# In the Name of Honour

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**An Essay in Memory of Pamela Bone**

In February 2005 the Australian journalist Pamela Bone, already close to her death from cancer, published an article in the Melbourne Age entitled “Where are the Western Feminists?” Some of us would still like to know.

The immediate spur to Pamela Bone’s article had been the piercing silence from Western feminists on the subject of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s condemnation of how women were being treated in the culture of Islam. In asking her question, Pamela Bone already knew why the Western feminists were saying so little. They were saying little not just about Islam, but about Hinduism or any other culture which, when the behaviour of its more extreme groups towards women attracts criticism, bridles as if it is being attacked as a whole. Of all the liberal democracies, Australia is the one where the idea is most firmly entrenched among the local intelligentsia that the culture of the West is the only criminal, all other cultures being victims no matter what atrocities they might condone even within their own families.

Perhaps the most successful example of how a western liberal democracy can absorb migrant diasporas into its social texture, Australia would have reason to vaunt itself as a multicultural society if the supposedly universal unhappiness of the Aboriginals did not, in the eyes of its guilty intelligentsia, make the claim seem empty. But in Australia multiculturalism is not only a social aim, largely attained. It is also an ideology, in which form, to borrow Pascal Bruckner’s useful phrase, it becomes the racism of the anti-racists. Australian multiculturalist ideologues will call anyone a racist who dares to suggest that another culture than the one in which they flourish might have aspects more repellent than their own. And it was just such accusations that Pamela Bone heard ringing in her ears when she made her exit.

The essay you are reading now has its own history, which will probably be part of its subject, because I have nothing original to say on the matter. Indeed that was why I could never seem to get the thing written. That there were countries in the world where the culture visited hellish violence on women even when their governments professed a measure of equality, and that these governments were unlikely to temper the psychopathic inclinations of the culture unless there was a measure of democracy sufficient to separate the state from theocratic pressure: these conclusions seemed obvious. The only mystery was why so few female intellectuals seemed willing to reach them.

Pamela Bone was still very much alive when I began making sketches for this essay back in the first year of the decade, before the successful attack on the World Trade Center. Her cancer had already been diagnosed but she was fighting it hard and had definitely not stopped writing. Indeed she was producing some of her most adventurous things. She had made the inherent conflict between feminism and multiculturalism one of her subjects.

To do so took bravery, especially in Australia, where the multiculturalist ideology – as opposed, often directly opposed, to the reasonable approval of multiculturalism as a desirable form of social organization -- is not just a consensus, as I have said, but often thought to be fundamental to a liberal position, and therefore not to be questioned. The distinguished writer Helen Garner had been similarly daring when she raised the possibility that the occasional woman might be evil enough to falsely accuse a man of sexual harassment – a conjecture on Garner’s part which drew the wrath of all those legions of Australian female pundits who seemed honestly to believe either (a) that if the occasional innocent man should get locked up it would be a small price to pay for the sure punishment of those men who were guilty, or (b) all men were guilty. Like Helen Garner, if on a less celebrated scale, Pamela Bone was a fine enough writer to make the onlooker toy with the possibility that these matters vital to women were being debated among them.

But the onlooker needed to overlook the fact that such independent voices were few, whether in Australia or anywhere else. And as the decade wore on, the number did not notably increase, especially in the matter of the treatment of women within the culture of Islam, and especially in the matter of honour crimes. My own impression, drawn over the course of these past ten years or so, is that the amount of protest about honour crimes from Western female thinkers has diminished as the news about honour crimes has proliferated, and has steadily shrunk towards nothing even as news about honour crimes among immigrant populations in the Western countries has become more conspicuous. In Britain especially, the worse it gets, the fewer objections we hear from writers in the serious newspapers. (In the unserious ones, the stories run all the time, as a kind of snuff video on a loop: but the purpose there is to play on fears about immigration in general, and not to highlight a failing in the law.) A serious British journalist such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who promotes the difficult double programme of wanting Islam respected and honour crimes condemned, would not have to be quite so brave if she had more-back-up. But the feminists do not want to know, or, if they know, prefer to do nothing. This was certainly a conclusion I didn’t want to draw, because I never wanted to publish this essay, or even to make much more than a start on writing it. I wanted women to do the job. After seventy years of hard training I had finally accepted that it was not a woman’s job to wash my socks, but I still thought that if there were thousands of madmen all over the world ready to murder or mutilate their own daughters for imaginary crimes, then it was a woman’s job to object in the first instance, always provided that she was free to do so. On the whole, however, it hasn’t happened.

Some people keep a file of outrageous things they read in the newspapers, and sometimes those same people are eventually found dead among their heaps of clippings, having understandably decided that life is not worth going on with. Keen to avoid the same fate, I make a point of throwing almost everything away. But there is a paragraph I saw in 2001, before the twin towers were brought down, that I have never been able to get rid of. When I clipped it out in the first place, I knew it would be harder to lose than a bad dream. I would use the clipping as a marker in a work-book, and then deliberately lose the work-book in my inland sea of papers; but I always knew where the clipping was. I knew that it would go on sending out its beeping signal until I had summoned up the courage to write something about it. Perhaps the time has come. Anyway, here is the clipping, reduced to the form of a single quotation, with a credit for the speaker.

All women killed in cases of honour are prostitutes. I believe prostitutes deserve to die.

--- Abdul Karim Dughmi, former Minister of Justice in Jordan, quoted in the Sunday Times Magazine, July 8th, 2001.

The “former Minister of Justice” no longer held his post, but he was still prominent enough in public life to have his opinion quoted. A key part of his belief system, it emerged, centred on the principle that if a girl is raped, her father is honour-bound to kill her. At the time, as clueless as anyone else in the West, I was not yet fully familiar with the idea of taking revenge on the victim. Later on, when it finally emerged that a feature of the conflict in the Balkans during the 1990s was the reluctance of Muslim girls who had been raped to tell their own families, I woke up. But even while still asleep I was impressed by what this man had said, mainly because of the eminence of the post he had held, and in which country. The fact that this principle could be enunciated at all by any man not clinically insane attained a special piquancy in the context of Jordan, then as now held to be a centre of enlightenment within the Arab world. Stung to attention, I started to keep an eye on the news coming out of Jordan.

I should say straight away, when it comes to Jordan, that there was, and still is, reason for hope. Obviously Queen Rania has never believed any of this lethal nonsense, and she has often verbally condemned it as an anachronism. Even saying that much couldn’t have been easy, but she has contrived to back her words with action, and it was partly due to her influence that the notorious Article 340 of the Jordanian criminal code was at last modified so that men who murder women on a point of honour no longer automatically walk free straight away. But they still walk free soon enough to make you wonder if an enlightened ruling elite, and even a reformed justice system, really has much chance against the ingrained prejudices of the culture. We know that the present monarch, Abdullah II, and his elegant wife have done what they can for the liberal reform of the Jordanian system of justice. But we also know that they would be receiving less praise for their bravery and originality if the Jordanian system of justice had been less recalcitrant. Or, to cut the irony before it starts softening the enormity, it is a fair bet that the culture, in Jordan, goes on treating women like dirt.

Upon investigation this proves to be the case. In Jordan, to expiate the shame brought upon a family by loss of honour, a woman is murdered every two weeks. Not only the crime of having been raped brings loss of honour. A rumour can bring loss of honour. Apparently there is little to encourage fathers in these cases to the consideration that there might be loss of honour involved in murdering their helpless daughters. The King and Queen have tried: they have spoken out for reform. The lawyer Asma Kadaar and a journalist on The Jordan Times have bravely devoted a good part of their working lives to the cause of sanity – particularly bravely because they are both female, and thus potentially subject to the self-righteous vengefulness of any mentally challenged male with honour on his mind. These advocates of elementary justice are people of influence, but they count for little against the collective dementia of the culture.

One says “the culture” because one is not allowed to say “the state”. The state, we are assured, isn’t really like that. Theoretically, in Jordan, a father must go to gaol for killing his daughter. And so he does, but he is out again soon enough to be in good shape for a hero’s welcome. In response to the influential liberal voices, the Jordanian system of justice is currently, in August 2009, tying itself in yet another series of knots as it strives to assure the world that the courts will not admit a plea about “honour” when it comes to murder committed “in a fit of fury caused by an unlawful act on the part of the victim”, and that a convicted murderer in such a case, instead of being let out after three months – six months in severe cases -- might have to serve the full term of two years. (A 29-year old man who stabbed his raped sister twelve times was sentenced to fifteen years but has just had his sentence halved. Will anyone be stunned when the sentence is halved again?) It seems to occur to nobody, not even the concerned royal family, that the sentencing policy is laughably unjust even when it is strictly applied. What a threat: if you murder your daughter because you think she has been raped you might very well go to gaol for months on end.

We are told that when it comes to a case of honour, Jordan is one of the more progressive Islamic communities. In Jordan, only one quarter of all homicides are cases of honour. In the Palestinian sectors of the West Bank and in Gaza, the proportion is two thirds. In Pakistan about a thousand women get killed every year, and a startling, if lesser, incidence of ritual murder is true wherever Pakistanis live in the outside world. When a girl in a British Pakistani community is set on fire by her brothers, or has her face ruined with acid by a rejected candidate for the role of husband, we hear about it in the newspapers, although seldom for long; but in Pakistan such incidents aren’t news at all. They happen three times a day. They are part of the culture. It was news in Britain when, on July 14, 2006, in London, a gifted Pakistani girl (her name was Sumari) was slain by her father, brother and cousin. It needed all of them to do it, because apparently she had to be stabbed eighteen times. Her crime had been to disobey them, and she died of the proof that they had been well worth disobeying. Taking it on the lam, the father – who, while thicker than any brick, had at least been smart enough to spot the lack of congruity between British law and his own beliefs – holed up in his land of origin, Pakistan, thus providing yet another statistic in one half of the two way traffic whereby potential victims, if they are lucky, hide out in the West, whereas perpetrators flee the West to hide out in the East. That two-way traffic should surely be enough by itself to define the nature of the horrible cultural interchange, which is mainly a matter of our culture failing to provide sufficient protection against the consequences of theirs.

I long ago lost count, just as I lost the clippings, of those occasions in which a local British police force could do no more than “warn” a woman whose life was in danger from the men around her. In late July 2009 the newspapers were featuring –but for not more than the usual few days – stories of a case in which a woman had been “warned” after the men around her poured acid down the throat of the man she had been seeing. The man ended up in hospital with his tongue destroyed, but it appears that the tongues of the police had been destroyed too, because a “warning” was the only help they could give, apparently for fear that the local immigrant community might take offence. There is seldom, apparently, much chance of “warning” the men in such cases that if they publicly avow violent intentions towards a woman they will be hauled up, and there is never any chance at all that such men will be expelled from the country. No Minister of Community Cohesion has yet said that all communities would have a better chance of cohering with each other if those communities whose beliefs about honour were contrary to the law of the land could change them.

By this time the words “community” and “culture” are starting to sound like what they are: weasel words for institutionalised sadism, which the naïve onlooker is likely to suspect might have something to do with the religion, whether it be Hindu, Sikh or Islamic. But at the mere mention of Islam, cue the experts: apparently these cases of honour have no justification in Sharia, and therefore honour crimes have nothing to do with the religion. In Sharia, four witnesses have to catch a pair of illicit lovers in flagrante before they can both be killed. We are supposed to be reassured by these rigorous requirements of sufficient evidence, and are thought to be niggling if we question the assumption that the death penalty is mandatory if the case is proved. The requirement that the culprits should be killed goes unexamined. No doubt, if it were examined, the community would be placed in danger, and the culture begin to fray. But surely, if moderate Islam is to hold its own against its extremist wings, then fraying, in that one respect at least, is exactly what the culture needs to do. There are more than a billion Muslims who are not engaged in jihad against the west, and not likely to be. We should try to remember just how few people are trying to kill us, even when they feel sorely provoked. But if the non-fanatical majority can’t find a voice to condemn the few among their fellows who see nothing wrong with killing their own women for imaginary crimes, then they either condone that attitude or are afraid of those who hold it: either way, not a very encouraging start towards the more liberal Muslim future that we have been promised.

If Jordan is progressive, you can imagine what things must be like elsewhere: except that you can’t imagine. Interviewed in our press, a Tunisian woman who dares to write about what is going on in her homeland clearly credits herself with the life expectancy of a snowflake on a hot stove. No wonder she is a lone voice. From Afghanistan, when the Taliban ruled, the reports were awful beyond belief. But we did better if we believed them, because it turned out that some of the Northern Alliance forces that replaced the Taliban were united only in their conviction that the Taliban were soft on women. Later on the Taliban came back to prominence and in the areas under their control things were re-established on the same plane of dementia as was the rule until just yesterday in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, where it was considered a mercy if, when a girl’s school was burned to the ground, the girls were not still inside it. At the time of writing, the Pakistani army has cleared the Taliban out of the Swat Valley, to the point where the streets where they used to dump the bodies of the punished are now full again of living people. But when the BBC interviews boy “fighters” who have been rescued from the Taliban’s suicide schools, the hoys have to be fully masked for their “protection.” It doesn’t sound as if the madmen have gone very far away, and judging by the fact that the BBC correspondent has only her face showing, the local men who theoretically aren’t insane might not be as sane as all that.

We had also better believe that where men alone decide what women’s rights are, the results are rarely good. Western liberal democracy, or a reasonable imitation of Western liberal democracy when it comes to the rule of law, is still the only kind of society we know about where women are not at the mercy of systematic injustice –that is, of justice conceived of and maintained as a weapon of terror. Where women are concerned, countries like Japan have climbed out of their dark histories to the exact extent that they have become Western-style liberal democracies, and no further. The same is true for the “Tiger” economies: the condition of women might have been ameliorated only because it has been thought expedient to subject theocratic pressures to the rule of law, but it doesn’t matter why the law is there, as long as it is there. The rule of law does not guarantee justice, but there is no justice without it. It has been one of the sour amusements provided by our feminist movement in its modern phase to watch its proponents trying to blink this fact.

At one point our feminists, getting frustrated as the pace slowed down in the home stretch to utopia, started telling us that other cultures (cultures practising clitoridectomy, for example) were more “authentic” in the respect of female sexual identity. A woman in Somalia, we were told, at least knows she is a woman. At one point my friend Germaine Greer could be heard propounding this view, but she has a good heart, and perhaps found reason to dial back on her fervour after Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has actually suffered a clitoridectomy in Somalia, pointed out that the practice, far from being a sign of authenticity, was a mechanism of repression. How Germaine Greer could ever, even momentarily, have thought anything different is a matter for study in a field that needs to be explored: the way Western intellectuals lose sight of elementary liberalism in the heat-haze of their own rhetoric.

In a free society, radical dissatisfaction is usually a condition of mind before it is a response to circumstances, so it has to go somewhere. As atomisation continues in the liberal democracies, the number of candidates for an irresponsible semi-intelligentsia continues to increase. They come from either wing, but are always more vociferous on the left, because capitalism provides the more blatant source of provocation. One can hardly blame them for that. What is striking is their capacity, once they run out of injustices in liberal democracy that they can blame on capitalism, to look for injustices in the rest of the world that they can blame on liberal democracy. In sub-Saharan Africa, especially, criminal states are regarded as victim states even when their sole concern is the victimisation of their own people. By now Bob Geldof seems ready to admit the possibility that he and President Mengistu of Ethiopia were in a symmetrical relationship. But Geldof is a long way ahead of most of his admirers. Food aid enthusiasts are still reluctant to believe that most of the money raised for Ethiopia was wasted.

But it was worse than wasted. It fuelled the engine of injustice, and the result of injustice, in Ethiopia and in any other African country that melts down, is invariably a situation in which the lot of women, already bad, gets worse. In those failed states where Islam is a factor, the sufferings of women seem to be even worse than in the others, but in the others it is bad enough to suggest that what we are talking about goes far beyond religion. An African state where men rule the roost is usually on its way to chaos, and the inevitable inference is that a fair shake for women is the only hope for a decent future. It is some encouragement to find that Barack Obama, whose influence is bound to count in Africa for the foreseeable future, seems to think the same. His excellent first book Dreams from My Father is ruled by the spirit of his mother, not his father. She is the responsible one. And as the Australian Aboriginal political thinker Noel Pearson has insisted, the right to responsibility is crucial. (Pearson, who argues that welfare for Aboriginals should be accompanied by a strict application of the law against abusive Aboriginal men, will no doubt become an object for execration among Australian intellectuals once they have finished collating the evidence that he is a CIA sleeper who was planted in Cooktown by a low-flying C-130 after he completed his training at Langley, Virginia.)

The other crucial requirement, surely, is for the pampered intelligentsia of the West to give up finally and forever on any notion that the Third World –for all its deprivations and perhaps because of them – is some kind of Eden in which countervailing values against the excesses of the West may be found. What may be found is more often a heap of dead bodies. Most of those get blamed on the West, too, but when half of the population of Rwanda sets out to murder the other half, with no recourse to Western technology except the metal to make machetes, the explanation starts looking thin. And always it is mandatory for the women to be raped as well as being chopped up, the only question in the minds of the men being about what order in which to do these things. No doubt the same sort of dialogue was going on somewhere in the mind of Fred West, but at least he found it advisable to hide the corpses.

It should be obvious that in Africa there is little hope without education and that any educational reform should emphasise the educating of women. We can’t be sure that the rise of women to political prominence, there or anywhere, will guarantee the beneficial modification of a monolithic state – Madame Mao, after all, was a product of the Chinese educational system – but we can be sure that any monolithic state which resists the very idea of educating women has no intention of liberalising itself. This principle holds true all the way up to – or down to, if you like – the level of Saudi Arabia, which even the West’s most ardently anti-Western feminists are ready to concede is an organized insult to their gender. (They would probably be less ready to concede this if Saudi Arabia were a declared enemy of the United States, but that’s by the way.) Where women are concerned – and where women are concerned we are all concerned, or should be --Saudi Arabia is such a horror show that it would constitute all on its own sufficient reason for the West to wean itself off oil, if only to deprive those untold thousands of idle princes and useless Koranic scholars of their endless supply of free money, large amounts of which are used in an export drive to flood the world with extremist doctrine on the intellectual level of the Sexcetera channel but with the virulence of botulism. Countries in receipt of free money are under no compulsion to develop a real economy, and are thus less likely than ever to see even the material benefits, let alone the moral ones, of setting women free.

Similarly, to return to my main theme, it should be permissible to say that if Islamic leaders really believe that the Koran is a book of justice, they should enforce its spirit. It took Western civilization almost two millennia to do a decent job of enforcing the spirit of the New Testament, and part of the job consisted of imposing a separation between church and state, which couldn’t be done until the book was subjected to critical scrutiny, so that it could be taken as a source of benevolent metaphor rather than a set of inflexible precepts. In this regard, the enforced halt, in the 19th Century, to any critical scrutiny of the Islamic sacred writings had such deleterious effects that they were regretted even by Edward Said. But even in less enlightened times, the New Testament had one salient virtue: the merciful teachings of Jesus Christ. In Italy, perpetrators of crimes of passion were still being given a free pass well into my own day, but finally even the Catholic Church felt obliged to remind the legal system that the Son of God might have taken a dim view. It would be a blessing for Islam if its book featured a leading character imbued with the belief that when a woman is taken in adultery the best idea is not to throw stones at her unless you are certain of being without sin yourself. Jesus never said that if four of you catch her in the act, you can stone her to death.

But at least the Islamic holy writings say that Allah is merciful. Some kind of Islamic protestant reform might start from that assurance. In the case of Christianity, protestant reform started with pointing out what was actually written in the book, instead of concocted by a priesthood. Islamic protestants might have less to go on, and it could be that Ayaan Hirsi Ali is correct in wanting the whole religious edifice pulled down. But if we think that a reformation, rather than a dissolution, is more desirable, or at least more likely, then surely a movement that puts the emphasis back on the less fanatical interpretation of the texts that prevailed before the Wahabist aberration is one to be encouraged. Islamic protestants, however, seem more likely to come from among women than among men. Recent initiatives from putatively liberal thinkers among Islamic men have not been very convincing. Paul Berman has dealt in detail with the thought processes of Tariq Ramadan but really Nicholas Sarkozy had already done the necessary when, before he was President of France, he asked Ramadan on television whether he condemned the stoning of women, and Ramadan said that he could have no opinion until the imams had discussed the matter first. And Ali A. Allawi’s recent assurances that the Islamic civilization of the future will be ruled with the aid of a modernised Sharia sounded a lot less promising than his fond reminiscences of what the secular movement in some of the Arab countries used to be like when he was young enough to enjoy it.

A modernised Sharia? Even the Archbishop of Canterbury would have smelt a rat there. Instances of these nice noises from Islamic male thinkers could be multiplied, but even at their best they sound hollow beside those cries of protest arising from women where protesting is momentarily permitted without penalty, as it was when the admirable Wafa Sultan confronted a studio full of imams on Al Jazeera Television and told them where they could put their parade of clerical authority. But Wafa Sultan was safe in America when she said her piece, although the assembled male clerics would undoubtedly have thrown stones at her satellite image if there had been any stones available. It’s the cries of protest when protesting is not permitted, however, that really tell you what you need to know. The cries tend to be brief, and in the case of the girl we now all know as Neda Iran, we might not have heard the cry at all if she had not been so beautiful. The cult of glamour worked, for once, in the cause of justice. It was a crumb of comfort to offset against the depressing extent to which the cult of glamour has failed to work in the cause of Aung San Suu Kyi. She is beautiful too, and she is still alive: but she is wasting away.

What is to be done about this world-wide victimisation of women? What else but to condemn it? To do so, it would be a help to uncouple the question from all the other questions that look more pressing but are much more equivocal. Let me end where I started, in Australia, where Pamela Bone asked “Where are the Western feminists?” when she already knew the answer. They were hiding, under the guise of concerning themselves with those pressing questions. In Australia, which is in so many ways the ideal Western liberal democracy, and all the more instructive for being so, it is hard to find more than a handful of pundits, academics, journalists and broadcasters who do not hold the West responsible for world poverty, Israeli imperialism, genocide in Iraq, and the imminent heat death of what they insist on calling the Planet. On each point, they might well be less silly than they sound. They can make a case for their views. The feminists among them are especially eloquent in the condemnation of Western evils. But Pamela Bone wanted the feminists to speak out clearly about a simpler topic, which can be exemplified by a sign on the wall of a temple in Bali. NO MENSTRUATION WOMEN ALLOW. And the fact that there are men in charge of synagogues who feel the same is not really an answer, because except for the occasional ultra-orthodox head-case no man who runs a synagogue wants to burn the women inside it.

But there are men all over the world who really do want to kill women on a point of honour. What kind of honour is that? When are these dreadful men, and all who encourage and “understand” them, to be condemned as the homicidal maniacs they are? It could be said that there is not much point in condemning what we can’t change, but in our own countries, where it could be changed if the will existed, condemnation would surely be a useful first step, and it might help some of the countries of origin to at least see the point. Jordan, which is sensitive enough to Western opinion for its Queen to see the advantage of regular appearances in Hello magazine, has recently announced a shelter system for women running away from danger. While the women are in the shelter, the men in their families are given counselling. I suppose that’s a start, although some of the women might be wise not to take it on trust when they are told the danger is over. Daddy says it’s all right to come home now.

-- Standpoint, September 2009