

Burned Alive: A Victim of the Laws of Men

Souad (Judith S. Armbruster, tr.)

Great Britain: Bantam Press, 2004. 333 pages.

Burned Alive is the true story of Souad, a young Palestinian woman who survived an attempted honor killing carried out by her brother-in-law. This autobiography, documented by Marie-Thérèse Cuny and translated from the French by Judith S. Armbruster, is narrated in such a way that the readers can develop a familiarity with the complicated dimension of gender roles, the prevalence of asymmetrical standards of male and female moral-

ity in misogynistic societies, and their impact on women. The plot develops in a way designed to inform the reader that honor killing, although outwardly practiced as a customary punishment for an illicit sexual relationship, is, in reality, a brutal form of female suppression.

The book, divided into five parts, covers two different stages of Souad's life. Now forty-five, the first phase of her life took place in a small West Bank village where, at the age of eighteen, she experienced the atrocity of an attempted honor killing because she had had premarital sexual relationships with a man. Through an aid worker named Jacqueline, Souad miraculously survived and was moved to Europe, where she began the second phase of her life. She now lives with a loving husband and three children, following her tryst with death, twenty-four operations, and innumerable excruciatingly painful recovery procedures.

Despite the book's melancholic quality, Souad's narration is about regaining life through courage, belief, and "self-acceptance" after facing rejection (p. 329). Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and humanitarian workers can find it very informative. While her narration is more personal, Jacqueline (Souad's rescuer and biographer) reflects on the issue holistically and identifies other countries, among them Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, India, Pakistan, and even Israel and Europe, where men condone similar honor crimes (p. 221).

Burned Alive argues that culture, education, and knowledge act like a mirror through which an individual develops an understanding of "self." Souad was kept illiterate and her cultural image generated a personal sense of worthlessness, self-incrimination, timidity, impurity, shame, guilt, and potential evilness. She shares the insight that in her society, "a man who takes away a girl's virginity is not guilty ... in fact a man who has self-respect doesn't marry the girl he has de-flowered" (p. 150). In patriarchal cultures, women are programmed to obey and submit to men. This autobiography implicitly presents Souad's intimate encounters not as her own moral failure, but as a by-product of her perceptions of "woman" as a servant and "man" as a master who can ensure her freedom. Her surrendering to the allocated gender roles makes her easily exploitable and vulnerable to the man who casually deflowers her and then leaves her in the hands of death.

This book also portrays women as patriarchal. Souad acknowledges that although men are the "symbols of enslavement" (p. 56), they themselves are also "consenting slaves" (p. 79) and indulge in slandering one another. Rebellion and eccentricity in a woman leads to a stigmatization that sometimes ends in homicide. This is disturbingly captured through the character

of Souad's mother – herself a battered wife leading a life of self-denial (p. 36) – who suspected Souad's pregnancy and disclosed it to her father so that she could be punished (p. 142).

The book's strength lies in its simultaneous particularistic and generic approach. Souad takes herself as a case in point, but within a certain local context, and Jacqueline reflects on the issue in a broader context. The material is organized in a manner that captures Souad's life as a journey from nothingness to something to everything. During this process, the sentiments of shame and inferiority for conceiving and giving birth to her son Marouan diminish as she finally accepts him wholeheartedly. Her eventual feeling of connectedness and comfort with her womanhood is a very moving experience for the reader.

However, *Burned Alive* contains certain limitations that must be mentioned. First, due to her atypical and exceptionally cruel household, Souad's experiences and level of susceptibility cannot be generalized. Second, *Burned Alive* can be used by those engaged in anti-Islamic discourse to denigrate Islam, and particularly the Palestinians, as a result of which it can be unduly rebuffed by apologists in the Muslim world. Souad's Muslim identity, however, does raise some issues for Islamic thought as she becomes an embodiment of the plight of Muslim women in patriarchal Muslim societies.

While reading the book, one realizes that an illicit sexual relationship is not presented as a theological issue, but as a sociological and psychological one. This raises some issues for Islamic thought, such as viewing sexuality as a taboo subject and dismissing sex education. Both of these need rethinking. In real life, the conventional approach of cloistering women does not preclude chance cross-gender encounters, as was the case with Souad.

Paradoxically, although Souad was not sent to school and received no Qur'anic education, she was still expected to be moral – a contradiction in itself. It is significant to realize that her Muslim household indoctrinated her with a fear of village norms but did nothing to help her internalize Islamic norms. Therefore, for her any illicit sexual relationship remained culturally incorrect but not an explicit matter of religious concern.

The reader finds Souad following an integrationist approach in her new society and Europeanizing herself by keeping only a few relics from her native culture. During her time in Europe, she is presented as a woman who rationalizes most of her decisions in an attempt to survive. A case in point is her prolonged cohabitation with her boyfriend Antonio before they get married, even though her own priority of getting married is elaborated throughout the book's first part. She was culturally programmed for marriage and

had fantasized about it as a key to her freedom and to attaining an elevated social status. However, she met Antonio when she needed to feel secure and protected, and therefore chose cohabitation.

After surviving her own culture's misogynistic and chauvinistic attitudes, it is understandable that, in all probability, she could not have idealized her own norms. This reflects upon Souad's tragic disillusionment with her own culture and, inevitably, with her own religion, thus bringing forth gender violence as a major cause of her detachment from Islamic social norms.

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