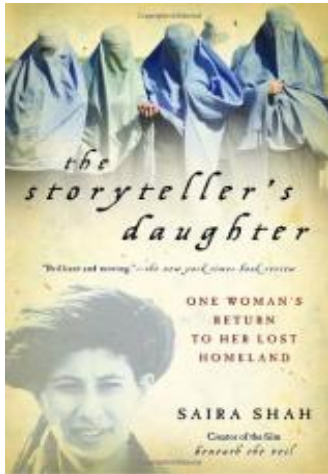

The Storyteller's Daughter: One Woman's Return to Her Lost Homeland

by Saira Shah



About the Book

Imagine that a jewel-like garden overlooking Kabul is your ancestral home. Imagine a kitchen made fragrant with saffron strands and cardamom pods simmering in an authentic pilau. Now remember that you were born in London, your family in exile, and that you have never seen Afghanistan in peacetime.

These are but the starting points of Saira Shah's memoir, by turns inevitably exotic and unavoidably heartbreaking, in which she explores her family's history in and out of Afghanistan. As an accomplished journalist and documentarian--her film *Beneath the Veil* unflinchingly depicted for CNN viewers the humiliations forced on women under Taliban rule--Shah returned to her family's homeland cloaked in the burqa to witness the pungent and shocking realities of Afghan life. As the daughter of the Sufi fabulist Idries Shah, primed by a lifetime of listening to her father's stories, she eagerly sought out, from the mouths of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the rich and living myths that still sustain this battered culture of warriors. And she discovered that in Afghanistan all the storytellers have been men--until now.

Discussion Guide

1. What does the title, **The Storyteller's Daughter**, reveal about the perspective Shah brings to her memoir? How does it encompass the various themes she explores?

2. Shah spends her childhood in two disparate cultures, living in middle-class Kent while identifying herself as an Afghan. As a teenager, she asks, "How could my father expect us to be truly Afghan when we had grown up outside an Afghan community?" [p.6] Does the question reflect a feeling common to immigrant families, or is her household an unusual one? What are the positive aspects of maintaining ethnic traditions in a new homeland? In what ways can it have a negative impact?

3. Shah's father tells her, "In our tradition, stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense of and deal with it" [p. 7]. How does this definition of storytelling, in addition to the actual stories she hears as a child, contribute to her sense that "Two people live inside me. . . . My Western side is a sensitive, liberal, middle-class pacifist. My Afghan side I can only describe as a rapacious robber baron." [p. 14]?

4. Shah discusses the historical differences between the Islamic tradition in which she was raised and the teachings of the orthodox Muslim world [p. 10]. Why is it important to understand this distinction? What light does it shed on the repressive measures imposed by the Taliban and on the fundamentalist Islamic movement in other parts of the world? Does the distinction between a literal and a spiritual emphasis exist in other religions as well? If so, how has it manifested itself?

5. What do Shah's descriptions of the little boy in the Afghan refugee camp [p. 28 - 29], Maryam, her guide in Kabul [p. 31], Halima and her family [p. 36], and others she meets during the filming of *Beneath the Veil* reveal about the importance of myth and legend in Afghan culture? What makes these portraits so effective in conveying the complex role these elements play in people's lives?

6. In what ways does Shah's visit with her extended family in Peshawar at age seventeen change her sense of self and her attitudes about Afghan culture? How does her uncle's household differ from the one she grew up in? Do the women in this traditional Muslim family, for example, wield more power than her mother? Do the interactions within the family contradict or reinforce your previous beliefs about Muslim society?

7. Why does Shah find the idea of an arranged marriage "seductive" [p. 51]? Does it reflect her naïve eagerness to identify with her heritage? To what extent is the desire to marry "a family, a tribe, a way of life; somewhere to belong to" a universal one?

8. Shah first enters Afghanistan with the mujahidin in 1986 at the height of the war with the Soviets. Why does she take us into the home of one of their leaders, Zahir Shah? What is the purpose of depicting him as a husband, father, and son?

9. Why does Shah include the anecdotes of her conversations with Zahir Shah's wife [pp. 76 - 77] and with Karima, the young woman she meets in a small village in the Valley of Song? What other examples are there in the book of why it is "practically impossible to convey concepts outside somebody's cultural experience" [p. 94]. How, for instance, are Shah's interactions with the mujahidin, her relationship with her extended family, and her position within the circle of Western journalists also attributable to a cultural gap?

10. At the time of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Shah writes, "One could read very little in the Western press about the mujahidin that was not tinged with politics of one shade or another" [p. 87]. Are war reporters always vulnerable to preconceived notions and political prejudices? What is your reaction to Shah's analyses of the U.S. activities during the conflict [for example, pp. 111, 119, 133, and 149]? Do they influence your opinions about the recent

investigation into U.S. efforts to combat terrorism before 9/11?

11. What new insights does Shah's perspective provide into the rise of the Taliban following the Soviet withdrawal? Are the "trade-offs" and concessions by the West that permitted the establishment of the Taliban regime [p. 204] understandable or dangerously misplaced?

12. Shah re-creates the horrors of life under the Taliban in vivid detail. What particular passages show how the distortion of Islam devolved into the blatantly cruel repression of women? In what other ways did the Taliban regime betray Islamic principles and traditions?

13. How do the descriptions of the landscape [for example, pp. 43, 82 - 83, 95] mirror the portrait of the Afghan population in **The Storyteller's Daughter**? Do they help you better understand the national characteristics that Shah admires?

14. Shah writes, "My father's mythological homeland was a realm where I could live through the eyes of a storyteller. In my desire to experience the fairytale for myself, I had overlooked the staggeringly obvious: the storyteller was a man" [p. 57]. To what extent are the observations and opinions in **The Storyteller's Daughter** colored by Shah's viewpoint as a woman? What does she bring to light that a man might have overlooked? Does her gender affect the tone of the book? How does **The Storyteller's Daughter** compare to other accounts of war and its impact on soldiers and civilians, either fiction or nonfiction, that you have read?

15. A generation of children in Afghanistan has grown up knowing nothing but war, and the conflict still rages today. Does **The Storyteller's Daughter** provide possible approaches to ending the despair and devastation ravishing the country?

16. In an interview, Shah said "A lot of the book deals with the question of how to approach the truth." Why has she chosen to interweave such diverse elements as mythology, genealogy, and poetry in her chronicle? How do they help deepen and clarify the factual history and reportage she presents?

Author Bio

Saira Shah lives in London and is a freelance journalist. She was born in Britain of an Afghan family, the daughter of Idries Shah, a writer of Sufi fables. She first visited Afghanistan at age twenty-one and worked there for three years as a freelance journalist, covering the guerilla war against the Soviet occupiers. Later, working for Britain's Channel 4 News, she covered some of the world's most troubled spots, including Algeria, Kosovo, and Kinshasa, as well as Baghdad and other parts of the Middle East. Her documentary *Beneath the Veil* was broadcast on CNN.

Critical Praise

"Both tender and haunting. . . . A stylized work of humility and heartbreaking devastation and dignity."

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