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**A loss of humanism**

We do not have any standard prescriptions for dealing with grief and the loss of loved ones. Poets and creative writers may give voice to some of our feelings and ease our pain a little bit. There are experts with their advice. And, of course, we find strength in the love and support of family and friends.

I had shared last week my personal story of losing three siblings to Covid-19. As I struggle to deal with this loss, the realities that surround us are gradually emerging on the horizon of my consciousness. I can see that this is a season of bereavement. An unseen bond exists between families invaded by the pandemic.

In some ways, personal grief tends to blend with the general environment. That is how I am particularly disturbed by the rising tide of censorship and intolerance in Pakistan. We have fresh evidence of the confusion that resides in the minds of our rulers about the national sense of direction, particularly in the spheres of the emancipation of women and the containment of religious extremism.

This week, our prime minister expressed very problematic views – for the second time this year – about rape. To relate this crime to the dress worn by women is to totally negate, as one newspaper editorial put it, “the epidemic of sexual violence against children, both boys and girls”.

Let me repeat the quotable quote of Imran Khan’s HBO interview: “If a woman is wearing very few clothes it will have an impact on the men, unless they are robots. It’s common sense”. Placed against the reality of the numerous incidents of rape in this country, particularly of children, these words of wisdom have revealed the prime minister’s understanding of sexuality, social issues and human behaviour.

There are other dimensions of what provokes sexual violence in Pakistan and the prime minister has apparently paid no attention to a religious leader’s well-documented perversion in a madrassah milieu. But we need to focus on the role and status of women in Pakistan and on forces that have subverted the rise of modern and progressive values in society.

We had a glimpse of the prime minister’s mindset when he called Osama bin Laden a martyr in the National Assembly – a statement that he has not retracted. Now, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi is found unwilling to decide, on behalf of his government, whether Bin Laden was a martyr or a terrorist.

Is this not a hint that they, the present rulers of Pakistan, do not know or want to decide where they are going? It means that they love to remain in the grey area. And that is where the Financial Action Task Force wants Pakistan to stay, though for very different reasons. Pakistan has been in FATF’s grey list since June 2018.

Metaphorically, perhaps, our women are also detained in a grey area or a darkened place. There is no clarity as to what would be an ideal projection of the Pakistani woman, a role model to illuminate the future of Pakistan in the comity of advanced and liberated countries.

It is an irony of our recent history that Imran Khan’s party was initially seen as the harbinger of a progressive dispensation, with emancipated women in its front ranks. But the PTI leader, defying the journey of his own past, is marching on a socially conservative and illiberal path. (And eulogising Bin Laden as a martyr.)

One was amused to see three women leaders of the PTI, who otherwise could represent the liberated Pakistani women wedded to progress, speaking in defence of their leader’s pronouncements. Zartaj Gul argued that liberally corrupt goons do not represent women.

Now, one reason why I took this diversion is that it has aroused feelings that overlap my personal grief. There is this incomprehensible sense of loss and regrets. I had mentioned in my column last week that my elder sister Dr Aquila Islam, one of my three siblings who died of corona in Dubai earlier this month, was the first Pakistani woman to do PhD in nuclear physics. Sadly, her contribution to promoting physics and education of girls in Pakistan were not duly recognised. Here, I have a story to tell that dates back to the initial days of Ziaul Haq.

Aquila had done her PhD from McMasters University in Canada in the mid-seventies and when she returned to Pakistan, she started teaching physics in a girls college. Teaching was her passion but in 1977, the then chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Dr I H Usmani asked her to move from teaching to research and offered her the post of a scientific officer.

When she joined PINSTECH, she had to fill a number of forms and in the box for religion, she wrote Humanism. There were consequences and, to conclude, let me quote from an interview freelance journalist Fahad Deshmukh recorded with her, in August 2017.

Aquila said: “It created a sort of disturbance in the entire institution and the director general of IB himself came to me. My director told me: ‘Aquila, you have burnt your boats. You will never be included in a classified project because of this…The IB DG said, are you are not a Muslim? ... I insisted that every religion proposes the same thing and you have to be a real human being to understand the suffering, to value, to sympathise, to have empathy. So I think … the greatest crux of Islam is humanism.

“Then I was asked to write a long, long explanation on why I wrote humanism…”

An explanation that many would not have understood then, and will not understand now. But to write it, and to insist on it without being cowered down by role and rank, and while giving up her own title of significance, my sister stood up for the words she believed in.

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