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معارف اسلامی

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Authors & Affiliations	Inayat Ul Haq PhD research Scholar Islamic Studies, HITEC University Taxila Dr. Jawad Haseeb lecturer Islamic Studies HITEC University Taxila					
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Re-Mapping the Self: An Islamic Conceptualization of Self-Awareness as the Foundation of Emotional Intelligence

Abstract

Self-awareness is a central construct in Emotional Intelligence (EI); however, prevailing psychological models often conceptualize it within a secular and material framework that limits the understanding of the human self. This article examines self-awareness exclusively through the lens of Islamic teachings, drawing upon the Qur'an and Sunnah. Using a qualitative and conceptual methodology, the study explores *Fiqh al-Nafs* (the jurisprudence of the self) as a foundational framework for understanding emotional awareness and regulation in Islam. The Islamic model views the human being as a holistic entity comprising the *nafs*, *qalb*, *'aql*, and *rūh*, each playing a distinct role in emotional perception, moral discernment, and spiritual accountability. The study argues that self-awareness in Islam is not merely introspective but ethical and transformative, aiming at *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self) and alignment with divine guidance. Emotional intelligence, therefore, is oriented toward moral excellence (*ihsān*) and success in the Hereafter rather than solely worldly effectiveness. This article provides a theoretical foundation for assessing self-awareness related to EI among Muslim undergraduate students and contributes to the development of an Islamically grounded emotional intelligence paradigm.

Keywords: Self-Awareness; Emotional Intelligence; Islamic Psychology; Fiqh al-Nafs; Tazkiyah al-Nafs; Qalb; Nafs; Islamic Education

1. Introduction: The Islamic Paradigm of Human Psychology

The study of human psychology in the modern era has largely been dominated by a materialist ontology, viewing the human being primarily as a biological organism driven by evolutionary imperatives and cognitive processes. The Western models of Emotional Intelligence (EI), such as those proposed by Salovey, Mayer, and Goleman, offer sophisticated maps of the "mind" and "behavior." However, from an Islamic perspective, these models are fundamentally incomplete because they restrict the definition of the "Self" to the brain and the ego. Islam introduces a metaphysical dimension that transforms the very understanding of what it means to be human. In the Islamic paradigm, the human being is not merely a thinking animal, but a spiritual entity composed of interacting subtle substances (*Latifa*). To truly understand Emotional Intelligence in Islam, one must first understand the topography of the human interior, the *Fiqh al-Nafs* (Jurisprudence of the Self).

This article argues that Islam provides a more holistic model of self-awareness regarding EI, one that integrates the cognitive functions of the brain with the spiritual functions of the heart. While Western psychology asks, "How can I regulate my emotions to succeed in this world?" Islamic psychology asks, "How can I purify my emotions to succeed in the Hereafter?" This shift in purpose alters the mechanisms of regulation itself.

Objectives

1. To examine the concept of self-awareness from an Islamic perspective, based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, in contrast to secular Emotional Intelligence models.
2. To analyze key dimensions of Islamic self-awareness, including self-reflection (*muḥāsabah*), emotional awareness, self-knowledge, and personal growth, within the holistic Islamic model of the human self.
3. To clarify the roles of the *nafs*, *qalb*, *ʿaql*, and *rūḥ* in shaping emotional perception, moral judgment, and spiritual accountability.
4. To provide a theoretical basis for assessing self-awareness related to Emotional Intelligence among Muslim undergraduate students.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and conceptual research methodology based on textual analysis of the Qur'an, authentic Sunnah. A thematic approach is used to examine concepts related to self-reflection, emotional awareness, self-knowledge, and personal growth within the framework of Fiqh al-Nafs. The analysis is theoretical in nature and aims to develop an Islamically grounded understanding of self-awareness as a core component of Emotional Intelligence, without involving empirical data collection.

3.1 Literature review

3.1.1 The Metaphysics of the Self: Qalb, Ruh, Nafs, and Aql

Islamic psychology (*Ilm al-Nafs*) identifies four distinct yet interconnected spiritual organs that govern human emotion and behavior: the *Qalb* (Heart), *Ruh* (Spirit), *Nafs* (Self/Ego), and *Aql* (Intellect).

1. The Qalb (Heart): The Seat of Consciousness In secular physiology, the heart is a pump. In Islamic metaphysics, the *Qalb* is the center of human consciousness, the locus of emotion, and the king of the limbs. It is the vessel that contains belief (*Iman*) and the receptor of Divine light. The Quran explicitly links the function of "understanding" to the heart, not just the brain.

Allah Almighty states in the Holy Quran:

”أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا“

"Have they not traveled in the land, and have they hearts wherewith to understand?" (Al-Hajj, 22:46).ⁱ

Here, the Arabic phrase *qulubun ya'qiluna biha* ("hearts to understand with") establishes the concept of *Aql al-Qalb* (Intellect of the Heart). From an EI perspective, this implies that true intelligence is impossible without a sound heart. If the heart is corrupted by spiritual diseases like envy (*Hasad*) or arrogance (*Kibr*), the cognitive intellect acts merely as a tool for rationalizing evil. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the centrality of the heart in emotional and behavioral regulation in the famous hadith:

”أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْغَةً إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ. أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ“

"Beware! There is a piece of flesh in the body if it becomes good (reformed) the whole body becomes good but if it gets spoilt the whole body gets spoilt and that is the heart." (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 52).ⁱⁱ

2. The Ruh (Spirit): The Divine Connection the *Ruh* is the non-material essence of life; the breath of the Divine breathed into Adam (AS). It is the source of the human capacity for transcendence, awe, and pure love. While the *Nafs* pulls the human toward the earth (desires), the *Ruh* pulls the human toward the heavens (Divine connection). Emotional conflict often arises from this tug-of-war between the *Ruh* and the *Nafs*.

Allah mentions the origin of the Ruh:

“فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ”

"So, when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall down to him in prostration." (Al-Hijr, 15:29).ⁱⁱⁱ

3. The Nafs (Self/Ego): The Locus of Desire the *Nafs* is the self that experiences biological drives and ego-centric emotions. It is often the source of impulsive behavior, anger, greed, and lust. In the context of EI, the *Nafs* corresponds to the "Id" in psychoanalysis, the primitive, instinctual force. The Quran describes the default state of the unrefined ego as *Ammarah bi-su'* (Commanding Evil).

“وَمَا أُبَرِّئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ”

"And I do not acquit myself. Indeed, the soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil..." (Yusuf, 12:53).^{iv}

The regulation of the *Nafs* is the primary objective of Islamic Emotional Intelligence. Unlike modern psychology, which often encourages "self-expression" or "self-acceptance" unconditionally, Islam mandates *Jihad al-Nafs* (Struggle against the Ego) to bring it into submission.

4. The Aql (Intellect): The Restraining Force Linguistically, the word *Aql* comes from the root 'Iqal, meaning "to tie" or "to restrain" (like tying a camel). In Islamic psychology, the Intellect is the faculty that restrains the impulses of the *Nafs*. It guides the emotions using logic and revelation. A person with high EI in Islam is one whose *Aql* governs their *Nafs*, preventing emotional outbursts.

3.1.2 The Purpose of Emotion: Ayat and Bala

A fundamental divergence between Western and Islamic EI lies in the *purpose* of emotion. Why do we feel grief, fear, or anger?

Emotions as Ayat (Signs) Islam teaches that emotions are *Ayat* (Signs) of Allah's Lordship. Positive emotions like love and affection are reflections of Allah's attributes (Al-Wadud, The Loving). The bond between spouses, for instance, is described as a Divine Sign designed to produce tranquility (*Sakinah*).

“وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً”

"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy." (Ar-Rum, 30:21).^v

Emotions as Bala (Tests) Negative emotions are framed as *Bala* (Tribulations/Tests). In Western psychology, chronic sadness or anxiety is often viewed strictly as a pathology to be eliminated. In Islam, these states are viewed as necessary tests of faith. They are not "errors" in the human system, but "features" designed to facilitate spiritual growth. The Quran prepares the believer to expect emotional hardship:

“وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ”

"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits but give good tidings to the patient." (Al-Baqarah, 2:155).^{vi}

By categorizing fear (*Khawf*) as a test from Allah, the believer is empowered to regulate it through *Sabr* (Patience) rather than succumbing to despair. This reframing is the core of Islamic emotional resilience.

3.2 Self-Awareness (Intrapersonal Intelligence)

In the taxonomy of Emotional Intelligence (EI), Self-Awareness is widely regarded as the cornerstone competency. Daniel Goleman describes it as "knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions." However, in the secular psychological framework, this awareness is often strictly cognitive, a mental acknowledgment of a feeling. The Islamic perspective elevates this concept into a

spiritual discipline known as Fiqh al-Nafs (Jurisprudence of the Self) or Basirah (Inner Insight).

For the undergraduate student navigating the complexities of academic pressure and identity formation, Islamic Self-Awareness is not merely about identifying "I am stressed"; it is about understanding the metaphysical origin of that stress and its implications for one's relationship with the Creator. It transforms the question from "How do I feel?" to "What is the state of my soul?" This section deconstructs Islamic Self-Awareness into five essential components: Self-Reflection (*Muhasabah*), Emotional Awareness (*Shu'ur*), Self-Knowledge (*Ma'rifat al-Nafs*), Personal Growth (*Tazkiyah*), and Self-Regulation (*Mujahadah*).

3.2.1 Self-Reflection (Muhasabah)

The first functional component of Islamic Self-Awareness is *Muhasabah*, often translated as "Self-Audit" or "Accounting." While Western psychology advocates for "mindfulness" (paying attention to the present moment without judgment), Islam advocates for a critical, judgmental review of one's own intentions and emotional outputs.

The Quranic Mandate

The imperative for this deep introspection is established in the Holy Quran, where Allah Almighty commands the believers to audit their souls in preparation for the ultimate accountability.

“يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ”

"O you who believe, fear Allah and let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow (the Hereafter); and fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do." (Al-Hashr, 59:18).^{vii}

The Arabic phrase وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ (*wal-tanzur nafs*) implies a deep, scrutinizing gaze. It requires the individual to detach from their immediate ego and view their actions objectively. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, in his seminal work *Madarij al-Salikin* (Stations of the Seekers), explains that *Muhasabah* is the first station of wisdom. He argues that a soul that does not hold itself accountable in this world will face a severe reckoning in the next.

Application in Emotional Intelligence

For a university student, *Muhasabah* operates as a preventative emotional mechanism. It involves two stages:

1. **Muhasabah Before Action:** Pausing before expressing an emotion (e.g., anger at a professor) to ask: "Is this emotion driven by truth (*Haqq*) or by my ego (*Hawa*)?"
2. **Muhasabah After Action:** Reviewing one's day to identify emotional failures. This mirrors the practice of Umar ibn Al-Khattab (RA), who famously said:

“حَاسِبُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ قَبْلَ أَنْ تُحَاسَبُوا”

"Call yourselves to account before you are called to account." (Jami' at-Tirmidhi, 2459).^{viii}

This practice builds high Intrapersonal Intelligence by creating a feedback loop. A student who practices *Muhasabah* does not repress their emotions but evaluates them against a Divine standard, ensuring that their internal state remains aligned with their spiritual goals.

3.2.2 Emotional Awareness (Shu'ur) and the Levels of the Nafs

In modern psychology, emotional awareness is the ability to label feelings (e.g., distinguishing between sadness and depression). Islam provides a far more sophisticated diagnostic tool by categorizing the "Self" (*Nafs*) into three distinct stages. These stages help an individual identify not just *what* they are feeling, but *where* the feeling is coming from.

1. The Impulsive Self (*Nafs al-Ammarah*)

This is the lowest stage of emotional existence, characterized by raw, unchecked instinct. It is the source of impulsive aggression, lust, and greed.

“وَمَا أُبْرِئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي”

"And I do not acquit myself. Indeed, the soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil, except those upon whom my Lord has mercy." (Yusuf, 12:53).^{ix}

When a student feels an overwhelming urge to procrastinate, to cheat on an exam due to fear of failure, or to lash out physically during a conflict, they are under

the influence of the *Nafs al-Ammarah*. High Islamic EI involves recognizing this state immediately ("This impulse is not 'me'; it is my lower self") and seeking refuge in Allah to disengage from it.

2. The Conscious Self (*Nafs al-Lawwamah*)

This stage represents the awakening of the conscience. It corresponds to the psychological concept of the "Superego" or the moral compass.

“وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ”

"And I swear by the reproaching soul." (Al-Qiyamah, 75:2).^x

The term *Lawwamah* comes from *Lawm* (to blame/reproach). This is the self that feels guilt after a sin or an emotional outburst. In Western psychology, chronic guilt is often viewed negatively. In Islam, *constructive guilt* is a sign of spiritual life. It indicates that the heart is sensitive to right and wrong. A student at this level has developed the capacity to self-correct; they feel regret for wasting time or hurting a peer, and this regret drives them to make amends (*Tawbah*).

3. The Contented Self (*Nafs al-Mutmainnah*)

This is the pinnacle of emotional awareness and regulation. It is a state of tranquility (*Sakinah*) where the self is no longer agitated by the storms of the material world.

“يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً”

"O reassured soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing [to Him]." (Al-Fajr, 89:27-28).^{xi}

At this stage, a student possesses the highest level of EI. They are not immune to pain or stress, but they are not destabilized by it. Their awareness is anchored in the presence of God, allowing them to remain calm during finals week, patient during conflicts, and optimistic during failures.

3.2.3 Self-Knowledge (Ma'rifat al-Nafs)

Self-Knowledge in Islam goes beyond knowing one's personality type (e.g., introvert vs. extrovert). It is a theological imperative. The classical scholars formulated the maxim:

”مَنْ عَرَفَ نَفْسَهُ فَقَدْ عَرَفَ رَبَّهُ“

"He who knows himself knows his Lord." (Al-Ghazali, 11th century/2011, Book 21)^{xii}

This implies that deep introspection leads to the realization of human dependency (*Faqr*) and Divine All-Sufficiency (*Ghani*). When a student truly understands their own emotional fragility, how easily they are angered, how quickly they become anxious, they realize their need for a Sustainer.

Conversely, the Quran warns that a lack of connection with the Divine leads to a profound psychological dissociation, a loss of self-identity.

”وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ“

"And be not like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget themselves. Those are the defiantly disobedient." (Al-Hashr, 59:19).^{xiii}

This verse describes a state of low EI where the individual becomes "alienated" from their own soul. They may be intelligent in a worldly sense (high IQ), but they are oblivious to their own internal reality. They cannot answer the questions: "Why am I feeling this way?" or "What is my purpose?" This lack of *Ma'rifat al-Nafs* leads to an identity crisis, a common affliction among modern youth who chase external validation while remaining strangers to their own souls.

3.2.4 Personal Growth (Tazkiyah)

In secular EI models, the goal of self-awareness is often "Self-Actualization", maximizing one's potential for worldly success. In Islam, the goal is *Tazkiyah* (Purification). The word *Tazkiyah* implies both "cleaning" (removing weeds) and "growth" (nurturing the plant). It is the continuous process of pruning negative emotional traits (vices) and cultivating positive ones (virtues).

Allah links ultimate success solely to this process of emotional and spiritual growth:

”وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا“

"And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness, He has succeeded who purifies it." (Ash-Shams, 91:7-9).^{xiv}

For the undergraduate student, this reframes the educational journey. The university becomes a training ground (*Tarbiyah*) not just for the intellect, but for the *Nafs*. Every academic challenge is an opportunity for *Tazkiyah*. A difficult assignment is an opportunity to purify the soul from laziness; a group project is an opportunity to purify the soul from arrogance. High EI in this context is measured by the student's ability to turn daily struggles into spiritual purification.

3.2.5 Self-Regulation (Mujahadah)

While Self-Regulation is often treated as a behavioral outcome (which we will discuss in Section 2.3), its root lies in the internal struggle known as *Mujahadah*. Before one can control their limbs (behavior), they must control their *Nafs* (intent).

Mujahadah is the active exertion of the will against the gravitational pull of the *Nafs al-Ammarah*. It is the internal "Jihad" to align one's feelings with one's values.

”وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ“

"And those who strive for Us - We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good." (Al-Ankabut, 29:69).^{xv}

This component highlights that Islamic EI is not a passive state; it is an active struggle. It acknowledges that negative emotions (envy, rage, despair) will arise naturally, but it demands that the "Intellect of the Heart" (*Aql*) steps in to regulate them. For example, a student may feel intense jealousy (*Hasad*) towards a peer who scored higher grades. The *Nafs* wants to belittle the peer. However, the student with high *Mujahadah* recognizes this feeling, struggles against it, and forces themselves to make *Dua* for the peer instead, thereby overriding the ego with spiritual intellect.

Synthesis of Intrapersonal Intelligence

In summary, the Islamic model of Intrapersonal Intelligence is far deeper than the secular model. It does not stop at identifying emotions ("I am angry"); it demands an audit of the emotion's origin ("Is this anger from my ego?"), a knowledge of its nature ("This is my Nafs Ammarah acting up"), a struggle to regulate it ("I must exercise Mujahadah"), and a goal of purification ("I must use this to grow closer to Allah"). By integrating these five components, *Muhasabah*, *Shu'ur*, *Ma'rifat*, *Tazkiyah*, and *Mujahadah*, the student develops a resilient, God-centric emotional core capable of withstanding the pressures of modern life.

Conclusions

- This study concludes that self-awareness, as defined within Islamic teachings, should be recognized as the foundational component of Emotional Intelligence. Islamic self-awareness extends beyond emotional recognition to include moral accountability before Allah, making it a comprehensive construct rooted in ethical consciousness.
- The findings recommend the adoption of *Fiqh al-Nafs* as a guiding framework for understanding emotional awareness and regulation in Islam. This framework integrates the functions of the *nafs*, *qalb*, *'aql*, and *rūh*, offering a holistic model of emotional functioning grounded in Islamic epistemology.
- Emotional Intelligence in the Islamic paradigm should be oriented toward *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self) rather than mere emotional control or worldly effectiveness. Emotional awareness serves as a means for moral refinement and spiritual growth.
- The study concludes that evaluating self-awareness without ethical and spiritual dimensions leads to an incomplete understanding of emotional intelligence in Muslim contexts. Islamic teachings necessitate the inclusion of *taqwā*, sincerity, patience, and humility as integral indicators of emotionally intelligent behavior.
- The findings emphasize the need to contextualize Emotional Intelligence models for Muslim undergraduate populations by grounding them in Islamic teachings, ensuring cultural, moral, and spiritual relevance.
- Emotional regulation in Islam should be re-conceptualized as a process of inner reform guided by divine principles rather than self-centered emotional management. This perspective redefines emotional control as conscious alignment with Islamic values.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Islamic concepts of self-awareness and emotional regulation should be integrated into undergraduate curricula, particularly within courses related to psychology, education, and character development.
- Future research should develop and validate self-awareness measurement instruments grounded in Islamic constructs such as *nafs accountability*, *qalb awareness*, and *tazkiyah-oriented emotional regulation*.
- University educators should be trained to understand and apply Islamic principles of emotional intelligence, enabling them to foster ethically and spiritually informed emotional development among students.
- Subsequent empirical studies should examine the relationship between Islamic self-awareness and academic behavior, interpersonal conduct, and moral decision-making among Muslim undergraduates.
- Higher education institutions in Muslim contexts should design student development programs that emphasize self-awareness as a pathway to *ihsān* and responsible citizenship, rather than solely performance-based emotional skills.

ⁱ Al-Qur'an, 22:46.

ⁱⁱ Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), Kitab al-Iman, Hadith 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Al-Qur'an, 15:29.

^{iv} Al-Qur'an, 12:53.

^v Al-Qur'an, 30:21.

^{vi} Al-Qur'an, 2:155.

^{vii} Al-Qur'an, 59:18.

^{viii} Muhammad ibn Isa at-Tirmidhi, Jami' at-Tirmidhi (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), Kitab Sifat al-Qiyamah, Hadith 2459.

^{ix} Al-Qur'an, 12:53.

^x Al-Qur'an, 75:2.

^{xi} Al-Qur'an, 89:27-28.

^{xii} Al-Ghazali, A. H. (2011). The Marvels of the Heart (W. J. Skellie, Trans.). Fons Vitae.

(Original work published c. 11th century).

^{xiii} Al-Qur'an, 59:19.

^{xiv} Al-Qur'an, 91:7-9.

^{xv} Al-Qur'an, 29:69.