WRITERS MOSAIC

Celeste Mohammed

In Conversation with Sophie Jai

> 'A buck, this little man that you keep in a bottle or wherever, comes from Guyana, people send to Guyana to buy bucks or whatever illegally, and they make you rich. But the deal that you have to strike with this buck is that you must take a life.'
>
> — Celeste Mohammed

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Sophie Jai talks to the Trinidadian novelist, Celeste Mohammed, about her second novel, *Ever Since We Small*.

[Music]

Sophie Jai (SJ): So we're sitting here with Celeste Mohammed, who has just released her second novel, *Ever Since We Small*. My name is Sophie Jai, and we'll be talking with Celeste today. So Celeste, you're just coming off the last stop in your UK tour, which happened just yesterday, I believe. How has the tour been for you?

Celeste Mohammed (CM): It's been amazing. I did not know what to expect. When I saw the schedule, I was like, *wow. That's intense.* But it's been good because it's allowed me to really travel around, for the first time to go so far out of London – I'm usually just in London – meet so many different types of people, and really have a different experience in terms of seeing how people are reacting to the book. Yeah, so I'm happy. I'm happy with how things have gone.

SJ: Yeah. Are you completely exhausted yet?

CM: I am completely exhausted. I think I was running on adrenaline. And yesterday after the last public event, I went home, and I just couldn't—I was like, *this is it. I'm done*.

SJ: Yeah, yeah. Are you going back to any more events in Trinidad or anything after this?

CM: Yes, yes. And actually, I have maybe four days at home, four or five days, and then I have to leave for the British Virgin Islands Lit Fest, which is another—

SJ: It sounds lovely.

CM: It sounds lovely. Yes, it does, but I'm tired. So that's another five days over there, and then I come back. And at the end of November, I have an event in Trinidad as well. And then hopefully that's it.

SJ: Yeah, hopefully. Well, I mean, this is not your first time, obviously, touring. *Ever Since We Small* is your sophomore novel. And your debut was a huge success, *Pleasantview*, which won the 2022 Focus Prize for Caribbean literature, the most prestigious Caribbean prize, among a few others that you won. So I always really like to hear, and our audience always really likes to hear how the experience has been for you writing your sophomore novel. Most writers find it more difficult than the first. I, myself, am in this process as well. And I just wanted to know what has it been like for you?

CM: Yeah, that's a good question because of course, when I was—*Pleasantview* was my thesis in school. And of course, you're done, you have this book, and for five years or

so after—no, I graduated in 2016—for about four years, I was intensely working on perfecting the book and trying to get it published. All of my energy, all of my mind, everything, was on that. And then when it was accepted for publication in 2020, it was accepted, it was coming out the following year, 2021, and so all of my energy was seeing this through the publication process. And then it comes out, and I didn't know what to expect. I'm just glad it's out. And then it blows up in this really big way. And immediately people start asking, 'So what's next?' And I hadn't thought about what was next. So it was like, *oh, my God*. And then when the following year, 2022, when it won the Bocas Award, the pressure was even more intense. How am I ever going to top this? Because things were being written that I won the award with my debut, blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, *okay, So what am I going to do? How am I—I don't even have any another story. I've never written another story. I don't know what to do here.*

So I kind of tricked myself into writing another book. I started with one story. And then people think that we sit at our desks, and we just write the book in order. That's not how it happened. I started with one story, the story that is now number six in the book was the first thing I had written. Then I wrote two more because people were asking me for short pieces to put in various anthologies or whatever. So I ended up writing two more. And then now that I had three stories, I was like, *well, this is half a book, so let me sit down and actually plan out where to go from here.* And so that is how—and once I

had made that plan, okay, I could see how a book could come out of this, and I started to flesh out each of the stories to get to what this is. And along the way, along that journey, it took about three years. I would say it took about three years to write this. It could have been shorter, but there was a lot happening. And along the way, it became a very intensely personal experience. So that's how it came to be. It just snowballed from one story.

SJ: Yeah. So it was almost, well, very much a novel by force because you were forcing yourself to write and other people were forcing you to write too. And I know you said you felt it could have been shorter, but I wished it was longer because I will ask about some of the stories in this book, but I personally don't think—I could do with a few more stories. [CM laughs] Because I'm actually writing up the book review for it for *WritersMosaic* as well, and I was getting—I was still writing it this morning, and I was getting quite emotional about making sure I did the review justice in the same way that this book has done justice for a Trinidadian women audience. So I can imagine that emotional journey that—

CM: Yeah, it became deeply, deeply emotional. Deeply emotional. Because you go from, at least me, so I go from one story, two stories, three, just trying to write because people want stuff, to coming up with a plan for a new book. And I'm like, *hey, okay*. And

I sit to flesh out my plan by writing each story. But I knew that I was going to write about intimate partner violence in Trinidad. I knew I was going to write about that particularly in relation to Indian culture. I knew all of that. But you know this academically, right? You know it theoretically in your head that this is what the book is gonna be about. But then when I sit to start doing the research, I had to ask—begin to ask my cousins, my great aunt, I had to rack my memory for things my grandmother might've told me, and it started me down a road of the examination of Indian culture that I needed to do to write the book became an examination of my own family history. Do you know what I mean?

SJ: Oh yeah, of course. Of course.

CM: And I'm not sure I was prepared for some of the answers that I was getting from my great aunt and other family members. And some of them remembering. It's one thing to know or have heard something as a child; it's another thing to remember it or be made to remember it as an adult, as a woman, and suddenly see it in a new way.

SJ: Yeah, completely. Like *Pleasantview*, this novel is also a novel in stories. And I was wondering, is there something appealing about this format for you to tell these stories?

And I also wonder if there was something about the traditional form of a novel that wouldn't quite work for the story or for these characters?

CM: Let's start with *Pleasantview*. *Pleasantview* is in the shape that it is in, the form that it is in, because of how it came to be. Like I said, it was my thesis. I had to submit a thesis, and I had all of these short stories in various stages of disrepair. And my teacher said, 'Pick six, fix them up, and send them.' And when I sat to pick the six, I realised that there were thematic similarities. And I realised, *hey, hmm, I could probably do something here similar to what Naipaul did with Miguel Street.* Zadie Smith did it as well with *NW*. James Joyce did it with *Dubliners*. There are people who have done this, who've taken their characters and put them all in one town and let the town become a character. And all of those books have an episodic feel, right? So that's what I did with *Pleasantview*. After *Pleasantview* now, I saw, *okay, it could work. That form could work. It could be considered a novel.* And then I thought, *well, let me see how far I could push that form*. Because I think short stories—everybody wants to write a novel. Everybody's—I think short stories are very powerful. Novels in stories, that format gives you almost two bites at a cherry because each story causes you to focus, causes the reader to focus on a particular person or topic intensely, right? So each story, for me, each story says pay attention to this. But if you arrange them appropriately, right, you can have that specific focus for each story but also travel along a very large arc in time, right,

which is what I've done in this book. So this book starts—it's a small book, but it starts in 1899 and ends in 2017. We've covered a huge arc of time, but we've done it in 10 stories, each one giving you focus into somebody's life, so it's like you're doing two things at once.

CM: Yeah, and to me, this is no easy feat because the short story in itself is a very difficult craft to, at least for me, to write. And I've heard from writers all over that sometimes a novel is just easier to do than a short story because you have more room to write. But in a short story, you have to be very exact, very intentional, and no fluff, and everything must serve a purpose, which you can also say the same of a novel, but you have a little bit more legroom. And then in addition to that, with the arc of the characters of the story in a novel, I think you've done it quite beautifully.

So each of the characters in this story, I feel like I've known them in real life, not only because of the conviction you write with, but also because these are people I have in my life, and I think that many Trinidadian people will also say this. The only person, not the only person, but I would say the person I don't have in my life the most is Godfrey. [CM and SJ laugh] And we're going to come back to Godfrey because we need to talk about Godfrey, Celeste. But you also did mention at your book launch that in this book, there are some characters who do bad things. I'm not going to call them bad people.

There are some characters who do bad things. And you said at your London book launch that, and correct me if I'm wrong, but so there's no such thing as bad people in your books, particularly about one character named Shiva. So I wanted to ask how did you navigate balancing this humanity of his bad acts with accountability in these characters? Because what he does in this book is very similar to the many things that happen in Trinidad as well.

CM: Yes. If I could just finish off a thought that I had about the novel in stories thing, I think the novel in stories format is really helpful when you want to look at a group of people, whether it be a community, like a village, town, or a family. In a novel, you tend to follow one person, maybe two. But I feel like when you're dealing with group dynamics and multiple perspectives and multiple voices, the novel in stories format can be really helpful for that, and it has been helpful to me, right?

As regards to your question, I firmly believe that we are all the villain in somebody else's story. As good as you think you are, as virtuous as you think you are. If you think you're the victim—in your story, you're always the victor or the victim. But in somebody else's story, you're the villain. And so that's what I try to do. I try so hard to understand the other side of the coin. So whoever is the bad guy, whoever is the person doing the bad things in the book, I try to also spin it around and see it from their point of view.

What would have made them behave like that? One of my favorite poems is this one: 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright'. I think it's William Blake. I read that in—must've been primary school—and it resonated with me because the poem says, 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night; What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry?' In other words, what made you the fearsome killer that you are? What God made you? Did God make you? How did you turn out to be what you are? And that's the question in every book: what made you?

SJ: Yes. And I think that's what's so powerful about these short stories. And I'll just go back to the traditional plot and the arc of English novels in the canon, there's usually from beginning, middle and end, there's a resolution at the end. At least that's the aim, right? But I love that your book did not aim to solve all of these traumas with one neat, tidy bow. The story is not how they're going to get from point A to finality but how have they actually come to be and why are we—because readers are going to be looking at this, specifically Trinidadian readers, how have we become the way that we have become? I think it's so important for people, for Trinidadians around the world as well, because that kind of trauma travels across time and borders as well.

CM: I think I would—I agree with you. My books are never seeking nice, neat resolutions; they're more seeking to carry you on a journey of questioning and

reckoning and just to change, change your mind, change your perspective about things. So yeah, you're right.

SJ: Can we please talk about Godfrey?

CM: [Laughs] Let's talk about Godfrey. It's funny you should ask that. I was thinking about Godfrey this morning.

SJ: [Laughs] He knew. He knew we were thinking about him. So Godfrey in *Ever Since We Small* is the buck in the novel. And he's described as tall as a 12 inch ruler, with a round head and body. I actually don't have any questions; I just want to talk about Godfrey. [Laughs]

CM: Let's talk about Godfrey. Tell me what you felt about Godfrey.

SJ: Godfrey was, in my mind, a side quest. Your stories are very deep and emotional and they resonate with me very much as an Indian Trinidadian woman, and then Godfrey came into play, and I do mean into play because it was a very playful element to the story. And we have all of these superstitions and figures in Trinidadian culture, but I've never heard of the buck, and I knew I had to do a little bit of research on it. And

I just felt like I could read a whole book about his stories. And maybe it's just my ignorance of not knowing what a buck is. But can you just tell me and tell us a little bit more about how you came about this character?

CM: So the first I heard of a buck I was a little girl. I was a little girl. And a building in San Fernando had fallen. It was being demolished or something, and there was a few walls left, and a woman standing at the side of the road waiting for a taxi, the wall fell on her, and she died.

SJ: Oh my gosh.

CM: And I overheard my parents saying, 'You know why that happened? So and so, the owners of the building, they have a buck.' And of course, my ears perk up now because I'm not drawing the connection. And what they were saying was that apparently a buck, this little man that you keep in a bottle or whatever, comes from Guyana, people send to Guyana to buy bucks on whatever illegally, and they make you rich. But the deal that you have to strike with this buck is that you must take a life. For every increase in wealth, you are required to take a life. So the story was that was the life, that lady who died, was the life taken because the building was being pulled down to put up a massive mall or something. That was the first time I heard about it. And several times

after, things would happen, I remember once they said—might not have been my parents but certainly older people I heard talking saying, 'You don't hear? So and so this funeral, these people who own the funeral home, the buck get away and run down the Coffee Street. Who see the buck? And they had to go back and catch the buck.' And I am like—but as a child, this is real, right?

SJ: [Laughs] You take it quite literally. Because they weren't really saying it in a joking way.

CM: No, they were very serious. So in my mind, a little leprechaun man was running down Coffee Street, and they were trying to catch him and take him back to his owner, right?

SJ: Very much like in the book, they talk about it—the family talks about it so factually that it's inseparable from fact.

CM: Yeah. So I had—I knew all of that. I know that it's a thing spoken about like normal. But it wasn't until I was grown that I understood that in Guyana, well, they call that character baccoo. That's their word for it, baccoo. We call it buck. But in Guyana, the word buck is actually an ethnic slur. It refers to a group of indigenous. I think they're

indigenous people who would have lived on the Orinoco Delta. They look, well, indigenous, so the oblique eyes, the kind of skin, the [missing word] hair, the black [missing word] hair. Because they grew up on the Delta, the Orinoco Delta, they developed the ability—they're very short—to walk—they walk bare feet on—not sink on the marshy—they have this ability to do stuff that other people can't do, right, which, you would understand would give rise to some people thinking maybe they had special powers. So anyway, a lot of research has been done into this ethnic group and whatever. And because they are an indigenous minority ethnic group, they have suffered persecution and prejudice. So it is an insult equal to the N-word or the C-word to call somebody a buck in Guyana, right? So to me, when I was writing this story, on one level, it is about the Trinidad playful, magical superstition about bucks bringing wealth, but when you really read the story you'll see, for Godfrey, what has happened to him. He doesn't see himself. He is a man. He keeps saying he's a man from a place with people like him.

SJ: Yeah, I believe it was Shiva who said, 'What kind of creature are you?' And Godfrey was like, 'Excuse me, I'm not a creature.' Yeah.

CM: 'I'm a man from a place with people like me, and I was caught, and I was brought here', and things. So I started to think about the two—again, two sides to the story. In

Trinidad, he's this novelty, magical character, but in his mind, he's just a man who has been taken advantage of and brought here, and he's trying to get back home. That's the story of a lot of immigrants all over the world.

SJ: Yeah. On the elements of magical realism in the story, how would you regard that as a genre within your novel, just because it's so imbued in Trinidadian life?

CM: Yeah. So yesterday, I was at the Senate House Library at the University of London, and someone asked me about this, and I said, 'It is a pet peeve when people ask me about the magical realist elements in your book, magical realism', because the truth is, as I just explained to you, in Trinidad, what does that even mean, magical realism? It's not magical; it's real. So for my parents and my grandparents and all the people who grew up hearing about [missing word], buck, this, that, these characters are real. Reality in Trinidad is a sliding—is a spectrum from cold hard facts, all the way, it involves folklore, it involves all these characters, it involves religion. All of these things exist on the same plane, right? So if you were to ask my grandmother, 'Excuse me ma'am, what do you—have you ever encountered a magical realist?' She would be like—she doesn't even know what I was talking about. So I know, I learned in school when I was doing my master's in creative writing, that there are rules for how you present or write a magical realist story, right? I'm not about to follow any of those rules

because my thing was this is real to the people who are encountering it, and I'm going to write it the same way that we deal with it in Trinidad, which is on the same plane of reality. So these characters walk on stage, they walk off stage, they're just like any other character in the book. There's no need to make them seem like, oh.

SJ: Like, yeah, just this otherworldly phenomenon entering the story. So I wanted to ask, at your London book launch, again, you were talking about the reception of the book and how it's been in different parts of the world. You did mention there was a deafening silence from some quarters. And I wanted to ask, why do you think that is, and what do you think that says? I feel like it's because you're doing something quite right.

CM: [Laughs] I love that, 'You're doing something quite right.' And maybe I am. I think when you write about women, when you write about women of colour, and I think particularly I'm learning when you write about Indian women, you're coming up against multiple stereotypes. I'm writing about women of colour, so that's one thing. I'm writing about Caribbean women, so that's another set of stereotypes because people on the outside have stereotypes about what a Caribbean female is, right? But within the culture, you also have the stereotypes and the way that we would like to be seen. So in Indian culture, a girl is supposed to be viewed as so virtuous. Women are supposed to

be viewed as virtuous and so self-sacrificing and good domestic goddesses, good wives, good mothers, good all of these things. Those are not the characters I'm writing. And because I am not feeding into that propaganda, there are people who would be offended because I am giving goddesses a say in things that might be different to what the traditional say is. So the goddess is coming, and the goddess is saying, 'No, don't kill yourself, live.'

SJ: Yeah, don't kill yourself on your husband's funeral pyre simply out of devotion.

CM: So it's bucking tradition, and it's bucking the way that a lot of people think Indian culture should be portrayed, with this whole don't reveal the secrets, don't bring shame. So I can understand why people would be—some people would just not want to deal with it.

SJ: Yeah, and I feel like every woman in this story has said no to something put upon her, and the consequence of just uttering those words and claiming her freedom is threatening.

CM: Yeah, and it starts with the opening story. I mean, every woman then has to contend with do I go the way of tradition or do I try to claim control over my own—particularly my own body.

SJ: Yeah, I feel like if I were in your shoes and writing the story, I would also feel the same way as the characters to have a voice and put print to these stories and to this voice. When I was writing my novel, when it came time to publish it—because my novel is about a young Indian Trinidadian woman, and she also is unmarried, doesn't have children, goes against tradition, and everyone else in her family is the opposite, so she's kind of the black sheep, well, she is the black sheep. And then when it came time to publish it, I was very, very—

CM: Scared.

SJ: Afraid. Almost to the point I wanted to pull it. I hit submit, and then I thought to myself, *oh my God, this is going to be published.* And I was very afraid. And that fear took on a rude metamorphosis. And I wanted to ask you, and you don't have to answer it, we can edit it out, were you ever afraid writing this novel?

CM: I was in the beginning, in the beginning, beginning. When I started down the path of writing it, I was very afraid that people would say, 'But this is not your story to tell. You're not an Indian woman.' Because of course, I had grown up my own life being told or being made to understand, 'You're not a pure Indian? Because you're not pure, you don't—you're not exactly one of us.' And then I did a lot of soul searching, and I realised, *you know what? What other story am I going to tell?* I was raised in an Indian home. My mother is Indian. I was raised by her, my grandmother, my aunts, and whatever. I don't know any other environment. Any other environment would be me making it up. This is what I know. And I realised that my position as an insider outsider meant that it was a privileged position. I was already out in some respects. I was already looked at as outside. You're not one of us. But I did grow up with you guys. So it means you can't kick me out. If I say these things and if you get vexed, what are you going to do? There are no consequences. There won't be any consequences in that respect because I'm already on the outside.

SJ: Could you do us the honor of reading a little bit from your book?

CM: Sure, I will. I will. I'm going to read—I have been reading quite often from this chapter, the chapter that gives the book its name, Ever Since We're Small. Because it is written in Indo-Trinidadian Creole, which is, as someone pointed out recently, a lot of

people don't talk like this very much anymore. Some of these words are dying. It's an endangered language. The people who used to speak like this, my aunts and great aunts and so, they have passed on. So it's very rare that you find this and very rare to find it in high literature. Typically, when you find Creole in Caribbean literature, it tends to be Trinidad Creole. It tends to be a very middle-of-the-road urban Creole. So to have these Barrackpore people talking in this way is, to me, it was important to be a record of those people and that time.

SJ: Yeah, of course.

[CM reads from *Ever Since We Small*]

> 'Ever Since We Small
>
> 1987, Barrackpore Village, Trinidad, West Indies
>
> That August holidays, after a year of matchmaking *commess* in the family, Pa did send me and Salma by Mammy sister, Tanty Nazroon, for she to learn we 'bout business-and-thing, just in case nobody ever ask again for we to marrid.

Nazroon shop was two streets away, we used to walk from home every day. But we did notice, early o'clock, Tanty couldn't do Maths to save she life. And we did wonder how she managed to stay in business so long, and what *she* coulda have ever teach *we*. And we did feel sorry-too-bad for she, so we did bring a lil calculator from home for she to use, but she say she didn't trust them small, small number that keep appearing and dis-in-appearing by theyself. That's how old people was in them days: you couldn't argue with them. You had-was to swallow whatever they tell you. Otherwise, was cuss in your tail, or worse yet, two *cocoyea* broom on your back.

That's why we did take a good long while before we interrupt Tanty and the young, handsome stranger-man who did waltz in the shop, on that rainy Tuesday morning, trying to pay with a hundred-dollars bill. We did spend a good few-minutes watching one-another, back and forth, talking with we eyebrow, until we decide that is *Salma* who should *chook* she-self in the big-people conversation. Like how she did smarter in schoolwork—even though she did only thirteen years and I was done fifteen—we know Tanty woulda accept *she* Maths much quicker than mines. You see, I was always the black sheep of the Mohammed family.

> Why? All because I did look scary when I born: tar-colour skin, with long hair, long nails and two newborn teeth. Mammy say the midwife did tell she I would be a greedy child [music] who woulda cause plenty grief. And she and Pa used to pound that talk in me and Salma head ever since we did small: one a we had blight, and one a we had *barakat*. Sometimes, I does feel things mighta turn out better for we, if only they did tell we something different 'bout we-self.

[Music]

Presenter: Sophie Jai was in conversation with Celeste Mohammed. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Celeste Mohammed was in conversation with Sophie Jai

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