SHADOWS ON THE WALL.

Gender. Sexuality. Islam.

Words **Syed, chair of Hidayah**

I've been thinking a lot recently about acknowledgement; what it means and why it's so important and transformative. I guess these thoughts were triggered when the telephone rang and someone from far away asked my mother about one of my younger male cousins and whether he was ready to 'settle down'. This is what I had grown up on; that when you reach a certain age, you start receiving rishtas. It seemed very normal but also quietly exciting.

There's a whole world of aunts and other well-intentioned busy bodies who form a chattering class of potential matchmakers. Growing up, I imagined I was in some kind of South Asian adaptation of Jane Austen (Bride and Prejudice hadn't been released yet). In a culture where you are regarded as an adult and someone who has a social identity all of their own only after you tie the knot, marriage is a coming-of-age ritual. The lavish ceremony, the colour and expense is all part of that social recognition conferred on the marrying couple. So when I heard that a rishta had been sent for a younger cousin, I felt strange. No one had said anything and yet something had happened: I was no longer part of that world. I was someone strange. An oddity – (put on your strongest Indian accent) 'Ajeeb ladka hai (what a strange boy); why doesn't he want to get married?'

Aaron and I have been together for more than seven years but my parents have not met him. No one in my family has. I go back and see them pretty much every week, and after coming out over a year ago, I'm building my relationship with them again. Aaron is amazing and even after these many years, I find myself falling for him still. I get butterflies when I wait to see him, I feel lost when he or I have to travel alone and stay abroad because of our jobs. My relationship with Aaron is as strong – if not stronger – than the best of relationships my siblings and cousins have with their partners, and in the case of a number of them, has lasted longer than some of their marriages. But nobody knows this. "You should not be so truthful," said my mother when I came out to her, "as to hurt somebody."

But increasingly, not only do I feel my world is divided, but that I'm a shadow in one half of it. When we go out as a family, or when the younger ones crash at my sister's and brother-in-law's for a movie night, and all of them snuggle with their partners or laugh or call across the room asking which pizza slice they want. I feel like a shadow. When I tell them about the amazing ski trip I went on where Aaron tried to teach me how to ski, or how beautiful Lake Louise was in Canada where we went to meet Aaron's sister, I edit Aaron out, and in so doing disappear myself. My story becomes a fiction, and though I maintain a kind of equilibrium this way and stave off conflict, I become a mere shadow.

When we acknowledge one another, what is it we do? A manager that acknowledges the work of an employee; a teacher who acknowledges a student's hard work; a parent who acknowledges their child and lovers who acknowledge each other? It seems to me, we step outside of the relentlessness of life characterised as it's by 'things to do'. Momentarily at least, we stand stripped of action and stationary in the present – naked in the gaze of another person.

We are acknowledged for being someone - a person and not a body moving through space and to-do lists. Something touches us in those moments; we feel connected and valued. Life when observed becomes real. I become real and step out of the shadows. So it's that I write this in the hope of shedding some light on truths that need acknowledging. "Beta, what kind of partner do you want?" "A boy auntie-ji."