

Interview with Shaila Abdullah, author of *Saffron Dreams*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview by Shaila Abdullah, who is here to talk about her new book “Saffron Dreams.”

Noted as “Word Artist” by critics, Shaila Abdullah is an award-winning author and designer based in Austin, Texas. Her creative work focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of Pakistani women and their often unconventional choices in life.

Abdullah’s new novel “Saffron Dreams” explores the tragedy of 9/11 from the perspective of a Muslim widow. She received a grant from Hobson Foundation for that body of work. Her debut book, “Beyond the Cayenne Wall,” is a collection of stories about Pakistani women struggling to find their individualities despite the barriers imposed by society. The collection won the Norumbega Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction and the DIY Festival Award, among other accolades.

Abdullah has published several short stories, articles, and essays for various publications, including “Women’s Own,” “She,” “Fashion Collection,” “Sulekha,” and “Dallas Child.” More information is available at www.shailaabdullah.com

Tyler: Welcome, Shaila. I’m excited to talk to you today about “Saffron Dreams.” To begin, will you tell us what the basic premise of the story is?

Shaila: “Saffron Dreams” is based on the basic premise that the preservation of cultural and religious identity of any group is the cornerstone of a civil society. In the terrorist attack of 9/11, the shards of glass reached far and wide wounding the hearts of Americans who had been very accepting of the melting pot their country had become. The event put them at odds with a community that had come to this country with very simple objectives: to work hard and lead honest lives. In “Saffron Dreams,” I have attempted to capture how ordinary Muslims were affected by the tragedy of 2001—the silent majority who lead very normal lives and are law-abiding citizens of this land. They are the ones we never hear about because their lives are too ordinary to be the subject of the nightly news.

In the novel, the protagonist Arissa Illahi, a veil-wearing Muslim woman, loses her husband in the tragedy of 9/11 and is faced with some tough choices. Pregnant and alone, she discovers the unfinished manuscript of her husband and decides to finish it as a tribute to him. Her unborn son and her husband’s legacy provide a renewed sense of hope to Arissa as she struggles to put the pieces of her life back together.

Tyler: Why did you choose the title, “Saffron Dreams”?

Shaila: “Saffron Dreams,” the novel is sprinkled with symbolism. Saffron is a rare and exotic spice derived from the stigmas of the saffron flower and is used in popular Pakistani desserts for its color and distinct flavor. In the novel it is used symbolically to represent the extraordinary encounters and experiences in life.

Orange, the color of saffron, dusty powder that with the right touch added flair to any dish. It was also the color that Faizan dreamed of having on the cover of his unfinished book, a project he thought would make him a famous writer one day.

Since the novel revolves around Arissa's unusual plan of fulfilling her dead husband's wish, I decided to call the book "Saffron Dreams."

Tyler: Where did you get the idea to tell a story, not solely about a Pakistani woman and her experiences following September 11th when Muslims were often feared and discriminated against in this country, but specifically, to give the story an extra punch by having the main character's husband die in the attacks?

Shaila: The tragedy of 9/11 was a great shock to the American psyche. Some of that anger was directed towards those who shared the race and religion of the terrorists, especially those who publicly exhibited symbols of their faith such as veils, beards, even their own names. With "Saffron Dreams," my intent is to convey that most Muslims lead their lives guided by the general principles of goodness and peace. It is important to note that Qur'an prohibits aggression and notes that true Islamic values are based on peace, harmony, resolution and forgiveness. One has to also recognize that terrorists do not represent mainstream Islam. Having Faizan, an innocent Muslim man, die in the attack shows that terror has no religion or race.

Tyler: Will you tell us a little about the background of Arissa and Faizan before they come to the United States and why they leave their homeland?

Shaila: Arissa and Faizan both grow up in Karachi and their match is arranged by a matchmaker in the ways of the tradition. Faizan's reason to move to U.S. was to pursue higher education while Arissa moved after her marriage to join her husband and start her new life.

Tyler: In the novel, Arissa recalls her life in Pakistan several times. What would you say she finds most difficult about adapting to life in the United States?

Shaila: Arissa's sense of direction is seriously flawed and I modeled that trait after my own. In Pakistan, women are quite used to being driven to places by drivers or male members of the society and so for some women like me who grow up there, that part of the brain that makes sense of directions never fully develops. Arissa faced the same dilemma when she moved to Houston and learned to drive.

Tyler: What are the advantages she sees to living in the United States?

Shaila: Being that United States is a country of opportunities and breakthroughs, Arissa considers it an ideal home for her son because of his rare disability. Even within the United States, she makes a choice of living in Houston, Texas, where she believes her child would get the best care.

Tyler: Arissa, after grieving her husband, also dates other men. What about dating in the United States do you think is interesting or different for a Pakistani or any Muslim woman?

Shaila: Dating is not a normal custom back home, but the protagonist is from an affluent family and grew up in a progressive circle where it is not uncommon for men and women to meet in various settings. In the course of the novel we see that although Arissa adapted well to the idea of dating, intimacy with other man did not come easy to her.

Tyler: Does it matter that Arissa is Pakistani specifically? Do you think the story would be different were she from another Muslim country?

Shaila: I don't think so. "Saffron Dreams" is the story of basic human desire to be accepted in society, no matter what your background, ethnicity or race. The issues that I explore in the novel are universal—racism, discrimination, bias, muddled or forced identities—those are all common issues that drive the value and worth of an individual in a society.

Tyler: Shaila, the September 11 terrorist attack was several years ago now. Do you think the treatment of Muslims in the United States has changed since the initial response of fear in the months following the attacks?

Shaila: There is more awareness now than before. Where the media instilled fear in the heart of the nation, lately they have also attempted to learn the true purpose of Islam by bringing in renowned and respected scholars and researchers to interview. There still needs to be more dialogs with positive role models of Islam like His Highness the Aga Khan who stresses on the importance of pluralism in a civil society and speaks about the clash of ignorance. Others like Karen Armstrong and Dr. Ali Asani who time and again have taken center stage to correct some of the misconceptions that exist around Islam. Much work still lies ahead but as with any wound on the psyche of a country, it will take awhile to heal. There is a great need in the U.S. for various religious entities to come together and build bridges of understanding and tolerance to find a common ground—work that Dr. Eboo Patel is doing through the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core. In general, I still think America, as a nation is still very accepting of other races and religions. Robert Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton conducted a survey that showed that fifty percent of Americans believe that religious diversity has been good for America. In the words of the Dalai Lama, “you can develop the right attitude toward others if you have kindness, love and respect for them, and a clear realization of the oneness of all human beings.”

Tyler: One additional aspect of the story that makes it interesting that we haven’t touched on yet is the special needs of Arissa’s child. Will you tell us about her son and how his disability influences Arissa?

Shaila: The protagonist’s son Raian has CHARGE syndrome, which is a rare pattern of birth defects occurring in about one in every 9-10,000 births worldwide. Children with this syndrome are often born with life-threatening birth defects, including complex heart defects and breathing problems. Such children require medical and educational intervention for many years. In the novel we see that having a child with CHARGE actually helps Arissa with her own healing process as she provides round the clock care to Raian.

Tyler: Did you intentionally choose to have Arissa bear a child with a disability to help her healing process? Can you tell us how this idea entered the novel?

Shaila: The protagonist is a veil-wearing Muslim woman. Having a child with disability compounds her fear of discrimination and forces her to make some hard choices as we find out in the novel. On the other hand, having a special needs child provides Arissa the necessary distraction from the biggest loss of her life and she finds out that her son fulfilled her completely. As she says at one point in the novel:

Our world was so different from the rest. Inside our little bubble, the space was concave, pliable; to those outside, it seemed convex. Perhaps we were oddballs to others, but put together we were an enigma.

Tyler: Our reviewer here at Reader Views compared your book to the Indian dish thali because it has so many contrasts to it, and that it goes from despair and heartbreak to humor and joy. How would you describe your writing style and your goal in writing “Saffron Dreams”?

Shaila: I consider my role as an author to constantly surprise the readers and keep them engaged in the story. If the readers are not drawn to the characters or the plot, you will lose them halfway. Then again, as any author will tell you, when you start writing, sometimes the characters take a life of their own and surprise even the original creator. I was amused that Baumgartner-Jackson compared my writing to the Indian dish “thali.” I must admit, I never thought of my writing as that but it rings true. Indeed this novel makes you laugh and cry with the protagonist. I will tell you this though, the character of Arissa kept me awake many nights wondering what she would do next.

Tyler: Will you explain your writing process a little? Did you start at the beginning of the story and work your way to the end, or write it in pieces as it came to you?

Shaila: As I get more disciplined about this passion of mine, I find that it helps to outline a story before developing it further. Then comes refinement or going through drafts. That process is almost like painting on a canvas, working in coats of colors to make your work better and better. It’s a true test of patience. Most of “Saffron Dream” was written during nighttime because my days are usually so packed with a full time job, family, and various voluntary activities.

Tyler: You mentioned earlier that Arissa’s goal is to finish her husband’s novel. Why is that task so important to her?

Shaila: Although resistant to the idea at first, Arissa is finally convinced that finishing her husband’s novel was an important task. She is struck by how callously life is taken away from Faizan and therefore considers the book his legacy and believes that he will continue to live on through that work.

Tyler: May I ask if you feel Arissa is biographical in anyway considering she also writes or completes a book and you are a writer?

Shaila: The novel is not autobiographical, although there are many similarities between the character and I. We are both writers and artists and had arranged marriages. We both have flawed sense of directions but I will tell you this, certain characters of the novel were modeled after members of my family. A cousin who died after three years of marriage, leaving a pregnant wife behind drove the character of Faizan. The cousin’s compassionate and loving parents inspired the characters of Faizan’s parents, who step in to help Arissa get back on her feet. My only regret is that my cousin’s father passed away last November and did not live to see this book in print. I hope the rest of the family will see this novel as a tribute to his amazing spirit.

Tyler: I’m very struck by how many wonderful novels are being published in the United States recently by Muslim writers—for example, the great success that “The Kite Runner” and “Reading Lolita in Tehran” have had, and I would add that “Saffron Dreams” belongs in that category. What do you attribute to the success of these books in recent years, and what has led to this creation of a new literary movement or renaissance of Muslim authors writing in English today?

Shaila: The geopolitical concerns that have drawn Islam and the West into many conflicts since 2001 have also generated a thirst for multicultural literature—fiction and nonfiction, with a Muslim angle. At a time when much of the world associates Islamic culture with oppression and terror, the new genre is tackling such universal themes as love, hope, and women’s issues. I find that there is a great thirst among readers today to learn more about Muslims and what drives them. The interesting thing is even the followers of mainstream Islam can’t tell you what drives terrorism. We are as clueless as the rest of you but keep reading. At least you will learn something about the true face of Islam.

Tyler: Shaila, besides “Saffron Dreams” being a terrific story, the cover is absolutely gorgeous and I understand you designed it yourself. What did you hope the book’s cover would convey about your novel?

Shaila: I deeply appreciate the fact that Modern History Press took into consideration my desire to design the book cover for “Saffron Dreams.” There are many things a book cover is supposed to do: engage the buyer, convey something about the story and leave the buyer wanting more. I will let the buyers decide whether the cover does all three and most importantly, how well.

Tyler: I understand you have designed many book covers. Will you tell us a little about how you got involved in book cover design, the process, and what you enjoy about it?

Shaila: Being a graphic and web designer for over fifteen years, I designed the cover, marketing materials and website for my first book. Right after the book came out, I offered to design the Writers League of Texas website and I was immediately flooded with requests from authors who wanted websites, book covers and marketing materials. It helps to be a designer and an author. When I work on any project, I try to apply the principles of marketing that have worked well for me. Some of the authors I have designed for include Paula Huston, Loren Woodson, Laura Oles, Leslee Williams, Crystal Dwyer, Irene Watson, Linda Overman, etc. Almost all of my clients end up becoming very dear friends. When a potential client comes to me and asks if I can design a book cover for them that looked like mine, I tell them no, but I can very well design something that would best represent their book and their style. The key is to bring out the unique flavor of the author and his or her work in the design. As such no two pieces can or should ever be alike.

Tyler: So, Shaila, I have to ask. Should we judge a book by its cover?

Shaila: Of course. Without a doubt, it's a big selling point for the book. I am always humbled by the trust authors and publishers place in me when they come to me for book designs. The same is true for websites. It's your online face and should represent you well.

Tyler: Shaila, I understand your previous book won several awards and you got a grant as well to write "Saffron Dreams" Will you tell us about the previous book and the awards?

Shaila: My previous book in 2005 was a collection of short stories called "Beyond the Cayenne Wall" about Pakistani women struggling to find their individualities despite the barriers imposed by society. The book was very well received and won the DIY Award and the Norumbega Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction. Soon after, I received a grant from Hobson Foundation for "Saffron Dreams."

Tyler: Do you plan to write any more books in the near future and if so, will you give us a hint about them?

Shaila: Actually there are two books that I am currently considering. One is a novel about the street children of Pakistan, a book that Arissa is shown working on in "Saffron Dreams" and another is a young adult novel about an Indian teen torn between her passion for dancing and keeping the family business alive.

Tyler: Shaila, you mentioned earlier that you lay awake at night wondering what would become of Arissa. Now that "Saffron Dreams" is finished, do you ever wonder what happened to her next? Do you think you would write a sequel, or do you feel her story is completely finished for you?

Shaila: I am afraid Arissa's story does not have a sequel. If you read the ending, you will know what the future course of her life is and no, she has finally left me alone and I sleep well, knowing she is in good hands.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Shaila. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "Saffron Dreams"?

Shaila: You can find a wealth of information on my website at www.shailaabdullah.com including a reading guide, excerpt and some reviews. Information about "Beyond the Cayenne Wall" is available there as well.

Tyler: Thank you, Shaila. It's been a pleasure to interview you. I found it difficult to put "Saffron Dreams" down when I read it, and I'm sure your readers will agree as well.

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