

Poverty and Charity Promotion in Hafez Ibrahim Poems

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Abstract: Poverty has been a favorite subject for socially responsible and alarming activists and poets. Poverty has been a social problem in many societies since ancient times. Social strata and economic classification have existed in all societies. Poverty may manifest itself in various dimensions of a society including cultural, religious, affectionate, economic, and so forth. Economic poverty is the most prevalent form. Many factors contribute in the spread of this infelicitous phenomenon including conflicts, natural calamities, mismanagement, economic fiasco, and social turmoil. Poverty is the root of persisting corruptions, crimes, and decadences. Poverty is remonstrated in religious narrations such as "poverty is analogous to blasphemy." People may adapt different standpoint against poverty. For instance, sociologists, scientists, philosophers, clergymen, poets, and the like have their own views on poverty. However, the main issue is what approaches a society takes to address it. Poets have addressed poverty as a social problem. Their sensitivity makes it difficult to accept this ominous and unfortunate condition. They always undertake and strive to promote its eradication through their work. Hafez Ibrahim is one poet who had personally experienced poverty throughout his life from his early days, during education, in his productive life, and till the end. He attempted to redress his unfortunate situation by expression of sympathy with people.

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Mit Ghamr Fire *Qasida*

City of Mit Ghamr in Egypt burnt in a huge fire in 1902 and left behind many dead and lots of damaged homes and businesses. A large group of elders and wealthy individuals formed a commission to collect donations for those who suffered from this unfortunate incident¹.

Poets who were present on the scene took the opportunity to compose about the disaster. Hafez Ibrahim used his unique abilities to depict the severity of the fire, the fear people had experienced during the accident, and their misery after everything settled.

"Fire has destroyed everything. Many children lost their parents. Only a heavy rain or flood of Noah can put out the flame. Fire is burning everywhere. Misery and despair have brought about poverty and calamity. People have lost their dwellings and life savings.

People left their homes for their lives without taking anything. Hafez Ibrahim uses *Ara* (عراة) meaning bare to describe the scene: "they opt for night as a cover for themselves. When morning comes, they put on the day as clothes. They do not have any clothing to save them from heat or cold. Or, keep dust away. Ground serves them as bed and sky is their roof."

Hafez Ibrahim changes his tone a little to address the wealthy and well to do. He compares their lives with indigents. He tries to bring the wealthy out of ignorance. He adapts a tone of tranquility because he believes to have higher effect. We witness the same when Moses confronted Pharaoh by speaking softly. Hafez Ibrahim encourages the wealthy to be sympathetic to the deprived. He may have deeply felt the suffering people were experiencing and put them into words. He earned the title "Social and Patriotic Poet" for his work².

Hafez Ibrahim addressed the well to do and wrote: "All of you who wear colorful clothing and live in a state of proud and arrogance. Your clothes hung out of the same proud and arrogance. He highlights the hunger and lack of proper clothing of the poor by this characterization of the rich. He continues by stating that you wealthy people live in comfort but there are people who spend the night with hunger and remain in continued hardship and misery. He compares the affluent with the poor: you wear expensive and colorful clothing while poor do not have enough for their daily meal. They hide because of the hardship they experience. Hafez Ibrahim hopes that his comparison would encourage the rich to rise in support of misfortunate and sufferers.

¹ Complete Works of Hafez Ibrahim (1998), Beirut: Dar al Fekr al Arabi, p. 200

² Hana Al-Fakhori, A Complete Book of Arab Literature and History, p. 138

He addresses Manshavi Pasha, a well-known wealthy Egyptian who was jailed. He writes: "being in jail should not interfere with charity of a generous individual." His writing is actually addressing every wealthy individual. Referring to a person in jail would in fact increase the burden on those who are out.

He makes another analogy and uses it to influence the rich to come forward and help the needy. He writes: "we witnessed a wedding ceremony yesterday with lots of squander. The cost of this wedding was extremely high to everyone's amazement. Money was pouring in from every direction." He was writing about the wedding ceremony held for three nights at Ali Fahmi Pashi's residence.

He described the Mit Ghamr fire so eloquently that made every one voice out in protest. People started questioning why the state of community was such that a group of people lived mirthfully while others lived in dire despair. He finally states that this is not surprising. There might be a night that serendipity and indigence lump together. There is always this potential that a similar incident may happen in another area. A similar occurrence may happen to you one night.

Caring for Children *Qasida (Ra'ayat al Atfall)*³

Regard Children is a Hafez Ibrahim *Qasida* (a long storytelling poem) that gives an account of a bitter reality. It tells the story of a girl who was pushed by poverty into depravity and fornication. She is a girl consumed by depauperation and misfortune. Shame and pudency prevents her from talking about her misery. She heals her hidden inner pain only with tears. Is she a specter or merely a phantasm? No, she is a girl in a vast plain in front of me. She has faced many problems and left without a caretaker. She is helpless and powerless. She spends the night with sorrow tears.

Hafez Ibrahim depicts an orphan girl without support. She is full of sorrow and poet describes her case by emphasizing that she is without protection and caretaker or she is facing difficulty and misery. He uses *Fatah* (girl) in his depiction because people are more compassionate toward girls when compared to boys. The depiction he makes from an orphan girl makes induces heartache and makes the reader craving to help her.

Poet says: "I could hear her groaning and wailing. It feels like getting hit by gunfire barrage. Her harrowing moan hurts like a penetrating bullet." Poet asks her who she is. She responds like an inanimate mound of ashes with no sign of the burning fire that once was. She describes her searing pains and

says that she is pregnant with no place to go. Hafez Ibrahim mentioned her pregnancy to influence the reader. A pain suffering pregnant girl without support or place is definitely facing misfortune.

Poet uses sensual depictions to influence reader. Most poems use this approach when they deal with poverty. He goes further to state that her parents and uncles had passed away and she does not have anyone to turn to show girl's misfortune at the highest level.

Shame and pudency stops her from telling her story. Poet hits the fact by declaring she has been sexually assaulted and feels ashamed about discussing it. She only cries. I understand why she tries to conceal her situation. People like me show empathy to orphans like her and rush to help. Poet sees himself as a people oriented individual who advocates for the poor and is proud of it. This is a problem in almost every society and is a sign of injustice. The fellow citizens of deprived individuals not only do not help, they might take advantage of them. The girl was forced to accept the intrusion and she regrets the incident.

Hafez Ibrahim likened her visage to a statue. He may have had one of the possible two objectives in his analogy.

1. The girl was frail in cause of illness, poverty, and difficulty and resembled a statue.
2. The girl resembled a cathedral statue or painting. She was beautiful but the incidents and tragedies she had experienced destroyed her beauty.

As the story goes, the girl is skinny and feeble in cause of extreme poverty and ailment. She is on the verge of eternal rest. I cannot do anything for him. He resembles her flimsiness to a mirage. The reason for such metaphor is that the girl walks abnormally and wobbly. She trembles like a mirage.

Poet then turns to the girl and tells her to get up. She responds by asking if a dead could rise from grave and walk away. How could a trity beather bottle move?

Hafez Ibrahim uses two metaphors here:

1. Her feebleness and leanness made her look like a corpse; and
2. Her skinny body looks like a trity beather bottle

Poet continues by alluding there is not much he can do. He decides to take her to an orphanage. He carries her on his back and rushes to the orphanage. He provides further description of her frailty and meagerness. He uses another metaphor comparing her to a light toothpick.

He says that he is carrying two poor and miserable beings. One is the unborn baby inside the orphan girl. He refers to the unborn as "طارق باب الحياة" who is expected to enter to this world. The other being

³ Complete Works of Hafez Ibrahim (1998), Beirut: Dar al Fekr al Arabi, p. 264

is the mother whom he refers to as "مؤذن بزوال" who is expected to leave this world. Poet cannot stand the scene and burst into tears. He is not concerned about questions and answers when he finally arrives at the doorstep of the orphanage.

With question and answer, he is referring to the questioning process that the person who takes an injured or sick person to the hospital is subjected to. The helping person may end up in jail till the culpable person is found. That is the reason many pass the injured and do not do anything to help. A similar situation existed at the time of Hafez Ibrahim.

He points to the humane treatment rendered to the girl. Orphanage officials accept the sick girl with a Godly gesture. They give a caring treatment to the girl. He indirectly addresses people and let them know that they could provide proper treatment to a given individual in a similar situation just like the treatment rendered by the responsible individuals at orphanage.

He then tells about the time when the physician came to treat the orphan girl. The doctor had come with medications. He would go around her like a butterfly and treat her wounds as if she was a relative.

Hafez Ibrahim continues further: I leave her alone with her new family fully satisfied and with peace of mind. He writes about feeling handicapped in expressing his gratitude to the orphanage officials for all the good they offered her. And, to thank them for the time and efforts they put into charitable works.

Hafez Ibrahim offers two wise conclusions:

1. The best favor is when the offering person does not belittle and degrade the receiver.
2. Doing good should save face for receiver.

It is better for the person who is doing good to render help to the target individuals before they ask and to help them without making them feel indebted. This is the acceptable way in view of Islam. Hafez Ibrahim's advices tell us about the fact that at the time of poet many people would engage in charity works and help the needy but without honoring their respect.

Hafez Ibrahim continues with his own characterization of the poor: hungry, bare, ill, sleepless, heartbroken, moneyless, meager, etc. He mentions the important role played by those who establish charity institutions. He comments that poverty and misery would destroy the needy without the help of charitable people. He believes charitable people save the weak from demise. He praises the orphanage officials at the end with the intention to encourage more people to engage in charitable works.

He characterizes orphanage employees as:

1. They are always attentive to sickly and hungry addressing their needs while many rich live comfortably in own ignorance.
2. They do many good works recommended by religion and generations of civilization while

many leisurely engage in wealth accumulation.

3. They support and help the needy families without breadwinner. They do not avoid needy and rush to relieve their poverty and misery.

He refers to Quran at the end to remind the outcome of doing good and declares: The benevolent individuals are compensated 10 fold in Judgment Day and the Heavenly Reward is limitless.

Children Shelter *Qasida*⁴

Hafez Ibrahim composed a *Qasida* inspired by a ceremony held by Caring Association for Children in an attempt to encourage helping the needy. He depicts a train in his poem and expects it to encourage others to come forward and help the misfortunate. His objective in composing this poem was to help the poor.

Poet characterizes a train in this poem. He speaks about a steam train and praises its speed, its glitter, and its supremacy over animals. A steam train shares the same qualities of a Poet. But, there is a vast difference between the two. One difference is that a train is not affectionate but poet is full of affection and has a burning heart.

Hafez Ibrahim says that he witnessed a strange incident in the train that he could not put it into words and provide a description. He goes on with the story. One dark night we witnessed a bizarre accident over a bridge. A person was thrown out of the train into a turbulent river rushing through underneath. Another person jumped into water at a speed of an eagle, swam up to the drowning person, and pulled him out of water at no time.

People circled around the rescuer and praised his action at awe and wondered how could undertake such miraculous act. It became more perplexing when people found out that the drowning person was a charitable individual and the person who saved him was a member of Caring Association for Children.

A young girl cried out loud: "he was saved because of his caring for orphan children." Poet here undertakes to call the rich indirectly and without commanding to provide help to orphan. He puts his belief across that wealthy individuals should expect to see the reward not only afterlife but also in this world.

Notwithstanding the rescuer's life was in danger, he hit the waters and saved the drowning person with bare hands. He, then, stresses the consequences of good deeds. Helping poor people stands tall like a stronghold against disaster and mischief. It takes the mischief away.

⁴ Complete Works of Hafez Ibrahim (1998), Beirut: Dar al Fekr al Arabi, p. 306

Hafez Ibrahim mentions charity as the cause of saving the man's life. Poet explains man's good deeds in words of the women who summed up the cause of saving the drowning man in few words by saying "save your afterlife by caring for orphans." Poet then lists the reasons for escaping the eminent demise. His objective is to encourage others to step forward and provide help to fellow countrymen.

1. The first reason is that the charitable man always respected the needy person and helped them at time of illness. His help was without expecting anything in return. He helped before anyone asked.
2. The second reason is his role in caring for orphans. He provided food and clothing plus monetary assistance to satisfy their needs.
3. The third reason is his membership in a charitable institution. He was saved by his commendable help he rendered to the poor, his generosity, and payment of religious dues or *zakat*. The prayer of orphans and the children with no caretaker was always with him.

Poet describes the charitable organization. It is a place for peace and tranquility. They would not embarrass the needy by questioning them. They only attend to the problems and try to relieve the pain.

He repeats his belief that the drowning person was saved because of his good deed and payment of his dues. His intention here is to alert the rich and well to do. He invites them to work with charitable organizations. He also advises them to pay their religious dues. He utters the benefits of doing so. He reminds them that it is an Islamic principle and Quran has highlighted its importance.

Hafez Ibrahim offers another approach for eradication of poverty as infelicitous phenomena. He invites people to respect their duty and pay religious dues or *Zakat*. He considers *zakat* as being more important than prayer and fasting. The reason for his argument is that prayer and fasting benefits the individual. But, *zakat* has public as well as private benefits. Therefore, poet considers it more important than prayer and fasting. He reminds his readers that it is an important principle of Islam and God has mentioned it repeatedly in Quran⁵ to promote the payment of *zakat*,

⁵ Quran, Rome Sura, verse 39 and other similar suras.

He offers an additional reasoning. He says *zakat* is the foundation for religious belief and a proper base for public order. He advocates that the payment of *zakat* contribute to society perpetuity and provides for eradication of poverty and misery.

He explains and states why he believes if rich people were to pay their religious dues, we would no longer witness poverty and hunger - the root of all evil. He declares that society suffers from crime and corruption because of poverty. Then, he concludes that the payment of *zakat* can eradicate poverty and corruption.

Hafez Ibrahim recollects his own problems and difficulties. He remembers the orphans and tries to be kind with them.

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