A review of ‘The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation’

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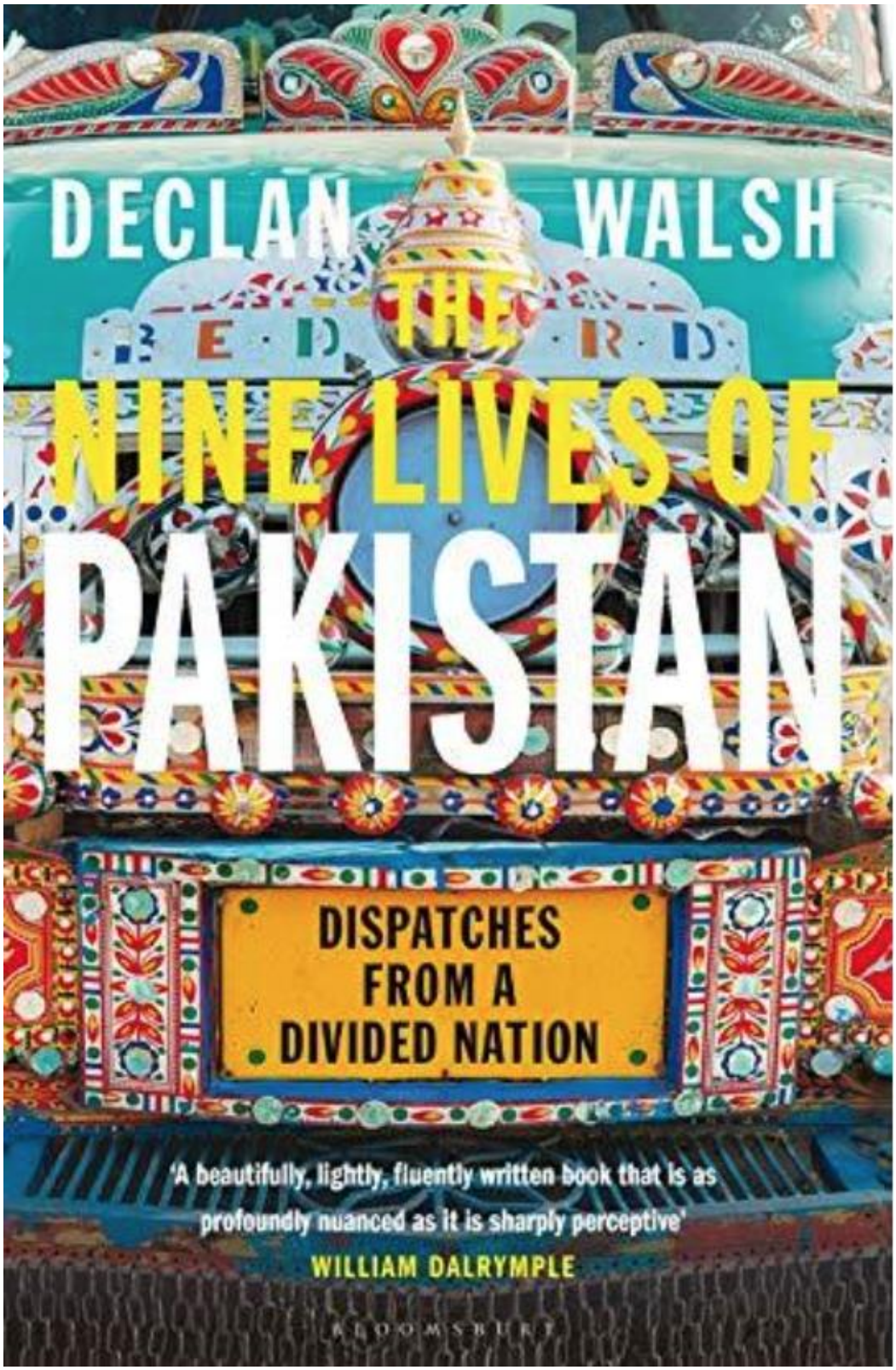

Walsh, D (2020) *The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation.*London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing. 368 pages, ISBN-10: 1408868466

Abstract

The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation is Declan Walsh's reflection and exploration of the 'complex and interesting country' of Pakistan (pg 7). It reveals events that occurred before, after and during his time as a reporter there for *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. Walsh writes from personal experience as a result of the confusion of being expelled from the country in 2013 and reflects on Pakistanis he interviewed, interweaving this with Pakistan's intriguing and complicated history. This makes the book an engaging and thought provoking read.

1. Introduction

Within *The Nine Lives of Pakistan*, Walsh indicates how he 'poked an unexpectedly tender spot' (pg xx) which led to his expulsion from the country – his questioning of government activities is referenced throughout the book. At the end of the book, he explains some of the reasons why he was removed from Pakistan – despite publicising stories as a journalist there for over a decade – after he discovered the definition of 'undesirable activities' years later (pg 249). This key driver for the book's creation is reflected in the theme of tensions and divides and is highlighted through discussion of religion, politics, gender and class.

2. Discussion

In *The Nine Lives of Pakistan*, Walsh selects 'nine lives' that represent nine significant people he met when he was a journalist in Pakistan (excluding the founder of Pakistan): deputy leader of the Red Mosque, Abdul Rashid Ghazi; founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah; Pashtun politician, Anwar Kamal Marwat Khan; human rights activist and lawyer, Asma Jahangir; 'tycoon-turned-politician', Salmaan Taseer (pg 137); spy, Sultan Amir Tarar (Colonel Imam); 'Karachi's most famous cop', Chaudry Aslam Khan (pg 191); tribal leader, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti; and former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officer, 'Ashraf'. Ashraf concludes the book which allows Walsh – and a reader – to have some closure with a lot of questions being answered in the last chapter. This makes the book have an ever-changing narrative whilst also remaining connected with the overarching theme of the journalist's personal travels in Pakistan. The tensions and divisions are a key focus throughout the book which is specifically seen with a high proportion of the key people mentioned having died. As a result, I would encourage people to read the book

to find out more about the people who were affected by the politics of the country as well as the connecting threads between them.

Walsh notes how a possible title of the book was to be the Chapter 1 title 'Insha'Allah Nation' – which translates to 'if God wills it'. This phrase is used frequently in Pakistan as what he calls a 'comfort blanket' (pg 20). It appears significant since it reflects the strong religious values of the country and the role that plays in the tensions often perceived when someone thinks of Pakistan. Walsh does not deny this assumption of the 'lumpy stew of tribes, tongues and cultures' (pg 54) but instead focuses on the reasons for the tensions such as religious differences, extremist groups, political power and military dominance that also play a part in geopolitical studies.

Despite supposedly having a majority Muslim ummah (community), Pakistan is also home to Sikhs and Hindus along with other smaller faiths. This makes the disputes unsurprising due to the differences in views and the desire for Pakistan 'to be everything India was, and was not' (pg 277). However, Walsh does mention the term 'desi' which references the culture of South Asia as a whole which would contrast this as a reason for such divides and tensions. Therefore, religious tensions play an important part in the divisions in Pakistan, but Walsh appears to use satire frequently in his book as well to suggest the political and military involvement in the disputes.

Significantly, the book opens in 2013 during the election between Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan, which indicates Walsh's focus on the history of political tensions and how Pakistan didn't want a similar 'blood-soaked independence of 1947' (pg xviii). Even a reader who doesn't follow Pakistani politics can clearly identify the instability resulting from previous political decisions. In human geography in particular, politics and religion are often referenced in terms of development and harmony in a community which makes the book's focus on tensions even more relevant and important in academic terms as well as in a global context. These themes are also seen in fictional novels set in countries in this region such as works by Khaled Hosseini like *The Kite Runner* (2003) or *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) which have the geopolitical history of Afghanistan as their backdrop. Walsh perhaps focuses on political tensions due to his expulsion from Pakistan. There is also a clear concern regarding some political decisions and the dominance of the military which have dangerous consequences for many people featured in the book.

Another key theme focused on in *The Nine Lives of Pakistan* is colonialism and the divisions between countries because of the hurried construction of nations on both the east and west border of India. Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were formed during the decline in colonial dominance of

the British Empire but were 'hurriedly carved from blood-soaked maps' (pg 56). The British Empire and colonialism are also explored in books such as *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need To Know About Global Politics* by Tim Marshall (2015) (which has a chapter dedicated to India and Pakistan) and *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* by Satnam Sanghera (2021). Both of these echo Walsh's views on the importance of history and geopolitics in other nations as well as Pakistan. The role of politics and high-income countries (HICs) such as the UK and the USA are significant factors in Pakistan's development challenges and the irresolvable tensions in the nation which is clearly shown in this metaphor of 'blood-soaked maps', connoting death, instability and war.

In Chapter 3, Walsh explores how Muhammad Ali Jinnah founded Pakistan in 1947, however, he reads this from a fanciful depiction in a children's book which also deliberately downplays the role of the crumbling British Empire and the destruction caused. Equally, later in the book, Walsh notes how new redrafted Indian textbooks have a 'Hindu first' approach (pg 281) and Jinnah's South Court home on Malabar Hill is considered 'enemy property' by new Indian leaders (pg 282). Overall, Walsh has the view that India and Pakistan have a lot of similarities but, due to their history, simply cannot be harmonious neighbours. The disputed territory of Kashmir in the north-east of Pakistan is used as an example in the book. Wilkinson et al (2021) also explored this in the *National Geographic* article '*A Line in the Mountains'* which explores the boundaries in this territory claimed by Pakistan, China and India due to the unclear maps created after Pakistan's formation in 1947 and the resulting disputes.

The stereotypical westernised view of Pakistan being unstable and divided is reinforced by Walsh, but he gives reasons for this that put Pakistan in a less negative viewpoint. After all, *The Nine Lives of Pakistan* explores Walsh's desire to 'say farewell to the country that filled [his] life for a decade' (pg 283) so he presents a fondness and warmth towards Pakistan. Nevertheless, this book allows a reader to appreciate the view that the instability is not solely caused by inside forces but also by colonialism and globalisation.

It would have been valuable to include more women in the book since Walsh notes how 'as ever, women suffer most' (pg 226). Benazir Bhutto was the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and twice became president of Pakistan in the late 20th Century, making her the first female president in a Muslim majority country. However, despite her influence she was not one of the selected 'nine lives' by Walsh and is only included as a minor role. Except for Asma Jahangir in Chapter 5, the remainder of the 'nine lives' Walsh explores are male and often of a higher class. Other perspectives would be valuable for *The Nine Lives of Pakistan* given Walsh's approach, although he

does reference different elements of Pakistan's society in detail. This allows the reader to explore from different Pakistani viewpoints regardless. However, by including others who were lower class or female as major roles in the book, there might have been a more complete overview and resulting discussion of the experience across all members of society.

In Chapter 9, when discussing 'The War of the Flea' he focuses on the Balochistan separationists and guerrilla warfare. Chapter 5 and Chapter 9 also explore human rights in more detail with the focus on Jahangir's human rights movement and guerrilla warfare, emphasising the tension and divides in Pakistan but also the progression of women's rights throughout the nation. Interestingly, Walsh notes Jahangir told him how "you can't be a self-respecting citizen in this country if you don't go to jail" (p109) which underlines the importance of human rights developments not only in Pakistan but worldwide too. However, specifically in Pakistan, this also emphasises the division between the upper and lower classes which is only exacerbated by ethnicity, gender and province.

Walsh experienced first-hand the consequences of delving too far into the 'divided nation' of Pakistan as a result of publicising details that their government did not want revealed. This appeared to align him with the people he writes about in *The Nine Lives of Pakistan,* as a majority of the key people were either killed as a result of what they said, did or believed or remained alive and were at risk of becoming a 'problematic asset' like the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) military spy Ashraf in Chapter 10 (pg 264). Consequently, throughout the book, Walsh explores the dangers of being progressive or having views contrary to those in charge where, quoting police officer Chaudry Aslam, 'the line between criminal and cop are hopelessly blurred' (pg 206). This perfectly summarises the issues with control in Pakistan identified by Walsh.

When exploring updates of lives of the people featured in the book in Chapter 11, Walsh quotes Ardeshir Cowasjee, a Karachi journalist, who was "tired and disillusioned with a country that just cannot pull itself together in any way" (pg 289) which Walsh seemingly agrees with. Overall, Walsh sees Pakistan as a society with many divides including but not limited to religion, politics, gender and class. In turn this creates tensions that Walsh depicts throughout *The Nine Lives of Pakistan*. At the close of the book, there are elements of resolution for him, however, Walsh still misses a country that he spent over a decade reporting from.

3. Conclusion

Despite being a complex read, *The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation* is compelling, and it is worth persevering since it provides a detailed personal discovery of an extremely interesting country. It would be a great book for students and teachers who have a particular developed interest in Pakistan as well as those interested in non-fiction and biographies. I did not have much knowledge of Pakistan when I began reading and my vision of the country has changed as a result, so it is equally a good read for those not aware of Pakistan's politics. However, it may also be worth viewing other texts in addition to *The Nine Lives of* Pakistan, such as Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography,* as this gives a simpler explanation of the formation of Pakistan and the disputes that still exist.

4. References

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