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Secrets of the Henna Girl

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In this brave and finely judged story, Sufiya Ahmed tackles not only the question of forced marriage but also the wider issues of culture, religion, class and ethnicity which are often entangled with it. Zeba Khan, brought up in a small town in the north of England, is taken on summer holiday by her parents to visit her family in rural Pakistan. There she learns that, in a matter of weeks, she is to marry her cousin, Asif. Zeba is outraged and only under extreme pressure accedes to her parents' wishes. They are themselves under pressure from her father's elder brother, Asif's father. While struggling to come to terms with the direction her life may now take, Zeba makes friends with Sehar, a British-born woman of her own age who herself was the victim of a forced marriage. Now pregnant, Sehar has made plans to escape, once her baby is born, through a contact she has made with the British Foreign Office's Forced Marriage Unit. These plans are tragically frustrated when, neglected by her husband and his family, Sehar dies in childbirth. Zeba takes advantage of Sehar's contact to make her own bid for freedom. This story, told by Zeba, is painstaking not only in revealing the reasons behind such marriages but also the difficulties of rescuing their victims, predominantly women but also some men, who, for their own protection, may well have to cut off contact with their families and their former lives completely. It portrays Zeba's warm Muslim family life, distorted and almost destroyed by traditional notions of 'honour' and female subordination. Ahmed is clear that such notions are not endorsed by the Quran, and a quote from the Prophet Mohammed 'Obtain the virgin's consent before you marry her' precedes her story. Ahmed is also nuanced in her treatment of the feudal aspects of rural Pakistan and on the place of women. Perhaps her most memorable character is the family matriarch, Nannyma, a woman whose status in her community allows her to challenge its worst aspects. If the care with which Ahmed writes occasionally gives the story a didactic air, this is a subtle and powerful book that, while it unequivocally condemns forced marriage, has a great deal more to say about the importance of universal human rights, the benefits and challenge of living between two cultures, and the role of women in Islam and traditional Pakistani society.

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