

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: The Shafia Murders and the Culture of Honour Killings," is about the tragic murders of four women, victims of a grand plot set up by a father, mother and brother to restore "honour" to the family. Schliesmann reminds us that although immigration has its many benefits, it can also bring with it challenges that many of us overlook such as the clash of cultural values and their impact on young women who want to fit in with Canadian culture. Although much of the book retells the days during which the investigation and trial took place, Schliesmann attempts to explain: (1) the lives these women lived in the Shafia household, and (2) how cultural discrepancies between members of the household may have deemed these women as dishonorable, ultimately leading to their murder. The book is organized into chapters in a way that allows us to walk through the investigation process and the lives of the victims, however does a poor job of tying their murders to "honour" as an underlying theme.

At the start of the book, Schliesmann showed the lives the victims lived while in the Shafia household. He reveals the lives of Rona, Zainab, Sahar, and Geeti through evidence gathered by investigators and statements given by those whom they interacted with. Although, their struggles and suffering differed, there was one reoccurring commonality: the lack of freedom resulting from patriarchal control.

Book Reviews

Rona was not a cousin or aunt as the family claimed, but Shafia and Tooba's partner in a polygamous marriage. This became evident when police found Rona's diary in the back of a closet in the Shafia home. In the pages of this diary, Rona confided the depth of her suffering. Unlike her husband, Rona was an educated woman, but even educated women must marry. She was chosen to be Shafia's bride. However, it soon became obvious Rona was infertile and Shafia took on a second wife. Not long after, the physical and emotional abuse began. It became particularly bad after they moved to Canada. She was isolated from the children she helped raise. Tooba took total control of her temporary immigration and constantly reminded her "your life is in my hands" (p. 57).

Zainab is the eldest daughter in the Shafia household. She is described as fashionable and loved to take pictures of herself "some of them sexy or provocative" (p. 65). Eventually, she began dating a boy named Ammar who was of Pakistani heritage. This relationship was cut short when her family found out. Even though, the couple wanted to meet, it was difficult because Zainab was forced to attend night school and was accompanied by her brother. Eventually, Zainab left her home life and escaped to a women's shelter. Her caseworker classified her as a victim of family violence (abused by her brother and father). In order to bring Zainab home, Tooba promised to help arrange her marriage to Ammar. On the day of her marriage she confessed she did not want to marry Ammar and the whole marriage was annulled. Soon after, she was engaged to her second cousin.

Sahar is the second oldest daughter in the Shafia household. She was the biological daughter of Shafia and Tooba, but was adopted by Rona when she was forty days old. She was also the first to have authorities involved when she informed her vice-principle she attempted to commit suicide due to being "emotionally rejected from family" and being physically abused by

Book Reviews

her elder brother (p. 61). Later that day, social workers were called in. They described Sahar as “very, very scared about her parents knowing about the report” (p. 62). When they questioned her further, she took back all she initially stated. When things got a bit better, her younger brother discovered she was dating a Catholic boy named Ricardo; she was then accused of being a “whore.”

Geeti was the sixth child of Shafia and Tooba making her the youngest victim. She was strong willed and defiant. This was evident such that, Geeti was often absent from school or got sent home for wearing revealing clothes, makeup and earrings deemed inappropriate for a thirteen year old. There was also an incident when authorities were called to the Shafia home and Geeti begged the police to take her away from her imprisoning home to a foster house.

To understand the motive behind the killings, Schliesmann attempts to explain how cultural discrepancies between members of the household may have deemed these women as dishonorable. Zainab and Sahar were quickly adapting to new cultural values, ones that clashed with the cultural values their parents thought necessary to follow. The way they carried themselves as young women in Canadian society bothered their father. He had a problem with the way they dressed, the pictures they took and even the men they dated. He even went as far as spying on his daughters through his sons. As for Geeti, she was on the track to following in her older sister Sahar’s footsteps. She became problematic when she got expelled from school due to dressing inappropriately, failing classes and exploding at her teacher. Unfortunately, Rona was only a family burden they sought to remove.

With the help of the evidence gathered from the investigation and statements given by those close to the Shafia women in court, Schliesmann’s book accomplishes two goals. First, it provides a well-pieced together background story of all four victims. Second, it emphasizes the

Book Reviews

importance of cultural discrepancies between the family members and how it played a greater role in the murder than initially thought. These goals were accomplished by using the investigation and trial as a means to tell a greater story, one in which the cultural component was of core importance.

Schliesmann's intended audience was primarily to educate and bring awareness on the topic of honour killings to various forms of authority. With the help of this book, perhaps authorities will be "more sensitive to cultural differences in suspected abuse cases" (p. 200). I believe this book would also be beneficial to many post-secondary disciplines namely sociology, criminology, cultural anthropology, cultural psychology, and women's studies.

Although, this book was a good read there were a few aspects the writer could improve. The first limitation was the subjectivity on the matter of beauty in which he mentions, on more than one occasion, how the daughters and first wife were beautiful and how the second wife (mother of the daughters and one of their killers) was ugly. He unintentionally enforced the idea that only ugly mothers kill their daughters. Where in fact, being an "ugly" woman has nothing to do with the murders. This was perplexing because he barely spoke about the men in terms of their looks. As a result, the mention of beauty seemed completely unnecessary. Similarly, the second limitation has a lot to do with the intended theme of honour. This book revolves around the idea that the Shafia women fell victim to the culture of honour killings. I do wonder, however that perhaps this could have been more thoroughly discussed rather than forcing the cultural aspect of honour killings into a mere chapter. With that said, I found "Honour on Trial" a pleasure to read because it was informative and captivating at the same time. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic of honour killings.