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**Title of the Book:** *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*

**Author:** Fatima Bhutto

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**Reviewed by:**

**Irfan Mohammad Malik**

*The Shadow the Crescent Moon*, debut novel by Fatima Bhutto, the author of *Songs of Blood and Sword*, is a political novel with profound humanitarian concerns. The novel is set in Mir Ali; a war troubled town of Pakistan's FATA of North Waziristan. The novel unfolds over a single morning and revolves around three different brothers and two women. After breakfast in the morning the brothers go their separate ways. The eldest Aman Erum hires taxi to a local mosque. The second, Sikander, a doctor heads off to work at hospital and the youngest, Hayat, rides out of the town on his motorbike. The novel is structured around hours in a single, eventful day, with various back stories filled through flash backs pushing the reader in multiple directions.

The eldest of the three brothers Aman Erum had, like many young Pakistanis, nurtured a dream to study in the USA and he successfully secures a coveted place in an American university to study business, but has to sell his soul to Colonel Tarik to get the requisite papers. Aman Erum is one among many Pakistani young men who aspire to go abroad for higher studies but have to face hardships in procuring necessary documents and have to compromise on various things including their convictions and beliefs. The middle brother Sikander, who is by profession a physician, has no desire for trouble, but trouble fatally finds and ruins his family. The youngest brother, Hayat, becomes a revolutionary to fight injustice and oppression. Sammara, the female protagonist of the novel, first intended by elder brother Aman Erum and ultimately the beloved of the youngest, Hayat, is a delicately fragile young woman and of course a victim of various conflicts around her and swept up by politics and rebellion. Mina, Sikander's wife also plays a significant role in the novel. She is emblematic of the Pakistani women who have suffered worst due to terrorism and sectarian

strife. She has lost her only son in an explosion and the agony and trauma she goes through is unspeakable.

Bhutto takes the curious readers along with her to visit this remote frontier region and one can experience its touch and feel, even its taste, through Bhutto's portraits of Mir Ali's daily life—the “battered yellow Mehran Taxi”, the “Chitrali Pakol hats”; the medicines that are “older than most of the doctors”, the feral cats searching the hospital's corridors for “discarded placentas, which they eat out of half-open medical waste bins”. Bhutto presents a series of lucid encapsulations about this region as a learned insider.

Bhutto makes bold statements about the aspirations of the people of Mir Ali and the consequent hostility that most Pakistani's harbour for the people of this region. People, like Hayat and Samarra and their revolutionary fathers feel that Mir Ali is nothing more than a colony of Pakistan:

Most Pakistanis thought of Mir Ali with the same hostility they served for India and Bangladesh; insiders—traitors who thought their way out of the body and somehow made it on their own without the glory of the crescent moon and star shining overhead.

But the shadow of that moon never faded over Mir Ali. It hung over its sky night after night; condemning the town to life under its cold shadow.” (2013: 19)

*The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* is an overtly political novel, however, to read it from the single perspective might be to miss the humanity in the novel. Bhutto's characters are credible with whom one sympathises and empathises and the novel convincingly documents the breakdown in basic humanity brought about by oppression, distrust and uncertainty resulting from vicious cycles of violence from different quarters.

Sectarian strife which has engulfed the whole country in general and the tribal region of Waziristan in particular, has resulted in fear psychosis. Bombings in mosques during congregational prayers has traumatised and haunted denizens to the extent that the three brothers choose to offer Friday prayers at different places for the fear of getting annihilated. At another occasion later in the novel the second brother, Sikander, almost loses his life when questioned about his sect by a Talib and it is Mina's emotional outburst and breakdown that saves him.

Fatima Bhutto belongs to one of the most influential yet wronged political families of Pakistan. Her grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Father Murtaza Bhutto and Aunt, Benazir Bhutto lost their lives to the political intrigues and machinations. Her family tragedy does have bearing on her writings about Pakistan and its people. In the novel Bhutto has attempted to demonize Pakistan's military and intelligence forces represented by Colonel Tariq. However, such straight condemnation seems to weaken the moral power of the novel.

Bhutto has portrayed extraordinary women characters with more lively spirit who overshadow the three male protagonists in the novel and towards the end of the novel reader feels more connected to wailing Mina and rebellious Samarra than any of the three brothers.