

Iqbal's Philosophy of the *Khudi* as a Tool for Women's Empowerment

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God is the ground of *khudi*'s existence
Khudi's own manifestation is due to God's
Where would this luminous pearl have been
Had no ocean existed? (Iqbal, 2014, p. 138)¹

Abstract

This paper examines Muhammad Iqbal's concept of the *khudi* in relation to key Islamic principles, primarily, the inherent value and dignity of all human beings. It attempts to demonstrate that Iqbal's empowering philosophy is applicable to women and can serve to liberate them from external and often internalized patriarchal mindsets that construe females as being intrinsically inferior and subservient to males. Although these misconceptions manifest in different ways in East and West, Iqbal considers them both to be equally problematic. The paper shows that Iqbal's philosophy of the *khudi* and his views of women are both directly grounded in the Quran. Iqbal understood the Quran as valuing diversity in creation and viewed gender differences as part of nature's beauty and grandeur. Iqbal asserts that women and femininity are not devalued in Islam, but on the contrary, are treasured and considered the heart of society. This paper also examines Iqbal's harsh criticism of women's status globally. He condemns the East for failing to uphold Islamic values and disapproves of the West for commodifying and masculinizing

¹ Citing a poem that originally appeared in Farsi in *Armaghan-i-Hijaz*. When asking *where would this luminous pearl have been / Had no ocean existed?* Iqbal likens the human *khudi* to a pearl and God to an ocean.

women under the guise of granting them “equality”. The consequences of the latter are the destruction of women’s nature and disruption of social balance. Based on Iqbal’s work, I argue that the Islamic Iqbalian approach can serve to empower women while allowing them to preserve their feminine qualities and essence, aims that are highly desirable to many women globally and that Western feminism has thus far failed to attain.

Keywords: Iqbal, Khudi, women empowerment, Islam, equality, western feminism

Defining Muhammad Iqbal’s Concept of the *Khudi*

Allama Muhammad Iqbal’s thought is grounded on the inherent value and purpose of human life. A central aspect of his philosophy is the concept of *khudi* or selfhood. Iqbal proposes strengthening the *khudi* through the assimilation of divine attributes into a human being’s personality. He believes the role of the human being is clearly defined in the Quran, which states that our sacred nature comes from God having breathed His own spirit into us (*see*, Quran 15:20; 32:9; and 38:72). Furthermore, we were created to be representatives of God on Earth (2:30) and as such, we have a great responsibility. Human beings willingly accepted a trust and burden that all other creatures rejected: the trust of personality (Quran 33:72). As God’s viceregents on Earth, we also have tremendous potential and it is our duty to actualize this potential by strengthening our selfhood rather than seeking to annihilate this divine gift.

For Iqbal the *khudi*, or human selfhood, is everything. The ideal for humanity is not the self-negation promoted by the Greek classics and by some strands of Sufism, but self-affirmation. “...The idea of personality gives us a standard of value: it settles the problem of good and evil. That which fortifies [the self] is good, that which weakens it is bad. Art, religion, and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality” (Iqbal, 2008, p. 7). Based on this standard of value, Iqbal rejects any philosophy, system or form of mysticism that promotes the

weakening of the self. He believes that the idea of killing the ego results in the weakness and stagnation that has ruined Muslims.

Iqbal is thoroughly disappointed by the inner state of Muslims, describing them as lacking *ishq*, or passionate love, going as far as saying “Muslims are drained of blood...their inner feeling is dead” (Iqbal, 2014, p. 150). He concludes that this is because their *khudi* has become paralyzed as a consequence of a misguided view of selfhood. This erroneous conception of the self is partially caused by the influence of the “Sufism of dispossession” which in turn was influenced by Neoplatonism, a movement that Iqbal describes as a cult of passivity (Diagne, 2015). These philosophies encourage the dissolution of the self into the Real and discourage people from engaging in “worldly” activities. However, these attitudes oppose the spirit of the Quran, which emphasizes action. Iqbal concludes that because of “engagements with ancient Greek thought...Sufis conceived of the self as something that had to be overcome and ultimately annihilated” (Azad, 2014, p. 16). This has caused, according to Iqbal, the individual and collective entropy and atrophy of Muslims.

The word *khudi* means “self-reliance, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, and even self-assertion when such a thing is necessary, in the interests of life . . . truth, justice, [and] duty” (Iqbal, 2008, p. 2). *Khudi* means to actualize one's own value, competencies and potential through self-knowledge, reflection and purposeful action. Iqbal's poetry contains powerful imagery, the eagle is one such example,² in order to vividly impress in the reader his idea of a strong *khudi*. A strong sense of self is not to be confused with tyranny or self-centeredness, but rather with the highest degree of self-realization, vitality and individuality.

² “Live in the world like an eagle, and like an eagle die” (Iqbal, 1994, p. 182).

Human Dignity in the Quran

Iqbal's philosophy of the *khudi* is directly based on the central and uncontroverted Islamic precept that God granted value, dignity and selfhood to *all* human beings. Based on this Quranic principle, Iqbal opposed the oppression of women in both East and West. He believed that both East and West have failed to recognize women's intrinsic value and crucial role in society. Throughout history and across civilizations, women have been treated no better than servants or slaves. They have had few rights, little respect, status, and value. In other words, women's dignity has been trampled upon. They have been treated as property to be sold, used or even destroyed at the whim of the men who "owned" them. Before the advent of Islam, the birth of a girl was considered a curse in the Arab lands and many female babies were buried alive. The Quran categorically condemned this as evil (16:58-19).³

The Inherent Worth of Women in Islam

The Quran, far from subjugating women, can and should be read as a liberating and empowering scripture. Iqbal was first and foremost a devout Muslim who understood the Quran in general, and as it pertains to women in particular, as proclaiming the inherent worth of the human being. If we read the Quran as Iqbal did, as a divine book that aims to protect the dignity of God's highest creation, the human being, we will find that it is not necessary to resort to secular feminism to "empower" women.

³ "When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child) his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on!" (Quran 16:58-19).

Secular views and therefore many strands of Western feminism are rooted in entirely different conceptions of the universe and the human being. Secular philosophies do not understand creation as intrinsically worthy or purposeful. The Quran, on the contrary, clarifies that every single part of creation has a purpose and that human beings, both male and female, are the highest of creatures and possess inherent dignity and value.

However, in order for the Quran to serve as a source of liberation, it is crucial to engage in interpretations that are in accordance with its dynamic spirit, as Iqbal insisted. The strong refusal in the Quran to perpetuate the religious depictions of God as a father figure that exist in both Judaism and Christianity, and the refusal to engender and sexualize God, can be understood as militating against patriarchy, which Asma Barlas considers to be “the chief instrument of women’s oppression in Muslim societies” (Barlas, 2013, p. 421).

Patriarchal and oppressive cultural norms are often couched in religious terminology and deemed “Islamic” in order to justify them. However, the conflation of repressive cultural standards with Islam is a terrible misconstruction of the religion. Notions that Islam is inherently oppressive to women are contradicted not only by an in-depth analysis of the Quran but also by extensive evidence that demonstrates that women, during the formative years of Islam, enjoyed a high standing and were included in every aspect of life.

It would be absurd for a God who is above sex and gender, who is most compassionate, merciful (*Rahman, Rahim*, derived from the same Arabic root as the word *rahm*, womb), and will not transgress against the rights of others, to privilege men and take sexual partisanship. It is even more absurd to imagine that this most compassionate and most merciful God would advocate the oppression of half of His highest creation (women). Not only does the Quran not oppress women, “but it ... affirms that women and men originated in the same self, have the same

capacity for moral choice and personality and, as God's vice-regents on earth, have a mutual duty to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong" (Barlas, 2013, p. 421). That is, women have as much duty and right to develop their *khudi*.

Iqbal's Condemnation of Women's Oppression in East and West

Enslavement, whether of the body, mind or spirit, is a wrong against God and a violation of human nature. Iqbal rejected many aspects of ancient Greek philosophy, including women's alleged inferiority. He also disagreed with Biblical views of women being inherently sinful. He condemned medieval literature that depicted females as evil and opposed monastic definitions of male piety that advocated the avoidance of women (Tahir, 2019).

Furthermore, Iqbal rejected the mores of eastern societies that confined women to the home, limiting their education and involvement in society. Iqbal believed that men and women complement each other and that women should fully participate in society and have prestigious roles in it. Because preserving and fomenting the sacredness of human life are Iqbal's primary goals, he understood that the health of civilization is impossible to attain while continuing to subjugate half of its members. Both men and women should have the same opportunity and duty to develop their potential and to play their roles in the universe. Neither of them is superior to the other. Superiority is only determined by one's level of piety and good deeds. In fact, the Quran bestows a special status, reverence and rights to women that no other religion has ever provided.

Iqbal understood gender difference as part of nature's beauty and grandeur. He did not consider women inferior to men, on the contrary, he considered them to be the heart of society and essential in nation building. He understood Islam as valuing femininity and disagreed with ideologies that aimed to transform

women into men. He believed that women should be proud to be women and that Western forms of feminism and equality were a trap, a new way to exploit and enslave women for profit.

Modernity and the Commodification of Women

Considering the fact that the number of women who convert to Islam far outweighs the number of men, it is clear that many Western women are unhappy with the status of women in secular modernity, despite the mirage of “freedom” and “equality” that we supposedly enjoy. Women in secular modernity are deprived of support and are expected to do it all: financially support themselves completely, succeed in careers where they are expected to compete with men while using the methods of men, work endless hours in structures and environments designed by and for men which logically value masculine qualities, and, while doing all this, women are also expected to sustain a romantic relationship, provide a loving, well-maintained home and raise good children. If we pause to reflect on the social reality in many such societies, it is blatantly clear that things are not working. These values often result in lonely, empty, unnatural and exhausting lives, as Iqbal understood.

Non-Muslims criticize the gender differences maintained in Islam failing to understand the reason and essence of these differences. It is an easily observable fact that diversity exists in all of nature, which adds to the splendor and richness of life. In the name of “equality or gender revolution, elimination of this diversity and difference is coercion and negation of nature” (Eijaz & Eijaz, 2011, p. 112). Existing as a woman in much of the Western world involves bending one's feminine nature out of shape because the way to “succeed” is by becoming more and more masculine.

In the name of feminism, the West has “deprived women of [their] feminine identity and character. Every effort is made to

convert her to a ‘he-woman.’” She has been “allowed” to enter the labor force for profit and other capitalistic aims. The seemingly “charming yet deceptive slogans of ...emancipation and gender equality [cannot] eliminate [the] preferential wage structure on gender basis. [The] exploitations and miseries of women [have] increased even after about two hundred years of the so-called modernization” (Eijaz & Eijaz, 2011, p. 112). In the industrial revolution, women were used as a source of cheap and non-problematic labor, and later, turned into and specifically targeted as “consumers.”

Furthermore, in many societies today, women are disconnected from families, forced to work “maximum hours in offices, factories, clubs, streets, shops, plazas and markets. [They have] to face lustful looks [and harassment]. They are deprived of care, security, love, affection and feelings. They have lost her delicateness and softness. They have lost the relation of love, confidence, sacredness and kindness with her husband. Due to the breaking of the family bond, they [are] bound to bear all expenditures by themselves” (Tahir, 2019, p. 100). If being used for profit is a “right” that we have won, we must seriously question the aims of the system that makes us believe this is a worthy pursuit to begin with. As Iqbal correctly observed, both East and West have long ways to go in the path of adequately valuing women.

Many women in both East and West are “unknowingly caught in collective conditioning in which the feminine is made subservient to masculine, rational values. The feminine qualities of relating, listening, and waiting are repressed in favor of rational thought and goal-oriented values. American culture may appear to give freedom to women, but there is a collective pattern that denies the real nature of the feminine.” An American woman perceptively stated that in this culture a woman “can be anything she wants, as long as it is masculine” (Vaughn-Lee, 2013, p. 52).

Another problematic form of collective conditioning tells us that Western women are free because they can be a showpiece or sex symbol. This “freedom” is highly questionable. Female bodies are used as a commodity for all sorts of purposes, most of which involve making profits for and/or being a source of pleasure for men. These purposes range from sexual exploitation to marketing, to entertainment, to short-lived sexual relations, just to name a few. It is hard to understand how having the “right” to be ogled at every turn because we are “free” to wear the latest, most revealing fashions is considered “freedom.”

It would be one thing if people were consciously aware of what is happening, but many, if not most, are not. We automatically buy into the notion that being fashion-forward means being free to undress as much as we want and that dressing modestly is a form of oppression. We fail to understand that this “freedom” is not in our best interest and that we have been conditioned to think that way by the very system that is exploiting us. There is tremendous power and liberation in going through the process of thinking about what Islam teaches regarding modesty, and comparing these values to the secular ones and then deciding for oneself where in the scale of modesty versus exposure one feels best.

In Islam, the human body is private and sacred. We cover it to protect ourselves. The female body was not created to be “consumed” by every pair of eyes. The body is the home of the soul and intellect. It is the vehicle that allows us to participate in worthy spiritual and worldly endeavors. If a person understands the difference between the Islamic approach and the secular one and makes an informed choice in either direction, then at least we are a step closer to true freedom of choice. But the fact is that the forces that dictate what women should or should not wear are extremely powerful and deeply programmed into the collective psyche. Because of this, the “choice” of what type of clothing to wear rarely comes from a place of deep examination and understanding. It is, in fact, not a choice at all.

Iqbal's Understanding of Islam, Women and Femininity

Iqbal correctly pointed out that in Islam, a woman's feminine qualities are valued. Becoming masculine or distorting one's nature is not required in order to have rights and opportunities to progress. Iqbal was convinced that as a species, both men and women are equal. The roles that we play, however, are different because our nature is different. This is today a controversial statement but one that I am convinced is true, as it is readily apparent that more and more women are dissatisfied with the status quo, with the pressure to do and have it all, with the expectation of having to behave exactly like men if we want respect. Many women long for the support and peace that come from more well-defined gender roles in society and that give value to women at every stage of their life (Tahir, 2019, p. 100).

Iqbal recounts a trip to Italy where he met a man called Prince Caetani who was fond of Islamic history. He asked Caetani the reason for his interest in Islam and he intriguingly replied, "Islam turned women to men." What Caetani meant is something quite different from the type of distortion previously discussed. He believed that Islam had instilled such "great faith and enthusiasm" in the hearts of women that they became equal in status to men (Eijaz & Eijaz, 2011, p. 192). That is, they acquired faith, education, rights, and value in Islam that they never had in other religions.

In his magnum opus *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal recounts that he studied the works of Turkish scholar, poet, sociologist and reformer Ziya Gokalp. Although he disagreed with Gokalp on various issues, he approved of his views on reform because he considers him an energetic Muslim thinker. Iqbal understands Islam as a dynamic way of life that "rejects the old static view of the universe" (Iqbal, 2013, p. 116). Providing historical information about the events that led to the rigidity and mediocrity that Iqbal believed had taken over Muslim thought, he explained that "a false reverence

for past history and its artificial resurrection constitute no remedy for a people's decay" (Iqbal, 2013, p. 120). Worn-out ideas only accelerate the decay of civilizations. The only way to counter this decay is through the influence of self-concentrated individuals, that is, those with a strong *khudi*. These individuals "reveal the depth of life" and new standards that make society realize that its environment is not inviolable and requires revision.

Iqbal goes into an overview of the legal history of Islam and highlights certain characters that have brought pulsations of life to modern Islam.⁴ Praising modern Turkey for its broadening and reinforcement of the concept of *ijtihad*,⁵ and discussing political movements in Turkey that are not relevant to this paper, Iqbal discusses Gokalp's thought,⁶ citing several of his poems, including the following about women:

There is the woman, my mother, my sister, or my daughter; it is she who calls up the most sacred emotions from the depths of my life! There is my beloved, my sun, my moon and my star; it is she who makes me understand the poetry of life! How could the Holy Law of God regard these beautiful creatures as despicable beings? Surely there is an error in the interpretation of the Quran by the learned.

The foundation of the nation and the state is the family!
As long as the full worth of the woman is not realized,
national life remains incomplete. (Iqbal, 2013, p.128)⁷

⁴ Among these, he counts Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad Ibn Tumart (Ghazali's student).

⁵ "The exertion of mental energy for the sake of arriving, through reasoning, at a considered opinion" (Hallaq, 2009, pp. 50-51).

⁶ Iqbal did not know Turkish and used August Fischer's German translation of Ziya Gokalp's work.

⁷ Ziya Gokalp, cited in Iqbal, 2013, p. 128.

Iqbal admires his spirit and appreciates this part of the poem. However, Gokalp also criticizes the Islamic inheritance laws, which Iqbal addresses, stating that the poet does not understand the family law of Islam or the economic significance of the Quranic rule of inheritance. He explains that the inequality of legal shares in inheritance should not be interpreted as assuming the superiority of males over females because “such an assumption would be contrary to the spirit of Islam. The Quran says: “And for women are rights over men similar to those for men over women (2:228) (Iqbal, 2013, pp. 134-135). In other words, Iqbal is crystal clear on the fact that claims of superiority of males over females contradict the spirit of Islam.

Iqbal’s understanding of inheritance laws sheds light on his views about women. He states that the share of a daughter is determined “not by any inferiority inherent in her, but in view of her economic opportunities, and the place she occupies in the social structure of which she is part [of] . . . [Furthermore], the rule of inheritance must be regarded not as an isolated factor in the distribution of wealth, but as one factor among others working together for the same end.” In Islamic law, a woman is the full owner of the property given to her by both her father and her husband at the time of marriage. Moreover, “she absolutely owns her dower-money which may be prompt or deferred according to her choice, and in lieu of which she can hold possession of the whole of her husband’s property till payment, the responsibility of maintaining her throughout her life is wholly” her husband’s. Finally, any money that she earns is hers to keep. She does not have to contribute to the household expenses unless she chooses to.

This is, in Iqbal’s opinion, a vastly superior position to that of many secular modern women who are required to contribute equally to the financial support of the household, while still being paid cents to a man’s dollar. These women also bear the brunt, in the majority of cases, of housework and childcare. The “advantages” of modern marriage economics are

difficult to understand. If one were to consider the entire social framework, there is no economic disadvantage to women in the Quranic law of inheritance. There is, instead, financial protection.

Abuses and violations of the spirit of religion happen in all societies. Aberrations, repressive cultural norms and other types of abuse, justified by the wrongdoers through false religious interpretations, are not measures of the ethical validity of the system these wrongdoers claim to represent. Neither are external standards adequate to critique piecemeal items of another system that “appears” a certain way to those who lack an understanding not only of the system as a whole (i.e., Islam) but also of the specific items being critiqued (i.e., inheritance laws). As Iqbal observed, Islam can be corrupted by wrong interpretations in order to justify abuse and all kinds of wrongful behaviors. But these problems are not specific to Islam. They happen in every religion and culture. Bigots often seek to justify their behavior by formulating it in religious terms, resorting to interpretations that distort and contradict the spirit of the entire tradition. One need only look at the recent American political, social, and “religious” landscape for a Western example of this kind of corruption.

Addressing Islamophobic Views of Women in Islam

A common Western interpretation is that Islam oppresses women, deprives them of rights and degrades them. When analyzed carefully, this seems to be more of a projection of the West's own attitudes towards women than a reflection of the principles of Islam. In the United States, for example, the ratio of women who convert to Islam compared to men is four to one (Giglio, 2005, p. 1). Nobody is forcing these women to convert to a religion where they would be “oppressed” and “degraded.” Many of these converts are highly educated and intelligent women. They find in Islam freedom from the pressures, hypersexualization and commodification that American society

subjects women to. Many female converts understand Islam as providing women with dignity, respect and protection in every aspect and stage of their lives.

Karima Slack Razi, a convert to Islam interviewed by Elizabeth Giglio, explains that she longed for “a truth in which heart would be compatible with mind, action with thought, intellect with emotion. I found that reality in Islam. With that reality came true self-confidence and intellectual freedom.” Another woman, Sumayya (Evelyn) Tonnellier, “never understood why Muslim women cover themselves until she became a Muslim.” She explained that wearing the *hijab* made her feel as if she “had more peace. I was someone...a Muslim. I was (and am) protecting myself from all evil. I feel a lot closer to Allah...” (Giglio, 2005, p. 1).

Many converts cite the Quran to support their belief that Islam liberates them spiritually and even sexually. These verses “support their right to education, to work, and to keep the money they earn” (Giglio, 2005, p. 1). The Quran states that both sexes not only are equal but complement each other. For instance, *Surat al-Nisa* reads:

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul, created, of like nature, His mate and from them twain, scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through Whom Ye demand your mutual (rights) and reverence the Wombs (that bore you) for Allah watches over you (4:1).

They also emphasize the fact that Asma Barlas pointed out: that God in Islam has no gender. While it is common usage to refer to Allah as “He” or “Him,” Muslims understand in clear terms that God is beyond gender and unlike any human creature. God possesses attributes through which we can get to know Him, but at the same time, has a limitless and eternal nature that is beyond

the reach of our limited human comprehension. Unlike in Christianity or Judaism, God is not referred to as a “father” and His feminine traits are among the most important of his ninety-nine names: Rahman, Rahim (Giglio, 2005, p. 2).

Several other Quranic verses also clarify the negative views of women that earlier religions held: Eve was not responsible for the deception of Adam by the devil. The devil misguided both (Quran 2:35). God talked with Moses' mother directly (28:7). Mary, the mother of Jesus, had such a high rank that Allah sent her angels to reveal His messages (19:17). Men and women are protectors of each other (2:187). Women are the source of love, kindness and peace for men (30:21) (Tahir, 2019, p. 102).

Conclusion

In the Quranic worldview, which is the basis of Iqbal's philosophy in general and the concept of the *khudi* in particular, men and women have equal worth. Both can attain Heaven and both are viceregents of God on Earth. Both can and should strengthen their *khudi* and actualize their potential. If we combine the Quranic views on women with Iqbal's philosophy of the *khudi*, we have a comprehensive system that promotes the true liberation and empowerment of many categories of oppressed human beings, including women. It is up to each of us to live up to our God-given potentialities, fully develop our *khudi*, and use our status, talents and tools to uphold the spirit and teachings of the Holy Quran in our societies. Iqbal's philosophy and powerful poetry can help us undertake this demanding task.

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