



Struggle To Self-Realization: A Feminist Analysis Of Umera Ahmed's *The Perfect Mentor*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the struggles of a woman to assert their identity, self-realization, and autonomy through Umera Ahmed's novel *The Perfect Mentor*, through the lens of Islamic Feminism, it explores the journey of the protagonist, Imama Hashim, towards self-realization and empowerment, grounded in Islamic principles. The novel criticises the patriarchal structures and cultural norms that curb women's social and spiritual autonomy. This paper examines Imama's defiance of societal expectations and her quest for spiritual growth, aligning with Ahmed's vision for a gender equitable Islam, resonating with Islamic Feminist principle. This study employ a qualitative research design using Judith Buxter's Feminist Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis framework to explore how Islamic teachings and feminist ideals intersect and merge in the protagonist's journey.

Keywords- Islamic feminism, self-realization, spiritual knowledge, patriarchy and gender equality.

Introduction

Umera Ahmed a prominent figure in contemporary Urdu literature, frequently explores the intersection of religion, culture and gender in her works. Her novel *The Perfect Mentor* (Pir-e-Kamil) offers a rich narrative that follows the spiritual and personal journeys of its protagonist, Imama Hashim. This paper seeks to analyse Imama's journey self-realization using the framework of Islamic feminism- a movement that advocates for women rights and gender equality within the context of Islamic teaching. Islamic feminism argues that Islam's fundamental principles support justice, equality and human dignity for all the genders, challenging patriarchal interpretations that perpetuate male dominance. This research examines how *The Perfect Mentor* critique the existence power structures and advocates for a more gender-equitable of Islamic values. Through the process of "self-realization," which enables one to feel the wholeness of one's existence and human potential, it seeks to make women aware of their own duties when it comes to articulating religious knowledge.

Islamic Feminism: A Theoretical Framework-

Islamic feminism emerge as a response to both secular feminist movements and patriarchal interpretations of Islam that marginalized women. It asserts that Islam, at its core, promotes equality and justice for all, including women. Proponents of Islamic feminism use the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence to challenge cultural norms that restrict women's freedom. Unlike secular feminism, Islamic feminism seeks gender justice within the boundaries of religious faith, rather than outside or against it (Badran 2002)

This framework is essential in understanding Imama Hashim's struggle. Her journey to self-realization involves not only confronting cultural constraints but also reinterpreting her religious beliefs to reflect her personal faith, free from patriarchal influences. The role of women in Islamic theology is generally not accepted by the men, Saba Mahmood in her article argues, "religious knowledge as a means of organizing daily conduct, has become increasingly marginalised". Pakistani patriarchal country also marginalized women from socially politically and religiously, it restricted women within a frameworks what men have decided for them. Women are confine within the four wall of home and restricted many things which men consider not acceptable by them. Male ego satisfy to control inferior being like women. Through this paper I tried to explore the socially and religiously awareness of woman who fights for her rights and make herself individual being, for her the support and love of

Allah is enough. So it become important to study women in patriarchal society to immerse into religious knowledge so as to gain their rights in Islam, which we believe are inherently theirs. So Islamic feminism thus offers an ideal lens through which to examine Imama's resistance and spiritual empowerment.

Imama Hashim's narrative in the novel *The Perfect Mentor* serves as a critique of the rigid patriarchal structures that dictate women's roles in society. As a young woman Imama Hashim, born into a affluent but a rigid family, she belongs to a particular community in Pakistan called Ahmadiya community and her father Hashim Mobeen is influential leader of the community. Imama's life is initially, shaped by the expectations of her family and community. Her life was going smooth until she follow the rules and regulations of her family and society. When she recognizes the true meaning of her life she decided to left everything but being a girl nothing was easy for her to go against the family and social expectations. Imama's father forcefully her engagement to a man she does not love and marry present the male tendency to control over women's body, their choices, especially regarding marriage and education a key aspect of patriarchal control in many cultures.

Imama's decision to refuse to marry Asjad and flee from home represents her first step towards asserting her autonomy. This act of defiance is not merely a personal decision; it becomes a spiritual act of resistance. By rejecting an arranged marriage that aligns with societal expectations, Imama also reject the passive role that women are often expected to play in such situations. Her decision making process, grounded in Islamic teachings that emphasize personal choice and consent in marriage, reflect Islamic feminism's call for reinterpreting religious principles in a way that empower women.

Spiritual self-fulfilment as liberation

At the core of Imama's journey is the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment, which becomes a key aspect of her self realization. Her desire to understand her faith more deeply and live in accordance with her beliefs challenges the superficial religiosity often imposed on women. While her family adheres to certain cultural and religious practices, Imama seeks a more meaningful connection with her faith one that allows her to flourish intellectually and spiritually.

This emphasis on spiritual knowledge aligns with the broader goals of Islamic feminism, which advocates for women's right to access religious knowledge and interpret it for themselves. Imama's exploration of her faith is not just a personal endeavor; it represents a broader critique of how

patriarchal structures often limit women's access to religious and spiritual knowledge, thereby stunting their personal growth. Her decision to change her faith and completely embracing its principles on her own terms, shows her freedom from both societal pressures and her internal struggle.

The concept of self realization presented in the novel for understanding the role played by Islamic knowledge in making a woman identify her true identity and right path and the love of prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Self realization has been used to recognizes the inner self and the awareness of the fact which try to cover by the men to maintain their power structure. The concept of self-realization is evident in the novel . Fitzgerald J. Desmond defines self-realization as a fulfillment by oneself of the possibilities of one's personality or character; it is "freedom from external coercion, including cultural expectations, political and economic freedom from worldly attachment and desire. (Fitzgerald 50)

Imama Hashim in the novel left everything behind her, her luxurious life at her home, her dream to be an eye specialist and run away from her without thinking the reputation of her family, her become rigid when he came across the fact that her daughter accepted another faith and started questioning on her faith which she follows since her birth and her father is the most influential leader of the community, who taught other about the faith and her own daughter started objection on her faith that what she follow is a wrong path. He put restriction on her, stopped her education beat her and locked her in her room. Imama's parents curses her, "what you are doing Imama you will regret one day...you will have nothing left. You will have nothing but lamentation and grief, disgrace and humiliation. God punishes girls like you; you will not be fit to show your face to the world." (446) Hashim Mobeen tries to frightened her and portrays her future if she goes against his will, "there will a time when you will come back to us. You will be beg to be taken back. You will plead and grovel to come home and shall shun you. Then you will cry to be forgiven; then you will acknowledge you were wrong..." (446) Mobeen's words presented the gender discrimination rooted in male dominated society, where men consider its there duty to control over women's body and women should be totally dependent on men.

Through Imama's story, Umera Ahmed advocates for a reading of Islam that supports gender equality. This is not just about equal rights in a legalistic sense but also about equal access to spiritual growth, intellectual autonomy, and personal fulfillment. Ahmed's portrayal of Imama's underscores the potential for Islamic teachings to be a source of empowerment for women when interpreted through a feminist lens.

In critiquing both patriarchal structures and rigid cultural norms, *The Perfect Mentor* aligns with Islamic feminism's call for a more equitable understanding of gender roles. The novel challenges the societal expectations placed on women, especially in matters of marriage, family, and personal agency. Islamic feminism advocates for the re-interpretation of Islamic teachings in ways that empower women, allowing them to exercise their rights to spiritual and social freedom. Umera Ahmed's narrative reflects these ideals, especially through the transformation of her protagonist, Imama Hashim. At the beginning of the novel, Imama is portrayed as a woman constrained by her family's expectations, particularly those of her father, who insists on controlling her personal choices. Her engagement to a man she does not love represents not only societal control over women's marriages but also the lack of agency that women often experience. However, as Imama's character develops, she embarks on a journey of self-realization that is deeply rooted in her faith.

Imama's journey from a woman constrained by social norms to one who forges her own spiritual and personal path provides a compelling example of how Islamic feminism reinterprets women's responsibilities within the context of religion. Her unwavering faith in Allah and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) marked a turning point in her life. In contrast to many feminist stories, which only emphasize secular emancipation, Imama's journey is driven by spirituality. Her faith serves as the compass that she needs to overcome repressive social conventions. Her faith in Allah and her belief of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the final prophet not only fortify her but also direct her in making choices consistent with her own moral principles and sense of self-worth.

She has the ability to resist her father's and society's pressures because of her spiritual transformation. Because she has faith in Allah and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Imama is able to reject the wrong paths of forced marriage and family domination and instead choose to follow her own path of spiritual clarity and inner strength. She makes a compelling argument for her faith in a stirring conversation with her father, saying that she will not be ashamed in this world or the next. Her statements demonstrate her inner fortitude, which stems from her belief that Allah and His Prophet (PBUH) are watching and protecting her. Imama says to her father:

That one day I may come before you and you may see that there is no mark of shame on my face, no sign of dishonour. Allah and His beloved Prophet (PBUH) have protected me. They have protected me in this world and I will face no disgrace on the day of judgment; and if I am present here today it is only because I am on the right path, and sitting here I once again reaffirm that our holy Prophet (PBUH) is the last in the line of prophet-hood. (446)

This is a significant statement because it shows her defiance of patriarchal authority and her faith in her spiritual path. Imama embraces her faith to establish her autonomy and make decisions for her life and future rather than giving in to her father's control. By doing this, she shows how Islamic feminism re-imagines women's roles and regains her identity and dignity. She has come to a spiritual as well as a personal understanding when she realizes that her chosen course is consistent with her beliefs. Imama's story serves as an example of how Umera Ahmed applies Islamic feminism's tenets to her claim that, when taken at face value, faith promotes women's empowerment and gender parity. With her faith in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Imama is able to defy social norms and forge her own route to spiritual fulfillment and self-realization.

This study employs Judith Baxter's frameworks of feminist Post structuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) to examine the gendered power dynamics in *The Perfect Mentor*. FPDA allows for a nuanced reading of texts, acknowledging how language reflects and shapes power relations. By analyzing Imama's interactions with her family, her finance, and her community. This paper uncovers how patriarchal discourses are both challenged and produced in the novel. FPDA also highlights how Imama navigates these discourses to assert her autonomy, making it an ideal tool for exploring the intersections of gender, power and religion in Ahmed's works.

The novel begins with a conversation between Imama and her friends in school, Javeria reveals her life's dearest desire for Imama to become a true Muslim, as Imama and her family practices a different faith which is according to Islam is not true Muslims. Imama becomes shocked to hear Javeria's desire, as Imama never thought about it, her ambition is to become the top eye specialist in the country. But Javeria's wish causes Imama to have an inner struggle, which makes her reevaluate her beliefs and embarks her on a spiritual self-realization journey that challenges society's expectations of her. She says,

“I can sacrifice everything for it, this has been my long life dream” (6) When Imama for the first time encounter with the fact that her father get a big amount from the foreign to preach and spread his false faith in the society, which Islam has completely rejected that the prophet-hood continue after Prophet (pbuh) it declare that the prophet-hood came to an end after our beloved Prophet (pbuh).

When Imama reveals that she has changed her beliefs and won't marry Asjad, her father, Hashim Mobeen, reacts angrily and treats her harshly. As a woman and a daughter, Imama is supposed to be docile and subordinate to her father's demands in a typical patriarchal setting. She is about filial piety without question, particularly when it comes to something as important as expected to submit to the expectations of society marriage. Imama, however, opposes this concept by maintaining her autonomy over decisions. Her decision to not marry Asjad is a clear challenge to her father's authority. Hashim Mobeen is presented as having full authority over his daughter's life, reflecting the stereotype of the typical father in a patriarchal society. Not only is he disappointed, but he also reacts with extreme dominance, seeing Imama's independence as a challenge to his power. He declares angrily, “you will not be allowed to marry anyone else except Asjad. Even if you are interested in someone else, you have to forget him...Now! Never, never, never will I let you get married anywhere else!” (106)

This statement highlights the power that men, like as Hashim, have over women in patriarchal cultures where a woman's decision is not seen as her own. His remarks highlight the fact that he sees no significance in Imama's emotional ties or personal desires. The fact that he used the word "never" repeatedly shows how determined he is to have his way with her and perpetuates the patriarchal idea that a woman's destiny—especially in marriage—is not her own to determine. Hashim Mobeen is portrayed as a barrier to Imama's personal and spiritual growth. His dictatorial attitude is a symbol for the more common social constraints that keep women from learning social or religious knowledge and from implementing their right to self-determination. Here, the male figure represents the patriarchal system, which aims to regulate women's identities, beliefs, and behaviors in addition to their behaviors.

Jalal Ansar also highlights the gender disparities and patriarchal norms in the society. Jalal's strong religious convictions and affection for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are what first drew Imama to him. But after eight years, when Imama proposes, he declines, putting his reputation and social status above all else. He justify his decision by saying, “Religion is one factor, but it is not the only factor. We

can not discount the society we live in and the obligation social life put on us.” (419) The rejection of Jalal highlights the social constraints that determine a woman's value and desirability. Imama becomes an outcast as a result of her independent decisions, particularly her refusal to submit to social norms and her transformation in faith. Jalal's remarks make it abundantly evident that he and society as a whole cannot tolerate Imama because of her decisions. The patriarchal systems in their environment seldom accept woman like Imama who stand up for themselves.

where were you these years? How did you live? These are pertinent questions. My parents will not believe what you say and I have my reputation to safeguard. You may be a very nice girl but you have a sullied reputation. I cannot marry a girl with a tarnished reputation. I will not have people say my wife is a woman of ill repute. (419)

In Pakistani society, the dynamic of power between both genders is apparent throughout an individual's life. The gender roles given by society mean that men will always be dominant and women will always be helpless.

Conclusion

Umera Ahmed written in the foreword of the novel, *Pir-e-kamil*, The Perfect Mentor, has been written for you. For that moment in your life when you need to decide between light and darkness. You may tread the path that leads to light or, if you wish, take the path that end in darkness. The Perfect Mentor is that voice that can guide one and can lead one from the dark towards the light, if one so wishes to take that path- ‘And indeed guidance is given to them who desire it’ The Perfect Mentor is a rich text that offers a critique of patriarchal norms while simultaneously advocating for a gender-equitable reading of Islam. The text helps promote a discussion of self-realization as an essential tool for spiritual knowledge acquisition, particularly for women. It encourages women in realizing their individual role in gaining proficiency in religious theology. As demonstrated by Imama's path to spiritual fulfillment and self-realization, the process of self-realization is crucial because it enables a woman to attain soul purity through taqwa, or love for God and his beloved Prophet.

Umera Ahmed articulates an Islamic feminist vision that emphasizes women's rights to autonomy, intellectual growth, and spiritual freedom. By employing a feminist post-structuralist

discourse analysis, this paper demonstrates how Ahmed's novel aligns with the broader goals of Islamic feminism- showing that faith and feminism can coexist and, in fact, reinforce each other in the quest for gender equality. The study of this discourse in the novel reveals that men prevent women from progressing and holding positions of authority in the religious community. However, women become aware of their rightful position in Islamic theology through the process of self-realization.

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