

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 113-117  
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta  
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy>

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

Reviewed by: Chelsea Kowalchuk, MacEwan University

Paul Schliesmann's book, "Honour on Trial: The Shafia Murders and the Culture of Honour Killings," gives an insider's perspective into the way individuals are victimized by their own culture. Schliesmann effectively demonstrates how women, surrounded by Western culture and lifestyles, are subject to fall under its norms and abandon other cultural family values. Schliesmann investigates how Afghan women are expected to behave inside and outside of the home and the consequences of failing to do so.

In the summer of 2009, the bodies of four dead Afghan women were found in a sunken Nissan Sentra in a lock station outside of Kingston, Ontario. Accusations were made of how the car got there and why it was found in the locks, but as investigations, interrogations, interviews, and trials proceeded on, there was only one clear answer. Mohammad Shafia, Hamed Shafia, and Tooba Mohammad Yahya were all charged with four counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison for murdering Mohammad's first wife Rona, daughters and Hamed's sisters, Zainab, Geeti, and Sahar.

In several religions around the world, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism, the concept of killing individuals, particularly women, to restore honour within the family is known and practiced (p. 153). Schliesmann successfully describes the nature of honour killings and what leads up to them. Women who dishonour the family by disobeying family orders and values are subject to be victims of these types of killings. Men within the household

hold dominance and authority over the women, which make them the instigators and plotters of the killings and abuse within the home. Honour killings are not recognized or legal in Western cultures because of their unethical motives to murder a woman who steps outside cultural boundaries, such as Zainab leaving home and getting engaged to a man outside of the Afghan community before finishing her education (p. 74). Many women in these cultures desire freedom and as a result, many will rebel against their family rules to gain it.

Schliesmann effectively demonstrates the many ways that family honour is destroyed through the perspectives and lives of the four women who were the victims of the honour killings. Since family honour is something that is to be protected and preserved, as a result, there is more than the murder that led to the demise of Rona, Zainab, Geeti, and Sahar. The planning of honour killings occurs over many years and experts say that it starts “with disappointment, moving into physical violence, psychological pressure, financial restrictions, leading to the ‘gradual escalation of violence and then the moment of killing’” (p. 155).

Clothing, relationships, marriage, and divorce are the aspects that led to the extreme isolation, physical and emotional abuse, and eventually the murder of Rona, Zainab, Geeti, and Sahar. Due to Mohammad and Tooba acknowledging Rona as Mohammad’s cousin, ending her communication with other family members, abuse, and withholding her immigration papers, she proceeded into a lifestyle of isolation and depression. The daughters were also victims of their parents and brother’s physical and emotional abuse that led them to rebel against their cultural values by dressing in westernized clothing, entering relationships with men, and leaving home.

When digging deeper into the nature of honour killings, the author provides useful and effective recordings given by the Kingston police. Recording devices were implanted into the Shafia’s minivan and home that gave the police helpful information into why the killings took

place (p. 102). The constant mentioning of family honour became significant when looking at the recordings and determining why different cultures do the things that they do. Mohammad Shafia became a prime suspect after these recordings took place because of him “calling his daughters ‘whores,’ exhorting the devil to ‘shit on their graves,’ and vowing that if they ever returned to life, he would take a cleaver to them” (p. 102). These words said by Shafia raised significant concern for the well-being of the other children living in the Shafia household and the lifestyles that Rona, Zainab, Geeti, and Sahar had while living in the care of Mohammad and Tooba. Schliesmann does an excellent job when describing these recordings because he consistently includes the way Mohammad continued to feel dishonoured and how he believed he had done the right thing by murdering the four women. Shafia mentions the importance of honour when he shares with Hamed that “[e]ven if they hoist me up onto the gallows, nothing is more dear to me than my honour. Let’s leave our destiny to God and may God never make me, you, or your mother honourless” (p. 108). Schliesmann effectively presents the constant themes of honour and dishonour because they allow the reader to gain insight into the mind of Shafia and learn from his perspective of why he proceeded with the honour killings.

Schliesmann’s idea to include the detailed trials, interrogations, and the interviews with the family and teachers are significant because they allow the reader to enter the minds of the Shafia family and discover the true meanings of why the girls were murdered and what their lives were like before the murders took place. The documented interviews and interrogations proved that Mohammad, Tooba, and Hamed’s stories did not relate to one another, which helped in charging them guilty. It is effective that other family members testimonies were documented, such as Tooba’s brother, Fazil, who knew “about the family problems in the home” (p. 95). Fazil’s testimony was significant into charging Mohammad, Tooba, and Hamed with murder

## Book Reviews

because he was aware of the anger Mohammad had towards Rona and his daughters and how he had been plotting to murder them (p. 97).

In addition, Schliesmann does an exceptional job outlining where the murders took place. He provides maps of where the murders occurred and photographs of the evidence found on the scene, such as the plastic debris found on the grass and the two family cars, the Nissan that had been pushed into the water and the family Lexus with the broken headlight (p. 38-41). Schliesmann also includes photographs of the four women. These photos are significant because it allows the reader to imagine the lives of the girls more closely and allows the reader to connect themselves to the women directly. Also, the additional stories of other honour killings Canadian immigrant families have enacted is significant because it allows individuals to discover how these violent crimes, such as the Shafia murders, surround us as Canadian citizens.

In contrast, Schliesmann includes an extensive amount of background information before describing what honour killings are and their affect on women of different cultures in Canadian society. Although all of the information is useful, the reader may be tricked by the title of this study. The title of this book portrays itself to have a main focus only on the “Culture of Honour Killings,” but fails to present this throughout the entirety of the book.

All in all, Schliesmann did a great job in making this book an interesting read and it would appeal to many individuals. In particular, individuals fascinated by cultural crimes and crime in general would find interest in this book as well as anthropologists. Anthropologists would find this book enticing because it gives insight into why cultures do what they do. Also, it aims to have the reader attempt to understand why different cultures and religions perform honour killings and the motives behind them. The aims of this book would be useful in post-secondary education classes that involve crime, culture, women’s rights, domestic violence, and

## Book Reviews

family dynamics. I would highly recommend “Honour On Trial” to anyone who is interested in any of the subjects listed, as it was informative, easy to read, and eye opening into how and why individuals perform their cultural values.