

- Behind The Veil -

Book Review

By Brittany Searle

Shahzad Rizvi's *Behind the Veil* tells the story of a young student, Shamim, and his affair with an older woman, Rashida. Set amidst the rich tapestry of cultures that make up India, it offers a large-scale view of the many challenges that faced the nation as it gained its independence, as well as an intimate portrait of a family and a circle of individuals. Through Shamim and Rashida's affair, the novel explores love, loyalty and fate, and the effects we have on each other as we inevitably grow and change.

Rashida falls in love with Nadim, an author, after reading one of his stories. She waits for him through the political upheaval that rocks the nation, despite never having met him. Nadim, when he finally appears, turns out to be nothing like Rashida had imagined. Soon after their wedding night, Rashida begins to wonder if the Nadim she thought she loved was anything more than a dream, asking herself, "Maybe the Nadim of today is the real Nadim and the Nadim of the past was a girlish fantasy?"

Rashida's disappointment leads her to develop the independence that transforms her from a headstrong child to a woman. Craving the intimacy she thought she would find with Nadim, she begins an affair with Shamim, but he ultimately disappoints her as well. In their final conversation, Rashida takes responsibility for her mistakes when she says, "I have always been a rebel and iconoclast. I challenged my religion, I thumbed my nose at tradition and I caused so much grief to my family." Rashida shows how her ideals have changed when she admits, "I wanted to marry for love, but now I have to settle for security and loyalty."

Rashida not only embodies human adaptability, but is Rizvi's love letter to the strong women of the world. When Rashida forgets her veil for the first time, she begins to leave behind the scars of her old life and embarks on her journey to be her own woman, despite the setbacks and frustrations she faces.

Nadim, Rashida's husband, is the only intolerable character in the novel. Balding, overweight, and bad-smelling, his appearance reflects the ugliness of his personality. When the young Shamim meets Nadim, he is compelled to respect him for his talent, despite his crude nature. He carries him home on the handlebars of his bike, and pays for his shoe to be fixed. Dragging Nadim home reflects the conflicts that will face Shamim later in the story, as he grows into a man bearing the burdens of life.

Nadim is a catalyst for change throughout the novel. He changes Rashida's life, first with his writing, then by bringing Shamim to meet her, and finally with his lies and treachery. While making love to Nadim, Rashida is both revolted and aroused. The experience inspires her to question her religion, as she wonders to herself, "Why is Islam so hard on women?"

By making Nadim central to the lives of the characters and making his exit from their lives equally significant, Rizvi uses him to warn against romanticizing others, or forgetting that heroes have feet of clay. Rashida's persistent illusions about Nadim are a metaphorical veil over her eyes, hiding the fact that human nature has some aspects that are seductive, and others that are repulsive.

When Shamim meets Rashida, finally divorced from Nadim, he falls in love with her instantly, beginning the cycle of uncontrollable situations that dictates his life. He is confronted by opportunities to fight for Rashida, as she has for him, but fails to rise to the occasion. When he witnesses a young girl being violated, he simply returns to his bed. When he meets Sarah Ashford, an attractive Englishwoman, he tells her, "Fate is the hallmark of Indian life," and instantly submits to what he considers his fate, taking up with Sarah and leaving Rashida abandoned again. Unlike Rashida, Shamim acts as though he is victim but tells people he is a hero. When Sarah asks him about Rashida, Shamim says, "There is nothing to tell. She is older and nice. Her husband deceived her and then left and I rescued her," despite the fact that the opposite is true. Shamim knows that Rashida chose to leave her husband, and envies her strength to walk away from the bonds of a sad life.

Shamim frequently loses control during moments of intimacy and experiences feelings of inadequacy afterwards, turning to the women in his life to reassure him. In a culture where women are veiled and physically separated from men, and the sexes have little chance to interact naturally, intensity and sexual frustration build. When culture emphasizes the differences between men and women, rather than their commonality, each sex is deprived of the richness that comes from balancing the feminine and masculine in each soul. Through pressure to be stronger than Rashida, Shamim loses touch with the woman who has anchored his life.

Shamim is attracted to Western culture, as reflected in his career in English Literature, his Western dress, and his unreasonable attraction to Sarah Ashford. He is cynical about his own people and looks back on his own childhood and background with feelings of shame. This self-hatred leads to spiritual and moral turmoil for Shamim. This is Rizvi's subtle comment on the West's effect on the East and the danger of detaching people from their culture. Shamim has a sense of incomprehension and inadequacy, a feeling of failing to measure up. Like Rashida, Shamim has own veil lifted, "People in the West fall in and out of love all the time, Maybe they don't mind being discarded so their partner can try someone new..."

Like the lack of unity between the sexes, the lack of unity between the peoples of India has resulted in sporadic outbreaks of violence that continue to this day. The novel plays out against Partition and the absorption of the princely states into India, and reflects the tension between Hindus and Muslims that sometimes flares into acts of violence and atrocity.

An interesting aspect of the novel is the comparison between Sarah Ashford and Rashida, who, despite their ethnic differences, share some common struggles. While Rashida fights to be empowered and respected, Sarah Ashford is born into a culture where respect is expected. Yet the two women make the same heart-breaking mistake of trusting men more than themselves. Though their lives look different, the two characters may simply be aspects of each other, Rizvi's comment on the universality of hope, and the desire to love and be loved.

Aptly named, *Behind the Veil* considers the question of culture, and the effect separation between the masculine and feminine can have on the human psyche. Rizvi gives his readers a rare look into Indian Muslim lives, where he shines a light on the inequalities between men and women. However, he does this with a gentle and sympathetic eye, without shadowing the beauty of the nation, or the strength of the women of the world.

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