

Saffron Dreams

Shaila Abdullah

Modern History Press (2009)

ISBN 9781932690736

Reviewed by Olivera Baumgartner-Jackson for Reader Views (10/08)

Arissa Illahi, a Pakistani woman living in New York, has it all - a loving husband, the freedom to pursue the work she enjoys, good friends, understanding family and a child on the way. Then one fateful morning her life shatters – the World Trade Center in NYC collapses in a terrorist attack, and takes with it Faizan, Arissa’s husband. Arissa’s world will never be the same. Not only has she lost her soulmate, her beloved husband and the father of the unborn child, but she suddenly finds herself in a world where she is perceived as an enemy just for being a Muslim.

There are books that are beautiful simply because they are so positive and pleasant. And there are those that manage to be beautiful in spite of the pain and the suffering and the heartbreak contained within. Shaila Abdullah’s “Saffron Dreams” is both. Her writing is mesmerizing. On one hand it feels like a classically cut diamond – precise, sparkling, blindingly beautiful, but also incredibly sharp. On the other hand her writing reminds me of a dish I’ve often had traveling in India – a thali. Yes, I am very well aware of the fact that the author is Pakistani and not Indian, but many of the foods she mentioned in the book reminded me a lot of India, and that is probably why I thought of thali. Thali is usually a round metal tray with many compartments, each containing a different item, such as rice, dhal, different vegetables and curries, chutney, yoghurt and something sweet to finish. Each of those items complements or contrasts the others to perfection, and together they are some of the best food I’ve ever tasted. This is the way I feel about “Saffron Dreams.” It was comforting, it was funny, it was spicy; and then heartbreaking, full of despair, filled with hope, amazingly fresh and vibrant and satisfying. Following Arissa’s story makes the reader realize how little most of us know and understand the world of Muslims, and how incredibly wrong so many of our perceptions are.

If you are looking for a tender love story, you’ll find it here. If you are curious about how people live, love and laugh in another culture, you are in for a treat. If you want to read about overcoming challenges, your wish will be granted. If it is simply beauty that you are searching for, you’ll find it in abundance in “Saffron Dreams” by Shaila Abdullah. This is a book I would highly recommend to anybody who loves beautifully written and intelligent contemporary prose, especially to the readers who are curious and open minded, and to those who enjoy stories with strong female characters.