

Does the Soul Have Gender? | The Soul and Gender in Islamic Self-Knowledge

Relationship Between Soul and Gender; An Analysis of the Differences Between Women and Men in Islamic Self-Knowledge

Does the human soul have a gender?

At first glance, this question may appear simple, yet its answer has the potential to profoundly transform our understanding of identity, gender justice, and the differences between men and women. The question of the human being's essence and nature—and their position within the system of creation—has always been one of humanity's core concerns. Islamic self-knowledge is one of the fields that seeks to present a comprehensive and precise picture of the truth of the human being. One of the fundamental and thought-provoking topics within this field is the examination of the relationship between the soul and gender.

In Islamic self-knowledge, the soul is regarded as the divine and essential core of the human being. Human beings are introduced as a compound of soul and body, whose ultimate purpose is to attain perfection and nearness to Allah. On this path, understanding the nature of the soul and its relation to gender holds great significance. Awareness of how the soul and gender relate to one another contributes to a deeper grasp of human identity.

Several pivotal questions arise in this context:

- What is the reason for the differences between men and women?
- Is the concept of the soul beyond gender?

- Is the human soul masculine or feminine?
- Can gender be considered one of the grounds for divine tests?
- Is gender an inherent quality of the soul or merely a means for spiritual growth and divine trial?
- Are gender differences merely bodily and worldly matters, or do they originate from the truth of the human soul?

These questions are significant because their answers affect our view of the position and role of men and women in both this world and the hereafter. Many questions concerning the relationship between the soul and gender stem from the outward differences and social roles assigned to men and women. However, do these differences necessarily arise from a difference in the gender of their souls? In this article, through the lens of Islamic self-knowledge, we examine the relationship between the soul and gender to explore whether gender is merely a bodily phenomenon or if it is rooted in the existential dimensions of the human being.

The Concept of Soul and Gender in Islamic Self-Knowledge

In Islamic self-knowledge, the soul is regarded as the essential, divine core of human existence—a breath and spirit from God that bestows life upon the human being [1]. This spirit is an immaterial reality, originating from 'ālam al-amr (the World of Command), and it is devoid of gender.

An Immaterial soul cannot be categorized as male or female, because gender pertains exclusively to the material dimension of human existence, and such a distinction does not exist in the realm of spirit. In fact, the spirit is a singular, unified reality that manifests itself in diverse bodily forms. Gender, racial, and cultural

distinctions are all external and superficial characteristics that cannot impact the primacy and unity of the soul. The soul transcends such distinctions and possesses inherent capacities and potentials which, through nurturing and spiritual development, can attain its ultimate perfection.

‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī, in discussing the relationship between the soul and gender, states:

“It is thus evident that the command including the soul—is different from body, is something immaterial. We know that the material things come into being gradually and are fettered with time and space. Obviously, the human soul is not a material thing and is different from the body, although it has a special relationship with the body [2].”

Reasons Demonstrating the Absence of Gender in the Soul

The absence of gender in the human soul can be affirmed through numerous rational and transmitted proofs. Here, we refer to three of the most important arguments:

- **The Divine Origin of the Soul:** The spirit is a divine gift bestowed upon the human being by God. Since God is utterly transcendent and free from all forms of deficiency and material limitation, including gender, it follows that the soul —originating from such a pure source—cannot itself be characterized by gender.
- **The Immaterial Nature of the Soul:** The soul is an immaterial and non-physical entity, while gender is a material attribute that pertains exclusively to the body. Ascribing material qualities to an immaterial entity is inherently contradictory. Ayatollah Jawādī Āmulī, in his discussion regarding the reality of men and women and the relationship between the soul and gender, states:

“The truth of men and women is almost equal, because the soul is neither male nor female. The main teachings, main beliefs and rulings are shared between men and women and they are separated in some issues related to the body. Therefore, there is no difference between the truth of a woman and of a man who is a single soul [3].”

This statement clarifies that gender is a material attribute and does not pertain to the soul.

- The Quranic Reference to the ‘Single Soul’: The Noble Quran refers to the creation of humanity from a single soul [4]. This verse indicates the unity of the soul’s origin in all human beings. If the soul were gendered, such essential unity would be undermined.

Gender as a Ground for Divine Trial and Affliction

Although the spirit itself is devoid of gender, its manifestation in the material world is accompanied by gender. However, this accompaniment does not imply that gender is innate to the soul; rather, it serves as a ground for divine trial and affliction on the path toward the soul’s perfection. Gender differences—including physical, psychological, emotional, and social aspects—all provide opportunities for the spiritual growth for each individual. These differences must not be viewed as indicators of superiority or inferiority; rather, they are complementary, with each gender—male and female—fulfilling its unique role within the system of creation. By establishing physical and gender distinctions, God places human beings in varied life conditions to test them through challenges and hardships. These trials offer individuals the opportunity to journey the path of spiritual elevation and perfection through conscious, deliberate, and responsible choices.

Given that the soul is the true essence of the human being, there must necessarily be a relationship between the soul, the body, and worldly circumstances. The body serves as a vessel for the soul's growth and perfection. If the body fails to provide the necessary conditions for the soul's survival and development, the soul departs from it—just as a fetus will miscarry if it does not settle in a secure residence [5]. This illustrates that the body occupies a lower rank than the soul, and that primacy and reality belong to the soul. In essence, the body is merely the limited, physical manifestation of the soul [6].

Regardless of whether the soul belonged to a male or female body in this world, it ultimately determines the quality and form of the body in the *Barzakh*. If the soul is unbalanced, and *fasiq* with harmful habits, then in the subsequent realms, the body will manifest in forms that correspond to the spiritual state of that soul [7].

Examining Common Misconceptions About the Soul and Gender

The human body has been created in accordance with the living conditions of life in the world, and at every stage of physical existence, the human being possess a distinct physical form. One of the reasons some individuals become confused about the relationship between the soul and gender is that they attempt to interpret the realms beyond this world based on the characteristics observed in the material world. This method of analysis is flawed, as each realm possesses its own unique laws and requirements, and must be examined within the framework of its own existential conditions.

Reflecting on the past can offer a clearer insight into the future. We all know that during the embryonic stage—the phase prior to entrance into this worldly life—the human being existed with a bodily form distinct from that of worldly life. These

differences are due to the contrasting environments of the mother's womb and the external world and it is through these very characteristics that the body of the fetus, meets their needs within the womb. Similarly, the post-worldly realms should be understood and studied according to the characteristics unique to them.

Below, we address several common misconceptions and provide brief clarifications for each:

- **Misconception Number One: If the Soul Has No Gender, How Can We Account for the Physical and Psychological Differences Between Men and Women?**

The physical and psychological differences between men and women are rooted in physiological, hormonal, neurological, and socio-cultural factors that pertain to life in this world. These differences have been designed to serve divine purposes and to facilitate the tests of this worldly life. For instance, motherhood and spousal roles in women require particular physical and psychological traits that manifest differently in men. These distinctions, however, do not imply any difference in the gender of the soul. The soul in both men and women possesses equal potential and capacity for spiritual growth, perfection, and nearness to God.

Moreover, many of the differences observed between the sexes are shaped by cultural and social constructs, and must not be mistaken for distinctions at the level of the soul's essence.

- **Misconception Number Two: If the Soul Has No Gender, Why Does the Quran Mention Difference Between Men and Women?**

The verses referencing male-female differences pertain to their social roles, responsibilities, rights, and obligations, and relate to their physical and psychological

aspects—not to the essence of the soul. The purpose of mentioning these differences is to provide a realistic and practical framework for human life and to assign roles and responsibilities that correspond to each gender’s natural disposition. This approach ensures harmony, balance, and justice within society. Islam does not ignore the inherent differences between men and women, but these are not presented as a basis for superiority or inferiority. Rather, the ultimate purpose of creation for both men and women is mutual complementarity and the joint pursuit of human perfection

- **Misconception Number Three: If the Soul Has No Gender, Why Do Some Islamic Rulings Impose Restrictions on Women’s Role?**

Islamic rulings are based on societal benefits and harms, taking into account natural differences. Such limitations should not be viewed as gender discrimination, but as part of a framework intended to protect the dignity, rights, and well-being of both sexes, and to preserve social justice and moral integrity. Each gender, by virtue of its role in the system of nature, is granted specific abilities and opportunities. These capacities serve as a means for curbing material nature and attaining spiritual growth.

- **Misconception Number Four: Are Divine Tests Only Related to Gender?**

Divine trials encompass many dimensions of human life—gender is only one among them. God tests humans with various trials to guide them on the path of growth and perfection. While not all trials are related to gender, many are shared by both men and women. God tests human beings through diverse circumstances such as wealth or poverty, health or illness, knowledge or ignorance, power or weakness, and more. Gender is a context for testing, not the objective or the criterion for human worth. The

Quran repeatedly emphasizes that the true criterion of superiority before God is *taqwa* (piety)—not gender, race, or social status [8].

Being male or female is neither a virtue nor a flaw, but rather a circumstantial framework within which each person may pursue spiritual growth through righteous deeds, intellect, emotion, and willpower. What ultimately matters before God is how a person acts within the unique circumstances they are placed in—not the nature of those circumstances themselves.

In this lesson, we emphasized that in Islamic self-knowledge, the spirit—being a divine and immaterial reality—is free from all material attributes, including gender. Gender holds meaning only at the physical and worldly level, while the soul in both men and women shares the same essence. Apparent differences—such as physical differences, physiological traits, and social roles—should not be mistaken for differences in the nature or value of the soul. Gender is merely one dimension of human experience in this material world, while the soul, as the true essence of the human being, transcends such distinctions.

Recognizing this truth fosters a deeper understanding of the self, promotes respect for all human beings, and helps to overcome gender-based biases and prejudices. The ultimate goal in human life is to preserve the balance between the soul and the body. Neglecting this balance can result in spiritual illness and distance from true bliss. Gender and the body are temporary and secondary, whereas the soul and its orientation toward the Absolute Perfection remain the essential and enduring focus. By internalizing this perspective, we can move beyond superficial distinctions and turn our attention to shared human values, striving for spiritual growth for both ourselves and others.

A sound understanding of the relationship between the soul and gender can correct many unjust and discriminatory views, replacing them with a more profound, divine, and human-centered outlook. This refined understanding not only enhances our comprehension of humanity's place in the system of creation, but also sheds light on the unique role of each individual in their journey of divine trial and spiritual perfection.

Regardless of what form a person assumes, they are created with an identical spirit and equal value. It is this spirit —not gender—that determines their path in both this world and the Hereafter.

References

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