

## Representation of the Social and Political Status of Women in the Quran and Iranotopian Thought

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### Abstract

In light of social, historical, and intellectual developments, the view of women and their social status has become one of the central concerns of human societies. Investigating the intellectual roots, beliefs, and established doctrines of a society toward women inevitably begins with studying the doctrinal sources and the thoughts of the intellectual leaders of that society. Similarly, an analysis of the contemporary social status of Iranian women cannot present a comprehensive image without tracing back to the intellectual sources of this perspective. In fact, from a theoretical standpoint, it appears that there is a strong connection between the social status of women in contemporary Iran and these doctrinal sources, as well as the interpretations and beliefs of intellectuals and thinkers. The main concern of this article is to answer the fundamental question: How is woman represented in the Quran and in Iranotopian thought? It is worth noting that when discussing the status of women in the Quran and Iranotopian thought, the focus is on the “gender” of women. In the study of women in Iranotopian thought, the primary texts of this ideology, including the *Avesta* before Islam, and the *Shahnameh* and *Siyāsatnāma* of Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk after Islam, are taken into consideration. The choice of these two texts stems from the belief that, given the intellectual, political, and social transformations of Iran throughout different historical periods, the current social and cultural structure of Iranian society, in general, and the role and function of women, in particular, cannot be shaped without the influence of these two texts. Given the nature of the research topic, which aims to understand the meaning of woman in two historical texts, the use of a theoretical approach and interpretive and hermeneutic research methods becomes inevitable. This article, based on the interpretive and Skinners's intentional hermeneutic approach, seeks to deconstruct the

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dominant understanding of woman in the two aforementioned texts. Of course, when the issue is the interpretation of the Quran as a sacred and determinate text, one cannot freely make use of all hermeneutic approaches without paying attention to the epistemological differences between them. Philosophical approaches to hermeneutics, such as Gadamer's interpreter-centered approach, are in existential and epistemological discord with religion. The use of intentional hermeneutic methods, such as Skinner's approach, in light of the requirements for analysis in a sacred text like the Quran, can be enlightening. Based on the findings of this research, when it comes to the representation of women in the Quran, a distinction must be made between the Quran's view of the nature and function of women. In terms of creation and dignity, the gender of women is not different from that of men. However, the roles and laws pertaining to women differ greatly from those of men in various fields, including individual, familial, civil, criminal, and political domains. In examining the sacred texts of Iranotopian times, despite a gender-equal perspective in some of the *Avesta* texts, especially in the *Vendidad*, women are placed in a subordinate position under the guardianship and authority of men, lacking equal rights with men. This same perspective is observed in the post-Islamic Iranotopian texts, particularly in the *Siyāsatnāma* of Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk, which severely condemns the political and social role and presence of women. This research primarily focuses on the main texts and sources using a library-based approach.

## Keywords

Women, status, Quran, Iranotopian wisdom, social rights.

## Introduction

The topic of women and gender has been of interest to many thinkers. Some scholars, with a pessimistic approach to women, have considered their identity and social presence as a result of modern feminist movements within the framework of modernity and Western culture. On the other hand, there are those who, with a positive perspective on women, seek the essence of gender and social rights in local and religious texts. The effort to understand 'woman' without referring to its theoretical sources would be incomplete. The main issue of this research is to present a narrative that, as much as possible, aligns with the explicit text of the Quran regarding the representation of women in Islamic religious texts and Iranotopian thought. Given the textual continuity of the Quran, it can be expected that the social, legal, and political status that the Quran depicts for women, in comparison with Iranotopian wisdom, would possess a strong textual harmony and coherence. In fact, historical and social developments have led to a portrayal of women in Iranotopian thought that is heterogeneous and contradictory.

The theoretical assumption of this paper is that the historical perception of Iranian society regarding the concept of woman, and consequently her social-political status and rights, is incomplete without understanding the problem of gender in the realm of Quranic wisdom and Iranian intellectual texts. Simply put, the representation of women in Quranic wisdom and Iranotopian thought directly reflects the historical perception of Iranian society regarding this concept and, as a result, the status of women in this society.

Reviewing the related research literature indicates that the historical and social thought of philosophers and intellectuals, as the context for the representation of women in their views and ideas, has been studied in a superficial and insufficient manner. Most research in this area has focused on the creation, dignity, and human rights of women in the Quran. Therefore, although numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of women, particularly regarding their individual, social, and political rights in religious texts, there is a relative lack of research on the subject of women with a comparative and intertextual perspective. Research of this kind is considered a step toward enriching the research literature in this field.

## Methodology: Skinner's Intentionalism and Contextualism

Essentially, when it comes to understanding and text, interpretive methodologies inevitably emerge as the theoretical guide to research, making them an unavoidable choice. Among these, the hermeneutic approach presents

a broad range of theoretical perspectives for understanding a phenomenon; including intentionalism in the theory of re-enactment by Collingwood, contextual intentionalism in the views of thinkers like Skinner, and even interpreter-centered approaches in the philosophy of thinkers like Gadamer (Fay, 2004).

Among the hermeneutic approaches, Quentin Skinner's account, considering his critique of Collingwood's pure intentionalism and his criticisms of the limitations of other text-based and context-based approaches, provides a more comprehensive theoretical framework for studying issues related to political thought. This is especially true since Skinner has attempted to apply this method in his theoretical works, particularly in *Machiavelli* (Skinner, 1390).

Skinner's method falls under author-centered hermeneutic approaches; methods that regard the meaning of a text as the author's intention and belief that in order to understand the meaning of a text, one must grasp the author's intended meaning. According to Skinner, understanding the sentences and phrases of a text without access to the author's intentions and motivations, apart from the social contexts and historical conditions under which it was created, and also separate from the overarching linguistic and intellectual context of the period in which it was written, will never lead to a correct and complete understanding.

In this method, the framework or context determines the meaning of the text; because understanding the meaning of any text depends on understanding the intellectual, religious, political, social, and economic contexts of the society in which the thinker operates. According to this methodology, in order to understand the themes of any text, the general context or ultimate framework in which that text emerged must be reconstructed (Tully, 2004, p. 78).

The main claim of Skinner's method is that understanding meaning and intent is essential and fundamental for interpreting texts. However, such understanding cannot be derived solely from studying the social context or from the mere study of the text itself. Therefore, neither a methodology of textual reading that focuses on the text alone, nor a contextual methodology focusing on the social and historical background, is sufficient for understanding a text (Mortazavi, 2004, p. 287). Ultimately, Skinner critiques these two methodologies and develops his own, introducing intentionalist hermeneutics.

According to Skinner, finding the author's intent is crucial. The main point of Skinner's methodology is that he distinguishes between "intent to do

something" and "intent in the act of doing it," maintaining that in order to understand the meaning of a text, it is not enough to merely determine the author's intent to write it; rather, one must also identify the author's intent while writing the text itself (Fay, 2004, p. 212).

Skinner focuses on two key aspects when it comes to understanding political thought: first, what meaning the thinker has in mind, which he believes is typically achieved through studying the writer's texts or statements. The second point is uncovering the intention behind the thinker's writing of the work. In this stage of the discussion, Skinner employs an intentionalist hermeneutic approach. According to him, to understand the author's intent, one must consider the debates, controversies, and questions that were relevant during the thinker's time, as well as the thinker's participation in those debates and his attempt to convey something within that context. Therefore, it is essential to be familiar with the prevailing atmosphere of the era and the intellectual movements occurring during the author's time. Skinner's hermeneutic approach provides a theoretical framework that guides the understanding of how women are represented in the two texts examined in this paper, although the direct application of this approach to the Iranotopian context and especially the Quran is not without its challenges. Thus, without attempting to apply every element of Skinner's method to the research topic, its general principles and framework will guide the present study.

## **1. Representation of Women in the Quran**

### **A. The Shared Inherent Dignity of Women and Men**

The issue of women is often examined in comparison with men, particularly in terms of their individual and social rights. The central concern of many studies in this field is the equality of men and women in terms of individual and social rights. However, the issue of women in the Quran is presented from two distinct perspectives: one from the standpoint of gender and the inherent dignity of women in comparison to men, and the other from the perspective of women's roles and individual and social rights. Although the Quran acknowledges differences between the roles and rights of men and women—due to biological and psychological reasons—women's gender is considered equal to that of men.

According to the explicit statement of the Quran, God has granted inherent dignity to the human race, which is bestowed upon all humans regardless of color, race, class, or gender: "Certainly We have honoured the Children of

Adam..." (Quran 17:70). The verse refers to the status of humanity as a whole, irrespective of the special dignities and spiritual and moral virtues that are attributed to some individuals (Tabatabai, 1995, Vol. 13, p. 214). Dignity here means nobility, purity from lowliness and degradation, and the possession of spiritual elevation. In this regard, men and women are created from the same essence, and the distinction between humans and other beings lies in an essence that is not closely related to the human body or form; rather, it is the human soul and psyche, in which all humans share the same truth (Javadi Amoli, 2013, pp. 58-59). The Quran, in recounting the creation of Adam, questions the Jewish account of the creation of Eve from Adam's left rib. The Torah suggests that man is the primary being and woman is secondary, whereas the Quran affirms the equality and unified essence of both men and women (Sadeghi, 1986, p. 162).

After describing the creation of Adam, God says: "And from this primal substance, We created his mate." This means that human beings, in terms of essence and nature, are one reality, and despite their apparent diversity, all have originated from the same root (Tabatabai, 1995, Vol. 4, p. 215). It is evident that one individual cannot fulfill the duties of God's vicegerent alone. Thus, the existence of Adam's mate, as a counterpart and partner necessary for navigating the stages of life and completing the first individual, was created from the very beginning to bear the burden of God's vicegerency (Javadi Amoli, 2013, p. 61). Therefore, woman is the complement of creation, and it can be said that men and women are complementary to one another, serving as sources of flourishing, vitality, and nurturing, such that each is incomplete without the other. Hence, one *raison d'être* for the creation of two genders, male and female, is their mutual dwelling and peace. The verses indicate that the creation of man and woman alongside each other is a divine law and a heavenly tradition that is also in harmony with human nature, for humans are naturally inclined towards the opposite sex, and this inclination is one of the most rooted instincts of human beings, ensuring the survival of their species. A unique characteristic that humans possess over other creatures is intellect, through which humans distinguish good from evil.

## **B. Existential Differences Between Women and Men**

Although the creation of man and woman in the Quran is regarded as equal, with no difference in their humanity, the obvious and inherent differences between them cannot be denied. These differences have become the source of their varying rights and responsibilities. Men and women are equal in

humanity and created for a common purpose; however, they are two distinct sexes, each with natural characteristics that set them apart from one another.

The differences that cause the diversity of rights and obligations between men and women can be divided into two general categories: (1) Physical differences, which are perceptible through sensory experience and are studied in physiology and anatomy; (2) Psychological differences. These physical and psychological differences lead to fundamental distinctions in the personal, family, and social lives of men and women, which must certainly be taken into full consideration when determining their rights and duties. The integration and design of these differences are necessary and unavoidable for the formation and preservation of the family system, and consequently for the survival and continuity of the human race.

Some accounts also include expressions that, according to some, suggest a weakness in intellectual faculties. Statistical psychological studies indicate that women's ability to learn in certain fields of knowledge, such as mathematics and philosophy, is weaker than men's. However, it is still not entirely clear and remains a subject of debate whether intelligence is a term given to a single faculty or to a collection of multiple faculties and abilities (Mesbah Yazdi, 2003, p. 23). Perhaps it is fundamentally impossible to compare the intelligence of men and women, as women may be stronger in certain stages of cognition and learning, while men may be stronger in others. However, women, due to their intense emotions and feelings, are often unable to maintain self-control as they should. Since regulating and controlling emotions is the first condition for proper thinking and judgment, women are highly vulnerable in this regard. Therefore, it might be said that the greater intellectual capacity in men does not stem from their inherent strength, but rather from the weakness of the adversaries of reason within them (Mesbah Yazdi, 2003, vol. 5, p. 24).

By the command of the Lord, maternal emotions and feelings were manifested within women, and based on this, the responsibility of reproduction, such as pregnancy, breastfeeding, and caring for the child, was entrusted to them. The fundamental role of women in reproduction, the continuation of the human race, and the upbringing and nurturing of children is undeniable, and the Quran also alludes to this reality.

Men and women are not only dependent on each other for reproduction and the satisfaction of sexual instincts, but they are also deeply interconnected in terms of psychological and intellectual development, as well as the fulfillment of individual and social needs. This mutual dependence provides the

foundation for the continuation of a healthy marital system, through which the proper upbringing of children is ensured.

In the Quranic verse, "And of His signs is that He created for you mates from your own selves that you may take comfort in them, and He ordained affection and mercy between you" (Quran, 30:21), God clearly designates the emotional tranquility of a man's life within the existence of a woman. Therefore, the inner peace of the family is entrusted to the woman, while the outer peace and security, which constitutes the stability and dignity of the family, is the responsibility of the man. Women are the first pillar and the fundamental agents of human society (Tabatabai, 1995, vol. 4, p. 343).

### **C. Differences in the Rights of Women and Men in the Quran**

In the discussion of women's rights, if the differences between men and women in physical and psychological aspects are conclusively established, understanding the discrepancies in their rights and duties will become easier. The law of creation has made these differences to divide, by itself, the rights and duties of society and family between men and women. The differences between men and women are based on harmony, not deficiency or perfection. The differences in the rights of men and women can be categorized in various areas, including individual, political, civil, penal, and constitutional rights (Kadivar, 2007, pp. 298-305).

From one perspective, the legislative differences in the rights of women and men can be categorized as differences in individual rights and duties, family rights and duties, social-political rights and duties, and penal rights and duties.

Mainly, there are not significant differences between the rights and duties of men and women in individual and economic spheres, except for differences such as the fact that women are exempt from praying and fasting for a few days each month, whereas men do not have such exemptions. There is no verse in the Quran specifically addressing individual differences, but by studying and researching the narrations of the infallibles (A), one can find instances of individual differences between men and women. Regarding family differences, there are over 80 verses in the Holy Quran (Mesbah Yazdi, 2003, p. 12). Given that there are only two verses in the Quran addressing social differences, it is clear that the vast majority of legislative differences in the rights of women and men mentioned in the Quran pertain to family matters, which highlights the importance of this social institution.

Regarding the social differences between women and men, only two verses are mentioned in the Quran:



1) A verse that states prophethood is exclusive to men: "We did not send [any apostles] before you except as men from among the people of the towns..." (Quran, 12:109)

2) A verse that considers the testimony of two women equivalent to the testimony of one man: "and take as witness two witnesses from your men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women—from those whom you approve as witnesses—so that if one of the two defaults the other will remind her..." (Quran, 2:282).

The exclusive governance of men is almost universally agreed upon by Shia jurists, who hold that a woman cannot be a ruler or leader. It is not unlikely that the reason the Quran limits prophethood to men is the same, as prophethood is also a form of leadership and the management of society. The assignment of the judicial office to men is a disputed issue, but the majority of Shia jurists consider the judiciary to be exclusive to men. The matter of the exclusivity of religious authority (*marja'iyā*) to men is also well-known among Shia scholars, although some have suggested that a woman could become a religious authority, but only in the sense of conveying divine rulings, not as a reference point for religious matters or as a religious leader of the community. In total, women cannot hold five religious positions: (1) Political leadership and governance; (2) Serving as a judge; (3) Religious authority (*marja'iyā*); (4) Friday prayer leadership (Imamate of *Jumu'a*); (5) Congregational prayer leadership (Imamate of *Jamā'a*).

The criminal laws governing the behavior of men and women are also different. The blood money (*diya*) for a woman and a man is not the same in Islam. In a hadith transmitted from Imam al-Ṣādiq, it is reported: "The *diya* of a woman is half of that of a man" (Najafi, 2008, vol. 43, p. 32). This same hadith is reported by al-Bayhaqī from Prophet Muhammad. There is consensus among both Shia and Sunni scholars on this ruling.

It should not be forgotten that *diya* does not represent the price or value of a person, so any difference in it does not imply a difference in the worth of two human beings. The human soul is priceless. Regarding the wisdom behind the difference in the *diya* of men and women, it can be said that this difference is due to the important responsibilities that men typically bear in the family's economy and management. The loss of a man is considered a loss to the family.

There are also differences between the rights of men and women in the Quran in relation to civil rights. In matters such as marriage, divorce, alimony, inheritance, and the status of women in the family, there are distinctions

between the rights of men and women. Both men and women in Islam have the right to choose their spouse and life partner, and no one can force either party into marriage. The marriage contract, if entered into with coercion or force, is invalid. In marriage, the concept of compatibility and equality between the woman and the man plays an important role. In this regard, the Quran states: "Vicious women are for vicious men, and vicious men for vicious women. Good women are for good men, and good men for good women" (Quran, 24:26). In another verse, it also says that believing men and believing women should marry each other.

The inheritance share of a man is twice that of a woman. However, in many human societies, women have been deprived of inheritance. But in Islam and the Quran, it is explicitly stated that a woman, in addition to not being deprived of inheritance, inherits just like a man. However, there is a difference in their shares due to certain considerations (Tabatabai, 1995, vol. 2, p. 262).

Another topic is custody. The ruling on custody in the Quran, like other divine rulings, is based on the interests of the servants of God. In this matter, the well-being, upbringing, and protection of the child in society are the primary concerns. On the other hand, the Quran takes into account both the maternal emotions and the child's need for the mother, as well as the differences between a daughter and a son in terms of their attachment to the father and mother. It also considers the responsibilities of child care, its financial costs, and other related matters.

On the other hand, the Quran grants women the right to ownership and economic independence, and does not permit men to take control of women's property. It has not placed the burden of household and family expenses on women, while at the same time, it has made the provision of maintenance (alimony) for the wife, children, household expenses, and other living necessities obligatory for men (Motahari, 2017, p. 197).

## **2. Representation of Women in Iranotopian Scriptures**

### **A. Elements and Components of Iranotopian Thought**

Iranotopian (*Iranshahr*) thought is considered a model of governance in ancient Iran, which is associated with the survival and continuity of a governmental structure based on social, political, and cultural relations. *Iranoshahr* in the Avestan language means the domain of the Aryans. Before the Sassanid period, the term *Iranoshahr* referred to the territory of Iran and had a geographical meaning. However, gradually, within the Sassanid state, the conceptual significance of this term changed with the rise of the Magi, and

it acquired a cultural-political dimension. This term continued to exist after the Sassanian era, undergoing numerous fluctuations.

The heritage of Iranotopian thought was passed down from the pre-Islamic era to subsequent centuries through texts and works such as the *Letter of Tansar*, *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, *Siyāsatnāma* of Khwāja Nizām al-Mulk, *Marzbānnāma*, *Qābūs-nāma*, and *Kalila and Dimna*. The two main concepts of Iranian urban thought are the ideal king and the unity of religion and government. According to Seyyed Javad Tabatabai, the point of origin of Iranotopian thought is during the Sassanid period, where the fusion of politics with all matters related to governance emerged. Since the ideal king has divine grace (*farr īzadī*), in Iranotopian writings, he is regarded as the representative and chosen one of God on Earth, and "the essence of the Sharia" rather than merely its "executor" (Tabatabai, 2001, p. 131). Furthermore, the *Farr* of the kingship, or the royal grace, is given only to just and rightful Iranian kings, those who became kings by the will of Ahura Mazda (Amouzgar, 2011, p. 353). This concept was always conditional on the king's competence and is a celestial gift that is always contingent on the ruler's merit, meaning that the ruler must observe the moral laws of the divine realm (Knauth, 1976, p. 51).

In the primary texts of Iranotopian thought, women are not overlooked. Gender and the familial and social roles of women are discussed in detail.

## **B. Representation of Women in Avesta: Human Dignity**

Women were a subject of attention in the sacred texts of the Iranotopian era. Signs of gender equality can be found in Zoroastrianism and the teachings of the Avesta—their holy book—especially where women are recognized as "partners of men in the common struggle against evil." In a way, this has given a modern appearance to this ancient religion. In the Avesta, the names of women and men are mentioned together four times. Moreover, the moral and religious authority and agency of both women and men are considered equal, and they are addressed together; women are also seen as recipients of religious teachings and doctrines just like men (Yasna, 30:2). Those who hold the greatest respect for truth, regardless of their gender, are deemed worthy of receiving instruction to achieve a position in the propagation of the faith. Some argue that this indicates the education of women—beyond mere preparation for the role of homemaker during the Avesta period (Goldman, 2000).

In the Avesta, whenever the souls of pious men are mentioned, women are immediately described in the same way as men and are also praised. "We

praise the Fravashis of the pious men of Iran, we praise the Fravashis of the pious women of Iran..." (Farvardin Yashte, Karda 31, Verse 143).

Nevertheless, the Avesta outlines a class-based model of society. In this classification, society is divided into four classes: (1) *Athravans* (clergy), (2) *Ratheshtar* (warriors or charioteers), (3) *Astryoshvints* (herdsmen or farmers), and (4) *Divansalars* (bureaucrats). This hierarchical portrayal of society clearly disregards women as an independent group, presenting a patriarchal image of the social order in the Sassanian society. Additionally, in this sacred text, which is derived from the social structure, men are always the speakers. Warfare, bravery, and valor are considered masculine virtues. Women rarely participate in these values, and men are consistently portrayed in laws and frameworks as guardians, caretakers, and leaders, while women are described as creatures under the protection and service of men, tasked with reproduction and upbringing.

In the *Yashts*, one of the five books of the Avesta, traces of gender differences between women and men are evident, and the demonic characteristics of women are mentioned more than those of men. Furthermore, in the *Yashts*, the gendered roles of women become more pronounced, with their value being emphasized in terms of fertility and obedience to their husbands. In the *Visperad*, another book of the Avesta, the same perspective on women as found in the *Yashts* continues.

In the *Vendidad*, another book of the Avesta that contains laws and regulations, the strictness towards women is more pronounced. Although women are sometimes strongly supported by the law, in the regulations of the *Dashtan*, which relate to women's menstruation, it was believed that during this period women were possessed by demons and evil spirits. In *Vendidad*, in chapter 16, paragraph 12, a great deal of strictness is applied, to the extent that avoiding water is considered a grave sin, one that warrants severe worldly and afterlife punishments for neglecting it (Razi, 1998).

The difference in the *Vendidad*'s view of women, compared to other books of the Avesta, lies in its emphasis on the roles of motherhood and wifehood for women, limiting them to these two positions—both entirely submissive. The gender differences between women and men in the *Vendidad* are also evident in the value judgments placed upon them.

### **C. Representation of Women in Legal Texts and Iranotopian Social System: Women's Secondary Status**

The *Vendidad* of the Avesta contains a legal system and the social status of

women. In fact, when discussing legal texts and the social system of Iranotopia during the Sassanian period, the primary reference can be considered the *Vendidad*. The matriarchal system in Iran has very ancient roots, and attention to women and their important roles in the political, religious, social, and economic systems of Iran was such that even in the Zoroastrian era, women were respected. However, during the Sassanian period, when civilization had greatly developed, civil and legal laws concerning women were written without regard to the teachings of the Zoroastrian prophet, which resulted in women being placed under the power of men (Hinnells, 2010, p. 466).

It seems that this shift in perspective regarding women had very profound effects on her rights, social status, and power. In terms of family law, the most common type of marriage in the Sassanian era was royal (*pādkhāshāyī*) marriage. After marriage, the woman falls under the power of the new family, and all legal rights are severed from her paternal family. The name, wealth, and social status of the groom are inherited by the children born from this marriage (Wiesehofer, 2001, p. 224). Additionally, the authorities of that period, due to their interest in preserving the patriarchal system, established laws regarding inheritance and succession. For all Iranian families, regardless of class, the continuation of their lineage through male heirs was legally important (Yarshater, 2001, p. 47).

In the legal sources of the Sassanian era, women are placed in the same category as minors (young children), considered individuals who must be under the protection of the male members of the family. Some male members of the household had their own specific rights, while women and minors had different rights (Wiesehofer, 2001, p. 226).

Another issue addressed in Sassanian laws is that men had the right to polygamy, and marriage was made easier for women in order to bear male heirs for the first husband, which points to the control and dominance of men over women. According to Cohen, this was a symbol of dignity and superiority for men (Cohen, 2005, p. 128). It seems that in Iran, the control and dominance of men over women was essential for the survival of the Sassanian Ilkhanid system and the preservation of the existing social order. If women and men had equal rights, a significant portion of the resources would be removed from the paternal lineage with each marriage. The Sassanian Empire was based on the succession of male offspring and the concentration of power in the hands of men. From a political standpoint, by marrying women, the concentration of power could be removed from the hands of the

Sassanian family. Therefore, female royals were typically not considered a suitable option for succession. Although the Zoroastrian faith and the Avesta placed women on an equal footing with men in many instances, women during the Sassanian era did not truly find their rightful place. Despite social and legal changes, the prevailing culture among the people reflected skepticism and distrust toward them. Therefore, by examining the books of the Sassanian period, we can identify two fundamental principles concerning women: first, the importance of women and the codification of all their related roles and rights; second, the secondary status of women in relation to men.

#### **D. Representation of Women in Post-Islamic Iranotopian Texts: *Shahnameh* and *Siyāsatnāma***

After the conquest of Iran by the Muslims, the Iranotopian worldview did not disappear; rather, it continued to exist by merging with Islamic culture. The full revival and continuation of this worldview owe much to works such as the *Shahnameh* and the *Siyāsatnāma* of Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk. Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk, by writing a political treatise based on what he had inherited from Iranian traditions, introduced the theory of absolute monarchy and a centralized political system, which formed the foundation of every governmental theory in Iran until the establishment of the Constitutional Revolution (Sarafrazi, 2013, p. 59). The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, as a classical text and a bearer of Iranian wisdom, has given special attention to women from the ancient to the Islamic period. Although some *Shahnameh* scholars have downplayed the importance of women in this text, perhaps because the absence of women is evident and noticeable in the national epic of Iran, from the reign of Keyumars to the time of Tahmuresh. This means that the beginning of the *Shahnameh* is a narrative of a patriarchal era and the discovery of iron; although in other sections, signs of matriarchy (women's power) are also found (Ferdowsi, 2003).

Nevertheless, the distinguishing feature of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, aside from its literary aspects, lies in its special attention to women. In other words, among the classical poetry of the past, the *Shahnameh* is the only book in which women play a fundamental and active role, having a profound impact on life and contributing to the unfolding of certain events.

Most of the women in the *Shahnameh* are prime examples of individuals with qualities such as wisdom, nobility, courage, and at the same time, possess a distinctly feminine essence (Eslami Nadoushan, 1969, p. 61). In none of the *Shahnameh* stories can it be claimed that the narrative concludes without the

role and influence of a woman. The women of the *Shahnameh* are characterized by purity, dignity, status, respect, and a special esteem (Akbari, 2000, p. 101). In fact, the heroes of the *Shahnameh*, especially Sam, Zal, Rostam, Sohrab, Siyavash, and Esfandiyar, would present an incomplete picture of the mythological life of ancient Iran without female characters like Sindokht, Rudابه, Tahmineh, Gordafarid, Frangiz, and Katayoun. Of course, the story of Sudابه is cited as a prominent example of misogyny in the *Shahnameh*, and some view women negatively, as seen through Sudابه's pursuit of selfish desires. However, great *Shahnameh* scholars like Eslami Nadoushan have regarded this view as naïve (Eslami Nadoushan, 1969, pp. 23-24).

All the familial roles of women, including that of wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt, and stepmother, are all reflected in the 38 marriages depicted in the *Shahnameh*. Mothers in the single-parent families of the *Shahnameh*, such as Farank, Tahmineh, Frangiz, Jarireh, and others, are never portrayed as weak or censured. Instead, mothers in these families hold a revered and constructive position (Yazdanfar & Shiri, 2016, p. 179). Socially, however, the women in the *Shahnameh* are categorized and introduced according to their social status in three distinct social ranks: that of rulers, heroes, and the lower social class. Women, as active citizens, are defined in roles derived from social and economic structures, and perform their roles within the boundaries of their social class. Although the abilities, knowledge, and wisdom of women in the *Shahnameh* vary across different characters in the stories, this difference is not defined by gender but is related to the natural differences among individuals. Women, in accordance with their social rank or caste, possess knowledge and influence equivalent to that of the men of the same rank.

Another text that, according to scholars like Seyyed Javad Tabatabai, embodies Iranotopian philosophy is *Siyar al-Muluk* or *Siyāsatnāma* (*The Book of Government*). Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk, the vizier of Malik Shah Seljuk (5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century), revives Iranotopian thought in his book *Siyāsatnāma*. In various sections of the book, he mentions women and presents female characters in the stories.

With the rise of the Seljuks, the presence of women in society became more prominent, and they were able to participate in various political activities. This was somewhat due to the position of Turkish women in the tribal and clan system. Women were engaged in family work, economic activities, military affairs, and other matters, alongside their husbands. They had their own wealth, attained positions of authority, and, when necessary, took control of



the tribe or clan's affairs (Beyani, 1973, p. 1). In fact, the period of the Ghaznavid and Seljuk rule marked the beginning of the active involvement and influence of women in the Islamic era (Heidari Babakamal et al., 2012, p. 42), which is evident in Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk's *Siyāsatnāma*.

In the forty-third chapter of his book, which is dedicated to women, Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk adopts a derogatory view of women. He advises women to remain hidden and considers them to be "more virtuous and praiseworthy the more hidden and acceptable they are." He even quotes a narration from the second caliph, Umar, saying: "The speech of those who observe modesty is like their private parts. Just as it is not appropriate for them to appear publicly, their speech should not be revealed either" (Nizām al-Mulk, 2015, p. 234).

Additionally, the refrain in the forty-second chapter of *Siyāsatnāma* addresses the incompetence of women in matters of counsel. Nizām al-Mulk criticizes veiled women, claiming that, like workers who serve under a covering, they are incapable of meeting the external conditions of governance. He asserts that when women, like a *hājiba* (female servant) or *khādima* (maid), give orders, those commands must contradict justice, leading to corruption, diminishing the grandeur of the king, harming the people, and causing chaos in both the monarchy and religion. He argues that such actions create a desire for power among the people, anger the great men of the state, and, throughout history, whenever a woman has gained control over a king, nothing but disgrace, evil, sedition, and corruption has resulted (ibid, p. 226).

All the stories related to women in *Siyāsatnāma* share a common theme, which is the disregard for women's speech and their exclusion from social and political activities (Nizām al-Mulk, 2015, p. 172).

### 3. The Impact of the Author's and the Text's Intention on Women's Representation

According to the hermeneutic methodology of Skinners, the representation of women in Iranian political thought is closely tied to the core elements shaping this thought, particularly the adherence to the model of *asha* and the logic of *khīshkārī*. In the sacred and political texts of the Iranian era, primarily the *Avesta*, women are not independent from men. They are in a subordinate position, under the protection and guardianship of men, and do not have equal rights with men. Although this perspective is much more moderate in texts like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, it is worth noting that literature serves as a mirror of the culture of the people in any given era, and Ferdowsi, based on his social experiences and personal insights, expressed his doubts about women's



discretion in certain verses. In the *Shahnameh*, there are verses that praise women, while others depict them as beings inferior to men. Through these, one can glimpse the cultural views of Ferdowsi's time regarding people's beliefs about women.

The judgment of Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk regarding women and those who observe modesty cannot be examined independently from the political, social, and cultural conditions of his time. Given the historical evidence of women's involvement in governmental affairs, particularly the influence and interference of Turkan Khatun, the wife of Malik Shah, in political matters, Khwaja concluded that women's involvement in governance leads to political misdirection. In Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk's view, the status of women is inferior to that of men, although this viewpoint is understandable when considering the societal context and the emphasis placed on military power in Seljuk society. On the other hand, Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk considers women to be less capable in matters of governance, although he specifically refers to civic (political) management (*tadbīr al-mudun*) rather than household management (*tadbīr al-manzil*), as he believes that women play a major role in managing and advancing the household.

On the one hand, although the Holy Quran, in its role of reviving the identity and human dignity of women, grants them an equal honor to that of men, based on its text and historical context, women and men find themselves in different conditions when it comes to the enjoyment of rights. From the perspective of religious reformism, considering the historical context of the Quran's revelation, women were granted the highest possible social rights by the sacred lawgiver, and in their most just position, they enjoyed social rights. During the time of the revelation of religious rulings, that is, in the era of the Prophet's mission and Quranic revelation, each legal ruling had three main characteristics: First, it was considered rational according to the norms of the time, not merely because the Prophet said so; second, the legal rulings were superior to similar solutions of the time. Women's rights in Islam, compared to those in the pre-Islamic era (*Jāhiliyya*), in Iran, Rome, and Greece, were superior; and third, the most important feature of the legal rulings was that they were just. The customs of the era of revelation, including the rights of women, were evaluated in terms of the utmost justice, fairness, and equity (Kadivar, 2007, p. 290).

## Conclusion

The comparison of the representation of women in the Quran and Iranotopian

thought is significant because both emerged in historically somewhat similar contexts. In other words, women in the ancient world, regardless of their geographical location, more or less found themselves in the same social conditions. Comparing these two ideological perspectives reveals the normative status of each. Another point is that both the Quran and Iranotopian thought share a common essence. The Quran is nourished by the divine source of revelation, while Iranotopian thought is largely influenced by Zoroastrian teachings, which have a divine foundation. Therefore, examining the perspectives of these two religious texts from two different geographies, with regard to women and the rights and rulings associated with them, reveals both commonalities and differences between the two religious frameworks. However, in the case of Iranotopian thought, unlike the Quranic perspective, one cannot speak of its purity or its immunity from historical considerations.

Given the nature of the research, which aims to understand the meaning of women in two historical texts, the use of a theoretical approach and interpretive-hermeneutic research methods is inevitable. However, when the issue of understanding the Quran as a sacred and definitive text is at hand, it is impossible to engage with all these hermeneutic approaches freely without considering their epistemological differences. In other words, philosophical approaches in hermeneutics, such as Gadamer's interpreter-centered approach, are at odds with the ontological and epistemological foundations of religion. Such approaches, based on assumptions like skepticism, epistemic relativism, the indeterminacy of meaning in the text, the infinite possibility of interpreting the text, the absence of a superior understanding or meaning, the fusion of the interpreter's horizon with that of the text, the non-authoritative nature of word appearances, and the vicious circle in understanding, overlook the intrinsic essence of religion. In contrast, employing intentional hermeneutic methods, such as Skinner's approach, which takes into account the requirements of discussion and examination within a sacred text like the Holy Quran, could be more fruitful in understanding this matter.

Regarding the representation of women in the Quran, a distinction must be made between the Quran's view of the nature of women and their role. In terms of creation and dignity, women's gender is not different from that of men. However, the roles and rulings assigned to women in various domains—such as individual, familial, civil, criminal, and political—differ significantly from those of men. In traditional religious perspectives, these differences are considered to stem from the biological and psychological distinctions between men and women. However, from the perspective of religious reinterpretation,

these differences are not so much derived from the Quran's view of women as they are rooted in the jurisprudential approach, which is not free from contemporary and historical considerations.

Historically, although women in ancient Iran were able to attain the highest political and administrative positions in some cases, they generally did not hold a high social status, especially during the Sassanian period. The attribution of inherent qualities to women, such as intellectual weakness, physical frailty, deceitfulness, and their lack of independence from men, can be seen in Iranotopian thought. In the sacred texts of the Iranotopian era, despite a more gender-equal view of women in some of the *Avesta* texts, in others, particularly in the *Vendidad*, women are depicted as being in a subordinate position, under the protection and guardianship of men, and not enjoying equal rights with men. This same view is found in post-Islamic Iranian political texts, especially in the *Siyāsatnāma* of Khwaja Nizām al-Mulk, which strongly condemns the political and social presence and role of women. While this perspective is more moderate in texts like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, where women are mostly described with virtuous qualities, even in this text, women are categorized into multiple and unequal social classes.

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