These are the character in Arabic literature, which have repeatedly been quoted by Iqbal as given below¹⁰

⁷ Al-Quran, Al Baqara:143, Al Hajj:41, Al Imran:110

⁸ M Iqbal, 1995

⁹M Iqbal,2004

¹⁰ M Iqbal, 1995

رختِ جاں بتِ کدہ چیں سے اٹھا لیں اپنا سب کو محورِ سعد و سلیمیٰ کردیں
دیکھ یثرب میں ہوا ناقہ لیلیٰ بیکار قیس کو آرزوئے نو سے شناسا کردیں

It seems quite difficult, if not impossible, to translate the “hidden literary message” in these two couplets. However, learned readers may appreciate the literary style and its beauty in drawing the attention of Ummah towards رِخ سعد و سلیمیٰ i.e. Renaissance of Islam. In the second couplet, he has pointed out the absence of an Islamic State and order even in Saudi Arabia, thus urging Ummah (Qais, قیس) to hoist the flag of Islamic revolution in the world.

While studying Iqbal it becomes clear that the topic of Islamic revival is so dear and near to his heart that whole of his poetry revolves around this subject. Let us see in how novel way and the finest literary style, Iqbal has dealt this subject in his poem Tadmin on a Verse of Anisi Shamlu¹¹ (تضمین بر شعر انیسی شاملو). It may be noted that this poem was written when Iqbal visited the tomb of پیر سنجر¹² Nazam ud Din Awliya at Dehli. It is the literary style of Iqbal that before giving “some message”, he always starts in some “eye catching” words / couplets. Just see the novel style in the poem.

ہمیشہ صورتِ بادِ سحر آوارہ رہتا ہوں محبت میں ہے منزل سے بھی خوشتر جادہ پیمائ
“I always remain roaming like the morning breeze
Roaming is more pleasant in love than destination”

In this couplet Iqbal has pointed out that in search of love (aim of life i.e. Islamic Renaissance), I always remain traveling like the cool morning breeze it is because that striving for this objective continuously is much better than to settle down at one place! While standing at the grave of the saint Nizam-ud-Din, Iqbal had not uttered even a single word that there came a voice from the tomb of the saint that:

یہ مرقد سے صدا آئی "حرم کے رہنے والوں کو شکایت تجھ سے ہے اے تارکِ آئین آبائی!
ترا اے قیس کیونکر ہو گیا سوزدروں ٹھنڈا کہ لیلیٰ میں تو ہیں اب تک وہی اندازِ لیلای
“A voice came from the tomb, “The
Harem's inhabitants have internal warmth cooled down?
A complaint against you, O Because Layla still has the
renouncer of ancestor's ways!” same ways of her old self”

¹¹ M Iqbal, 1995

In this couplet, Iqbal got a warning from the tomb that the present day Muslims have ignored to abide by the Islamic teachings, thus “اہلِ حرم” (the pious people of the Ummah) have a genuine complaint (شکوہ) against them. In the second couplet, he got another blow from the grave that Qais (Ummah) has become unmindful of the sole objective for which she was destined as Ummat-i-Wast (امتِ وسطہ). However, Laila (being a symbol of Islamic Revival) is still awaiting the Ummah (Qais).

No sooner, Iqbal had been relieved of the shocks of this “loving warning”, he got another charge in the last two couplets and especially he became stunned when heard the last charge!

وفا آموختی ازما، بکارِ دیگران کردی ربودی گوہرے ازما نثارِ دیگران کردی

“You learnt fidelity from us but used it on others

You snatched a pearl from us but sacrificed it on others”

In another poem Iqbal highlighted this message of Islamic Revival to Ummah from “شمع”¹²:

سوچ تو دل میں لقبِ ساقی کا ہے زیبا تجھے؟ انجمنِ پیاسی ہے اور پیمانہ ہے صہباتِ
کعبہ پہلو میں ہے، اور سودائی بت خانہ ہے کس قدر شوریدہ سر ہے شوقِ بے پروا تیرا
قیس پیدا ہوں تیری محفل میں یہ ممکن نہیں تنگ ہے صحرا تیرا، محمل ہے بے لیلیٰ تیرا

While scolding Iqbal, Shama (Islamic Revival) alleged Ummah to be having lost the objective of her creation as the world is waiting for it very badly. It was regretfully said that Ummah being the LAST RAY OF HOPE has indulged in anti-Islamic activities. Further alleging that Ummah has forgotten his Divine Role (limiting the canvas of her universe تنگ صحرا) and having no desire for the Islamic revival (خالی محمل). It was thus concluded that for an individual or some nation / Ummah, having no goal and aim of life, it is never possible to succeed in this world of hard ground realities! Here in all these and other couplets to follow, Iqbal has used the feminine characters (Laila/Salma/Saad) which also show his esteem and regards for these terms indicative of womenfolk.

¹² M Iqbal, 1995

Continuing the same theme, in another poem entitled “Muslim”¹³ (مسلم) written in 1912, Iqbal invited Ummah by pointing out that having no objective of life before them nothing could be achieved in this world.

نغمہ امید تیری بربطِ دل میں نہیں ہم سمجھتے ہیں کہ یہ لیلیٰ تیرے محمل میں نہیں

Addressing Ummah, Iqbal said: You do not have any desire and will in your heart for the Revival of Islamic Mission; As such it is rightly believed that you have left this Mission of achieving “Laila (Islamic Renaissance)” as an objective of the life. In the portion of “Ghazliyat (غزلیات)” Iqbal has also invited Ummah to ponder over the reasons of her down fall during the present age. In a very novel and unique literary style, he has pointed out that ignoring the very purpose of creation of Adam and forgetting the Message of Allah and not following the Role Model of the Prophet, Ummah has lost their whole glamorous life in the past. Addressing the youngster of Ummah (Qais) Iqbal exhorts:

عزت ہے محبت کی قائم اے قیس! حجابِ محمل سے

محمل جو گیا، عزت بھی گئی، غیرت بھی گئی، لیلیٰ بھی گئی

“Here in an every novel way, Iqbal has used “Mahmal¹⁴” symbolically for Islam but having a feminine touch”. Further, Iqbal has reminded young generation about their glorious past of being the Rulers the world. Since they forgot that message, they lost that superb position. Here Iqbal used different terms symbolically as محمل for sovereignty, عزت و غیرت (integrity and esteem) and لیلیٰ as the Islamic rule over the universe.

As we have seen in the above paragraphs that Iqbal has used Laila for Islam as a symbol. While discussing Laila being a female character in the Arabic / Urdu literature, he attributed the highest status to this gender as given in Islamic teachings. While giving it a resemblance with the “love of Majnun / Qais for Laila”, Iqbal meant Ummah to strive for the Islamic Renaissance. He seems to be hopeful for achieving this goal in the near future as indicated below:¹⁵

مل ہی جائے گی کبھی منزلِ لیلیٰ اقبال کوئی دن اور ابھی بادیہ پیمائی کر

Here again, Iqbal has used Laila, being a female character, symbolically for Islam. While giving good tidings of the Islamic Revival, being the Order of the Day, Iqbal has encouraged the youth of Ummah for striving hard for some more time as the

¹³ M Iqbal, 1995

¹⁴ M Iqbal, 1995

¹⁵ M Iqbal, 1995

success is awaiting them. We would like to conclude these submissions and invite the attention of our learned brothers and sisters to ponder over these submissions and become the torch bearers of Islamic teachings. Just listen, what Iqbal is saying:¹⁶

بیا تا گل بیفشایم و مے درساغر اندازیم فلک را سقف بشگافیم و طرح دیگر اندازیم

In this couplet, Iqbal has invited Muslim youth to pave the path of Islamic Revival by saying بیا تا گل بیفشایم و مے درساغر اندازیم Here he has gone to the extent to uncovering the skies (فلک را سقف بشگافیم)!

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