

SISTERS READS

Brick Walls: Tales of Hope & Courage from Pakistan

Written by Saadia Faruqi | Published by FB Publishing

Reviewed by Sa'diyya Nesar

Brick Walls: Tales of Hope & Courage from Pakistan by Saadia Faruqi is a must read short story compilation centred on modern Pakistan - a country that has been under the spotlight for many years due to the war on terror. However, still many people do not know about the everyday lives of Pakistanis. Saadia paves the way for readers to have a glimpse of what it may be like behind the stereotypical walls of Pakistan, where she constructs characters in seven short stories from different backgrounds including the young and the old, male and female, secular and conservative. Saadia's characters all have an underlying bond - they all are striving to survive in a country that they all love, a country that has been under threat for many years both from outside forces, as well as from tides from within, where her characters struggle to balance between globalised western culture and their societal traditions.

As a Pakistani youth living abroad, I never got to know what it was like living in Pakistan after the war on terror and the rise of extremism. This book has, however, allowed me to see how the political situation has affected Pakistanis. She cleverly does this by constructing two characters that demonstrate how the political situation has caused immense confusion amongst the youth - a generation that grew up in the midst of turmoil, and they are now at the age of beginning to discover themselves and the world around them.

The characters are Javed from the short story *Tonight's the Night* and Faisal from the story *Paradise Reinvented*. Javed faces Islamic extremism due to his aspiration to be a musician, whereas, the character Faisal is lured into a terrorist group after facing rejection from his girlfriend and family. Both characters face extremism, but struggle in defying it in different ways, with Javed trying to externally overcome the threats and Faisal trying to internally find his way.

The young characters' struggles to discover who they are, while making peace within themselves and the world around them gives way for readers to easily empathise with them. This peek therefore helps to break the walls of stereotypes that are so common in the world beyond Pakistan, even among other Muslims.

There is the notion that Pakistani women are voiceless and

oppressed; however, Saadia swiftly clears up this misconception by demonstrating the change in tide through the characterisation of young Nida in *Making the Team* to Rabia in *Bittersweet Mangoes*.

Nida's ambition is to play cricket - a popular sport that is usually played only by boys in Pakistan. She strives to convince her elders and peers into letting girls play, and she ultimately joins her local neighbourhood team - a move that demonstrates her courage and hope for change within Pakistan. Rabia, a wealthy college student, is alarmed at the conditions of the less privileged around her. She starts to have empathy and later chooses a life of service, rejecting her status amongst the elite. Saadia demonstrates Rabia's courage, giving hope that there are some in the elite society who are waking up to the sufferings around them, and showing how women also have the power and voice to leave an impact on society.

Saadie's easy flow of words and fun characterisation of Nida allows us to better see the steady change in societal norms where the book not only clears up misconceptions of Pakistani women but also provides encouragement and hope for Muslim women in general. Saadia also delves into the internal struggles that the women face ranging from Asma in *Angel of Hope*, Farzana in *A Mother's Heart* to Lubna in *Free my Soul*. Asma, the seamstress, faces poverty while having a son who has ill health - a relatable trial some may face. Farzana, an aged mother, has worries and fears for the future of her children and her own - a worry all mothers go through. Lubna is a character who writes a letter from behind prison walls after living a life of misfortune. These women represent the everyday reality of Pakistan - connecting to readers regardless of ethnicity through how Saadia represents their humanity.

It is overall a well-written, moving book. Saadia not only takes us behind the walls of Pakistan but also constructs characters that have the courage to overcome their stereotypical norms through acts of resilience that provide hope and shows a fuller picture of the humanity of Pakistanis.

Sa'diyya Nesar was introduced to the world of books as a child during her long hospital stays. She found comfort in them and hopes to provide comfort through them, too. Read more from Sa'diyya on her blog and like her Facebook page for more writing updates: www.sadiyyanesar.tumblr.com

