



TELLING THE STORY OF 'HONOR CRIMES'

Mendy Gladden | For The New Mexican

In the fall of 2002, Jacqueline St. Joan was living in Denver and teaching a course called “Women Writing About the World After September 11th.” One of the course requirements was that each student “join the public discourse” by getting a piece of writing published. St. Joan, also a lawyer and judge, had worked for many years on behalf of battered women, and she found that she and her students felt serious concern for the women of Central Asia and the Middle East. All of these elements of St. Joan’s life dovetailed when a friend introduced her to a Pakistani woman St. Joan calls Aisha (her name has been changed for her safety). Aisha had worked as a teacher for 25 years and “had been involved secretly and personally in rescue efforts for a number of women condemned in so-called ‘honor crimes.’” Her life and work became the inspiration for St. Joan’s first novel, *My Sisters Made of Light*, a politically charged family saga.

The novel tells the story of a teacher and activist named Ujala, who is loosely based on Aisha, and her family largely through embedded narratives and flashbacks. Ujala relates most of her tale in a series of tea-time chats with Rahima Mai, the woman in charge of the prison in which Ujala is incarcerated. The point of departure is Adaila Prison in 1996, but we are quickly drawn back many years, across much of Pakistan and into the lives of family members and the women Ujala meets on her travels. She claims that “she could never recall a coherent version of events,” and can instead only see a series of significant moments: “The day her mother died and she became the family’s new mother. The day Yusuf left forever. Bilqis on fire. Khanum on the

train. Talisma in a pool of blood. Chanda dancing.” However, St. Joan spins a story around each of these images, gradually revealing to the reader how those moments form the path that led Ujala from a sheltered childhood in an affluent Karachi suburb to a life of dangerous social activism that landed her in the women’s prison.

Unbeknown to Ujala, her parents’ courtship is part of that path. An early chapter takes the reader to Malakwal (just south of Islamabad) in 1958, where a young woman named Nafeesa has decided to study in London, a choice sanctioned by her parents but frowned upon by much of her conservative family. While abroad, she meets Kulraj Singh, a handsome and loving Sikh. They secretly marry, with the blessing of Nafeesa’s aunt who is living a secret life of her own as a Westernized woman in the U.K. After the wedding they contemplate the seriousness of what they’ve done. Aunt Najima tells Nafeesa “Yours are double sins — female impurity and religious infidelity.” Kulraj points out, “Your family will consider it their right and obligation to kill both of us for having a love marriage.” Given the danger, Nafeesa and Kulraj consider staying in London, but Nafeesa loves Pakistan and isn’t ready to live in exile. As predicted, upon returning to Pakistan, the lovers are soon on the run from Nafeesa’s brothers, whose murderous rage they barely escape.

Ujala’s parents adopt what’s referred to as “Rule Number 1,” the book’s refrain: Tell no one. They decide that it’s too dangerous to tell their children what happened. Likewise, with each rescue project that Ujala and her sisters and colleagues hatch,

information is only given to those who absolutely must have it. One never knows who will mention a detail to the wrong person, and the consequences can be deadly. But Ujala eventually reveals to Rahima Mai her whole story, from her first experiences helping local women to her new status as a cause célèbre, one of the “She-Lions of Punjab.” We then step out of the prison into the courtroom and into the streets filled with protesters for a conclusion that’s equal parts Q’ranic legal history and family drama, satisfying at both intellectual and emotional levels.

A worldwide problem

Such stories and themes will be familiar to, among others, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof’s readers — and even, in a way, Stieg Larsson’s. “Honor crimes are not rooted in Islam,” St. Joan points out. Control of women’s sexuality is really at the root of much violence against women, and female chastity connects to honor, patriarchal notions of property, and control of bloodlines and DNA. These ideas are hardly exclusive to Central Asia or Islamic countries (although perhaps there’s something more thrilling about them when seen through Larsson’s Stockholm-noir lens).

In her writing, St. Joan comes much closer to Kristof than she does to Larsson, though with a healthy dash of Harriet Beecher Stowe. In fact, this novel’s moment of conception could have come straight out of a 19th-century sentimentalist’s imagination: The night that St. Joan met Aisha, “As we washed dishes after a small meal, we recalled the courage of the abused women we had known,

Impulsively, I quietly asked her if I could write her story.”

As she began to do so, she realized that she had to go to Pakistan to do a kind of “human rights tour,” seeing what tourists don’t see. Aisha’s family were her hosts and guides around the cities and countryside. In Punjab, she needed a male family member to escort her on any outings, and in the northwestern part of the country, which is closer to Afghanistan, she and the other women were restricted to the family compound during the day. “Being scrutinized on the street is very real,” she recalled, adding that while out in public one senses “lots of sexual tension.”

Once she returned to the U.S., St. Joan still needed to proceed carefully. The “tell no one” philosophy still applies to Aisha’s story. Although she had originally planned to write a nonfiction account of Aisha’s experiences, a “nagging fear” that she could put her friend in danger plagued her. “Finally, the decision to make the book a novel came from my own desire as a writer to follow the words, the images in my mind, the intentions that grew to be greater than Aisha’s story. ... I wanted to tell the truth about Pakistan in a deeper way.”

The author was concerned about possibly crossing a line into condescension or even exploitation. The hazards that come with indicting another culture’s systems are numerous, but the outsider’s perspective can also be insightful. St. Joan asked herself, What do you bring as an outsider? How do you have the proper tone as an outsider? While she realized that an outsider will see things that people within the culture don’t see, “you can also be misunderstood and misunderstand.” It’s crucial “to have reliable sources inside that are willing to educate you. But their interpretation of what goes on still might be defensive and worth challenging as well.” In the novel, Lia, an American worker, voices her frustrations with Pakistani culture, only to have Ujala call her on her “Western biases” and point out that American culture is not without its own serious gender problems.

Gimme shelter

Once you finish reading this novel, you will want to know how you can help. One of St. Joan’s goals is “increasing awareness of the serious gender injustice there within the complexity of the political/social mix.” Step one, then, is to educate yourself, taking particular care to acknowledge all the factors at play, from economics to geography to colonial history. While “tell no one” is still a governing principle for much of the human-rights workers in Pakistan, there are prominent figures who have published books and spoken out about their causes. For the scholarly-minded, St. Joan recommends Tahira S. Khan’s book *Beyond Honour: A Historical Materialist Explanation of Honour-Related Violence*. She also mentioned Mukhtar Mai, a woman who was gang-raped in 2002 under orders from a village council as punishment for what was seen as misconduct committed by her brother. This case was covered extensively in the American press, and Mukhtar has published a memoir called *In the Name of Honor*. Other major activists include Hina Jilani, Asma Jahangir, Zia Ahmed Awan, and Farida Shaheed.

Of course, money is always helpful, too. Many of the activists mentioned above are affiliated with or endorse charitable organizations. Aisha is now back in Pakistan continuing her work with women and girls, and half of the author’s proceeds from the novel are going to help build a safe shelter there. “They have the place and the contractor’s bid,” St. Joan reports. “They just need the money.” Tell everyone. ◀

details

- ▼ Jacqueline St. Joan reads from *My Sisters Made of Light*
- ▼ 5 p.m. Friday, Feb. 11
- ▼ Garcia Street Books, 376 Garcia St., 986-0151

