

The Discussion on Concept of Women Rights in Islamic Sufism

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ABSTRACT

Sufism usually perceived as only talking or dealing with spiritual matters, basically expressing serving to mankind, and therefore, it should be examined with Islam and women rights. This articles applies the concept of Islamic feminism to analyze women's rights in the Sufi literature. The paper presents an analysis of one of the classics “Mahak- ul- Faqar”, by Hazrat Sultan Bahoo *Rahmat ullah elehi* (ra). The significance of analysis lies in the illustration of women's rights in Islamic traditional text, which will assist in present-day negotiations of human rights.

Keywords: *Women Rights, Sultan Bahoo (ra), Sufi literature, Islamic Feminism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The association between Islam and human rights has recently received a full attention in the academics. The majority of Muslims believe that Islamic revelations guaranteed human rights. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is criticized by some feminists as anti-women religion. The Islamic feminist Fatimah Mernissi (1991) shared that although orthodox Islam has interpreted Islam revelation in a patriarchal manner Sufis wrote for women's rights and shows practical support for it [1]. Interpretations of Sufi scholars for religious text are supportive of woman rights and their participation in religious activities. The current paper will analyze Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) book “Mahak- ul- Faqar” with the perspective of Islamic feminism to analyze women's rights of agency, leadership, participation, inheritance, and education.

Women's illustration in theology particularly for a theology of Islam remained a debatable point in feminist studies. In recent history, researchers have started to determine a different standpoint of gender representation in Sufi thought [2]. Silver (2003) explains the cosmological gender pattern in Sufi literature. The Divine is a blend of the masculinity (*jalali*) and femininity (*jamali*) [3].

Few Islamic feminists focus on the interpretations of equality between men and women that continue to be a debating agenda for legal Muslim scholars. Islamic feminists come up with new responses to global, social, economic, and political explanations with reference from Quran and Hadith. They convince scholars, women's rights

activists and policymakers for thinking again about women agency in Islam [4].

Talal Asad (2003) opined that agency in religious settings is unreliable as one cannot choose freely at their own and have to follow religious rules that are not decided by an individual [5]. In contrast to that, Sassoubre (2008) consider agency does not need to be competitive, it can be assured with active participation [6]. This resounds in Beasley's (2005) concept of women agency about women as active agents of individual change that resulted in communal change [7].

Gender is one of the societal hierarchal patterns that were challenged by Sufis. In the opinion of Sadiyya Shaikh (2012), the majority of Sufi readings are non-discreetly. They criticize egoism and social power that provide the bases for men's superiority [8] as presented by fundamentalists. Hazrat Sultan Bahoo's (ra) speaks about women's rights in his book that concerning Quran and Hadith.

1.1. Objectives

The objectives of this study are,

1. To conduct an analysis of Sufi literature about women's rights with the perspective of Islamic feminism.
2. To analyze women's rights in Sufi literature of subcontinent.
- 3.

1.2. Literature Review

The researcher conducted a review of similar previous studies that analyzed women's rights in Sufi literature.

1.2.1. Religion and Women Rights

Human rights are rights that are entitled to every human being since birth and even before birth. According to an old age saying that all humans are born equal but in the actual world people are facing many discriminations. Women's rights in general continue to be among the most contentious national, regional, and global issues [9]. That creates a need for the formation of a universal human rights system [10]. Women's rights should be incorporated in all policy-making endeavors to avoid discrimination. With the growth of society some human rights relate to political rights whereas many relate to individual and communal autonomy in globalized world [11].

The sociological study of women's rights will be beneficial for individual and cross-cultural relations. Especially the need for researching women's rights from a religious perspective as a social phenomenon emerged in the globalized world [12]. Religion is always used to support conservative thoughts that denied women rights. Now it's time to use religion as a source for strengthening the argument for human dignity and freedom [13].

The agreement of religious scholars on human rights issues is very important because of the significance of religion in people's lives. This becomes challenging when an agreement is needed on women's rights. Some of the religious factors are challenging the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda of women's participation and rights. Women's rights need special attention in religious context (14).

Despite wide contributions to human rights and religion, women activists often sidelined in intergovernmental dialogues. There is a need for combined opinion by academics, leaders, educators and women religious leaders to know the positive and negative effects of religion on women's rights to create a global framework of women's rights (15).

1.2.2. Islam and Women Rights

The religion of Islam has compatibility with human rights [16]. *Khutbaa e hayat ul Wida* (the sermon of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) at his last Hajj) is remarked as the first documented source of human rights in the world. Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) taught about the equality of humans and raise the honor of feminine. The words of the Quran present equality of all human beings for Allah [17]. This partaking was reduced by the exclusion of women by religious scholars soon after the death of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) [18]. The change is derived from the socio-economic context of communities. However Islamic feminists are redefining and reinterpreting women's position

in Islamic traditions in the Quranic context [19]. Islamic feminists started to conduct region-specific studies on Islam and women's rights [20].

Few scholars argue that the Islamic notion of women's rights is different from western notions [21]. Whereas others still have the opinion that there is no difference in both [22]. Badawi (1995), expressed that in history, Muslim communities proposed rights to Muslim women [23]. The historical narrative of gender equality in the divine message is highlighted by reformists [24]. Very few religious scholars mentioned these narratives of Islam [25], however, it is always being promoted in Sufi teachings.

Sufism is one of the aspects of Islamic religiosity which mostly attached to spirituality but its focus on human rights needs to be studied. Sufism highly resonates with the concept of international human rights [26]. Said and Funk (2004) concluded that Sufism supports cultural diversity as a holistic spiritual sensibility [27].

1.2.3. Women Rights and Sufism

Women in general facing many biases because of their gender. These treatments are both direct and indirect. Women remain less spoken in the history of Islam. Islamic society mostly remains male-dominated. However, the concept of Sufism is resonated with Quranic concepts of mutual respect of a human being regardless of gender [28]. Sufism creates space for *Ijtehad*¹ in women's rights. Sufism has a history of women who perform mystic activities and re-interpret *Shariah* along with men [29].

Representation of Muslim women emerged from the sources of Sufism and Islamic feminism. This is aroused by women's aspiration for agency [30]. Sufism provides women public space in Islam that is denied by patriarchal society [31] and traditional law. In Quay (2018), opinion gender norms are challenged by Sufis in many writings [32]. The recent slogan by human rights activists of using women's human rights instead of women rights is the old age belief of Sufism. Sufism presented women's identity as an individual beyond their sexual and reproductive capability [33]. It provides the opportunity for women to directly connect with Allah for which she do not need to be dependent of traditional religious male hierarchy.

It does not mean that Sufism is always supportive for women there is mix attitude of Sufis towards women. Gross (1993) opinion about previous scholars is that the patriarchal mindset of their time makes their writings androcentric. It will be not justified if anyone portrays them as feminist scholars [35]. However, Shaikh (2012), studied past thinkers' gender narratives according to their context instead of comparing it with current criteria [36].

Dovel (2017), presented a comparison of writings by Al-Ghazali and Ibn al Arbi. Al Ghazali has a suppressive

¹ The technical term that refers to the process of independent reasoning that scholars, but also non-scholars, may choose when a legal precedent is not immediately clear and available [34]

attitude towards women that propagate the agenda of political authority. Ibn al Arbi presented gender-egalitarian views and promote women's participation in his literature [37]. Sadia Shaikh (2012), conducted a gender analysis Ibn Arbi Sufi literature. He promoted women's agency and subjectivity in his writings and personal life [38].

Said and Funk concluded that Sufis's belief of *Tawheed* means that Allah is everywhere and in every being which leads them to secure human rights [39]. The application of this idea provided support for women's rights also by giving the message of equality of all human beings [40].

Fatima Seedat (2016) in her article focused the subjectivity of notable women Sufi Rabia Adawiyya. Throughout her study, we can notice how Attar challenged the current understanding of his time that only associates the right of religious leaders to men only [41].

1.2.4. Hazrat Sakhi Sultan Bahoo (ra)

Hazrat Sakhi Sultan Bahoo (ra) was a great Sufi of his time. His saintly mother Mai Rasti (ra) was guided by Hazrat Muhammad Peace be Upon Him (PBUH) to name him "Bahoo" means "with Allah" [42]. She has socialized him spiritually and religiously (ra) [43]. He belonged to sub-branch of Qadri order, *Sarwari Qadri*. He was born in the era of Mughal king Shah Jahan in Jhung Pakistan and buried there [44].

1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study will utilize the theory of Islamic feminism by Margot Badran for analysis. Feminist movements in the Muslim world, alongside other social forces, are struggles for civil and democratic rights to achieve equality for all [45]. Rather than see it as a theory it should be seen more like a movement. It was observed by a group of scholars in 1990 that, the process initiated by some Muslim women to elucidate gender equality and social impartiality through re-readings of the Qur'an and other religious texts, shaped a novel form of feminism, "Islamic feminism" [46].

In Fernea (2010) view feminism always follows in certain historical and social contexts [47]. Arimbi (2009), presented the same point that any attempt at Islamic feminism must be conceived in the context of the dynamic history of Muslim societies. Islamic feminisms if apply in true spirit could serve as *Ijtehad* in Muslim societies [48]. Sufi scholars also emphasized on the need of *Ijtehad* for the redefinition of women's rights.

Islamic feminists seek to establish a comprehensive pro-women Islamic worldview by the religious source of sacred text or tradition and the *Sunnah*² of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). They are also considering cultural respectability as a framework for social activism [49].

Islamic feminism presents Quran backed egalitarian face of Islam across the public-private scale including the religious segment [51]. The current study is analyzing women's rights in the writing of Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) by using references from other scholars, source Quran, and Hadith to sustenance the arguments.

2. METHOD

This paper talks about women's rights in Sufi writings with the perspective of Islamic feminism. It analyzed the content of Mahak ul Faqar- Kalan groundbreaking writing of Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra). The Urdu translation of Syed Ahmad Khan Niazi Sarwari Qadri, was used as a basic source for current analysis [52]. The interpretation of the content of text data was done thematically. This study explains and interprets the text within its socio-political context. This systematic review was analysed through various articles published in journals, online articles, and books.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study presents women's rights in the text of Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) classic book "Mahak ul Faqar- Kalan". The study will highlight the manner women's rights were being epitomized in Bahoo (ra) writings and how he challenged the patriarchal mindset of his time.

3.1. Women Right of Agency

Stories and narratives of women presented by Sufis to challenge gender hierarchy [53]. In Bahoo (ra) transmitter truthful woman assertively presented her point of view in a public sphere. At the start of the story the women surprised Shykh by answering his question. Shaykh was astonished to know that she is a harvester. He asked women how a woman can harvest. That is symbolizing the common mindset of that era where, some professions belong to men, and women were considered incapable of adopting those fields. Male arrogance serves as evidence of how the male clergy contemplates the divine message by considering that the field of knowledge belongs to males and has a derogatory opinion of woman spiritual agency. But in the latter stage, male religious leader admits woman agency and requested her for purifying him from arrogance through teaching him. Women presented herself as Gardner who nourish the garden of heart from evils of the world. She attain high rank in spirituality and also teaches the Shaykh how to do it. Which made it clear that women's agency has an impact on the lives of others.

It is again and again mentioned by mainstream scholars that women are not allowed to attend religious gatherings in Islam. However, the transmitter of women agency from the pen of authority in Sufism is a solid intellectual rationalization for women's participation in religious activities. This liberates woman character from

² Recognized Islamic religious norms and accepted standards of conduct derived from the religious and ethical principles introduced by the Prophet [50].

interpretations in which women are not allowed to attend religious events.

Women are presented as an active source of knowledge by other Sufis too. Sanai, presented a transmitter in *Hadiqat al-Haqiqah* where women surprised Sultan with her knowledge and subversion. An old woman came to Sultan for seeking justice, but Sultan was unable to provide it. Women came to Sultan again, and surprise him and the audience with her condemnation of the Sultan for his lack of capability to provide justice. Sanai depicts women's possession of superior knowledge of justice [54]. This instance change women as mere receptive of justice to an active source of knowledge that was acknowledged by Sanai.

Murata validates that although women can freely enact in spiritual jurisdiction in social hierarchies, their obedience to men is necessary [55]. Through this position, scholar's separate morality and spirituality. While Islam, basic rules teach to be cautious about acts of private worship (*Ibadat*) and social actions (*Muamlat*) simultaneously. Truthful woman in this transmitter explained that spiritual stations named gardens of heart here, can only be achieved through eradicating social evils. The one who does not purify himself or herself from social evil will never reach the state of spiritual attainment.

3.2. Women Inclusion

Sufi scholars often use primary Islamic sources such as the Quran and *hadith*, and mystical experiences, to explain that there no space for discrimination in Islam. There are many verses in Quran that address male and women believers (*mominun* and *mominat*) or male and women Muslims (*muslimun* and *muslimat*) [56]. Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) reference of verse, where Allah demanded Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH), to seek forgiveness for Momin men and women (QS: 47: 19), presented Bahoo (ra) preference of women inclusion in his message. He challenges the community of scholars of that time who exclude women from their interpretations. Here it can be highlighted that the language of the Quran addresses both men and women so the religion could not be attached to men only.

In a quartet (*Bait*) Bahoo (ra) expressed every *hadith* and *ayah* give message that Man of gnosis, is he, who remains strong and steadfast. But an explanation of this *bait* there is no impression that here the word '*Mard*' referred to the physicality of a man. But it refers to the firmness of decision. This is the typical temperament of his time even in the contemporary era of the subcontinent that commitment referred to masculinity (*mardangi*). Masculinity is not related to a biological man. So, it will not be justified to comment that woman as gender is underestimated here and as man gender is given a superior position.

There are many such specimens in Sufi writings where a woman was called a man that neutralized biological gender. Seedat (2016) referred to Attar's hagiography where he

mentioned Rabia, as a woman who gains excellence and thus, she "ranked in man" [57]. Hoffman (1992), opined that when Attar calling Rabia, a man indicates the sex of the body could not be perceived as a barrier in the path toward Allah [58]. Attar also mentioned Mary, the mother of Jesus as a man. Indian Sufi Farid al-Din Ganj Shkar called the Sufi master Faṭima "man in form of a woman" [59].

In Sufism, "maleness" is considered as an ontological category signified the state of spiritual activity which was not attached to biological men. Sufis have described active spiritual striving against *Nafas al Amara* (evil self), as a "masculine" mode. It is receptive to gain spiritual purity and divine manifestations. These traits do not belong to man or woman. So, the "*mard e Arif*" of Bahoo (ra), does not categorically refer to a man but it speaks about both genders. Only those who fulfill the criteria of spiritual purification through conquering *nafs al Amara* and being receptive to divine blessings can be called "*Mard e Arif*".

3.3. Women Leadership

Women's leadership is discouraged by many scholars in Islam. In Nasar view, although man and women shared humanity they possess different spiritual qualities [60]. Whereas, Shaikh (2012) opposed Nasar's point of view by referring to Ibn Arabi who states that men and women share in all levels and stations of spiritual attainment. In Surah e Nisa, Allah mentioned that "*For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned* (QS: 4: 32)." Consequently, Quranic text does not differentiate in the reward of men and women because of their gender.

Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra), described the importance of *zikar*³ of *Kalma*⁴ لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad (PBUH) is His messenger) by declaring two levels of *zikar*. The initial level of *zikar* is *Zikar* in loud voice (*zikar -e- Jahar*). The advanced level is silent *zikar* (*zikar-e- Khafi*⁵). He mentioned that his mother practiced *Zikar-e-Khafi*. The *zakir* (a person who performed *zikar*) who accomplish this is called "*Hazor-e Haq Faqir* (The saint who got access to the court of the lord [62]. Bahoo (ra) mentioned the practice of his mother while referring to perfection in *Zikar*. That exhibited his favorable point of view for women entitlement to the highest ranks. Attar supported women have the equal capability as men in advancing spiritually. In the opinion of Ibn 'Arabi, the women are qualified to even for the place of *Qutb* (Pole) the highest rank in spiritual leadership.

³ Remembrance, often containing repeated Quranic phrases [61] names of Allah or praise of Muhammad (PBUH).

⁴ Islamic profession of faith (Al- kalmia- at- Tayaba), which constitutes the act of embarrassing Islam [63].

⁵ In-depth practice of *zikar* (Secretly - Inwardly), is the stage when one get closer to Allah [64].

There is a verse in Surah e Dahr which attaches human creation with both man and woman. The superiority of man is often attached to the creation of a human being, which speaks that Eve was made from the ribs of Adam. Although it was mentioned in the Quran that human being is created from male sperm (Nutfa) and highly quoted by scholars to prove male superiority. It mentioned, "Verily we created the human from a drop of mingled sperm" (QS: 2:76). This verse significantly speaks about "mingled sperm" that both males and females contributed to the creation of human beings.

3.4. Women Right of Inheritance

Sultan Bahoo (ra) mentioned a prophetic example in Mahak ul Faqar. One day Prophet (PBUH) went to the home of Hazrat Fatima (RA). Upon observing her poverty (*faqar*) Prophet (PBUH) asked, "If you want I can change your whole house in gold" she replied, "I am happy with the appetite of Faqar e Muhammadi (Poverty that belongs to Muhammad (PBUH))". Listening to her Muhammad (PBUH) replied "Oh, the Queen of Jannah, you are *faqir*⁶ (Mystic), and contentment on *Faqar* is my pride (*Al Faqar o Fakhri*) because it is my best possession". This brief dialogue between the seal of prophecy and his daughter expressed that Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH), appreciated Hazrat Fatima Razi Allah Tala Anha (RA), as the inheritor of one of the best possession of Muhammad (PBUH). This prophetic example proved women's right to inheritance.

3.5. Women Right of Education

Sultan Bahoo (ra), referred to a Hadith, that to seek knowledge is obligatory to every Muslim men and woman. Here the significance lies in the interpretation of this hadith by Bahoo (ra). He said knowledge means knowledge of gnosis and revelation. This offers another opportunity for Islamic feminists to deconstruct the patriarchal opinion that denies women education. This presents an egalitarian substitute from Sufi literature which advocates for women's education. The selection of this hadith and its explanation make it vibrant that Bahoo (ra) supports women's education. This depiction of women's capacity in his writing was instrumental to change the cultural patriarchal dichotomies of that time that even prevail in the current era of the sub-continent.

4. CONCLUSION

Many Sufis had gender-egalitarian views has added to the discussion on women feminism. Bahoo (ra) acknowledge many times about receiving basic knowledge of gnosis from his mother, Mai Rasti (ra). He portrayed his mother's performance of advanced level zikar as her spiritual distinction. He acknowledges his discipleship to his mother as his first teacher of gnosis. In his biography, we can notice multiple examples where his mother played the

role of mentor to him. He also resonates with his concept of "Mard e Arif" with gender-neutral being rather than to a man's body.

This analysis made it explicit that the Quran, Hadith and Sufi literature pose no barrier over women's right to participate in religious gatherings. In this article women agency and inclusion, right to leadership, right of education and right of inheritance discussed concerning Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) literature. Hazrat Sultan Bahoo (ra) does not pose any restriction in his writings on women to gain knowledge. Women were highlighted as a spiritual leader and source of knowledge in his writings. Especially in this book Bahoo (ra) made it clear that women are capable of attaining the highest positions by revealing examples of Hazrat Fatima (RA), Mai Rasti (ra), and truthful women. In addition, this review article also contribute to the theory of Margot Badran on Islamic feminism, as the current findings are close on the subject of women rights and feminist discourse. Furthermore, Sufism can be another perspective to ensure the Islamic ideology which may establish the women rights in the society.

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⁶ (A faqir is not poor or destitute, instead s/he shuns poverty and has abundant wealth full of many treasures. They are spiritually contended persons, who may apparently not possess anything but is totally possessed by the presence of Providence [64].

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