

WRITERSMOSAIC

Anjum Malik

in conversation with Trish Cooke

TRISH COOKE: I'm at Manchester Metropolitan University with Anjum Malik. It's a very busy day, all the students are just arriving, and we've managed to find a room to have a little chat. Welcome to *WritersMosaic*, Anjum Malik.

ANJUM MALIK: Thank you, Trish. It's a real pleasure to be here.

TC: So, I'd like to ask you a few questions but, really, I'd like you to let the listeners know about yourself – who you are and what kind of writing you do.

AM: I was born in Saudi Arabia, in Dhahran, which is by the sea, but my parents are both from Pakistan. My father was working for an oil company, Aramco, and my mother went out to join him and that's where I was born. I was in Saudi until I was seven. Then we went to Pakistan for about four years and then we came to England. We lived in London to begin with, which we loved, but my mum was desperate to be nearer her sister, who lived in Dewsbury in Yorkshire.

We ended up very quickly in Bradford because Dewsbury was quite traumatic. I'm sure it's a lovely place now but we had a house on a very cobbled, hilly street; the toilets were halfway down the street, so dad had to take us all with him. I had two sisters at the time and a baby brother, but I remember going down with my two sisters, like my youngest sister on dad's shoulders and me and my other sister holding my dad's hand, and us walking down the street in the dark.

TC: So, what inspired you to start writing?

AM: I think I was always writing. I used to write a diary. I remember my younger sister saying, 'You know you're writing poems in there,' and I'd go, 'You're talking rubbish.' But I was always writing. Mum and dad must have seen it in me, and my sister as well, and both of my sisters are really good writers. The sister two and a half years younger than me and I used to have – we called him Masterji – a private tutor who would come, when we lived in Pakistan for four years, every day for two hours after school and teach us Urdu poetry and we would study the language. We would look at stories and I loved it, and I was always desperately waiting for him. As soon as we'd got home and had something to eat, 'where's Masterji'? That's what I remember most.

TC: So, writing has been in your blood from a very young age?

AM: The family that I come from in Pakistan are writers and photographers and artists. One of my uncles was a very big writer when Pakistan was formed so he was very close to [Muhammad Ali] Jinnah. When Pakistan was formed, it had a lot of languages, so Urdu was made its national language. It's a bit of a bourgeois language, so there's a lot of people who are against it, and for very good reason, because they said it was kind of doing away with indigenous languages. One of them was our family language which is Pothwari. So, my uncle, who was a big poet, was also published in Pothwari. So, I have his book actually, which I found when I went to Pakistan.

And when my mum was growing up, girls weren't allowed to read and write. And there was a whole generation of men, starting with my paternal grandfather, who taught women to read and write in secret, in India and Pakistan. And so, my mum and her sister learned to read and write when they weren't meant to. And my poet uncle would let my mum sit and listen to his poetry recitals, outside the window where they couldn't be seen, but they could hear very clearly. He would give them snacks and things. And my mum writes beautiful poetry, so it's kind of normal in the family.

TC: It sounds like you also write in more than one language.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

TC: So, how many languages do you write in?

AM: I write in Urdu and in English, because mum was very particular about it. But when we arrived in England they didn't do exams in Urdu and my mum wanted me to do Urdu O Level and A Level, and the headteacher said [they] didn't do it. So now, I can't imagine how mum did it, but I remember her arriving at school saying she's found the examining board which would let me do O Level and A Level in Urdu and she was going to teach me. She turned up at the school, told the headteacher exactly what we were going to do, I did my O Level and A Level; I got As in them.

TC: So, when you're writing in both languages do you tend to write something first in English and then in Urdu, or do you write it in Urdu and then in English?

AM: Well, when I became officially a writer here, I started performing as a professional poet. I remember refusing to tell people anything about the Urdu poems I was reading out in public. I said it wasn't my problem that they didn't understand Urdu, it was *their* problem. But looking back, I know what I was doing. Because I've had so much trouble doing Urdu at school, there was so much emphasis put on – that I had to translate things and, in my mind, I think, 'Well, I'm not the one who doesn't understand it. I understand your language and mine.' You know because my headteacher would give me a hard time, he was quite racist. The English teacher was quite racist. And I remember that they would shout at me

because I would answer back, because I was the only Asian kid who could speak English.

So, I decided that if you couldn't understand my language, it wasn't my problem, because I could understand yours. But it was amazing because none of the audiences ever reacted badly. They loved hearing poetry in Urdu and a lot of times poems just come in one language to me.

TC: Things can get lost in translation quite easily.

AM: Yeah, yeah, but I remember there was a long time where I refused to even say what the poem was about. But if you understand Urdu, that was fine. But then I think I've kind of relaxed a little and I've translated quite a lot of my poems and people have helped and said, 'Can we translate your poems?' And I don't mind now, but I think that's the really... I think with you coming to talk to me about this, through this project, has made me think about why it's important not to put emphasis on translation. Because it's not important to translate everything. It's better to just leave it because we will lose things because people who need translations, generally are monolingual and they can only understand things from one point of view. And, really, they need to just let go of that and trust people and just let us do it in our languages.

TC: You touched on your work here at the university and so I'd like you to go into a little bit more depth on that. What is it that you do here and why is it important to you?

AM: Well, I teach scriptwriting. I write for TV, film, theatre and radio. So, I teach all those in my scriptwriting classes and I also teach poetry, as a poet. I think one of the wonderful things about this university is that they really, really do not have a box to shove you in and they bring you in, with all your glory, and they let you do what you want to do, how you want to do it. And of course, we've got a course to deliver, and we've got to help our students pass and get their degrees and everything. When I came in, I said, 'I want to teach the way I want to teach.'

Every year – I've only been here as a permanent member of staff for three years and I've been coming here for maybe 15 years as a visiting lecturer, as an honorary fellow – every year, my students have been winning awards, and I said that they would when I came in. And it's not because I'm cocky, it's because I know what I'm doing. And I say to my students, 'If you do what I tell you, you're going to get commissioned or you're going to win competitions.' And there's no point in being a writer if your work is not going to get published or produced, and the students who go ahead and run with me, get it.

TC: What are the key things you would say to the listeners who are, some of them are writers, or wanting to be writers, what are the key things that you tell your students that kind of steers them in the right direction to be published?

AM: Well, you have to *write*. You can't wing it. Do not leave it to the end, because you can't. You cannot be a writer by sleeping for a year and then writing for twenty-four hours, or a week. You just can't. You've got to do it bit by bit. You've got to do all the drafts. You've got to listen to someone, whoever's editing your work. You've got to be able to take criticism and run with it, and you've just got to work really, really hard. You've got to just keep going and you've got to finish.

TC: Yes.

AM: If you can't finish something, you're never going to make a writer. Everybody has great ideas... everybody! But the people who make it are the ones who finish their work and then rewrite and rewrite and rewrite.

TC: Which brings me to your own writing process. What do you, Anjum, set your day as, when you're writing?

AM: Well, I'm very lucky because I have commissions. Since I did my MA, I've been lucky enough to have commissions in my hand and I'm one of those writers who works better when I know I have a commission and that my bills are going to be paid. Otherwise, I get stressed, because I rely on my writing to pay my bills. I will always have a deadline. I'll know when I have to deliver a first draft, and I do

deliver – always on time. That’s the other thing you have to do as a writer. I never say, ‘Can I have another day or two?’

On a daily basis, my ideal day is to get up really early. I wake up at sometimes half five, six, just by myself, and write. And I will write for two hours or three hours. And imagine if you start writing at six and by eight you’ve done two hours; by ten o’clock you’ve done four hours. That’s a lot of writing. Then you can walk around – well I do – feeling full of yourself: I’ve done my day’s work. You can literally do anything and it’s a really nice, light feeling. When I haven’t done that, I’ve dragged myself around. But usually, I have a fixed time.

Nowadays, actually, things have changed a little because at the university they’ve given me a desk and we have a wonderful writing room and I come into the writing room, and I write. And there’s people talking, but I quite enjoy it and I wrote my last drama series for Radio 4, BBC Radio 4. That was a book I adapted, a cookbook written by Claudia Roden, an introduction to Middle Eastern cookery. And then I’d just sit and write, and then when I was done, I’d go home. And it was really nice because before, I was working from home, my office was my front room. So, I could always be sneaking back in and then find myself working when I shouldn’t be. But now it’s quite nice if I do it at the writing school because when I’ve done what I’m there for, I’ll go, ‘Right. I’m going home now.’ And then I feel really relaxed.

TC: Good.

AM: So, it's a nice... That works really well, so I'm planning on doing that again because I've just been commissioned for another cookbook I'm adapting to drama series – Madhur Jaffrey's this time, her first cookbook – which I'm going to be writing in January, January to March.

TC: And what is it that inspires you to write about cooking?

AM: Well, I love food. So, my poetry is all about food. I used to write about everything, and I still do. But I started writing about food because we had the Commonwealth Games here in Manchester and The Lowry were looking for four artists and one of them was a writing residency and I landed it. We had to have a hook and I came up with the idea of food because, you know, the Brits went out looking for food, and food in the widest context, treasures, spices. And now all those countries, we come as migrants looking for our 'food', which is education, improving our lives, or whatever. So that's how I came up with it. But it turns out it's a brilliant subject and you can write about it in any way you want. I've progressed from poetry to drama.

TC: But you've always been writing drama. When I first met you, you were writing drama then, and that script, if I remember rightly, was about house fires, women being set alight, or their saris being set alight. And you gave me some insight into it many years ago. Would you like to just tell us a bit about that?

AM: They're called 'kitchen fire deaths' in India and Pakistan. Sadly, it's a huge thing. Literally thousands of women die every year, where they accidentally, conveniently, catch fire, when they're not wanted anymore, in the kitchen. And you know what, they just hang on in there until they burn to death. Like, if you were to catch your hand on a stove, how quickly do you take your hand away from the flame? You know, instantly. And if there was a fire spreading, how quickly would you run out of the kitchen?

TC: Of course. You'd be out of there like a shot.

AM: Well, these women don't. They hang around until they burn to death. But what I found was that in Bradford, where I was living, these things were happening, and in one year, in 1985 I think, there were four deaths in one year. And my mum used to run a corner shop, a gift shop, in Bradford, and I would go and sit and listen to her and the women, and they would come in and talk about these deaths. So, I wrote a poem called *Snaking Flame*, which now I've made into a film. And then, I remember I became a poet and started reading this poem out thinking everybody would know what I was talking about, because it's like an open secret in the Asian community. If you say a 'kitchen fire death', everybody knows. But then with horror, I realised in the non-Asian audiences I was reading my poem out to, that nobody knew. I was part of the secret which was quite a shock to me. People would say, 'We don't know what you're talking about.' And I'd go, 'Oh my

god.' My first radio play I got commissioned to write with the BBC was called *Snaking Flame*. And then, ever since I met you, I've been writing this film.

TC: Yep.

AM: And believe it or not, I had rewritten it and I've just finished. I've got a director on it and we're about to go and cast.

TC: Good.

AM: And so, you never know. It might get made any day now.

TC: So, is that in film form or radio form?

AM: Yeah, it's a feature film. It's a social thriller. Yeah, thank you for reminding me of that.

TC: You have been a policewoman at some point in your life.

AM: Yes, I have been a policewoman in Yorkshire.

TC: And how did that come about?

AM: I don't know really. I mean, I don't think I knew what I was doing. I never even knew there were cells in a police station when I joined the police. So, I think my police sergeants were a little bit horrified by this naïve young woman who turned up to be a policewoman. And I really enjoyed it. I think it was the making of me really, because they throw you in at the deep end. I did alright in the police, you know. I think now I know, now that I'm older, that I do alright wherever I throw myself into. I'm one of those people who just gets on with it and does the best she can.

TC: And do you find that you've used that experience in much of your work – I mean, apart from *Snaking Flame*?

AM: Yeah definitely, because you know, you get to deal with people, and you see them at their worst. You know, they've just had the worst day and you're probably going to make it worse for them, even when you're helping them, you know. So, I have a never-ending admiration for the police because of where I've been and what I've done with them. Because the majority of the job is looking after people who are facing the worst day in their life.

TC: What I'd like to talk to you about now is your current work, Hidden Stories, that you've been working on. Tell us about that.

AM: Well, you know Hidden Stories came about in a very interesting way. As a writer, we pitch ideas to commissioners. So, I would go and pitch ideas to commissioners and they'd say, 'Oh, nobody would want to see this or hear this or blah, blah, blah. Usual, no, no, no.' And I'd think, 'I think lots of people would want to hear it and see it. This is a really good story.' And so, one day I got very, very fed up and decided that I would make this story happen. So, I came up with this idea of Hidden Stories. And I went to the Arts Council. Well, I didn't just go to the Arts Council, I went to a couple of organisations I work with.

TC: And what is the idea of Hidden Stories? What was the pitch?

AM: The core idea is that these are stories which are [about] hard-to-reach groups, you know. They're defined as hard-to-reach groups. Stories that you don't see in the mainstream, you know; stories of working-class, black people, anything like that. The thing is, they're not hard-to-reach. You and I know they're not hard-to-reach. You just have to turn up and say, 'Can I talk to you?' And so, maybe I have a knack, being an ex-cop, that a lot of people will talk to me and confide in me, and let me in.

So, I come up with a concept. The last one I did was to do with refugees and asylum seekers. But not just any refugees and asylum seekers, destitute refugees and asylum seekers, who are not recognised. So, not a lot of people know that when you're not recognised as a refugee, there are no numbers. You're not a statistic, you're just living on the streets.

TC: Right.

AM: There's no help available. You can't even go to the doctor. You have no money. You can't claim anything and you're totally at the mercy of someone helping you. So, an amazing man in Manchester came up with a charity called Boaz Trust, and I'm one of the volunteers. So, I decided to collect their stories. And so, I had Arvon come in, Portico Library Manchester, Manchester Met University. They all came in with money. So, I raised half the money, then I applied for the other half from the Arts Council. And so, for that, I've just produced a publication, my first one, through Hidden Stories Press.

TC: That's your own publication?

AM: Yeah. I'm going to be publishing those ones.

TC: How do you go about that?

AM: I have no idea how you go about it. I just come up with these crazy ideas and I've just produced a book, which has taken me a year.

TC: So, you've got the book, the physical book, you've done that?

AM: Yeah.

TC: The distribution is the difficult part I find when you're publishing yourself. How are you thinking to do that?

AM: For a start, the Manchester Met library are going to help me. So, you're going to be able to buy it through them.

TC: Right. Good.

AM: So, they've said that I could do it through them, and they've helped me. The university has been amazing. They've helped me at every step of the way. So, that's been pretty awesome. Arvon have been incredible. And so, I think I just happened to have these amazing people, you know, who came in as partners and it means now, that I kind of know the pitfalls and hopefully the next one will be a

bit easier. So, I produced a book. I produced a monologue as well, which I've been doing for other Hidden Stories projects.

TC: And is that part of the book?

AM: That will be a separate resource. So, the monologue will be a script plus with the director's notes. So, an organisation will be able to pick it up, or a school, and perform that piece themselves, and through it learn the stories of the people I've worked with.

TC: So, the monologue is written by you?

AM: Yes.

TC: The people that you've worked with have written... Have they written down their particular stories?

AM: Yeah, the publication has got their stories which I've edited. They may be poems, they may be little stories, and the book also has the workshops I've used. Because we did a weekend with Arvon where we are ... because there's a lot of incredibly talented, educated asylum-seekers here in Manchester, and I'm sure

everywhere. You know, journalists and lecturers ... who all found themselves in the streets in this country. So, they came for this weekend. Some terribly talented people who wrote pieces, so they are all in there as well.

TC: There's something I'd like to ask you that I find quite difficult myself, and that's writing versus life. How do you keep that writing versus life balance?

AM: How do you mean? Like, just being available for your loved ones?

TC: Yeah. Available for your loved ones. Available for the things you enjoy doing, that isn't writing. Available to just be in front of the television, and just kind of watch mindless TV, if that's what you enjoy doing.

AM: Yeah, I like doing that. It is really hard, isn't it? Because when you're into something which needs to be written, you can't come up for air. I think I do disappear sometimes. When I first started writing, you know, when I did my MA, I decided to go into it full-time, I did lose a lot of friends because they got fed up – understandably. They'd say, 'Do you want to come out on Saturday?' And I'd go, 'Oh, I don't know.' And I was really obsessive when I first started writing scripts, because I think you have to be. And I literally used to write for twelve, fourteen hours a day. And I'd just keep going. And I just didn't want to be bothered by anyone. And so, I think what I do now is ... I would say I'm a bit better. My people

in my life might not agree, where I try and go in and say, 'You know I'm going to write until I've done that and I'm going to go out.' But if I'm in the middle of a production, or I've got a deadline, I do tend not to commit myself because I don't want to worry about having to go out, because then I might be in the middle of something where I have to finish it. But I think what I've done is... I do my gym, which really helps me. I have an allotment. So, I think what I've done is, I've got places where I can go without having to rely on someone.

TC: OK. Yes.

AM: [Laughs] I've just realised as I'm talking to you. And then I have a handful of friends who are used to me coming up for air.

TC: OK, that's good.

AM: ... and letting me turn up and not saying, 'Well, we haven't seen you for weeks. Where have you been?' Some people do say that. It doesn't make any difference to me. And I suppose I know other writers and artists who are the same. And so, you just hope that they're there when you're free. But I don't get too upset when people say they are too busy because they've just got on with their life while you've disappeared.

TC: [Laughs]

AM: I think I'm a bit more established now, so it's a little bit easier, because there was a time when I was desperate to get some recognition, some work, you know. And I was worried about my bills, so I had to work. And I had to find work which paid, and I really wanted it to be through writing. So then, you just had to forgo everything and never say 'no'. And even now, saying 'no' is really hard. I get really anxious because... But, I've learnt how to say, 'I can't do it now, but what about then', and things like that. It's a little bit easier now that I can say, 'Well, I'm going to be busy' or 'I need to make time to see family.' I think I'm in a great place. I'm very lucky. I love going to my work and doing my work. I'm always very excited about it. Yeah, I know... it's been brilliant. It's been so nice... I think you've brought up some really important questions and thoughts about writers, and black writers especially.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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