



CONVERSATION WITH AN AUTHOR: SHAILA ABDULLAH BEYOND THE CAYENNE WALL

Where did you grow up? I grew up in Karachi, a city with cultural richness and sectarian differences. We learnt early on that if you hear a gunshot, do not run to the window. I had some great times there growing up with friends and cousins.

Tell us about your book 'Beyond the Cayenne Wall.' The book is a collection of stories about the struggles of Pakistani women and the barriers they face at every crosswalk of life. It deals with courageous women who go beyond the wall that society has constructed for them. In one story, a woman is forced to give up her firstborn to the caretakers of the temple of Shah Daullah in order to uphold the tradition of sacrifice. In another, a woman confronts

five mistakes in her life and ventures out among the wolves in human clothing to make the lives of her children better. In third story, a woman in Texas regrets her affair with a married professor and flees back to Pakistan for an arranged marriage. In fourth, a young woman returns to Pakistan to bring her widowed mother to live with her brother in the USA. The fifth story deals with a disturbing account of a young mother in search of her birth mother who uncovers bitter realities that were perhaps best left uncovered.

The Pakistan is not an exotic land and I have not tried to conjure up images of heaven on earth because it is not so. There are many beautiful people living in Pakistan but their lives are very hard.

Why writing about the oppression of Pakistani women is important to you? I write to raise awareness about women's issues in Pakistan. From the time a girl is born until she grows up, she is pushed to fulfill various roles, daughter, sister, wife and mother until she loses her sense of individuality in all the duties expected out of her. It's a country where historically women have little rights and I do believe that global awareness of the violations of women's rights can bring about changes for future generations there. It's changing now.

In which character of the stories do you see a reflection of your experiences and beliefs? My characters are derived from a lifetime of acquaintances, there are stories of dear friends in there as well as tales told in the passing, there are also events in there that I read about growing up. I recreated these stories from a fictional perspective. The only one I most closely identify with is the "Arrangement" as adoption has been a big thing in our family. ■