The Khan

Saima Mir

When I wrote *The Khan* (2021), I was looking for a crime novel about family, something like *The Godfather* but with a British Asian backdrop. I couldn't find anything to fit the bill, and in turn I couldn't stop thinking about the story I wanted to read, while wondering why it didn't exist. Family is a huge part of South Asian culture, along with all the drama that can bring. Immigrants from India and Pakistan have a track record of building successful businesses in Britain, and this too fed into the narrative I was looking for. Nothing else interested me, and the story in my head kept getting bigger and bigger, until I sat down to write it myself. I wrote the first draft whilst pregnant with my first child, and the version that is in shops today evolved in many ways, but the themes I started with are still there.

Growing up, representations of Muslims of British Pakistani background in books were few and far between. What there was, didn't fall under the banner of commercial fiction, or the genre of crime. I read widely, and loved losing myself in stories about different parts of the world. I discovered books by the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa whilst visiting my grandmother's home in Karachi, and for the first time I read about brown women. Her books were a little closer to what I wanted, being set in Pakistan and pre-partition India, but they still weren't about being brown and British. I didn't know it back then, but I was always scanning stories looking for myself within the

words. This is what many readers do, what it is they find when they fall in love with a character. The beauty of stories is that we don't have to be the same gender, race or religion as a character to relate to them. But, as a child of two worlds, it was important for me to see myself somewhere in the stories I loved. It meant I was not invisible, and that there was space for me to be me.

As a British woman of Pakistani heritage, I set out to write a crime novel with characters who looked and sounded like me and the women I knew. Almost every representation I came across of women from my background was one I couldn't identify with. There were victims of outright oppression, women rejecting their culture in favour of stereotyped western lifestyles, some full of internalised racism, and almost all were in need of rescuing. The women I knew were strong, smart, savvy. They navigated the complexities of intersectionality, of being many, overlapping things, with grace, and sometimes with rage, and they did not fit the stereotypes.

Out of these ideas was born – Jia Khan. *The Khan* is essentially her story. She is a successful London barrister and the daughter of a criminal kingpin. She has been estranged from her family for over a decade, but when her father is killed and her brother kidnapped, she finds herself drawn back into the underworld. Once there, she navigates patriarchy, misogyny, cultural contradictions, and the rival gang that is ready to take over the city of her birth. She returns to her culture as a grown woman, who has come to know herself, and who has great self-control and poise. She knows how to navigate rooms, in the way that women learn through experience. Where men can be the same in every room, women must first gauge and measure before deciding which tool to take from their arsenal to get the best result.

Along with handling her father's men, the Jirga, she also deals with her estranged husband and their teenage son. Jia Khan does not conform to the typical representation of motherhood. She becomes a matriarch by the end of the novel, but her methods are maybe not what one expects from a South Asian woman.

The Khan is not just about crime, it is also about family, and about the lines we will cross for those we love. As a journalist and a writer, I was often struck by the ingenuity of the criminal underworld, the things that people would do to make money, and the lengths to which they would go. I often pondered what paths people might have taken, given different circumstances, and what they could have achieved if they'd been given other opportunities. This was especially true during my career as a reporter in Yorkshire. I spent many hours listening to testimony at various Crown Courts, and watching barristers navigate the law, the accused give their evidence, and judges make their rulings.

I started my career as a reporter at the *Telegraph & Argus* in Bradford, West Yorkshire. I was raised in this beautiful and misunderstood city, where I spent more than three decades of my life. To me, it was a place of breathtaking views, amazing architecture, and people full of kindness and grit.

I attended a school in the heart of Manningham, an area that was at the centre of two riots, and walked past a burnt out BMW garage the day after the city had raged. When you live and work in a place, you see it for what it really is, you see past the spin and headlines that outsiders put on it. You see the blood, sweat and tears of those who built it, brick by brick, and of those left behind once those bricks have been thrown. You see when the

fuse was lit, and by whom, and you see the potential the place once had. *The Khan* was my attempt at capturing all of this, with raw honesty.

As a reporter, I'd often cover late shifts which ran from 3pm to 11pm. My colleagues would finish work and head home around 5.30pm. I would stay in the office, making regular calls to the police and fire brigade, following up leads, and developing contacts who knew what was really going on. I'd head out to stories, but if all the copy was already in, and there wasn't an interview in the diary, I would take my mobile phone and my reporter's notebook and head into the centre of town. I'd walk from Hall Ings towards Centenary Square, past the nineteenth-century Bradford City Hall. In winter, the Grade I listed edifice was bathed in soft orange light, its landmark clock tower standing tall, keeping watch and counting time.

I'd cross the road towards the Alhambra Theatre and head towards a café at the edge of the city centre, called Café Lahore. It was filled with young British Asians, looking for a place to hang out. The décor was different to other curry houses or cafés at the time. The place was filled with chrome chairs and brown tables. The burnt orange walls were hung with prints of film posters, classic Hollywood and vintage Bollywood. Images of Amitabh Bachchan in double denim, during his 'angry young man' phase in the eighties, were placed beside Al Pacino in his iconic role as Michael Corleone. The crowd was people in their 20s, a mix of professionals and students. The menu was a mix of lamb or vegetable karahis and grills, alongside lasagne with a masala kick, and all these were followed by school dinner puddings – a reflection of our second- and third-generation upbringing.

I'd place my phones and my shorthand-covered notebook on the table, and people watch. I'd have dinner there, meet friends, develop contacts and

make new acquaintances. It was here that the seed of *The Khan* was planted. This world that was never written about, but where I spent so much of my time. None of this was to be found in bookshelves yet, especially not when seen through the eyes of a woman.

Bentleys and Ferraris occasionally drove by, but the streets were mainly filled with BMWs and Mercedes. The beauty business was thriving, and young women liked to spend their money on treatments, hair and handbags. There was money, but it wasn't spoken of. This was a different kind of Yorkshire to the one seen in *Last of the Summer Wine*, and it was one I loved. The mix of languages spoken, the spectrum of skin tones, it felt fascinating and undocumented.

As a journalist, I covered a variety of stories and was given glimpses into the lives of a cross section of people. I was often sent out to the reception desk of our smoked glass building by the news editor, to meet someone who had walked in and asked to speak to a journalist. I remember one man who relayed a story to me, about a shady but powerful group of men who ran the city. Short, and smelling of booze, he had greying hair and a face covered with lines and crevices. He was passionate about his tale, and convinced of its truth, but there was no evidence to back up his claims. Urban myths like this came fast and frequently during my career, and they watered the story seeds in my head.

Court reporting, inquests and investigative pieces were all good grounding for developing story ideas and characters. The scent of various court houses, the sun shining on the street where a heinous crime had been committed, the broken look in the eyes of an accused person, these things all stayed with me, like a box of textile cuttings, ready to be called up when I sat down to stitch *The Khan* together. I met all kinds of characters, and

my position allowed me to ask them questions I would not otherwise have been able to. One of the best things about being a journalist is the privilege of mixing with people at all levels within society.

I loved the city where I grew up, but the media seemed to concentrate on its racial divide, problems and poverty. They couldn't see the hope, the joy or the real reasons for what was going on. The fact that these were real people with dreams and ambitions was conveniently forgotten. I always felt we were judged, maligned and undersold. Yes, there were problems, but there were reasons for them, and there were people who wanted things to change.

When I wrote the first draft of *The Khan*, it was a screenplay and in it Jia Khan was written as a man. The story only came alive when I re-drafted and decided to make the protagonist female. All of the sudden, I could relate to her better, I knew what she was up against, and the story developed layers that it didn't have before. The shift in perspective radically changed and it became a novel about more than just crime. It became about the things that women have to do to succeed, and the ways in which patriarchy tries to tear them down.

The Khan is a labour of love, and a love story to the city and region where I grew up. It is about womanhood, and the point at which women learn to step away from the things society tells them they should be, the point at which they become what they were destined to be. It is about stepping into one's own power.

It is a crime story, and therefore not a representation of all that is good in the world. I wasn't looking to write positive characters who show my heritage in an idealised light; I wanted flawed human beings navigating the

greys of society, struggling with life's realities, making mistakes, and being fully rounded characters. I wanted memorable characters who happened to have some similarities with my background. It is not a representation of all facets of every Muslim woman, or every British Pakistani family, or even the North, but it is the story I wanted to tell at a particular moment in time, and I hope it will open doors into a world not always encountered by white society, which will allow other women to step through with their own tales.

Saima Mir

Saima Mir is an award-winning journalist and writer. She has written for numerous publications including *The Guardian, The Times, The Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Prior to this she worked for the BBC.

Her debut novel, *The Khan*, was released in April 2021 to critical acclaim. It is a Times & Sunday Times Crime Novel of the Year.

Saima's work has also appeared in the anthologies *It's Not About the Burqa* (2019) and *The Best Most Awful Job* (2020). She is a recipient of The Commonwealth Broadcast Association World View Award, and the K. Blundell Trust Award. Saima's work has been longlisted for the SI Leeds Literary Prize, and the Bath Novel Award. Her screenplay *Ruby & Matt* has been optioned by Rendition Films.

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