

Iqbal and Women — A Deeper View

Riffat Hassan

My article titled “Iqbal’s view of an ideal Muslim woman” (*The Express Tribune*, May 28, 2010) has elicited a number of thought-provoking comments. Some readers referred to it as “commendable” whilst others responded by making critical remarks about me. For instance, Huma stated, “I cannot believe that a woman in 2010 has written this article without pushing Iqbal’s argument a bit further ... Our country already treats women horribly. Can educated women in Pakistan’s ranks stop saying silly things and have the courage to push their agenda a bit more explicitly?” And Rehan asked me directly: “Will Dr Riffat defend or oppose or beat about the bush if asked to give her comments on Iqbal’s views on a woman clerk/typist? Will she support Iqbal’s views on limiting women’s freedom in front of an audience who already has a myopic opinion of Muslim women?”

Firstly, there is a 700 word limit which does not permit a comprehensive discussion on any complex subject. Since 1974 I have been working internationally as a research scholar and an activist to educate Muslim women about the rights given to them by Islam. In 1999, I set up an international network to safeguard the rights of Pakistani girls and women who were victims of violence, particularly of “honour” crimes.

The fact that Iqbal considered motherhood to be a woman’s most important role does not mean that he was not aware of women’s trials. He took serious note of the socio-legal problems faced by Muslim women in India, and wrote as early as 1904, “The most sensitive issue in ... social life is the rights of women ... Western scholars have wrongly criticized Islam on the rights of women. This criticism applies not to Islam ... but to those legal opinions of the Muslim jurists which they have derived from the more general principles of the Qur’an ... These individual opinions are not essential components of the religion.”

Iqbal was probably the first to notice difficulties created for women who sought divorce under the Hanafi law being practiced in India. He said: “There have been cases in which Muslim women wishing to get rid of undesirable husbands have been driven to apostasy ... In view of the intense conservatism of the Muslims in India, Indian judges cannot but

stick to what are called standard works. The result is that while the people are moving, the law remains stationary.” It is also important to note that in his book on economics, *Ilm al-Iqtisad*, Iqbal reviewed the economics of population growth and criticized child marriage and polygamy.

Some readers have asked me for my personal opinion on Iqbal’s view on how Muslim women should stay at home and take care of their families ideally. In today’s world where the ratio of single women supporting their families is increasing everywhere, it is simply not possible to do as Iqbal would have wanted.

Some of Iqbal’s views about women’s role in society are culturally conservative but these views constitute a very small fraction of his total philosophy. For me, the most important reason Iqbal remains profoundly relevant and inspirational not only to men but also to women is that as a universal humanist philosopher he considered all human beings to be God’s vicegerents who were called upon to develop their potential to the fullest. Iqbal has given, and continues to give, to millions of Muslims - both men and women - the vision and the energy to engage in a passionate quest for a new world “vibrant with hope and high endeavor.”

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