

## Shamshad Khan

in conversation with John Siddique

**John Siddique:** Hi Shamshad.

**Shamshad Khan:** Hello, John.

**JS:** It's lovely of you to join me.

**SK:** It's wonderful to be here.

**JS:** I wanted just to explore your journey as a writer. I have known you for a very long time, and I don't think we have ever had this chat, so I would love to find out more about your writer's journey, as it were. So, for my first question, can I ask you: When did younger Shamshad discover poetry?

**SK:** Oh, she discovered it with Mrs Adler. She discovered it on the bookshelves at home. She discovered it in Burley Library... a few places, and probably more than that. My eldest sister, Sitara Khan, who studied literature, philosophy, and history, was a big influence in our family life, really. So, it meant we had a bookcase at home and on that bookcase, there were books on philosophy, there was Camus, and Shakespeare. I remember picking out a little collection of *The Tempest*. And because there were some little sections which were poetry – *Under the cowslip bell I lie, merrily, merrily* – as a little kid, I thought, 'Oh, this is like kids poetry!', and that was one of my first introductions. Then, we had Burley Library just on our road in

Leeds, so I used to go and get books but I was going to the children's section there so I had this mix of things - lots of Enid Blyton and the sort of very shiny books which had poems in them and pictures. Those were the very early influences, and then at high school, the teacher Mrs Adler, who was a Marxist. I remember her love for us was probably the most transformative thing. Absolutely passionate. She wasn't good at controlling the class, so we had a real laugh, but she loved literature. I remember writing poetry and I remember writing a poem about death and it having a snake in it; it was something I kept – I think that was the first poem I kept. Yeah, I think those were my main influences, early influences.

**JS:** What age were you then when you read this piece of Shakespeare?

**SK:** I am just trying to remember... I read *Jane Eyre* when I was ten, but I can't remember if I came across the Shakespeare in the bookcase, because at that age I was not really differentiating between adult and children's stuff.

**JS:** What else were you reading back then? Were you a big reader?

**SK:** Up until I was eleven, we had our library literally on the end of our street and over the summer holidays I would get the maximum number of books that I could take out on my ticket. Then I'd take them home and there would be like a stack of books under the settee, and then they'd be taken back. They were adventure stories, there was *Malory Towers*, it was lots of Enid Blyton, those kinds of things. There was a mixture of other books that I found in the house which were adult classics.

**JS:** When did you start feeling like there was a poet in you? There must have been a moment where a kind of a seed broke open in you and the poet

Shamshad began to be part of who you were. How old were you when that happened? What were the circumstances that cracked that seed open?

**SK:** I think what cracked that seed open was having decided to study science instead of literature at degree level. Because I had a number of loves – I loved literature and did it at A Level – but I also loved biology, and came to Manchester to study biology. It was fascinating, but my heart was in literature. That’s when I started writing as a necessity. These scribbles; I was looking at them thinking they’re not good; I need to write them. What the heck; I need something. That’s where Commonword [the writing development organisation] came in. Somehow, I heard about their writing classes and Identity black writers’ group. The beginnings of that seed breaking open, as you describe it, was standing outside the gates of the Greenheys Centre in Moss Side and waiting for this class; and that was the beginning.

**JS:** I was thinking, when I was putting these questions together, and I was trying to figure out how long I have known you. I think it is somewhere between twenty-five and thirty years, which is kind of remarkable. Something that struck me when re-reading your work, that I have found amazing, is that your voice to me has always been fully-formed. It has always had a particular ‘something’ about it and I have been trying to really reflect on what that is really. That is why I wanted to talk to you; it is your voice which is more than the way your voice sounds, there is something else going on. I wonder if you could share with us or talk to us about your use of voice, and what that means to you?

[pause]

**SK:** This is where the silence is central to it, and, we are doing an interview,

so I am going to have to speak, I guess. It touches on the concept of truth and finding that for ourselves in whatever way makes sense to us. I guess the 'voice' that I am using is the one that is closest to the truth that I find in myself, that resonates with the world I'm living in, and vice versa. You know, at different points that has been to express something which feels that it needs to be said, and that may be because of something I am witnessing in the world that I feel I want to convey – an alternative feeling about, or view about – to 'connect' with other people on that aspect.

Some of the writing that came through Commonword was sometimes around race, which was political. But deeper really than even that, is the love that is the core of that search for your own truth. When we are writing from that deep place, there's a sense that the writing is inspired, in the sense that the work we do is to be as still and as centred and open for that creative voice to come through.

That very inspired part is where we have the least ownership of what we write, strangely enough, you know. And yet, when we are developing our craft as a writer – I have talked about this in another interview, I did try to explain this, and my understanding of it is still evolving – but I think the metaphor is almost as though we are crafting a kind of a mesh, and for each of us that mesh is designed by our life and our understanding. Whatever comes through, has an imprint of that mesh, which is aspects of how we have lived our lives and what we've understood. There are, I guess, some aspects that we are involved in and we have a creative role in. But it's then being clear enough that whatever needs to come through, depending on how we've been working on ourselves, different things can come through.

**JS:** I understand, I agree. Thank you very much. Yes, I use the word 'trans-

parenthood', following Hemingway and Joyce. They talk very strongly about 'getting out of the way' of what needs to be communicated, but to be of good service to it. Did you feel that you knew this early on with your writing? When did you clue in? Because people come to writing for all sorts of different reasons. Yours has always seemed to me to be a pure kind of writing – although it expresses so differently, I want to look at that a little bit.

**SK:** I think I probably had a strong sense, from being a child, of this feeling.

**JS:** Is that to do with the house that you grew up in – your parents, your sisters, your family?

**SK:** I think my parents are very different and the beauty of what they felt was important, although my Mum couldn't understand what the heck we were doing with books. If we had the sniffles, she would say, 'There is no need to go to school,' and we would say, 'No, we really want to go. We really want to go!' My Dad, like so many people of his generation, came to Britain having been supporting the country through his involvement in the Second World War, but then actually came to work here, particularly for us to have an education. So, for him, education was a key factor – which is not unusual at all for a lot of South Asian people growing up in Britain – and my Mum was very ambivalent about it. So, it was a wonderful match for us, to have this ease about it, 'It's no big deal, don't worry about it', and then this aspiration that we can have a better life through a spiritual sense and a sense of peacefulness, I guess. That simplicity, some of that came from my family.

**JS:** Yes, as I have been reading your work again, I was trying to pick out the different tones of voice in a way, and how they express themselves. I wrote some words down. Feel free to disagree.

**SK:** Go for it.

**JS:** Femininity, sacredness, love, fear, exaltation of the ordinary, intimacy, sensuality, pinned down with a grasp of specific detail. That's kind of the magic formula that I felt I was seeing. So, what I would like to ask you to do in response to that, is to read us a poem. If you would, could you read 'Honey', part one?

**SK:** You want part one?

**JS:** Yes, if you are happy to do that?

**SK:** When I opened the book, it opened on section twelve. What would you like to hear, John?

**JS:** Whatever you feel drawn to.

**SK:**

they get back together

she tells him:

"you'll have to be worth everything I'll lose"

that  
they'll have to have a plan

she comes up with a few

ways of introducing him  
to her family  
gradually

she thought she might try:

"he's the  
muslim friend  
of a friend  
of my best friend's brother"  
or

"he was brought up muslim  
got separated from his family at birth  
and now  
doesn't know anything about islam  
but he's really willing to learn

and

that's how we met

he was looking at some islamic  
books in a specialist bookshop

and asked me for some help”

she suggests

“maybe you could learn to say –

asalaamalaikum –

in case we ever bump into my family  
unexpectedly”

“look”

he says

“it’s simple

you want to be with me  
and I want to be with you  
you should just say that”

she thinks of jackanory and  
play school nursery rhymes.



**JS:** Shamshad, thank you so much. I was thinking about the voice, you see. I know this part of you as well, as a reader and your ability to give shape to the silence. But I've even seen you – we were on the same bill one time, at some event – and you came out and did your thing and I thought, 'Oh, my god, I've got to go on after Shamshad'. And what you did is a poem where you didn't speak; you did it in sign language. That was ridiculous! Not ridiculous in what you did, but how do you follow that? Your commitment to shaping silence was so great. Your reading voice is really quite something. Could you share a little bit about how you use your vocal instrument?

**SK:** That piece, for example, 'Honey', was directed by Mark Whitelaw and his input as a dramaturg and as a director encouraged, in terms of looking at delivery of lines... This is in the middle part of my performance work... There are aspects where we're looking at performing, just as an actor might be directed. There is some aspect of that. I think in terms of silence, like we were talking about earlier, there is a meditative aspect. So many artists have talked about that, whether we are talking about music... what we hear is so much shaped by the silence before it, and then what we hear next, by the silence in between. But the energy that is created and the feel is impacted upon by what we've said, and that can be the meaning of a word, the sound of it, and that meaning will have feeling and resonance. It's finding in you the feeling that you are talking about and that you are relating to and embodying that emotionally. In the word that you are speaking, you are feeling the emotion of that word and of that phrase and of that memory. I guess, in acting form, it is almost like method acting – you're experiencing what you experienced when you wrote that piece, what inspired that piece. Once you have reached that, the silence means that you've reached that

feeling and you've taken yourself and the audience to that emotional state, and you don't then need the words because the words are just the steps to get you to that place emotionally and energetically.

**JS:** And what I love is that you don't overcook it. I have seen some pure horror show performances, where people have squeezed their emotions out in a very false and traumatic way, trying to find pain resonance in the audience; 'trauma bonding'. It's a terrible way to operate. The difference between an artist, such as yourself, with that ability and the blunt force trauma of somebody doing that is huge... I cannot thank you enough. It's like drinking pure water, it's fantastic.

**SK:** It's interesting, what you're saying, in terms of the pain. In the last few years, particularly, whilst I've not been performing in quite some time – most of my work has shifted to writing for other people to perform – because of my intention to be a constructive influence, sometimes I've wanted to share information or facts to help both heal myself and other people through what is being acknowledged.

Whether it's in the past – it might be something about racism or some aspect or some sort of gender issue – increasingly what I've been recognising is that, if we go to that place, and we speak from that place, we are reconnecting with that, as you called it, trauma in ourselves, and it's then activating it in the people who are listening. There's a fine line, and I'm finding, and understanding, that increasingly my practice is to be writing about things of joy. In my new work, the piece that I'm in discussion about with – we have just done an R and D with – HOME, which is the art centre in Manchester, we've got the theme of 'Ode to Joy'. This has been a con-

certed shift for me because it's to say: this is the way forward, encouraging ourselves to be in a state of love and joy, and whilst there's things that are going on in the world that will draw us away from there, for our own wellbeing, our practice can be to keep taking ourselves and other people there as much as we can. This relates to the piece on resilience because it links with the other work I do around coaching and resilience, and it feeds into where I'm taking myself in terms of where I'm choosing to go with my writing, my creative writing as well.

**JS:** Since you brought up the word 'resilience', I wonder if you could explore that a little bit more for us because it's come to be a very two-sided word and I don't think you mean it in the way that sometimes it's interpreted. Just to explain what I mean by that... I teach meditation, I work as a sacred teacher – that's what people say, I don't use those words myself, but you have to have some kind of thing and yet, somehow, I keep on writing as well – I come across the putting forward of, 'we need to be more stoic and we need to be more resilient', for people dealing with really difficult areas of their life and their work and so on. And in a way, the negative thing that can be heard from that, is that it puts the blame on the person, rather than the culture changing. You work with people to help them with this. What does resilience mean in a better state?

**SK:** I think the things that you've talked about can be qualified, because all of these things, they're not new aspects. Obviously, mindfulness, that term, has come through the Buddhist pathway and it's come and been adopted and integrated into corporate processes and language, and, as with anything, it can be used to mask something else. And we can put our attention

on that, or we can look up, 'What was its original intention?' and 'How and what are the benefits for it?' So, there's currently inequality in the world and that has a history and a momentum that's working its way through. Over time, certain things have been changed and that has sometimes been by concerted efforts, by people campaigning, and those campaigns have been in all sorts of different formats. Whether it's been anti-slavery, whether it's been campaigns for votes for women all over the world, including here, people have found ways to change the lot for themselves, or for other people who have been oppressed. Within that, each individual person has to have a responsibility, but more than that, it's how, given that in this particular moment, the only way that we can experience this moment any differently, is to find a way to access something within ourselves. I think your practice is a part of that, but these two things have to work hand in hand. So, we can be somebody who is trying to find that peace within ourselves and it may be that somebody has experienced sexual abuse in their own life or physical violence, but right now, they're going to need to find some peace. So, what are the tools and mechanisms? There's a whole range of what those can be.

**JS:** Wonderful. We've been talking way longer than we were meant to. You are just so easy to talk with. Let me just ask you a couple of last things. Your writing has changed over the years; you work with dance, you work with puppetry. You say you write more for other people now, and that other people speak the words, which is incredible. What kind of inspiration do you find yourself drawing on these days? Have things changed? You have been writing a long, long time. What has kept you going through the long haul?

**SK:** Not writing has kept me going. So, over that period of time, there's

been lots of 'not writing', not publishing. So, it was back in 2007 that my collection *Megalomaniac* came together, and I have been writing since, but I haven't been in any rush to publish anything. I've been looking after myself, I've been reading and doing collaborations...and where those collaborations have been drawing on material... *Moon Watcher*, which was a multimedia piece which used puppetry and animation, was a collaboration through the Horse + Bamboo Theatre company. That drew on a number of things, my own family history, but [also] a long project which Horse + Bamboo did in arts and heritage within their local area in Rossendale. And it was drawing together stories of first-generation British Asians; mother/daughter relationships has been the central aspect of the story.

So, really, drawing on a number of factors, but then, even within that, I am finding that depth within myself and the silence within me to allow something very personal to come through, that I feel I can voice and bring together, whether it's global issues about climate change, whether it's things that we want to hear. We want things to be reframed in a more enlightened way. Finding vehicles for that, opportunities for it. I've really enjoyed that process, sort of co-directing. I worked with a woman actor for her to be delivering the lines.

**JS:** Maybe newer writers listening, or less experienced writers perhaps, listening to this might be quite surprised to hear that one of your working methodologies is to not write. Culturally, we're kind of so... even this morning, I was out having coffee, and somebody said, 'Are you busy?', and my reply these days is, 'No'. Then people look at you quite strangely, to chose the path of not busyness so you can actually get things done, or being creative in the way that you want. I think perhaps we're still living an industrial

revolution model of what busyness means. That's wonderful: the space is the way to create. But just to finish off, let me just ask you this last little thing. Could you share with us three 'desert island' books that if we were to read them, we would get to know Shamshad better?

**SK:** Gerard Manley Hopkins – poetry. Rumi's poetry in Farsi. A book made of water.

**JS:** And who's that? Who's a book made of water?

**SK:** It could be the stream that runs somewhere close to here.

**JS:** Thank you, Shamshad.

**SK:** Pleasure.

**JS:** Thank you so much, that's absolutely brilliant.

**SK:** I enjoyed it, thank you. Lovely to be here.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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