

A Discourse on Muslim Women's Rights in 19th century India: Translated Excerpt from Maulavī Sayyid Mumtāz 'Alī's *Huqūq un-Nisvāñ* (1898)

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**ABSTRACT:** *The nineteenth century was a time of vigorous social reform in public and private spheres for Indian Muslims. The Muslim household, and especially its female inhabitants became the key ground of contestation in this regard with both assimilative and acculturative movements taking up the issue of women's rights with great zeal. Many texts, including prescriptive novels like *Mirat ul-'Arus* and religious treatises like *Bahishtī Zewar* were written on women's duties and responsibilities and soon attained cult status. However, some texts like Maulavī Mumtāz 'Alī's *Huqūq un-Nisvāñ* that openly challenged all assumptions regarding women's rights, duties and even traditional exegesis, were precluded from the mainstream narrative. This article includes an extract from a translation of *Huqūq un-Nisvāñ* that we are presently undertaking. Through this translation we aim to recover the voice of subversive Muslim reformers like Mumtāz 'Alī whose discourse has been missing from contemporary understanding of the history of women's rights in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** : Women's rights in Islam, Pardah, Muslim reformers, 19th century Muslim household, Mumtāz 'Alī, *Huqūq un-Nisvāñ*.

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## **Introduction:**

In India discourses about Muslim women emerged in the latter part of 19th century. Issues such as the failed rebellion of 1857, treatises on Indian Muslim women in missionary literature and the social dislocation faced by Muslims in 19th century colonial India prompted many reformers to discuss the role of women in society. The failure of the 1857 rebellion had the Muslim community of India thinking about their future and one thing was evident: Muslims had to move in a new direction that could help them survive in changing times and a rapidly fluctuating socio-political milieu, without completely breaking ties with tradition (Robinson 271-289). There were large scale efforts being made to reform different aspects of Muslim identity; the Muslim household being one of them. Many of the Muslim social reformers turned their attention to it and wrote extensively about the gender roles within the household, especially the role and responsibility of women.

Muslim reformist texts were not the first ones to draw attention to women as social subjects in their own right. The need to reform the conditions of Indian women had already been discussed by missionary and imperialist texts in colonial India by J.T. Gracey, David Oliver Allen and Edward Jewitt Robinson. However, the focus of most imperialist texts was the unhygienic conditions of the *zanānah* (the part of a house for the seclusion of women), the restrictive demands of *pardah* (the practice in Muslim community regarding seclusion of men and women) and lack of education amongst women. Later the introspective and self-critical indigenous reformists, most of whom were men from privileged, middle-class intelligentsia began to engage with the idea of recasting Indian women in moulds that were more in line with the domesticity of their colonial masters. According to Tanika and Summit Sarkar the indigenous reformists, whether they were liberals or revivalists, provided a rationale for reform but did little to question the domination of patriarchy (1-12).

This newfound interest in the role and position was the focus of much of Islamic modernism that separated *Qura'n* and *Hādīs* from Islamic tradition to allow for its reinterpretation, one that was more in line with the modern thought. In Egypt, for example, Qasim Amin argued for the abolition of veil in his then controversial work *The Liberation of Women*. In India the 'Alīgarh movement was the most significant in bringing about large-scale educational reform. Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan, the founder of the movement maintained in this regard that the education of Muslim men was of imminent importance but did not show the same enthusiasm for women's education which he considered to be of secondary importance. However, many of his disciples including Deputy Nazīr Aḥmad, talked at length about the education of women. As an author of some of the most popular novels of his time, Nazīr Aḥmad's influence was widespread and was

successful in making inroads into the average Muslim household. His novels *Mirat ul-‘Arus* (Bride’s Mirror), *Taubat un- Nasūh* (The Repentance of Nasuh) and *Ibn ul-Vaqt* (Son of the Moment) were driven by the spirit of reformism and focused on reminding the ashraf (respectable middle class Muslims) of their time honored values and traditions. *Mirat ul-‘Arus* that tells the story of Aşgharī, a woman who on account of her piety, purity and practicality is able to reform her household was considered quite modern for its times as its protagonist Aşgharī breaks away with many traditions. Despite being reformist in stance Ahmad’s novels implicitly retained many of the patriarchal structures. In comparing the protagonists of *Taubat un-Nasūh* and *Mirat ul-‘Arus* Ruby Lal writes,

What is present in these elaborations is the idea of distinct kinds of training – ta’lim-u tarbiyyat, which is translated as ‘education’ by many modern scholars – for men and women in the respectable family. The message of Nazir Ahmad is that it is such training that produces ‘good’ women, mindful of correct behavior and the ideals of domestic life, themselves signs of sharif traditions. Such training also produces ‘good’ men, equally symbols of cultured sharif existence. But there is a disparity, for the men are variously invested in contemplative endeavors. (24)

A string of Urdu novels followed Nazir Ahmad's writings and took up the reformation of Muslim women as their subject. Although these texts were important in drawing attention to the Muslim woman as a social subject in her own right, they simply reaffirmed the patriarchy setup instead of abolishing it. The social reality for many Muslim women in late nineteenth century India was one of limited mobility and autonomy. Purdah, the practice of secluding women from public observation, was widely observed among the Muslim households, restricting women's access to education and public life. Educational opportunities for women were scarce, and those that existed were typically confined to religious instruction. The above mentioned texts kept the basic patriarchal assumptions regarding the status and nature of women intact. Much like the Victorian conception of gender, a reformed woman was considered to be the bearer of higher moral values. Women in reformist texts- literary or religious- represented all that was wrong with the nation but also simultaneously, all that was worth preserving. They were at once temptresses and spiritual goddesses "the locus of sexual danger as much as spiritual purity" (7).

Writing at the time of this great conflict and contradiction within reformist scholars Maulavi Mumtaz ‘Alī (1860-1935) tried to carve out a niche for himself as a champion of Muslim women rights in his book *Huqūq un-Nisvān* (Women’s Rights). Gail Minault summarized the primary arguments of this book in *Sayyid Mumtāz ‘Alī and Huqūq un- Niswan: An Advocate of Women's Rights in Islam in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1990). However, a complete translation of this book remains unavailable to this day.

It is hard to position Mumtāz 'Alī within the Muslim reformists of nineteenth century as his writings were far ahead of his times. He neither blindly adhered to the 'Alīgarh college-educated, westernized professional Muslims nor to the Deoband-reformist religious scholars but valued ideas on merit rather than political or religious affiliations. In fact, he had been educated by both. His family was closely associated with the founders of the Deoband School and the intellectual legacy of Shah Waliullah of Delhi. He himself was one of the strong disciples of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan. However, Mumtāz 'Alī openly condemned patriarchy and the false assumption on which it rested. He was the first one to take up the subject of equality which was hitherto missing.

Born on 27th September 1860, 'Alī started his early education at the age of five in Sayyid Abdullah's maktab (elementary school) and later continued in Rawalpindi where he was taught Persian, Arabic grammar, logic and Islamic jurisprudence. After his mother's death in 1873, he went to Deoband and got admission in an Arabic madrasa founded by Maulavī Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautavī. His teachers included Maulavī Muḥammad Yaqūb, Maulavī Sayyid Aḥmed Dehlabī, Mehmood Deobandī and Muḥammad Siddique. His father, Syyed Zulfiqar 'Alī called him back when he got posted to Firozabad as extra assistant commissioner. In 1874, his father appointed a tutor for him who taught him the English language. He got admission in Government high school in Lahore and continued his education. During that time, he had already started taking a lot of interest in public debates that went on between Christian missionaries and Muslim scholars. He attended a lot of them and could see the loopholes in the presented arguments. Being an open-minded scholar himself who was owned by both Shias and Sunnis, he was unbiased and could easily see where most Muslim scholars were lacking in their logic. He started meeting Muslim ulemas in person to get their viewpoints. He had also been reading a lot of Christian books given to him by one of his father's Christian friends; so much so that his family feared that he might convert to Christianity.

In 1877 he began to be tutored by a Babū Chandarnāth Mītur who not only provided him with many books written in favor of Islam but also advised him to get in touch with Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan. Sir Sayyid cleared many of the doubts in Maulavī Mumtāz 'Alī's mind. Maulavī Mumtāz 'Alī revered Sir Sayyid and used to combat many of the allegations against Sir Sayyid's teachings that were frequently published in *Safir -e Hind*, a popular periodical that was published from Amritsar. Sir Sayyid Aḥmad, on his part, also used to take Mumtāz 'Alī's advice while writing the tafsīr (exegesis) of the more complex parts of Qura'n. In 1884 Mumtāz 'Alī appeared for his BA exam but could not pass. Later he joined the Lahore high court in the position of a translator, a post which he kept for the next three years.

He had been a great advocate of women's rights and had always wanted to start a publication for them. His first wife though sufficiently educated for an average Muslim woman of the time, could not help with the initiative due to failing health. Hafiz Jālandharī writes that after her death, Mumtāz 'Alī married Muḥammadī Begum, his second wife and facilitated her with the required training needed to take on a public role as the first Muslim editor of a woman periodical (607-617). Muhammadi Begum's biography and her contributions to female education have been recorded by Tahir Naeem. When Mumtāz 'Alī shared the idea of publishing a woman periodical, she told him to take Sir Sayyid's advice on that. Mumtāz 'Alī knew Sir Sayyid would not approve of the initiative and only requested him to choose a title for the periodical. It was at Sir Sayyid's suggestion that the periodical was titled *Tahzīb un- Nisvān* ('Alī 618-623). The periodical began to be published by Dār ul-Ishā't on 1st July 1898. Mumtāz 'Alī wrote regularly about matters of religious, social and domestic concern for the benefit of Muslim women in his magazine. However his most radical work on women in the light of Islam was *Huqūq un-Nisvān* (Women's Rights).

*Huqūq un-Nisvān* was the first book published by Mumtāz 'Alī's own publishing house Dār ul-Ishā't -e- Punjāb in 1898. Its content was so radical that Maulāna Shiblī advised against showing the manuscript to Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan. Indeed, when Mumtāz 'Alī showed the manuscript to Sir Sayyid, the latter was so shocked that he tore it to pieces. It was only after Sir Sayyid's death that the book was published. The book not only subverted the missionaries' critique of the status of women in Islam but also the false assumptions that had led Indian Muslims to envision restrictive roles for women. According to Minault, the book "emerged from Mumtāz 'Alī's training in Islamic law and his experience of religious debate, his sense of cultural pride when faced with an external challenge, his acute awareness of the need for internal reform, and his personal anguish of bereavement and desire for an educated wife" (150). Mumtāz 'Alī being well versed in fiqh (theory or philosophy of Islamic law) and mantaq (logic), having studied in Deoband for some time and also being tutored in English was far more radical and open-minded than many of his contemporaries. The book however fared quite poorly in comparison to the success of Bahishtī Zewar. The first edition had only 1000 copies and was soon out of print. Minault in her work *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* writes the book would have done better if written in his women's journal as it was not suitable for a school text at that time (95).

In *Huqūq un-Nisvān* Maulavī Mumtāz makes use of a step-by-step foray into the world of rational explanation. Given the radical premise of the book, it may be tempting to insinuate that it was written either in response to another manuscript

- as indeed many have pointed out the obvious rival to be Thānavī's *Bahishtī Zewar*- or something that reflects only a phase in Mumtāz 'Alī's life. However, as Hafīz Jālandharī puts forth in an obituary published in *Tahzīb un-Nisvān* in 1932, Maulavī Mumtāz always had the best possible interests of the mastūrāt (women) at heart, and indeed it seemed to be his calling for most of his life. The cover page of the manuscript contains a well-known Hādīs (saying of the Prophet Muḥammad) - "The best amongst you are those who maintain good relations with their wives." - an indication of what the book would be about. At the very outset Mumtāz 'Alī proclaims that his book contains ideas that have evolved and developed over a period of time and have now become firmly etched in his mind. He is talking of course about the rights of women, and firmly asserts he has put ideas to pen that he had long held about the stature of women. However, in a bid to firmly remind the readers of his position as an 'aālim (scholar of Islamic law and theology) and not to look like someone who is inspired by his own whimsies, he declares that the manuscript would only appeal to those who consider their own honor to be subservient to that of the Prophet and his family. Appeals to the reader's devotion to the prophet ensures that anyone who objects to his ideas is guilty by association of disrespecting the Prophet.

Like other reformist works, his style is conversational and strictly aimed at changing the perception of its target readers. As Gail Minault points out, the book is structured like a debate, putting forth argument after argument that have conventionally been used to deprive women of their rights, only to be brushed off by the writer as straw man fallacies, relegating them to the realm of farzī khayālāt (fanciful notions), t'aāsubāt (prejudices), and jahālāt (ignorant or imperfect knowledge) (4). Mumtāz 'Alī makes fair use of Qura'nic and Hādīs traditions to support his arguments and in many cases uses the same verses or Hādīs that have been earlier used to make a certain point about the inferior status of women and reinterprets them to show how subtle differences can actually change the entire meaning of the verse or Hādīs. He specifically takes issue with the interpretation of words like quwwām - traditionally interpreted as being superior-for example and argues it can mean many other things.

Mumtāz 'Alī makes frequent use of anecdotes to illustrate his points. In many cases he uses examples from his own circle of friends to elucidate exactly how women are often mistreated amongst the ashrafīa (nobility) or the so-called highborn middle class, all in the name of religion and tradition. In the part on Pardah for example, he shares a latīfah (a funny anecdote) related to a friend who was more horrified at the prospect of having his wife bare her infected arm to a doctor than her actual suffering. In anecdotes like these, his tone comes across as harsh and brusque that drives home the point that he is simply not amused at

some of the absurd injunctions that had become a part of the average woman's reality at that time.

The 190-page monograph is organized into five parts and argues against false assumptions regarding men's superiority over women, women's education, *pardah*, marriage and relationship between men and women within marriage. The book takes up many taboo subjects like that of women's testimony, inheritance and prophethood. Each part subsequently deals with the illogical reasons given for men's superiority over women and how almost all are guilty of stretching the teachings of Qur'an and Hādīṣ, if not directly contradicting them. In the first part for example he takes a long-established view among Muslims that all prophets have been men, head on by pointing out that the Qur'an cites only a few names and identifies them as men and prophets. And since there have been thousands of prophets who have not been named, there may well have been quite a few women amongst them. Similarly, he painstakingly illustrates why it is another misconception to consider men superior to women on account of bodily strength as then donkeys can be considered superior to men in turn on account of being capable of lifting heavy loads.

Despite the availability of many vernacular texts, there is little academic research that has gone into exploring the lives of Muslim women in colonial India. Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* is the only detailed account of the individuals, organizations and institutions that were influential in the promotion of education for Muslim girls in colonial India. In recent times C.M. Naim has drawn attention to the lives of women like Ashraf-un-Nisā and Muḥammadī Begum, mapping their struggle in a world of patriarchy in "How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write". Ruby Lal draws attention to the absence of the girl child experience within the broader 19th century question on Indian woman to show how a girl's training and education is missing from historical accounts in her book *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness*. We believe that translating this book will not only help international scholars problematize and re-read gender in late 19th century India realistically in its own historical context but will also make the text more accessible to the cosmopolitan reader of feminist literature. We have chosen an excerpt from the section on men's false superiority over women as it constitutes the key elements of Mumtāz 'Alī's argument and style. The first section is important as it lays bare the false assumptions on which rests the unequal status of men and women and lays ground for the rest of the arguments. Instead of simply giving a rationale for reform and recasting patriarchy like his contemporaries, Mumtāz 'Alī goes on to question the patriarchal assumption of man's physical or intellectual superiority over woman.

### Introduction to the Section on Women and Men's False Superiority over Them.

The extract given below is translated from the beginning of the monogram and discusses Sayyid Mumtāz 'Alī's views regarding equality between men and women. He insists on theorizing women as equal to men. He challenges many of the false assumptions associated with women especially the presumption that they are physically and intellectually inferior to men. The arguments he put forward to prove his point are based on logic and analysis. He neither looks at women as frail creatures naturally prone to vices like jealousy, envy, superstition and irrationality nor restricts them in the role of morally superior and spiritually pure homemakers. Instead, he takes a very objective tone to counter all objections to women rights. This section like the rest of the monograph makes sure that all arguments are well supported by Qur'an and Hādīs resisting all attempts to be dismissed as secular by religious scholars. This section first cites all of the popular arguments in favor of man's superiority over women and then, by subjecting them to rational analysis, exposes their absurdity and falseness. The section takes up many taboo subjects like that of women's testimony, inheritance and prophet hood. Maulavī Mumtāz 'Alī pleads the case for women not from a superior or patronizing vantage point, but in a thoroughly egalitarian way. He goes on to state that women of Hindustan do not fare well in comparison to women of other nations but states in the same vein that it is not on account of any inherent flaw but due to their disadvantaged position in the culture. The following extract is a translation from pages 2-15 of *Huqūq un-Nisvān*.

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Translated Excerpt from Maulavī Sayyid Mumtāz 'Alī's *Huqūq un-Nisvān*:

In these few pages I have tried to explain my long-held beliefs regarding the rights of women. Although my ideas in general have gone under gradual change, those regarding the rights of women have remained the same. In fact, I see that these ideas have gained strength and firmness in my mind over time. I hope the articulation and implementation of these ideas will sufficiently civilize our community. Hence, I take upon myself the task of publishing them.

I am well aware that because of these ideas I will be accused of adherence to the British and will be mocked in worse ways than this and that hundreds of pens will rise to reject them and to ridicule me, and that whatever can emerge from the two lips of human beings, justly or unjustly, will emerge about me. But those people who hold respect and esteem for the commands of the Sharī'a (Sharī'a, literally means "the way." It can be defined as the Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad



(PBUH), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for law breaking. It is not only concerned with religious practices but also day to day life in Islam) in their hearts, and those people who understand their own piety, dignity, and honor to be less than the piety, modesty, and honor of the Prophet of God (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and the prophet's family will be ready to walk the path of the sharī'a without hesitation and will neither be upset in temperament nor distressed in mind by the derision of some deficient and mean person or the taunting and reproach of some base and ignorant commoner. If, by the effect of this small writing of mine, the right of even a single old woman in all of Hindustan is protected, then I will believe that I have received all the reward I am owed. And Allah is He from whom help is sought and all trust rests upon Him.

*Women and Men's False Superiority over Them*

Man and woman belong to the same species. As human beings one cannot be superior to the other. Of course, the few characteristics that distinguish man from woman demand that there be a difference in their duties and way of living together, too, only to the extent of those characteristics. Barring any anatomical differences, the differentiation or biases in the roles assigned to men and women are based on the identity or qualities assigned to them and are hence, coincidental, accidental (In the Greco-Arabic tradition, in which Mumtāz 'Ali was trained at Deoband, 'ārīzī properties are contrasted with zātī (essential) ones, with ārizī" best translated as "accidental." Accidental here implies something evolved by accident and hence neither natural nor permanent) and inauthentic. They are a byproduct of different atmospheres, habitations, eras and civilizations. I will prove that the extent to which the differentiation between the conditions of men and women and their rights is made outweighs the differences between their anatomies. This differentiation is based on false ideals and is a product of men's prejudices and ignorance. It is damaging and degrading to human civilization and is the worst possible example of ancient savagery.

Many of the customs and traditions of our civilization are based on the false claim that men are rulers and women are to be ruled and women are created to comfort men. That is why men have nearly the same rights over them as they have over all kinds of property; hence women and men cannot have equal rights. If men had conceded this false and impure principal to be a product of their own narcissism and prejudice and had not tried to rationalize their position, I would have not objected. However, it is unfair that they base their false claims on justice, logic and in accordance with God's will. The main subject of this writing is to unmask the falsity of these ideas and to prove their fallaciousness

To facilitate the reader, I will divide my argument into five parts. In the first part, I will deal with all the arguments, rational or irrational, that are given in support of man's superior position. The second part will deal with women's education, the third with *pardah*, the fourth with marriage and the last one will be about the relationship between men and women within marriage.

As far as I know the arguments given to prove the superiority of men are as follows:

1. Men have more physical strength than women. That is why all prerogatives that demand strength and hard work are the prime right of men. That is why dominion, as it results from the exercise of power, is man's right alone.
2. Men's intellect, like their physical strength, is greater than that of women. That is why women of all ages and communities have been considered irrational by them. Women are attributed with infirmity of faith, lack of wisdom, foolishness and insincerity on these false presumptions.
3. Kingship is the greatest of the worldly blessings, likewise prophethood is the greatest of divine blessings. That too God has given to men. No woman has ever been granted prophethood for the guidance of mankind.
4. From a religious point of view, man's superiority is supported by the verse *Al-rijāl qawwāmun 'ala al-nisa'* (The Qur'an, 4:34) that is taken to mean that men are in command of women.
5. Another false argument is that Adam was created first while Eve was later created for his comfort. That is why women are subordinate and subservient to men, meant to be a source of their comfort and happiness. It is God's decree that they prioritize men's comfort over their own.
6. It is mentioned in Qur'an that the *shahādāt* (It literally means 'testimony'. It can be defined as an attestation with regard to a right of a second party against a third. A testimony must be based on definite knowledge of an affirmed event, and cannot be based on conjecture) of two women equals that of a single man. A woman's inheritance, since it is half to that of a man's, is also considered a valid premise for man's superiority.
7. Giving men the permission to keep four wives at a time and not granting the same to women is also a proof that God wants men to enjoy more privileges.
8. Men have also been promised beautiful women as a reward for their good deeds in the hereafter while women have been promised no such thing.

Besides the above-mentioned arguments that are falsely based on Qur'an, there are others that are

deduced from the wrongful parables of *Bahār Dānish* (It is a Persian collection of romantic tales adapted from earlier Indian sources by Ināyat Ullah Kamboh, who lived during the era of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and was a munshī at the Mughal court. It narrates stories consisting of the craft and faithlessness of women.). Although the writer Munshī Ināyat Ullah did not feel any shame in writing them, I feel embarrassed in merely referring to them.

These are the evidence and claims, whether you call them logical, philosophical or illusionary that in enslaving half the world have turned men into slaves or even worse. Moreover, they have deemed women, who are created in the best of mold among humankind, as a means to gratify the sexual, narcissistic and debauched desires of even the lowliest of men.

Now let's have a look at these arguments to see whether they are based on logic or are simply fabricated by those who make false claims to please themselves. If one clears one's mind of cultural influence, not worry about having to practice what one preaches, neither bother about the social consequences of his opinions nor about him or his family suffering because of them; after a little contemplation, will see the irrationality and absurdity of the above-mentioned arguments that are neither endorsed by religion nor supported by logic. In fact, we cannot even qualify them as speculations let alone consider them genuine.

The first argument regarding physical strength is inauthentic and cannot be considered an argument at all. I agree that men are physically stronger than women but how can this argument be used to establish men's superiority over women.

It is also self-evident that the strong ones should get to do all the work that requires strength while the weak ones should get to do all the easy work. Who says men should not toil? Men should gladly do all the manual labor; cut trees, cut through mountains, cut other people's throats or do all that requires one to be tough and hard-hearted. The question is whether doing all that hard work makes a man more civil or superior and the above-mentioned argument fails to prove this. The absurdity of this argument becomes evident when instead of comparing men and women, the same criterion is used to establish the superiority of cattle over men: since cattle have more physical strength than men, they are superior to them. If one accepts the argument about man's superiority over women, one has to accept the argument about the superiority of cattle over man as logical deduction. In other words, man's superiority, if the word 'superiority' can even be used here, over women is equal to cattle's superiority over man. If a donkey

cannot be considered superior to man due to its ability to carry heavy loads, then man too cannot prove his superiority over women because of his ability to perform tough labor.

For purposes of clarity and remembrance let me prove the irrationality of this argument in another way. Why is there a need to compare women with men? Undoubtedly, they are both animals. They are not called men and women on the basis of their being animals but because of their being better than other animals on account of their ability to speak. They have this added quality that differentiates them from other animals. In comparing both men and women one has to see if both have been elevated to the same status of humanness because of this quality or if men have reached some higher status than women. The first argument is invalid. It only proves that a man's body, his bones and legs are strong. Since these qualities are animalistic and not part of the above-mentioned added quality, they cannot be taken into account in comparing men and women.

Everybody knows that men and women are classified as animals. God minimized certain beastly qualities like quickness, wildness and aggressiveness, and accorded certain heavenly qualities to create this new species, that was called human being. Therefore, any distinction made between men and women should be on the basis of heavenly traits instead of animalistic ones. To claim that men are superior to women on account of these animalistic traits is to indirectly concede that men are inferior to women in the possession of human traits.

Secondly, even if one accepts that men are physically stronger than women, there is still no way to ascertain if this strength is natural or civilizational. As far as the most obvious reasons are concerned the difference of physical strength between men and women is not natural but is the result of specificity of culture and society over a period of thousands of years, just as incidental differences have developed over ages between different communities.

Why is it that the Afrīdīs (People belonging to the Afrīdī tribe that lived in the Pashtun region. This tribe was famous for its violence as well as courage. They were first mentioned in the memoirs of Mughal Emperor, Babar as violent tribes that needed to be controlled) of Kabul are so strongly built and robust but men from Calcutta are frail and weak? Why the Sikhs of Punjab considered fearless are while the Indian banīyā (A caste. It is usually used for all people who are involved in moneylending and similar activities in Bengal) are known for their proverbial faint-heartedness and lack of courage? The factors that contributed to making women delicate are even more ancient than those that contributed to making banīyās and Bengalis feeble. The truth is that differences in the physical strength of men and women are not natural but caused by factors that are incidental and accidental: it is proven by the fact that although women, all over

the world, to a great extent, lead the same kind of lives, the difference between their cultural conditions lead to a difference in their physical strength. If one compares the physical strength of the women of Ġhaznī and Hirāt with the ladies of Lakhna'ū and Delhi, one will notice that this difference is not as essential (Here “zātī” is best translated as “essential”. In the Greco-Arabic tradition, “ārizī” (accidental) properties are contrasted with zātī (essential) ones) and creational as it is civilizational (“Civilizational” here means “relating to civilization”). Hence, women's frailness is a direct result of the inferior status assigned to them, through which their potential has been enfeebled, dismissed and gradually eroded.

The second part of the first argument or the deduction made from the first part of the same argument that dominion is gained by force, is even more absurd and incorrect. In the earlier period of human civilization, when there was darkness and ignorance all around and human beings had still not devised any social and cultural codes of conduct, every act that resulted in some kind of gain was attributed to the policy of might is right. However, even then, it was not possible for the greatest of champions to use their might without needing the assistance of other individuals. When humans learned to establish a kingdom or dominion of some sort, they had already left their savage life and made enough progress to establish civil society and rules for its maintenance had been strengthened. Or you can say that people had started to understand them and they were compelled to obey them. He had devised cultural codes of conduct and had begun to understand and implement them. So, the head of state at that time did not rely on the use of force but the assistance of loyal and trustworthy friends to govern the state. Every type of state and every type of government has ruled on this principle only. Associating the right to rule with men does not hold water. Although men have always considered themselves superior to women and in using their privileges have insistently expressed their prejudice against women, the right to rulership has never been restricted to them alone. All countries and nations, at one point or another, have accepted a woman as its ruler. In fact, some women have governed so skillfully that it is difficult to find their match in history. In India the reign of Razīah (Razīah al-Din (r. 1236–1240), widely known as Razīah Sultānah, was a ruler of the Delhi Sultanate in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. She was the first female Muslim ruler of the Indian Subcontinent.), though brief, was more peaceful than those of other kings. Jahangir's reign could be rightly called Nūrjehān's (Nūrjehān (1577-1645) was the twentieth wife of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. She was the most influential woman at court and is considered by historians to have been the real power behind the throne for more than fifteen years) reign. It would be remembered in golden words in the history of India for its exemplary establishment of law and order and administration. One should pay attention to the excellent governance and justice with which malikah qaiṣar-e-hind (It literally means “the Empress

of India". It refers to Queen Victoria who ruled over the British Empire at the time the monograph was written) has been ruling her empire and dispensing justice. Now can one still insist that rulership is the privilege of men alone?

Moreover, the idea that one can only rule by force is false. Advancement of knowledge and the spread of civilization in addition to the British Raj in our country has proved that the greatest power in the world is that of knowledge and only the knowledgeable, whether they are men or women, have the right to govern the ignorant and they alone can be deemed worthy of real and genuine supremacy. I hope in future men would not try to prove their supremacy over women on the basis of the pride they take in their strong bones and big physique but would look for some right and valid arguments.

The second argument is just a claim without evidence. Although contemporary scholarly investigation finds a slight difference between the bodies of men and women and proves that some of women's bones are fragile in comparison with men, any sort of intellectual weakness or of those parts of brains that are responsible for its strength, have not been found in women. Despite there being conditions that led to a difference between the physical strength of men and women, even between their bones, no difference has ever been detected between their brains. Hence it becomes evident that if cultural or social conditions had allowed more nourishment and development of women's bodies, their mental capacities too would have been finer than that of men.

Just like the first argument, this argument also falsely considers an accidental difference to be a creational one. Even if it proved that a woman's brain is inferior to a man, why should it not be assumed that it is due to current cultural conditions of women that can be attributed to negligence towards their health?

This negatively affects the female nervous system and puts women under constant threat of getting impatient, restless, irresolute, grumpy, feeble in faith and faulty in opinions. Since men and women have never been considered equal and have not started their educational journey from the same vantage point, it is unfair to assume that men's superiority over women is legitimate. One cannot attribute Zulu's ignorance and the greater knowledge of medicine possessed by the English (that even surpasses that of Greeks) to any difference in their brains. Similarly, even if a slightest difference is found in woman's brain it cannot be taken as proof of her inferior intellect. Quite the contrary if one does not find any lacking in a woman's brain even after it has been kept idle for many centuries, from one generation to another; it is proven that woman's mental prowess are better and loftier than man's.

The third argument given in man's favor is that none amongst women have ever been granted prophethood. This argument can be countered on three points. First, Muslims believe that God has sent one hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets to the world but only ten or fifteen are discussed in scriptures. Even if one adds all the other known prophets to this the total number would still not exceed thirty. Hence, it is evident that we know nothing about the lives of hundred and twenty-three thousand, nine hundred and seventy prophets. Therefore, it is false to assume that they were all men or women or some were men and other women. To know only a few of them and to still make a generalization about all of them is a false dictum. Unless and until we know them all, it is not right for us to make any claim about them.

Second, a woman's creation demands that any work that requires years of incessant hard work and complete separation from family should not be included in her duties. To exempt women from such tasks is an assertion of their supremacy and is evident of the fact that although God has created both men and women to provide comfort to each other, women's comfort and ease takes priority over men.

Thirdly, I am not at all in favor of the idea of universal equality between men and women, but of the view that there are no essential differences between them. It is only because of accidental factors that at times, some women are superior to other women, some men are superior to other men, some men are superior to some women and some women are superior to some men. Thus, the superiority of an entire class over another entire class is not implied by the superiority of some individuals. Just as the superiority or excellence of those men who became prophets over all other men is proven, so too will their excellence over women be proven. Thus, no basic difference between men and women who are not prophets is proven by this argument, either, which cannot assist at all in proving the excellence of the entire class of males. Can one attribute the same supremacy to all women that has been granted to Ḥazrat Āminah (Āminah is the name of Prophet Muḥammad's (PBUH) mother. Ḥazrat is the honorific title preceding the names of the prophets, the imams and other spiritually exalted persons in Islam) for having conceived and brought up the prophet, the pride of all worlds, or the mother of other prophets for having given birth to them? Not at all. Only a few women were singled out for this honor and it was only granted to them. It does not matter if other women belonged to the same category of gender as these women. Similarly, all men cannot claim the same prestige granted to prophets by God on grounds of having the same face, nose and ears as them. There is neither might nor power except with Allah. As Rumi puts it, "Do not compare your deeds to those of holy men, as they will not fare well in comparison. Just like shair (lion) and shīr (milk) cannot be compared, despite having similar spellings."

### **Conclusion:**

The translated excerpt above consists of the counter-arguments presented by 'Alī against claims supporting male superiority over women. In conclusion, this section posits that the arguments presented for male superiority over women, rooted in physical strength, intellectual capacity, and religious roles, are fundamentally flawed and reflect a profound misunderstanding of Islamic principles. These arguments often conflate accidental cultural practices with inherent qualities, thereby perpetuating outdated prejudices rather than engaging with the real potential and capabilities of individuals regardless of gender. The section exposes that the arguments in favour of male superiority lack empirical support and disregards the impact of social and educational disparities. Differences observed in physical or intellectual attributes between genders are more accurately attributed to sociocultural factors rather than inherent deficiencies. The position of women, as argued, is more a reflection of historical contexts and societal roles rather than a definitive statement on women's capabilities or worth.



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