

Book Reviews

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Schliesmann, P. (2012). Honour on Trial: The Shafia Murders and the Culture of Honour Killings. Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

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Paul Schliesmann's book, "Honour on Trial" explores the culture of honour killing through the lens of the Shafia murders that occurred in Kingston Mills, Ontario, in 2009. The book follows the investigation, trial, and conviction following the murder of the three Shafia sisters and their presumed aunt, a conspiracy that was carried out by their very own family to "regain family honour" that had been lost (p. 47). Schliesmann also offers an insider's look at the lives of these four women and the events leading up to this horrific tragedy. In the midst of much detailed description specific to the case, the author intentionally adds discussion around the culture of honor killing and the cultural beliefs that prompted this act of injustice.

Schliesmann does a skillful job in guiding the reader through the case evidence as it was gathered chronologically, and through the unfolding of the police investigation. Using numerous direct quotes from the investigation and individual testimony, the author clearly paints a picture of the police findings and the development of the case, and explores the questions and inconsistencies that began to arise throughout different points of the investigation. This includes the police interrogations of Mohammed, Tooba, and Hamed Shafia, the accused murderers, and testimony from friends, family members, teachers and workers who had been involved with the family. These quotations are effective in reinforcing Schliesmann's credibility and gives an uncensored glimpse into the world of the guilty party as well as those affected by the tragedy.

The unthinkable act that was committed in Kingston Mills the night of June 29th is one that seems senseless and unjust to the Canadian audience that discovered it, but Schliesmann does give explanation to the ancient thought behind the act of honour killing to give readers perspective on why this act would have been committed. Honour killing in the Middle East does not stem from religious practice, but is a pagan ritual enacted against women who bring shame upon their family through an act, or even mere suspicion, of inappropriate behaviour (p. 48). These “inappropriate behaviours” are often associated with disobedience or a lack of submission to the family patriarch, and are often related to social relationships and marriages (p. 154). Honour and a sense of dignity, important to men in Middle Eastern culture, is “expected ... [to] be restored” through removing the source of shame from one’s family (p. 155). Schliesmann contends that the “competing cultural values – with the daughters choosing to behave in a more modern Canadian way than their parents could tolerate” was the driving force behind the murders of daughters Zainab, Sahar, Geeti, and their aunt Rona (p. 71). It is evident through the lives of the daughters and Rona that this patriarchal control was dominant in the Shafia household, a power they longed to escape from. The father Mohammed Shafia, the mastermind behind the murders, is cited stating “there is nothing more valuable than our honour ... there is no life without honour,” confirming his motive for killing was for the sake of preserving his families honour and dignity (p. 108). Though information is presented explaining the rationale behind the honour killings, Schliesmann does not in any way present this act as justified or lawful.

Schliesmann shares with his audience glimpses into the lives of the victims and their actions leading up to their murder. He focuses on Zainab, the oldest daughter, as it was her one night marriage – an attempt to escape the rule of her father – which was the catalyst for the

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crime. Time is also spent recalling Sahar's reports of abuse and a suicide attempt, and Geeti's rebellious attitude as a means of coping with the oppression she faced at home. The author spends time exploring Rona's relationship with Mohammed as his first barren wife, and discusses the family and cultural dynamics that resulted in her being shut out by members of the Shafia family. Each of the events discussed in relation to the victims act as small blocks building towards the climactic act that ended their lives at the Kingston Mills lock station.

The author maintains professionalism and sensitivity to the array of difficult subject matter that is presented in the book while offering appropriate challenges and questions for the reader to consider (p. 71). This is a strength and an important element to note as the book alludes to many charged topics such as patriarchy (p. 49), spousal and child abuse (p. 70), and cultural and religious differences (p. 71) as these are some elements that prefaced and contributed the murders of these victims. By adding these references, Schliesmann extends the breadth of the impact of this book beyond purely the unfamiliar culture of honour killing to include topics that North American readership may be able to personally empathize with.

Schliesmann concludes the book with mention to the shortcomings on the part of the police, social workers, government agencies and the community that could have had an impact on stopping the honour killings from being carried out. Though I appreciate this inclusion I feel this section could have been expanded upon to provide details regarding the changes that have been made to these systems in response to this tragedy, and perhaps could have suggested ways that readers could themselves be involved in creating safe, educated communities in their own area to prevent these tragedies from occurring.

Through a fusion of investigative material, personal testimony, and cultural details, I believe Schliesmann had a few intentions for this book. The first intention was to offer an

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educational resource about the Shafia investigation and trial itself. This is shown through the facts and details regarding the police investigation, interrogations, and the trial. Secondly, the book was purposed to act as a case study to explain the nature of honour killing and the cultural motivation that drives these acts. This was in effort to create an awareness of the occurrence of these honour killing and to encourage discussion around how they can be prevented here in Canada (pp. 195-197). This can be seen through specific chapters dedicated to cultural beliefs as well as other comments made throughout the book explaining cultural reasons behind the actions and behaviour of Mohammed, Tooba and Hamed (pp. 153-155). Lastly, I believe the author aimed to act as a voice for the victims and for young women that have immigrated to Canada, sharing the truth of their experience and the challenges they face “wanting to fit into Canadian culture” (p. XI).

Schliesmann’s background in journalism shines through as his delivery of the evidence and events cultivates reader interest while being factual and concise. This accessible style makes this book appropriate for a variety of audiences, academic and not. The book could benefit academics from a variety of disciplines such as criminology, sociology, social work and intercultural studies, and could also act as an intriguing case study for those interested in gender studies. I think it would also act as an excellent resource for any layperson interested in the Shafia case specifically, cases of honour killings, and for those interested in the true crime genre. “Honour on Trial” was a simple yet thought-provoking read that provided a wealth of information regarding the Shafia murders while also honouring the lives of the victims. I would recommend this to friends, family, students, academics and anyone interested in this true account or the themes surrounding it.