

THE US Review of Books

[Soraya: The Other Princess](#)

by Saber AZAM

Westwood Books Publishing

Book review by Dylan Ward

"Unlike other females of her generation, she dared to address all men, stare straight into their eyes, state substance and logic, and refute unsubstantiated claims."

In the introduction, AZAM is vigilant in telling us this is "in no manner Soraya's biography." This is only a synopsis of the overall neglect and suppression of women in Afghanistan. This thinly veiled fictional account is inspired by his friend Soraya Ludin's life. She is the daughter of politician and Afghan diplomat Kabir Ludin. AZAM's four-decade friendship with her and admiration prompted him to pen his "own recollection of her dazzling personality and remarkable endeavors for Afghanistan." He dedicates the book to "all Afghan women."

AZAM paints Afghanistan as a beautiful country but reminds us that it is a land ravaged by blood and war. He describes the landlocked territory as an "ornament of lofty mountains, deep valleys, coarse deserts, and quaint four-season plains." It is a place that has moved and inspired "poets, writers, and philosophers to describe heaven." Yet, the country is mired by a complex geopolitical landscape that sees cycles of "violence, revenge, and mistrust" impacting the region with its communities "built on wealth and power" for centuries.

The book centers on the fictional Soraya, an only child born in 1945 with "bright green eyes and magnificently long limbs." She earns the nickname "Emerald" from the family cook in reverence for her "priceless beauty." She is naturally inquisitive with an eye for discovery. Her curiosity and love of reading nourish a close relationship with her father, Zamir Suri. He provides his beloved daughter with the best education at home and overseas. He patiently indulges her serious questions and debates. Throughout much of the narrative, Zamir, referred to as Mr. Suri is a "renowned, educated, and handsome lawyer."

He believes in “robust reforms” for Afghanistan but is unable to prevent the inevitable regression from political fallouts. Where the country fails, Zamir quietly provides for his daughter. He ensures that she has a good life and the ability to travel. In turn, Soraya grows up as a strong woman with powerful beliefs and empathy for the plight of others.

As Soraya matures from childhood to adulthood, she learns of the inequalities of human nature. She meets major figures, such as Richard Nixon, Queen Elizabeth II, King Amanullah Khan, and Queen Soraya (with whom she shares her name). She is worldly, beautiful, and kind, which makes for a terrific protagonist we can support. We follow Soraya as she comes of age in the world and as she witnesses the turmoil of her motherland through pivotal years and notable historical events. The injustices of her people and those abroad influence her deeply; we experience them with her too.

AZAM knows his history. His book is carefully built, progressing through the significant events that shape Soraya’s character. While much of the action centers on Afghanistan, it is a global affair that shapes Soraya’s life. At times, the book seems unsure if it should be historical fiction or a historical biography. The text is densely packed with historical facts, real figures, and details. This makes for delightful reading to history lovers, but the average reader may be a bit overwhelmed as they search for the story buried within. Yet, without this history, we don’t have Soraya. It is refreshing to see this history through the viewpoint of a young heroine who gives us hope, cares for people and the world, and advocates fiercely for equality for all.

There is much to appreciate in AZAM’s book, and there is little doubt of the work put into crafting it. Soraya’s journey is almost majestic in its course. Through her, we learn of humanity’s good and bad, diverse customs and traditions, and how a variety of people make this planet extraordinary. Because of the volume of names and information provided, AZAM includes a list of “Abbreviations and Names Used” as a reference to help readers throughout the text. Also included is a section of “Important Quotes,” which the author pulls from scripture in the Koran and notable quotes from the mouths of world leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These quotes are selected for their importance and deemed by the author as “food for thought.”

AZAM harnesses the power of history to give us this weighty tale of one woman’s courage to stand up for what is right. It is not meant for light reading, but it is a book readers can marvel at. It is a book where readers can learn and understand the complexities of politics and cultures on an international scale and their impact on us for generations.