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Of love and other demons

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

In a country where factionalism pre-originate the birth of life and divisions lay so deep-rooted that politics and society are shaped by rifts, not unions, I think there is something to say for love. And if that love happens to be between two people of the same gender, then what of it?

I understand the knee-jerk reaction, the witch-hunt mentality and the feeling that someone else's personal life somehow deeply offends our own sense of calm and civility. I understand that those feelings are the primary ones, feelings that are difficult to overshadow by reason or -- imagine this -- a sense of living and letting live. I understand that there are things we cannot, or will not, tolerate. Old traditions, force of habit, schooled morality. I don't for a moment seek to undermine those prejudices or allay those feelings of confusion and dread. In our own lives, we abide by what we determine as being correct. In our own lives, we are undoubtedly free to draw the line at certain behaviour or lifestyles. But in others? Do we have a right to value the private choices made in the lives of others? In so much as they do not cause harm, I would say no, we don't.

My favourite professor at college, Dennis Dalton, demonstrated the conundrum of John Stuart Mill's no harm principle - that society ought not to restrict any action, so long as it does not cause harm -- with a personal example. Professor Dalton was sitting on a bus from New York to New Jersey to visit his grand-daughters for the weekend. Across the aisle from him was a young man making the same journey, except that as he was crossing state lines. The young man was furiously engaged in picking his nose. It was a laborious task and the young traveller seemed intent on getting the job done. Professor Dalton, wholly unamused, considered asking the hardworking man to stop, to cease and desist, but didn't. Picking his nose on the bus, as impolite and unbecoming as it was, did not cause anyone on the bus any harm. Aside from public decorum, which the young man was seriously lacking in, there were no grounds to ask him to take his finger out of his nose.

We don't automatically have the right to point fingers (no pun intended) and mark shame. What then of the latest controversy surrounding two women who chose to spend their lives together? There must be a reason that this is making national news, I just don't see it. Iran and the United States are engaging in diplomatic talks for the first time in twenty years, the Iraqi parliament is about to sign over their oil fields, their sovereign right, and all its revenues to large multinational companies, there are militants teaching boys as young as 12 to behead 'infidels' in Bannu and this is what we're devoting time to covering?

Let me backtrack a moment, Shumail and Shahzina, female couple -- or 'she-couple' in the derisive language of the press -- are not news. They are private citizens who made a private

decision. Their private choice caused no amount of harm, except perhaps to Shumail who may or may not have undergone a mastectomy. The private citizens, civilians, are of legal age and free to engage in relationships of their choosing. Except that they did not do the 'done' thing. They did not place themselves in a humiliating cattle like auction in front of eligible male suitors or try to butter up a thin lipped, disapproving mother-in-law. In short, they did not tick the right box in the bio-data section. They chose not men, but each other. "They did not mean to offend," their lawyer stated at their trial, "they only acted out of love for each other".

They were not jailed for their same-sex marriage; there are no codes to punish such a nuptial deviation under Pakistani law. It wouldn't have been quite kosher to throw them into jail, separate ones I should add, for the sin of not conforming to heterosexual norms so Shumail and Shezina will be jailed for perjury. For that may or may not mastectomy. Yes. Let this be a lesson to you: liars in Pakistan will be imprisoned. Severely imprisoned. How has there not already been a boon in perjury incarcerations? Do you think judges are simply unaware of the mass stockpile we possess of thieving black marketers, extortionist businessmen, and sinisterly corrupt politicians? The prisons would be full if we were to make a precedent of jailing people for lying!

I'm afraid the crime here was not lying, not in their case. Their crime was love. It's not any more complicated than that. Two people decide they love each other and that's what we're going to try in a court of law? What a total waste of time and legal energy. Since we're on the topic, what the members of the law should devote their time to is imposing stricter sentences on men for bartering underage brides in watta satta, or ritually murdering couples under the auspices of karo kari. Judges and lawyers and us newspaper reading public should be concerned with the prostitution rings that deal in young boys, because their bodies are sold cheaper than young girls, or the spread of HIV and AIDS among the many shadow sex workers forced into the underground trade.

God help me, if the emails I received over my writings on the Hudood Ordinance were nasty, then I'm not looking forward to the ones that will line up in my inbox come Monday. But this should be said -- it doesn't matter to me what Shumail and Shahzina do because they are individuals acting on private concerns. It concerns me even less that they are both women and that they technically shouldn't be with each other. I'm not advocating mass national conversion. I'm not pro anything; I'm simply not anti anything either. Freedom is about choice and that's what we need to support.

Let's get back to matters that need our attention and depend on our vigilance. Visit http://www.avaaz.org/en/iraq_oil_law to learn more about the proposed Iraqi oil law and while you're there please sign the petition to defend Iraq's right to economic justice. That's a far more worthy cause than nosing around in Shumail and Shezina's business; they have suffered enough at our hands.