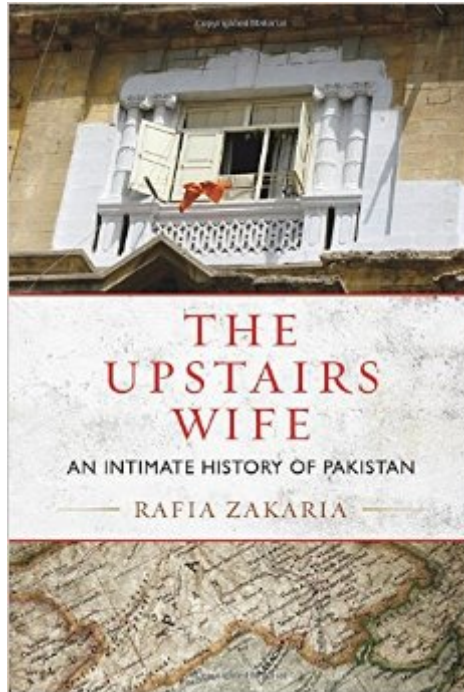


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# The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History Of Pakistan



## Synopsis

A memoir of Karachi through the eyes of its women An Indies Introduce Debut Authors Selection

For a brief moment on December 27, 2007, life came to a standstill in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto, the country's former prime minister and the first woman ever to lead a Muslim country, had been assassinated at a political rally just outside Islamabad. Back in Karachi—Bhutto's birthplace and Pakistan's other great metropolis—Rafia Zakaria's family was suffering through a crisis of its own: her Uncle Sohail, the man who had brought shame upon the family, was near death. In that moment these twin catastrophes—one political and public, the other secret and intensely personal—briefly converged.

Zakaria uses that moment to begin her intimate exploration of the country of her birth. Her Muslim-Indian family immigrated to Pakistan from Bombay in 1962, escaping the precarious state in which the Muslim population in India found itself following the Partition. For them, Pakistan represented enormous promise. And for some time, Zakaria's family prospered and the city prospered. But in the 1980s, Pakistan's military dictators began an Islamization campaign designed to legitimate their rule—a campaign that particularly affected women's freedom and safety. The political became personal when her aunt Amina's husband, Sohail, did the unthinkable and took a second wife, a humiliating and painful betrayal of kin and custom that shook the foundation of Zakaria's family but was permitted under the country's new laws. The young Rafia grows up in the shadow of Amina's shame and fury, while the world outside her home turns ever more chaotic and violent as the opportunities available to post-Partition immigrants are dramatically curtailed and terrorism sows its seeds in Karachi.

Telling the parallel stories of Amina's polygamous marriage and Pakistan's hopes and betrayals, *The Upstairs Wife* is an intimate exploration of the disjunction between exalted dreams and complicated realities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Writing about Pakistan must be somewhat like the proverbial blind man describing an elephant based on what he feels by running his hands over it (perhaps with the added fillip that he does so with several guns to his head in case what he says runs afoul of someone's religious or ideological sensibilities). Hence, for Westerners like me to get an overarching sense of contemporary Pakistan, we would have to read dozens of books and articles, making allowances with each for whatever religious or political pressures have shaped it. One of the first books any Westerner should read about Pakistan surely is *THE UPSTAIRS WIFE*; it also, surely, is less distorted by religion and ideology than most. Rafia Zakaria was born (in 1976) and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. Her grandparents on her father's side were Kokoni Muslims from Bombay; they did not emigrate to Pakistan until 1962. As refugees from India, they were "Muhajirs", second-class Pakistanis in many respects. "The Upstairs Wife" is Zakaria's aunt Amina, whose husband was selected for her by traditional customs. After a few years, he tired of her and, taking advantage of Muslim precepts that permit up to four wives, he took a second wife and moved Amina to the upstairs apartment. In *THE UPSTAIRS WIFE*, Zakaria tells multiple stories. One is about the half-a-marriage of her aunt Amina. That segues rather naturally to an account of many of the aspects of second-class status of women in Pakistan -- despite the fact that in 1988 Pakistan had elected a woman, Benazir Bhutto, as Prime Minister. Another story is a rather episodic history of Pakistan since Partition, the 1947 wrenching of a Muslim state from what had been the British colony of India. Running parallel to that is the story of her own family in Pakistan.

*THE UPSTAIRS WIFE* has a somewhat fragmented structure, with the biographical story focusing upon the author's India/Pakistani aunt alternating with chapters of Pakistani history. Although the historical chapters aren't well integrated into the story, they provide an essential context which helps the reader to enter the Pakistani mindset, and particularly the restrictive circumstances of women. The historical chapters, which are as readable and engaging as the narrative, present a terrifying view of an unstable, unpredictable and chaotic culture continually torn apart by violence, corruption, rape, war, religious and ethnic conflict and punishment. Within the strong bonds of family, women live restricted lives controlled by men, Islamic law, the state and the military. Issues

of family honor and pressures to conform keep women in their place, serving men, while bonding but also succumbing to disruptive jealousies and gossip. Yet as horrifying as some of these actual historical events and interpersonal circumstances are, the author engaged me emotionally without overwhelming me with that horror which occurs on both a personal and sociopolitical levels. The story is framed by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, Pakistani's only female President, whose rule infuriated Islamic extremists and men who believed that women in leadership positions was contrary to Islamic law, and could only bring misfortune. It then flashes back in time to the early lives of Rafia's grandparents, and Rafia's father, who was born the same year as the India/Pakistan partition in 1947. The family considered themselves Pakistani, but actually emigrated to Karachi, Pakistan from India in 1961.

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