Forbidden Union

A journalist becomes part of the story of an outlawed marriage.

By RAFIA ZAKARIA

THE SENTIMENTAL TITLE of "The Lovers" suggests a hopeful tale of youthful romance, of passion and perseverance against the backdrop of a war-ravaged Afghanistan. Zakia and Ali, the journalist Rod Nordland's Afghan Romeo and

THE LOVERS
Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet: The True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing
By Rod Nordland
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Juliet, are Tajik and Hazara, Sunni and Shia, disparate ethnicities and rived sects. They live in Bamiyan, where the Taliban destroyed two famed sandstone Buddhas in 2001. They fall in love as teenagers, exchanging flirty glances in the fields of their village, skirting elders and convention. Soon their parents find out; marriage is deemed impossible, and Zakia runs away to a shelter. The two elope but remain sentenced to a life on the run, with Ali facing criminal charges after Zakia's family lodges a kidnapping case against him.

Zakia and Ali's tale is, however, only the epidermal layer of "The Lovers"; underneath is an insight into the architecture of Western saviordom and the choices it imposes on those on whom it bestows its benevolence. "I would become their best hope to survive, entangling myself in their lives in ways that threatened my own values and professional ethics," Nordland writes, admitting that his articles on the couple in The New York Times exposed them to danger.

But words and deeds rarely match, and if Nordland, who is The Times's Kabul bureau chief, perceived threats in pursuing the story, his account does not betray such sensitivity. In one instance, Nordland, along with a videographer and a photographer, descends upon a remote house where the couple have taken refuge. How they get there is notable: Ali's poverty-stricken father, who supports the relationship, "could not afford the cost of a taxi," and agrees to take Nordland if he can accompany him. Ali knows the plan, but whether Zakia agrees is never revealed. Earlier in the chapter Nordland tells us how the couple's portraits, published with a Times story, have been splayed all over Afghan media, making it harder for the couple to hide; but this possibility does not give him pause. When they reach the house, Zakia is in the women's quarters. The photographer, semi-fluent in English, breaks in anyway and takes her picture, claiming not to understand the custom. Zakia and Ali later get a ride to another hiding spot in the journalists' cars, and Nordland slips Ali a thousand dollars.

The episode poses vexing questions about the disparities in power between storyteller and subject, American and Afghan; but Nordland never unpacks the

Ali and Zakia, Afghanistan, 2014.

complications of making the couple so notorious. It is a pity, for his skills as a journalist are evident in his rendering of this love blossoming against all odds.

It is in his efforts to mold the story into an example of the righteousness of Western intervention — and of their ultimately feminist intentions — that he falters, as indeed have those efforts. Violence against women in Afghanistan increased 25 percent from 2012 to 2013. In the crude illogic of Afghan anti-imperial resistance, the subjugation of women is being reified as some reclamation of cultural authenticity, where women who run off to shelters funded by the occupying American enemy are seen as less loyally Afghan.

IN AFGHANISTAN'S SUBJUGATED present it is not just family or tribal honor that is seen imperiled by female rebellion but also national honor, whose reclamation from the Americans requires even greater control over women. It proves what feminists from the global South have long held: Imperial interventions can make storyteller saviors, but they cannot produce the ground-level moral shifts that must occur within Afghanistan to make its women safe. "The Lovers," then, is an apt metaphor for meddling and its no-win conclusions; its heroine's choice is between capitulation to misogynistic local custom or laying herself bare before the voyeuristic demands of Western saviors. □

RAFIA ZAKARIA *is the author of "The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History of Pakistan."*

Lost in Hong Kong

Living abroad, a novel's American women face new expectations.

By MAGGIE POUNCEY

A FEMALE, FUNNY Henry James in Asia, Janice Y.K. Lee is vividly good on the subject of Americans abroad. "The Expatriates," her second novel, is set like her first, "The Piano Teacher," in Hong Kong, and the two books taken together are a rich education in an almost century of cruelty, exploitation, deep pockets and good parties in the city — a setting that becomes a complicated character in its own right. In her new book, Lee observes an affluent community of contemporary Westerners, but more specifically, those who "crossed over into that other country of motherhood," another foreign land requiring expatriation.

For these women in Hong Kong, the social world is temporary, "like college": "The signifiers were so important: Are you wearing Dansko clogs or Jimmy Choo mules . . . . Do you want to talk about nannies or Rwanda?" There are the clubs, and social causes, the managing the help,

THE EXPATRIATES
By Janice Y.K. Lee
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which is so inexpensive everyone has lots of it. They have left behind jobs. They are not at home in their own kitchens. The only role left for them is motherhood. An invidious acquaintance whispers to Hilary, one of three central characters, "Out here, you're not a real woman unless you have four kids."

This competitive procreation is a problem for Hilary, originally from California, who followed her husband abroad and finds herself in her late 30s, paralyzed by infertility and a marriage that has gone from icy politeness to stalemate.

As in "The Piano Teacher," Lee uses a shifting third-person narration that allies itself first with one character, then another. In addition to Hilary, there are Mercy, a postcollegiate Korean-American from Queens, perpetually "casting an anthropological eye," not quite belonging to any class or group, and Margaret, a beautiful housewife and sometime landscape architect, one-quarter Korean (though she thinks of this identity as "usually dormant"), "one of those women who Mercy imagined didn't recognize a mean person, since no one would ever be mean to her." This fantasy shatters when Margaret's son disappears, an event that occurs about a year before the novel begins.

Told in the present tense, it circles the past. When Hilary and her mother discuss her childlessness, "they both don't know what tense to use," and the tense problem applies to all three women. Mercy, who is implicated in the boy's disappearance, is tortured by guilt and self-pity, scarcely eats and "wonders when she's supposed to start her life again, when she is allowed." Margaret escapes her family in a modest apartment she has secretly rented. She takes baths and tries to reconcile her impossible present: "She is a woman who has two children. Not three." Hilary considers whether to adopt a young boy and seeks social anesthesia in an anonymous online chat room, "as if the answer to her life were there."

Moving between these intersecting characters offers relief from the suffocation of Margaret's grief. At times, though, her grief seems not suffocating enough, partly because it is often described in retrospect, condensed and reported, rather than lived in a scene. Lee has a gift for the well-observed generalization, but a related tendency to oversummarize. We don't see Margaret's worried children slipping into bed with her at night, only hear it referred to in passing. We hear

Janice Y. K. Lee

her marriage to her husband has almost failed, but we don't really see that playing out either. Similarly, her Skype conversations with her therapist are reduced to the platitudes the doctor dispenses: "You will be able to live. Time will help you." It is almost the difference between overhearing a conversation in another room and witnessing an event. As a reader, I felt I should be suffering more; I wanted to bear more witness.

But I enjoyed the not suffering. The book is also vibrant social satire: Inside these dark materials lies the sharpness of a comic novelist, and Lee's eye for the nuance and clash of culture, class, race and sex is subtle and shrewd. Away from "the all-encompassing and smothering embrace of America" — the motherland — these women peek out from the losses of their past tense, the temporariness of their present, and begin to see one another. □

MAGGIE POUNCEY *is the author of the novel "Perfect Reader."*

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, DIEGO IBARRA SÁNCHEZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; RIGHT, XUE TAN