

★ **Outside Women**

Roohi Choudhry

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Two women, their lives separated by a century, learn the meaning of standing witness to horrific injustice in Roohi Choudhry's epic historical novel *Outside Women*.

In 1890s India, after the British abolish slavery in their colonies, over one hundred thousand poor Indians are sent to South Africa as indentured servants. Sita is one of them. Forced to flee her family's ill treatment, Sita signs away five years of her life in the hope of making a better place for herself in a strange new world, only to find that abuse, disrespect, and oppression followed her.

A century later, Hajra, a Pakistani scholar, flees her home in Peshawar after an acid attack meant for her disfigures another woman. Doors open for her to further her research on indentured servitude in New York. Startling synchronicity leads her to South Africa, where her story entwines with Sita's. Both women hold dangerous secrets that, if revealed, would require bearing witness to life-threatening truths.

The novel is set amid clashes between rival ideologies and ethnic and class-based prejudice. Cinematic in color and scope, it reveals how the politics of patriarchal systems, religion, and family and social customs yoke women. Its revelations are made more poignant in considering that the century between Hajra and Sita resulted in so little change.

Outside Women is a gripping historical novel that contrasts the abuses of patriarchy and misogyny with the power of women to stand for freedom, truth, and justice. Notable for its emotional depth, lively pace, and smooth transitions as it moves across time and continents, this complex, nuanced story rises above its graphic descriptions of torture inflicted on those who dare to defy conventions to celebrate the strength of women and the warmth of human friendship and loyalty.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2025)

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