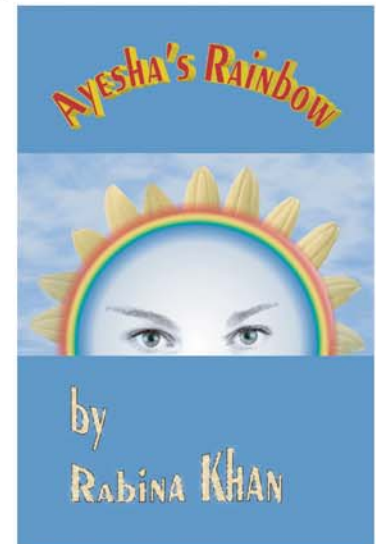


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Book Review...

by Rageh Omar (Broadcast Journalist BBC & Al Jazeera)

"I'd be interested to read it," my friend said with just a hint of déjà vu in his voice, "although by the sound of things it is going to go over subjects and themes which have been written about and filmed many times over...you know, Bangladeshi and Western lives in the East end of London, misunderstanding, cultural clashes, multiculturalism blah, blah, blah". And for the record, this was a fellow British Muslim speaking.

Being brutally honest, there was a tiny part of me which felt this way before I began reading Rabina Khan's warm and surprisingly direct book. In some ways such reactions are a measure of the extent to which these critically important issues and relationships have been written and presented in a stereotypical fashion.

Depictions of the stories; Bangladeshi generations learning to restart their lives in the East of London, the difficulties, failures and sheer power of spirit in which families have adapted themselves, their culture and identity, has for the most part been dwelled on in obvious themes, with inevitable outcomes. The gutsy young man / woman who overcomes the strictures and bigotry of his / her family, escapes and joins the far better western lifestyle. Or there is the Romeo & Juliet model; Muslim Asian boy / girl meets British boy / girl, love blooms across the religious and racial divide but bigotry destroys true love or, eventually everyone lives happily ever after.

Ayesha's Rainbow's strength is that it written by someone who has lived, worked and tried to understand her community, its problems and failures from a position of wanting to understand it with empathy.

Rabina Khan has succeeded in taking what seems, on the face of it, a predictable vehicle. The novel revolves around the relationship of a seven year old Bangladeshi girl and her neighbour, the elderly, white Mrs Peters whose family are staunch white racists, holding out in the East end in the face of the unstoppable Bangladeshi and Muslim transformation of her world. However through this vehicle, Rabina Khan succeeds in explaining the forces which leads different people, families and communities to be the way they are. She doesn't just settle for describing them and painting a picture of them. She writes about the slow and crushing economic collapses of the economies which supported white working class families in the East end. But the most vivid descriptions are of the intimate, cheek-by-jowl and often claustrophobic ways in which British and Asian communities and their problems evolved in the East End, and show the bitter irony of how these communities are in many ways far closer to each others struggles and pain.

At its heart, the book's optimism lies in the honest way in which Rabina Khan shows how the white families and Asian Muslim families came to rebuild a new sense of British identity. It was not done by all generation of Asians locking themselves away from any contact with their white neighbours. And it was not done by white families intimidating and forcing a completely western, British identity on their Asian neighbours. It happened by a joint embrace of the open, constantly shifting idea of what it means to be British. Rabina Khan has written a book which surprises, educates and engrosses the reader.