

This delicate political novel evokes the sights and smells of the Pakistan of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia. We are inside the head of a child, spying on her past. I read this novel as the story of another schoolgirl in Pakistan, a different Malala. This Malala unmasks a whole landscape of feeling. —AMITAVA KUMAR, author of *Husband of a Fanatic*

CITY OF SPIES

A Novel

Sorayya
Khan

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Sorayya Khan

It is the summer of 1977 and Pakistan swelters in the unrelenting heat. Weeks after her eleventh birthday, Aliya Shah wakes up to the news that there has been a coup d'état, General Zia has taken over the country and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is in jail. Although the shadow of the general and his increasingly puritanical edicts threaten to disrupt their comfortable existence, life goes on for Aliya much as before as she attends the American School in Islamabad.

However, when a much loved young boy, the son of the family retainer, dies tragically in a hit-and-run accident, her world is turned upside down, especially when she discovers the terrible secret of the murderer's identity.

City of Spies is a coming-of-age story that explores Aliya's conflicting loyalties and her on going struggle to make sense of her world. Set in Islamabad and Lahore, *City of Spies* is a gripping novel that unfolds over thirty months in Pakistan's tumultuous history.



One morning, I woke up just when my father rose to say his prayers. He had a travel shortwave radio in his hands and was adjusting its antenna. He was not a tall man; in fact, he was two inches shorter than my mother, but when he stood above us as we lay on our rolled out mattresses, he was a giant. He tried to hop over both Lehla and me in one go, and I was very lucky his foot missed my head.

He suddenly called, 'Abaji, Abaji,' as if he'd forgotten his father was deaf, and then, remembering, shouted louder and louder as if that would make a difference.

‘What IS it?’ Lehla cried, annoyed at being woken so early.

Knowing I wouldn’t be able to sleep again, I wrapped a chaddar over my pajamas and wandered into the next room. ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

My father handed me the newspaper he was holding and said, ‘Have you seen this?’ fully aware that I couldn’t have. Below the large bold print of the heading, *Pakistan Times*, the newsprint was missing. ‘This is censorship.’

Lehla groaned from the other room where she lay with a sheet over her face and complained about early mornings and loud voices.

‘There has been a coup,’ my father said after a moment. ‘The prime minister is in custody and martial law has been declared.’

Martial law sounded like the Marshall Plan I’d learned about in school, but clearly it wasn’t the same thing. I studied the *Pakistan Times*, noticing the formal portrait of a military general splashed across the page. The general’s eyes were cast down, as if he were posing reluctantly, like a Pakistani bride. He had a bushy moustache and sleepy eyes and a row of medals pinned across his shoulders.

When my grandfather returned from the mosque, he took a seat at the head of the dining table.

‘Abaji, you have heard?’ my father asked. He placed the newspaper near his father’s plate. Without glancing at it, my grandfather pushed it away. He fashioned a bite-size packet of halva and poori on his plate and put it in his mouth, his dentures clicking. I wished I could eat my halva as skillfully. Yunis, my grandfather’s servant, brought him the lukewarm glass of water he consumed at the same time every day, and we all watched him drain the glass in one gulp.

The three radios in the house played different newscasts—the BBC, VOA and Deutsche Welle offering the news in British English, American English and German—with equal solemnity.

‘Allah,’ my grandfather finally said.

‘Allah,’ my father replied, both men invoking God in what was an ironic precursor to the general’s plans to introduce Him into every aspect of our lives and the country.

‘God save your job,’ my grandfather said to my father as he put more halva in his mouth. My father had laid down his cutlery in an effort to listen. ‘Not that you’re any good at it.’

My father tried to explain to us what had happened. ‘The army has taken over. The Constitution has been suspended, the national assembly has been dissolved and the governors and chief ministers have been fired.’

‘What will there be instead?’ I asked.

‘Whatever the general wishes,’ he answered without hesitation.



Sorayya Khan is the author of two previous novels, *Noor* and *Five Queen’s Road*. Her work has appeared in several anthologies and literary reviews. She is the recipient of a Fulbright research award, a Malahat Review Novella Prize, and a Constance Saltonstall Artist Grant that took her to post-tsunami Banda Aceh. She lives in New York.