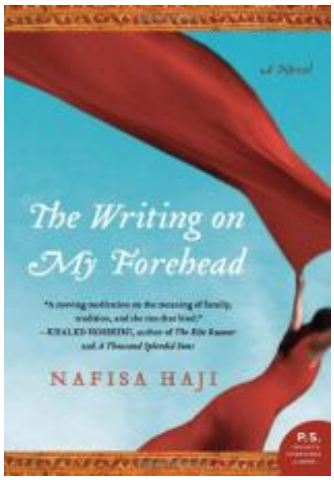
The Writing on My Forehead

by Nafisa Haji



About the Book

From childhood, willful, intelligent Saira Qader broke the boundaries between her family's traditions and her desire for independence. A free-spirited and rebellious Muslim-American of Indo-Pakistani descent, she rejected the constricting notions of family, duty, obligation, and fate, choosing instead to become a journalist, the world her home. Five years later, tragedy strikes, throwing Saira's life into turmoil. Now the woman who chased the world to uncover the details of other lives must confront the truths of her own. Throughout the novel, characters wrestle with the tension between personal freedom and social duties and obligations. Discuss the very different ways that this tension plays out in the lives of Big Nanima, Saira's two grandfathers, Mohsin, and for Saira herself as she grows up. What about for others?

Discussion Guide

1. On the husband-hunting journey to Pakistan, Saira's mother evokes the fatalistic notion of kismat or destiny and fortune. Discuss the ways in which her mother's efforts to find Saira a husband contradict this idea.

2. With regard to the concept of kismat, how does it contrast with the force of personal will in Saira's story? How about in the lives of Big Nanima, Nanima, and Ameena?

3. The verse of the Quran which was the writing on Saira's forehead refers to "what lies before and what lies after." How does this relate to the idea of destiny? How does it relate to the events of the novel?

4. The author has said that Sakina's role in the novel, for some Muslims, might be considered a metaphor for Islam in post 9/11 America. Discuss what the author may have meant by this.

5. What is the underlying contradiction between the professional course that Saira takes and the personal choices she has made in her private life?

6. Discuss the response to 9/11 that takes place in the Karachi living room of Saira's aunt as it compares to the way it was experienced in the United States.

7. How does the solution offered by the aunties at the end of the novel relate back to the tension between personal freedom and social duties and obligations that is one of the themes of the novel? Discuss Saira's options and what direction she might take.

8. How does Saira's dream foreshadow and then complete the arc of the plot in this novel? The position of the gun is different in the closing dream --- what do you think this signifies?

9. Social and political history provides the backdrop for the lives of all the characters in the novel. Discuss the interplay between public events and private lives as they unfold in the novel.

10. At the end of the novel, Saira reflects on what Majid Khan said about truth --- that "the greatest truths can be hidden in fiction." Discuss what that means to Saira at the end of the book. What truths may be hidden in the fiction of this novel?

Author Bio

Nafisa Haji is an American of Indo-Pakistani descent. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she now lives in northern California with her husband and son. She is currently working on her second novel.

Critical Praise

"**The Writing on My Forehead** is not only a family history but also a social history with an ambitious arc. Haji deftly illustrates how the Qaders? lives intersect with defining world events. (Haji is a) talented new writer of sense and a distinct sensibility."

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