

Shackled Sisters



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Since I was a teenager, I have sought the help of a counselor. The two of us have spent hundreds of hours talking about the intricacies of the South Asian community; the fear and shame of being ostracized, and the double life that most women in my community lead. My counselor has spent much of her life wanting to and succeeding in understanding these complex issues, and she continues to help me make sense of things around me. She helps me realize how I am the person that I am because of my own journey of self-discovery. When I think of the stories I have heard—compared to the outcome of my own—I count myself as unbelievably lucky.

About a decade ago, I started to notice the differences in the lives between my Asian friends and my non-Asian friends. Initially, I did not think much of it. I accepted the differences as the way things were. Certain cultures, my culture, react to things that are normal on the “outside” in a particular fashion. As I grew older, however, and my circle

continued to widen, my eyes opened to the injustices faced by many of my friends. I started to get involved: offering a bed when I could, lending money to women whose husbands controlled their every move, helping women open their own bank accounts and allowing statements to be redirected to me, escorting some brave women (and two men) to the police, advising women on where to get accommodation and support. I started to see how uninformed people outside the community really were about the existence of these women and how little they understood these women's complex problems. With such a lack of support and understanding for these women, it is nearly impossible to not only break free, but to remain free.

I wonder what you see when you pass a lady wearing a hijab in the street? Or when you see a plainly dressed Asian* woman trying to manage a number of children as her husband strolls ahead? Some see these women as doormats, submissive and uneducated; others pity them; some even fear them. Many of these women are brave, strong, intelligent women, who are ensnared in a tangled web of love for, and loyalty to, their families. Their lives may be guilt-ridden and fearful of blackmail, ostracization, and sometimes even death. The choice before them is to endure their suffering in silence or to leave behind everything they know, only to step into a world that may fear them.

What I describe above was my inspiration to write *Shackled Sisters*, a collection of eight stories depicting the lives of British women of South Asian heritage. This book is a door into a hidden world that illustrates how cultural values allow human rights violations to continue; how religion, customs, and traditions keep women shackled; and how reputation and honor is worth more than happiness, freedom, and love.

There are too many individuals living secret lives, scared of the consequences if their lifestyles are pushed out into the open, or living under the constant threat of the revelation of their former lives. Perhaps they had a partner before

marriage, went dancing, drank alcohol—what most of us consider normal rites of passage. There are too many individuals who have no one to speak to openly and honestly, without judgment. We need to change this. We need to create a space where these individuals can come together—free from fear, intimidation, and judgement—to share their stories.

Shackled Sisters is about the women living in the United Kingdom, today, who are bound to an existence from which they are too scared to break away. This book is about their stories, how they have lived, how they see their own culture, and how they exist. These women may have dreams of their own, but they are bound by custom, religion, love, fear, and honor. I want to highlight their plight and do their stories justice. I want to shout out about these women and give them a voice. This book was written for all those people who have waited, like me, for something like this to come along, about a fight that we must keep fighting.

THE ORIGIN OF SHACKLED SISTERS

I escaped a forced marriage. So, the real inspiration for *Shackled Sisters* arose from my own life story. That, and a repeated experience I faced when talking about what happened to me, and what continues to happen to friends, family, cousins, and acquaintances. When I retell my story to my middle class (and mostly white) friends, I am usually met with shock and surprise. Initially, I found these responses funny. They had no idea! After a while, though, those responses became annoying. I began to wonder how they could not be aware of the issues the women of my community face. The more people I spoke to in social circles, new and old, the more I realized how desperately a book like *Shackled Sisters* was needed.

When I began to understand how little people really knew about the community and the complex, multi-layered problems that

women face in it, I became angry. My friends viewed my own forced marriage with utter horror, but I am the lucky one, the one who eventually got away.

In the United Kingdom, occasionally the press covers a forced marriage or an honor killing. Since these incidents are not constantly in the news, however, it is easy for the community to pretend that they are not a problem, but they are. When university-educated females who have lived the same life a white, Western female has, and are then forced to give up that way of life, entirely, to marry a man they barely know and become a submissive housewife, there is a problem. I have watched in disbelief, unable to do anything, as blackmail, violence, and emotional abuse were used to keep some of my dearest friends in place. They will never experience the life most of us take for granted. They will never know what it is like to be utterly loved by someone, or to be passionately kissed, to have the freedom to go on a holiday, to wear whatever they want, to dance until dawn, or to experiment with wild eye-shadow colors and the latest fashionable clothes.

My main reason for writing this book is to let others in similar situations know that they are not alone. It is to let them know that others have walked the same path and lived through the same hurt and pain.

Subcontinental women of first, second, and third generations struggle with their identities. This book is written for all those women striving to find their identity in our world today. It is for all those women who managed to experience happiness and complete freedom, who managed to feel alive before it was all taken away from them.

Shackled Sisters was a particularly difficult book to write. Some of the stories broke me. Editing them over and over was at times torturous. These sad stories were made all the more heart-wrenching by the fact that I know these women. They are my friends and my relatives. I see them, talk to them, laugh

with them, and cry with them. I watch them as they gracefully continue with their lives. They are so brave, and so strong.

Unlike me, hundreds of thousands of women in positions similar to mine do not have the benefit of therapists educated in these matters. Some great charities offer a sympathetic ear to girls who break free from a forced marriage, for example. Yet, so many girls return to an oppressive existence because the right sort of therapy is not available to them. Often, if their family either refuses to take them back after they have rebelled, or threatens their lives if they return, options for recourse do not exist.

Women who have been in these situations need to work with a therapist on self-esteem in order to understand and, more importantly, to accept that what happened was wrong. Sadly, women come forward because, despite feeling that whatever happened to them was indeed wrong, they still cannot shake the guilt that they did something wrong by disrespecting their parents, elders, or the community. These feelings result from years of being made to feel less than, and will take years to rebuild (or build) a woman's sense of self-worth.

Read the stories of British born Nafisa who was forced to forget the love of her life and marry her first cousin. Read her story and understand her memories, betrayals, hurts, and acceptance of her life today. Read about Yasmin and the devastating aftermath of sexual abuse suffered at the hands of her uncle as a child. Read about the Western lifestyle that Shabeena lived, and the sex, drugs, betrayals, and repercussions she faced. Read about Parveen, brought to the United Kingdom by her husband only to be dumped for an American bride and passport. Read Farzana's story as she tells about growing up under a strict Muslim father, the abuse suffered by her mother, and how the daughters worked together to help their mom. Read about Saira who went to university, found love, and tasted freedom before deciding to take a very different path. Laugh and cry with Salma and Ameera as they

talk about their upbringing, parents, mosque, physical abuse, djinns, a controlling culture, and their lives today as modern, unmarried, British-Indian women. Read the heartbreaking letter written to an older sister, reliving events from both their pasts.

Shackled Sisters is for those who want to make a positive difference in the lives of women. Read and understand their stories, their worries, their woes, their fears, their barriers, and help them. If you work in a service that comes into contact with Asian women, then understand the complexity of issues faced by women from minority communities for whom English is not a first language and who are uneducated. Counselors and mental health practitioners: When you see someone from a minority community finding the courage to come and talk to you, help them! Understand the unique challenges they face as members of a culture that clashes with Western values. Help them work through the guilt they might feel for leaving home or having a boyfriend. Help them regain their self-esteem.

Although I want practitioners to use this book to better understand women from the Asian community, I also want members of the Asian community to read this book. Those of you on the inside who read this book and want to make a difference, consider a career in mental healthcare. There is such a shortage of Asian counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and healthcare staff. Qualify and put your bilingual skills to meaningful use! Teachers: For me, you hold the key to making the biggest change. Start when the children are young, tell them their worth and do not be afraid to challenge sexist views. Recognize signs of identity crises and suffering and step in. Be brave. Charities: There is some excellent work already being done out there, but more collaborative work is needed. There is a dire need for a support network spanning the breadth of the United Kingdom that can be accessed by those in distress. Work to put a support in place to help

those who leave their homes. Work with these women so the guilt they feel, the loneliness that comes with being ostracized, does not drive them back to an oppressive existence. Provide them with counseling, education, friendship, and comfort; help them form a new foundation so they can build a new life for themselves.

*To clarify, I use the term Asian to mean subcontinental women (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi) throughout the book and expand further on ethnicity and religion in each story.