

A Mother-Daughter Team Occupy the World Stage

Ellen Birkett Morris

To take one's place on the world stage and make a lasting impression is a rare feat. It takes a special kind of courage and the help of supportive loved ones. Riffat Hassan and Mehr Hassan are lucky; they have each other to lean on when the going gets tough. This mother/daughter team both occupy the world stage but in very different ways.

Riffat Hassan is a Professor of Religious Studies at University of Louisville, an international expert on feminist theology and founder and director of The International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (INRFVVP), an organization that helps female victims of violence in Eastern countries.

Her daughter, Mehr Hassan, is an actress best known for her work in Indian commercial cinema, playing roles which shed light on issues such as female coming of age and the religious differences between Hindus and Muslims. Her latest film, "Dreamers," is about the struggles of a Hindu/ Muslim couple dealing with societal pressures and parental expectations. Mehr grew up watching her mother address large crowds and seeing the impact she had.

"We both come from an eastern background that doesn't really promote women's independence. In India, women are the silent ones. My mother speaks out on behalf of women and against Muslim stereotypes. She has been an inspiration to me," said Mehr.

Riffat Hassan has spoken at United Nations conferences and developed programs for the Ford Foundation. She speaks on promoting women in religion, the role of women in Islam and the importance of inter-religious dialogue.

Her mother's speaking engagements include their own performance elements and function in much the same way as theater, according to Mehr. "I have watched her take a group of people and take them to a different level of consciousness. She moves them so that when they leave they are changed," said Mehr.

Mehr decided to pursue her own type of performance and set her sights for

a career in the competitive world of acting. While some of the extended family was “wary” about her prospects, Mehr always had the support of her mother.

Mehr said the greatest lesson she has learned from her mother is that there is no excuse for mediocrity. “I learned that if there is something you lack, go out and learn it. If you feel like you have the talent, make yourself as good as you can be,” said Mehr. She attended U of L and earned an undergraduate degree in Theater Arts.

Riffat Hassan, who was born in Pakistan, credits her own mother with providing a strong basis for success. “She believed in education for her daughters; that was a tremendous struggle in the culture in which she lived,” said Riffat.

In that culture, Riffat said women and girls struggled with lack of opportunity for education and employment and the kind of “internal disempowerment” that comes from the belief that you are inferior. “My mother gave a strong self-image and sense of self-esteem to her daughters. She also taught me to never give up and helped me realize that life wouldn’t be easy,” said Riffat.

Riffat used those lessons as she helped her daughter deal with the stereotypes that come from being Muslim in American society. In turn, Riffat said Mehr “stood by me [during tough times] but never let me nurture any weakness.”

It was Mehr who urged Riffat not to let an illness keep her from speaking at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China and reminded her to focus her talk on the issues that she had made her life’s work and not be swayed by suggestions from others.

“We are very good friends. We support each other and critique each other. We are not just a mutual admiration society. We have to keep each other on track,” said Riffat.

Riffat continues to lecture internationally. Mehr’s film “Dreamers” is currently making the rounds at film festivals in America. Mehr believes that other women can reach their goals by dedicating themselves to fulfilling their dreams and working to make those dreams a reality.

“Don’t sit at home and dream about it. Whatever your arena, whether it is dancing, teaching, or being a manager at Target, know your craft. The more you

know your craft, the more you are elevated above the competition,” said Mehr.

Riffat urges women to “do their homework,” be prepared to meet challenges, do their best and not settle for mediocrity, and to remember and work for the benefit of women other than themselves.

“The best way to give thanks is to give back to other women,” said Riffat.

Ellen Birkett Morris knows the importance of strong mother/daughter relationship. She looks to her own mother, Elizabeth Waldon, for support and Wisdom.

“A Mother-Daughter Team Occupy the World Stage,” by Ellen Birkett Morris, in *Today's Woman*, May, 2000, pp. 20 - 21