

## The Storyteller's Daughter

By Saira Shah

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### An Afghan Homecoming

By Ahmed Rashid

If there is one more book that should be read on Afghanistan, Islamic fundamentalism or the war on terrorism, it is the *The Storyteller's Daughter* by Saira Shah. Shah is better known as a television-documentary maker than a writer. Her face flashed around the globe after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, when her award-winning documentary on Afghanistan, *Behind the Veil*, was played and replayed on CNN. Everyone adopted the documentary and its haunting portrayal of the plight of Afghan women as their own—the Americans to justify the bombing of Afghanistan, Western peace groups to oppose the war, radical feminist organizations and even the Afghan warlords. Now Shah has trumped her own proven abilities with a book inspired to a great extent by her illustrious father, Idries Shah, the philosopher-writer who introduced Sufism, a mystical trend of Islam, to a Western audience and who was the storyteller of Shah's childhood.

Saira Shah was brought up in peaceful, rural Kent, in southern England, where she lapped up her father's stories about his unruly homeland. She heard of the gardens of Paghman, the hill resort outside Kabul where Idries Shah hailed from. In between teaching his children how to cook and appreciate pilau—the traditional Afghan rice and meat dish—he guided them along the Sufi way, which is filled with stories. "In our tradition," he tells her, "stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense of and to deal with it." Shaped by her father's tales, it is hardly surprising that Shah's own text is studded with couplets from Persian poets such as Sheikh Saadi and Hafiz and stories from Afghan sages such as Mullah Nasiruddin, who constantly baits and mocks his audience. A Shah favourite is the 12th century Afghan poet Jalaluddin Rumi. Fed on such rich fare as a child, Shah longed to see Afghanistan. She arrived in Peshawar as a young woman in the 1980s, ostensibly to report on the Afghan mujahiddeen's war against the then Soviet Union. In reality, Shah was desperate to see if her youthful dreams of Afghanistan matched the reality, if the mythical world of the Afghan personae she had created corresponded to real people. Perhaps as a result of her quest, the book is filled with a string of colourful characters, from intellectuals and beggars to drug dealers. There are lively descriptions of madcap Afghan warlords and fighters.

Shah also finds the three Afghan girls she had filmed earlier. The Taliban had first shot their mother and then raped them. Her meeting with the girls is a moving description of the futility of war. "Sitting in a row, hunched in their veils—pink, yellow and blue—the girls looked like broken birds. All I could see of them was their huge dark eyes. Slowly, from the corner of one eye a tear appeared and quivered for a moment before it burst and flowed. I could not even imagine from what deep well of suffering this single drop had escaped." Shah brings to this book aspects of her own disjointed life. If the clash of cultures was ever to meet on a benign plateau and become the caress of civilizations, Shah would be leading the troops. "Two people lived inside me," she writes. "Like a couple who rarely speak, they are not compatible. My Western side is a sensitive, liberal middle-class pacifist. My Afghan side . . . is a rapacious robber baron. It revels in bloodshed, glories in risk and will not be afraid." *The Storyteller's Daughter* is a lyrical travelogue. It is a Sufi's awakening and spiritual journey to find her own soul and discover the truth, which of course constantly eludes her. If the book has a shortcoming, it is that the reader may well hanker for more political background to better frame her adventures. Such a short book with so many literary ambitions could have faltered at every step as it attempted to switch from war to Sufism to the rush of personal anecdote. But Shah manages to construct a rich quilt, whose parts make a pleasing whole.

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