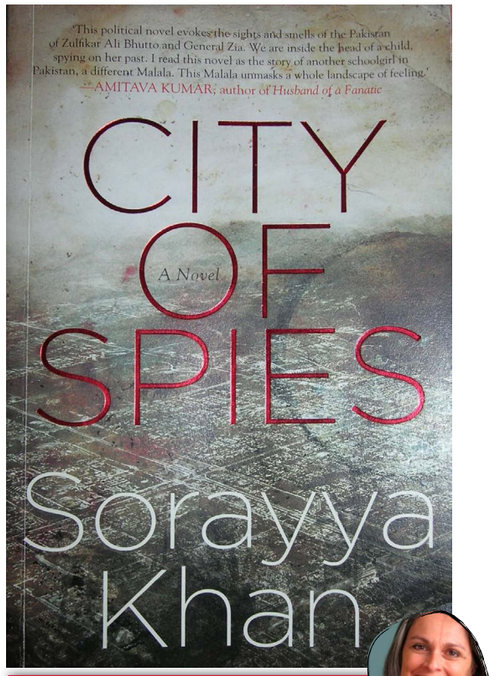
BY ILONA YUSUF

Coming of Age

Far from being a spy novel, Sorayya Khan's *City of Spies* is a multi-layered story that quietly examines the role history plays in shaping our perceptions and behaviour.



City of Spies
AUTHOR: SORAYYA KHAN
PUBLISHER: ALEPH BOOK COMPANY, INDIA
239 pages
Price: Rs 995

City of Spies, published early this year by Aleph (India), is a coming-of-age story. Aliya, "half and half" – half Pakistani, half Dutch – and 12 years old at the beginning of the book, lives in Islamabad. It is the late seventies and nothing seems to happen in the small, green, sleepy city. But this is the staging ground for the cold war, and the city is swarming with Americans and Russians, distinguishable by their cars and license plates: CD 64 and CD 62. Even if they work for the United Nations, or for the International School, there is a possibility that many Americans are covert CIA agents. And General Zia, the new ruler of Pakistan, has an army of spies who watch people's activities, including Aliya's family.

The story opens in July 1977. Aliya is staying with her sister Lehla at their grandfather's house, 5 Queens Road in Lahore. General Zia has just staged a coup and overthrown Z.A. Bhutto. Aliya's father, Javed, heads WAPDA, a job taken at the request of the overthrown prime minister, which has brought him back from Vienna to Pakistan with his unwilling family, his wife Irene and their three children. Lehla is about to leave for America to study; their older brother Amir is already at university abroad. Aliya, then, is left alone to come to terms with the events that occur.

The narrative unfolds almost like a diary account, the chapters denoting time periods, some of which symbolise family events which shape Aliya's view of the world and herself; others chronicle historical events, such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's hanging, the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Iranian hostage-taking and the 1979 attack on the US Embassy. These events provide the backdrop of the main story, in which the son of Aliya's family's servant is accidentally run over, late at night along one of Islamabad's poorly lit roads, by her best friend Lizzy's mother. She observes the family servant, Sadiq, slowly falling to pieces following his son's death. She is a secret witness to the financial settlement given to him by the American family, which he hides in a kitchen closet, making her in turn angry, confused. She is torn between her American friend and her Pakistani servant – who should she side with? How, and why, are Americans different from families like hers?

On a personal level, and on a larger scale, how do the lives of citizens of undeveloped nations differ from those of a superpower? Are the lives of the former cheaper, can they be bought and sold? It also makes her grow into and acknowledge the Pakistani side of herself, which she earlier resented, in comparison with the life she knew in Europe. Some of her questions arise from almost mundane observations, the little things that aren't really little: when Aliya rides the bus to the International School, where she studies, the older boys make a game of spitting out of the windows at pedestrians and cyclists on the road. Or they make brash, contemptuous comments about Pakistan and its leaders.

The story climaxes with the attack on the American Embassy. Lizzy's baby brother, conceived and born after the accident, is saved from the angry mob by Sadiq, although this is not immediately made clear to Aliya, who learns the truth years later, and narrates it in the lengthy epilogue as a grown woman visiting Lahore.

Autobiographical elements plus her memories of Islamabad are often present in Sorayya's work. Like Aliya, the main character in *City of Spies*, she is "half and half," which gives her an intrinsic understanding of the coming-of-age conflicts of such a child. A lesser novelist would not be able to carry her character beyond this relationship with the personal. But Sorayya uses her understanding to create a world extending beyond her own experiences, to weave a complex story of the ways in which nations such as Pakistan have broken free from one type of colonialism only to come under the yoke of another. Some of the events around which the novel revolves are based on fact: the author's fascination for stories leads her to look, listen, read and compile fact and embroider it into fiction. Anecdotal information from her brother, a film maker who has made a documentary about Partition, furnished stories and snippets for *Five Queens Road*, Sorayya Khan's second novel. And in *City of Spies*, the superintendent of the International School in Islamabad was actually taken hostage in Iran, while the story of the rescue from the burning embassy is loosely based on information in the archives of a university library in America.

My only disagreement with the book is its title. Khan's original title was different, but the publisher felt that it would have made the book appear as a young adult novel. And although the city is indeed a city of spies, in its capacity as a frontline state for the Cold War – even Lizzy's father, who works as a malaria specialist, is almost certainly employed by the CIA – it does not belong to the genre of spy novels. It is a coming-of-age novel. But it isn't just that. Like her other books, it is a multi-layered story which explores injustice, humiliation, grief, the discrepancies between the developed and undeveloped world, and finally, it is about compassion and forgiveness which transcend race and politics. Khan writes with great sensitivity, bringing her characters' conflicts – within themselves and without – to the surface. Her strength as a novelist lies in her quiet examination of the ways in which history shapes or affects our perceptions and behaviour, prompting her reader to ask questions about events that throughout our short history we have chosen to ignore. ■

Building Blocks

Born to a Dutch mother and Pakistani father in Europe, then moving to Pakistan as a young child, Sorayya Khan spent her formative years in Islamabad. Her university degree in International Studies from America was intended to prepare her for a career with the UN or other international donor agencies. But when she entered the work arena, Khan swiftly realised that she was more interested in the way the theories she had studied affected people's lives. In other words, their stories. Over the years, and initially with difficulty – establishing oneself as a writer while struggling to earn a living was not easy – she wrote what she refers to as "blocks." These were not yet stories or novels, they encompassed several decades of Pakistan's history, and they needed to take shape.

In a world where many writers have other jobs, writing is her only vocation, and she practices her craft with great discipline. Asked about the 'blocks' referred to above, she says that during a fiction-writing workshop with Douglas Unger at Syracuse, where she settled after her marriage, the latter advised her to spread out the 'blocks' so that she could view them and see the links they made. "Your story is big," he told her. Confronted with the sheer mass of detail, Khan eventually decided to start afresh and write something shorter. Thus evolved *Noor*, her debut novel, which was first published not long after the release of the Hamood-ur-Rehman Commission Report.

Khan's canvas is not that of the battlefield, with heroes and heroines struggling against monumental events. Instead, her forte is her use of the family unit and its immediate environment to examine "the silence and forgetting," which are the hallmark of Pakistan's history. In this, her method can perhaps be compared with the work of novelists such as Barbara Kingsolver, whose novel *The Poisonwood Bible* looks at the post-independence history of the Congo through the eyes of an American missionary family living, unbelievably for the time, deep in the jungle. In Khan's well conceptualised book, *Noor*, a child affected at birth by a complication which could be Down's syndrome, or autism – her affliction is never quite clear, by intention – has special powers. She has intuition and a talent for drawing. Her paintings, tableaux-like, illustrating scenes and events experienced by her grandfather, Ali, a veteran of the events of 1971, and her mother, his adopted Bengali daughter, are the catalyst through which the family comes to terms with their memories of the conflict, and themselves.

The setting of Khan's second novel, *Five Queens Road*, is a house built by an Englishman, bought by a wealthy Hindu just before Partition, and divided between him and his Muslim tenant just after it. The house, as well as the relationships between its inhabitants, is a metaphor for India and Pakistan's shared history. It also introduces Irene, a Dutch woman who marries the son of the Muslim tenant, a survivor of the Second World War who finds refuge in the family and the crumbling mansion. This complex, multi-layered novel switches back and forth between time periods and characters, and marks Khan's return to the large canvas of her early 'blocks.' It also introduces the family who reappear in her latest book, *City of Spies*. ■