



## Seven

### Farzana Doctor

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A sabbatical trip leads to unearthed family secrets in Farzana Doctor's luminous novel, *Seven*.

Sharifa and Murtuza's marriage has settled back into comfortable routines following her emotional affair years prior. Still, Sharifa wrestles with internal uncertainties and biting dissatisfaction. A year-long trip to India provides distractions, as well as an opportunity for her seven-year-old daughter, Zee, to immerse herself in India's culture.

In India, Sharifa finds herself settling into odd routines. She steps lightly in conversations with her family elders and with her cousins, Fatema and Zainab. She feels compelled to both defend and challenge community norms. She troubles where she, an acclimated Canadian who picks and chooses when it comes to Muslim practice, fits into her established family's dynamics.

The blank spots in the biography of a much lauded ancestor, Abdoolally, become a source of fascination for Sharifa, as does Fatema's activist work against *khatna*, a female genital cutting procedure that her contemporaries among the Bohra women are too quick to write off as a relic. Revelations—regarding the feminism in Sharifa's family's past, and about the true source of Sharifa's enduring issues with intimacy—upend her uneasy homecoming.

Silence is the novel's villain. It comes both in the form of family secrets and of choosing to be quiet in the face of new, regressive religious demands. Sharifa, a half-secular academic, at first feels excluded from contemporary Bohra debates, but later learns that religious expectations haunt her generation, too: "This story both belongs to me and does not. My body, as though finally being given a missing puzzle piece, adjusts." Devastating memories resurface, opening an opportunity for sexual reclamation. Cycles are broken; terribly, some persist.

*Seven* is an intimate, gutsy feminist novel that exposes the lasting, individual impacts of making women's bodies fodder for displays of religious obeisance.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2020)

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