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Literary

My Sisters Made of Light
Jacqueline St. Joan
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My Sisters Made of Light is the riveting story of Ujala, a Pakistani schoolteacher imprisoned in Adiala Prison, a women's penitentiary that holds the lives of hundreds of Pakistani women in limbo. Abused and lost, these women all have heartbreaking stories of the violence that lead them to imprisonment. With caution and devotion, Ujala slowly reveals her story to Rahima Mai, the Women's Prison Supervisor, forming a bond with the woman who may hold the keys to her freedom.

Shifting back and forth in time, St. Joan unravels the unlikely history of Ujala's family—a clan of vibrant men and women who struggle to fight for women's rights and challenge the cultural constraints that hold them hostage. With shifting perspectives, the murky pasts of Ujala's parents are revealed and interspersed through Ujala's telling of her own journey through Pakistan aiding and abetting the escapes of women trapped in the grips of men who harm instead of heal.

Readers are transported into 1980s Pakistan, with Ujala's world in her beloved family compound on Clifton Road blooming to life through St. Joan's exquisitely detailed prose. The imagery pulses with life, every description creating a tactile world readers can almost touch and feel. This connection is integral to the telling of the story—the experiences of the women Ujala tries to save are gleaned from St. Joan's real life interviews with victims in Pakistan during her time as a human rights worker. And while this lends credibility to the text, the transformation into fiction necessitates a narrative that allows the reader to sink into a world where they are not met with dry facts and figures and instead are allowed to invest in Ujala's story through empathy.

While St. Joan's detailed rendering allows for this empathetic connection, the detail sometimes verges on excessive, clogging the narrative with too much information. An overall streamlining of the book would help tighten the story for maximum effectiveness.

This novel may at first appear to be another well-worn story of Western ideals trumping the backward ways of rustic Muslims. But St. Joan avoids sensationalizing her subject matter and succeeds where many authors exploring the same tension-wrought issues of women's rights in Muslim-ruled countries fail: she avoids a simplistic treatment of a complex issue and has created a text where female power is cultivated and wielded in ways that challenge instead of perpetuate popular perceptions and misconceptions of traditional Islam.

My Sisters Made of Light is a finalist for the Colorado Book Award in literary fiction. Half of the book's proceeds are donated to a Pakistani nonprofit organization constructing a shelter for women and children escaping abuse.

Shoilee Khan