

WHAT NATASHA KNEW

Rodeo Drive to Raja Bazaar gives bilingual Pakistanis the opportunity to read light fiction set not in London or New York but in their very own Islamabad and Lahore.

By Hani Yousuf

Ayesha Ijaz Khan's debut novel, *Rodeo Drive to Raja Bazaar* (RDRB), is a surprisingly good read. Even though the story is typical, the style is original and fresh.

The novel traces the life of 10-year-old Natasha between the years 1994 and 2004. After spending the first decade of her life in Los Angeles, Natasha becomes a victim of reverse migration. Her dogmatic father and submissive mother lay all practical issues aside and decide to return to Islamabad, where an ailing Dada and nagging Dadi await them.

During the summer of 1994, Natasha celebrates her 11th birthday amid a crowd of aunts, uncles and mangoes. Natasha has a lot to adjust to: the heat, an annoying dupatta, desi food and repeating the fifth grade. Her parents don't make things any easier. Though determined to enrol her in a good school, her parents keep quarrelling, and her father, despite his years in the US, still holds Pakistani patriarchal attitudes that are as strong as ever. To top it all, he cannot find work and ends up squandering most of the family's savings by investing with a fraud advisor. Meanwhile, Dada passes away, and Natasha and Dadi become better friends than ever.

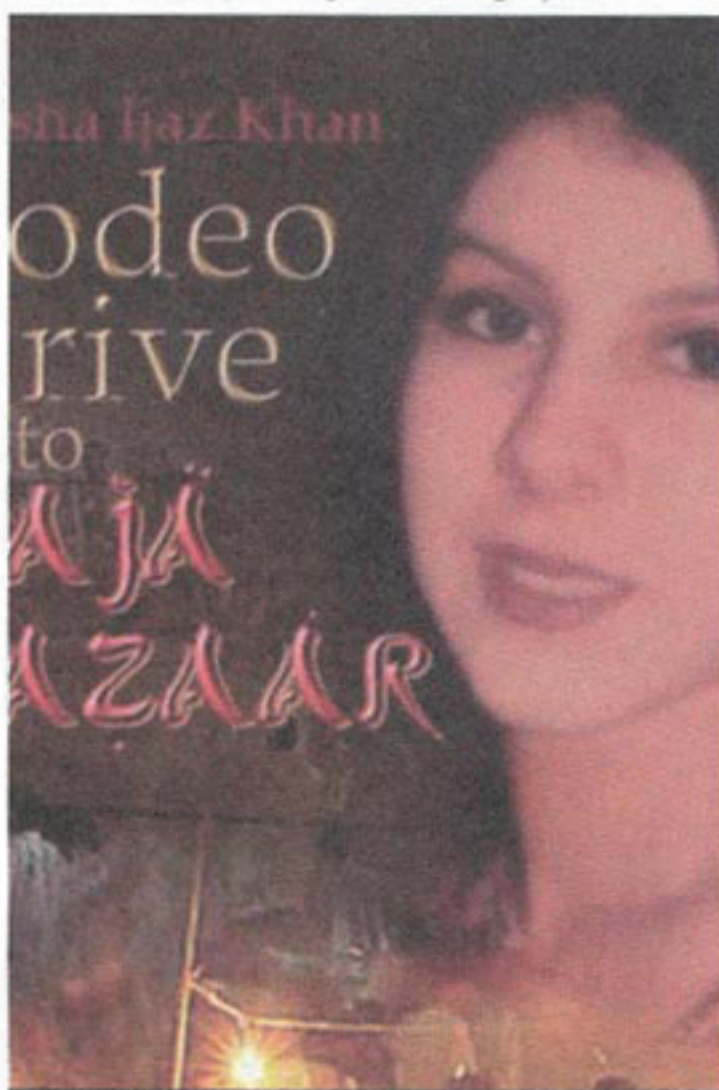
Natasha ends up growing up in a Pakistan that resembles the America that her parents tried to escape from:

a place filled with parties, revealing fashions and young romances. Natasha sneaks out to parties, changes from her shalwar kameez to jeans and a sexy top at her friend's house, witnesses her friends suffer dire consequences because of a bit of harmless dating and tries to come to terms with the general ambiguity of a

society that oscillates between liberalism and conservatism. And in her quest to be reunited with her birthplace and follow in the footsteps of her foreign degree-seeking friends, Natasha settles upon marriage with a Boston-based young man, a cousin of a friend, to achieve her dream.

One perhaps needed a novel that historicised post-9/11 politics – and RDRB serves the function quite effectively. Relating Pakistani politics during its most exciting period through the eyes of middle class Pakistanis is the most interesting and important aspect of the novel. The family's dollar accounts are frozen after the 1998 test of nuclear weapons in the country. The coup in October '99 is looked upon with scepticism by the characters of the novel. After that come the World Trade Center attacks sparking off polarised debates in every drawing room. For some it was a tragic event, for others it instilled a fear for their own Pakistani skins, and for still others it was just vengeance wrought upon the Americans. At any rate, it was a drastic turning point for all and sundry.

The novel also examines the harsh reality of racial profiling. Natasha's US-based Pakistani husband is subjected to hours of interrogation at the airport and arrested for not carrying his papers on him all the time. The novel exposes the hypocritical and unfair treatment of Muslims in post-9/11 America. In fact, the novel ends with Natasha saying, "I think



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By Ayesha Ijaz Khan

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