

Farzana Doctor's Book *Seven* Confronts An Abusive Tradition

[Jeanne E. Fredriksen](#) | Mar 18, 2021

<https://indiacurrents.com/farzana-doctors-book-seven-confronts-an-abusive-tradition/>



Trigger Warnings: FGM/C

Some Christian denominations believe a seven-year-old can make spiritual choices. Judaism and Islam hold that a seven-year-old boy is able to participate in fasting and praying. For many, seven is the age at which a child knows right from wrong. For others, it's simply a lucky number. In award-winning Canadian author [Farzana Doctor](#)'s bold and compassionate novel [Seven](#), the significance is painfully different.

Sharifa, a 40-year-old Dawoodi Bohra woman born and raised in America, is a classroom-weary high school history teacher. Her marriage to the jovial Murtuza is an agreeable one, but behind closed doors, there are ongoing issues: Sharifa once engaged in a brief online affair, and she never has experienced an orgasm before or during the marriage. However, when she, Murtuza, and their daughter Zeenat travel to India for his eight-month teaching sabbatical, they hope for valuable marriage mending.

Aside from homeschooling her second-grader in India, Sharifa dives into researching her venerable great-great-grandfather Abdoolally and his rise from poverty to philanthropy. Family visits double as research sessions, ranging from willing contributions of bits and pieces to handed-down myths to hesitant refusals. Hazy stories about Abdoolally's four wives—especially Zehra, whom he allegedly divorced—grab her imagination and expand her focus.

Meanwhile, conversation with her favorite cousins Fatema (a bisexual, outspoken feminist and activist) and Zainab (a traditional Bohra wife) turns to the uncomfortable subject of khatna, female genital mutilation/cutting. Sharifa learns khatna, assumed to be illegal and long believed by some to prevent girls from being sexually promiscuous, continues to be enforced by the women of the Bohra community.

To complicate matters, Fatema and Zainab hold diametrically-opposed views not only about the practice itself but also that it is performed on seven-year-old girls. When Fatema reveals most of the girls in their family have been cut, Sharifa is shocked. And when Zainab offers confirmation, Sharifa protests, insisting it never happened to her.

Yet, this new knowledge, coated with panic, seeps into Sharifa's relationships and research, and she unearths astonishing details about her predecessors.

Part domestic mystery and part call to action, the novel serves up tense encounters, private marital scenes, and personal victories and defeats. Doctor's writing is skillfully layered, yielding a novel that is complex, gripping, and thought-provoking. Her ability to present a highly-readable story while raising awareness about a difficult topic is to be congratulated, and despite the weightiness of the subject, Doctor provides an occasional burst of humor, allowing the reader a moment to breathe and regroup.

[Seven](#) is a singular engrossing, emotional, and empowering story of the strengths of women, family, and truth. Unreservedly, Doctor examines the thorny dualism of women's lives—as victims vs. offenders; activism vs. suppression; responsibility vs. conformity; pre-marital sex vs. marital sex; belonging vs. longing. She is an accomplished storyteller whose characters are effortlessly embraced and not easily forgotten, and she hits the mark in this nuanced story about family dynamics and khatna's adverse effects on women's sexual, mental, and other health concerns.

[Seven](#) is an important work about an abusive action that continues without a medical foundation. A khatna survivor herself, Doctor volunteers with [WeSpeakOut](#), a global organization working to ban FGM/C in her Dawoodi Bohra community.

For more information about khatna-FGM/C, access the United States [Office on Women's Health](#) and the United Nations [International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, 6 February](#).

Jeanne E. Fredriksen lives in both Carolinas where she is a long-time contributor to [India Currents](#), a Books for Youth reviewer for [Booklist](#) magazine/[American Library Association](#), and a member of WCPE-FM [The Classical Station](#)'s Music Education Fund committee. She always wears a mask in public settings, avoids crowds, believes in social distancing, and washes her hands.