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## 'Voices We Don't Hear About': An Interview with Mahsuda Snaith

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An interview with the author Mahsuda Snaith about representing homelessness in her novel *How to Find Home*, diversity in contemporary literature, and the authorial responsibilities in writing fiction. Mahsuda Snaith is a writer of novels and short stories. She has led creative writing workshops in universities, hospitals, schools and a homeless hostel, and has worked as a mentor for a variety of writing organisations.

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A double-prize win boosted Mahsuda Snaith's writing career. An extract from what would become her first novel won the SI Leeds Literary Prize in 2014, which is for unpublished fiction by UK Black and Asian women. Shortly after, Snaith won the Bristol Short Story Prize with her submission 'The Art of Flood Survival', about a young Bangladeshi servant girl, Rabeya, as she observes her employers during the visit of English cousins. She is mistreated, obliged to hide her education, and longs to escape her predicament as a house girl. Snaith had already achieved competition success as The Asian Writer Short Story Competition winner in 2012 and as a finalist in a *Mslaxia* magazine competition in 2013, which promotes women's writing.

Snaith is the author of two novels and is currently working on a third. *The Things We Thought We Knew*, published in 2017, is a coming-of-age mystery story of sorts. Ravine, an 18-year old British-Bangladeshi girl bedbound with chronic pain syndrome in her mother's Leicester council flat, gradually confronts the explosive memories she has hidden from for a decade. From the safety of her 'life bed', Ravine writes to her lost friend Marianne in her 'pain diary' and unravels her family relationships, childhood experiences, and survivor guilt. 'Maybe I should write it down', she suggests, 'all the things that happened to us the way I remember, as well as the life I have now. I could document it all and then maybe I would understand' (15). Whereas *The Things We Thought We Knew* is sequestered on the inside – the bedroom, the flat, the mind, the memory – Snaith's second novel, *How to Find Home*, published in 2019, is about surviving on the outside. It follows Molly and a group of other people that are homeless in Nottingham. As they journey east to Skegness, Molly's past life of abuse and prostitution catches up with her. Snaith imagines the physical and psychological hardships for people sleeping rough and their dependencies on alcohol, drugs, and each other. Her characters feel profoundly marginalised, both existentially and socially: 'We are barely people; just waste products on the sidelines of humanity', thinks Molly (27). The novel was serialised for BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bed Time* programme and is among the score of contemporary novels, biographies, and autobiographies about street homelessness in Britain that recognise and raise awareness of people sleeping rough. They include Alexander Masters' *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), Jon McGregor's *Even The Dogs* (2010), Ross Raisin's *Waterline* (2011), James Bowen's *A Street Cat Named Bob* (2012), Charlie Carroll's *No Fixed Abode* (2013), and Craig Stone's *The Squirrel That Dreamt of Madness* (2016). Like Snaith's novel, a handful of other contemporary texts focus on women that are homeless, such as chapter 2 of Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001), Trezza Azzopardi's *Remember Me* (2004), and Raynor Winn's *The Salt Path* (2018).

Snaith's first two novels establish her interest in portraying the everyday lives of narrators that are in some way out of the ordinary, largely unseen, or not well understood.

As a British-Bangladeshi, Ravine is part of an ethnic population that is less than 1% of the UK total, according to the 2011 census. *The Things We Thought We Knew* is one of the few literary accounts of the Bengali diaspora in Britain, including Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). On *Brick Lane*, Nick Bentley (2008) writes that 'Ali is attempting to represent the experiences, through her main character Nazneen, of a group of Bangladeshi women that have rarely before been represented in British fiction' (84). Snaith joins these ranks, but Bangladeshi heritage and British national identity are only parts of the diversity that she wants to explore. Social class and the council estate add another layer, although Snaith gravitates to a light-hearted, amusing side over gritty realism. In an article about books on council housing, the social historian John Boughton (2018) states that 'in literary fiction, authentic interest in or real knowledge of the lives of the millions who have lived in council homes over the years is almost nonexistent'. Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) is the only novel he can recommend. Even more idiosyncratic in Snaith's first novel is the persistent, debilitating pain that has rendered Ravine bedbound throughout her adolescence. The severity of her condition means she is part of a small sub-group of people in a larger population experiencing some kind of chronic pain. The NHS recognises that chronic pain syndrome is often undiagnosed but is thought to be 'fairly uncommon' (2019). These distinctive facets of Ravine's character enlist her in various underrepresented groups, to the extent that her cloistered existence in her bedroom is symbolic generally of many people that feel unheard and unseen. However, Ravine's intersectional identity across race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and disability, as well as gender, sexuality, religion, and region, means no one aspect defines her, which crafts a complex character that exceeds low-resolution group identity politics and makes her more relatable as a composite human being.

In Snaith's second novel she concentrates on unusual but still all too frequent experiences of living outside. The official average number of people sleeping rough in Nottingham in April 2019, the year *How to Find Home* was published, was 55 (Locker 2020). According to national figures in the same year, 15% of people sleeping rough were women (Clark 2022). However, in contrast to Ravine's domestic seclusion, Molly is among a group of people that are very much present in public spaces and afflicted by a different kind of segregation. As Tamsen Courtenay (2019) notes in her non-fiction book *Four Feet Under: Thirty Untold Stories of Homelessness in London*, a feature of street homelessness is that it is both conspicuously visible and relatively unknown: 'What particularly struck me about the homeless was that their lives are indeed secret but they are not hidden: quite the reverse – they are there, in ever-growing numbers, for everyone to see. They are in every city in every country'. Street homelessness is not concealed but it is often ignored. The sociologist Benno Herzog (2019) theorises

this type of situation as the dialectic of (in)visibilisation, via Alex Honneth's theory of recognition. In *Invisibilization of Suffering: The Moral Grammar of Disrespect*, Herzog writes that 'to be invisibilized socially, one must first be physically identified, that is, visibilized. To deliberately ignore a person, one must first visually and correctly identify the individual as the person one wants to ignore' (76). Whereas Ravine is invisible through a retreat to the private space, *How to Find Home* in particular engages with the simultaneous visibility and invisibility that Herzog identifies, and it expresses the consequences for those subjected to disregard. 'You become invisible when you live on the street,' thinks Molly, 'People avert their gaze when they walk past, look straight through you when you speak. I used to think this was a good thing, that this meant you could truly disappear. But now I know when you stop being seen, you stop existing and when you stop existing, that's when you give up' (13). Snaith is aware of people receding into social obscurity and draws on fiction's ability to pay attention to those that require recognition. Her novel contributes to the task of bringing these lesser-known experiences to public consciousness. It is incumbent on authors to offer these exposures in conscientious, sensitive ways. In *How to Find Home*, at least, reflections on storytelling, intertextual references to *The Wizard of Oz* and being away from home, and episodes on media portrayals of homelessness, suggest Snaith is mindful of narratives as influential constructions and the responsibility of her own novel's entry in the discourses of homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear Snaith wants to convey very different slices of life, not all aspects of which come from personal experience. She has not been homeless herself, for instance, so her imaginative exploration of homelessness could invoke the strict, unforgiving kinds of criticism that *Brick Lane* received over 'the question of what right and insider knowledge Ali, as an Oxford-educated woman brought up mostly in the north of England, has to speak for this under-represented minority' (Bentley 2008: 84). As Bentley asserts, this question 'is one that is pertinent to fiction generally, especially fiction that has an element of sociological concern. If writers were not allowed to use their imaginations to empathize with characters from a different class, gender or cultural background, then novels would be limited to a series of semi-autobiographical, first-person narratives' (84). This point on the primacy of personal experience in some quarters is relevant to contemporary narratives of homelessness, where first-hand accounts are now recognised as crucial in research and representation in an effort to capture the individual experiences and expressions of a complex, multidimensional issue. Hannah Green (2021), author of *My*

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of *How to Find Home* and reflexivity in constructing narratives of homelessness, see Joseph Anderson, "Imagining Homelessness: Ethnofiction in Marc Augé's *No Fixed Abode* and Mahsuda Snaith's *How to Find Home*." *Alluvium*. Vol.9, No.4 (2021): n.pag. <https://doi.org/10.7766/alluvium.v9.4.04>

*Journey Home* (2021) summarises that: ‘People with experience of various social issues are in a unique position to provide insights that would not be possible had they not lived through the things they have’ (203). This strikes one as a truism, although in practice, first-hand experience ‘continues to gain little traction as a key part of social change work’ (Green 2021: 203). Nevertheless, these once muted, distant voices are more amplified and platformed today, so that participating in the conversation on homelessness through literary fiction is thornier than it used to be 20 years ago. Now, fictional and biographical explorations of homelessness must overcome the more prominent ethical discomfort of speaking alongside people that have lived it. The author Kit de Waal (2018) suggests that creative writers should not be scared away from depicting experiences other than their own, but they must be self-reflective and interrogate their agenda. She asks: ‘Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true? Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality? By writing our story are we taking the place of someone better placed to tell it?’ Snaith’s work is engaged with the intricacies of authority and authenticity around ‘writing the other’ for multiple reasons. As a creative writer who addresses social marginalisation in relation to disability, homelessness, and trauma, she wonders what different lives are like, and occupies the mental space to simulate perspectives, thoughts, and feelings that are not specifically her own to surpass the limitations of autobiography. By diverging from aspects of her personal background, Snaith also challenges the historically established expectation for writers of colour to concentrate on race, ethnicity, or cultural difference, which, ironically, generates the inverse pressure to swerve these areas too. And the multiple stratifications evident in her main characters push back against the logic of individuals representing whole groups based on single identity characteristics. By developing distinct, unusual narrators with particular personalities and social identities in pursuit of thorough diversity, Snaith complicates the crude parcelling of people into monolithic, homogenous masses. This approach to literature is a reminder to seek out interesting and different angles while seeing the depth of people and the specificity of their stories.

**Where did the idea for *How to Find Home* first come from? Why did you choose to write about people experiencing homelessness?**

We grew up in a working-class council estate in Leicester and my mum was super frugal about everything. But when we went into town she would give me money to give to homeless people. I was about six at the time and I would think, this is interesting, because she’s so frugal with all her money otherwise, but she still wants me to go and

give money to these people on the street. I didn't fully understand at that age why they were on the street. I'd be really shy and I would do it but not really want to. Those experiences planted a seed in my mind about who these people are and what their lives are like. I think that's followed me as a writer. I'm always looking at what people's actual lives are behind what we see. And because homelessness is so visible, even though a lot of people try not to see it, it's always played on my mind. Then I wrote a novel that didn't really work out but had this side character, a small character, who happens to be homeless and she drifts into the main character's world and then goes away. That was Molly who ended up in *How to Find Home*. I would ask, where is she and what is she doing now? Where is she sleeping? And she just became bigger and bigger in my mind to the point where I felt she needed a whole book. So it really did happen organically after a failed novel developing into this character that just stayed with me and I couldn't let go.

**How did you research for the book and how do you think that research affected the final novel?**

It was really important for me if I was going to write about something I had not personally experienced, to do the research. My first book was about a British-Bangladeshi girl growing up on a council estate, so it had autobiographical elements and I didn't have to do so much research for that. But because homelessness is not a world I have experienced, and having been from a marginalised group where people have maybe misrepresented people of colour, I really did not want to misrepresent homeless people. I started with reading lots of books. A great biography I read is Alexander Masters' *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, which I loved as a book and I've watched as a film. I didn't find hardly anything fiction-wise. There're a few autobiographies. So I read lots of books, looked online, and watched lots of videos about homelessness. Then I decided I needed to get some real hands-on experience so I volunteered in a soup kitchen and an organisation that supports sex workers. I managed to get a residency as a writer in a homeless hostel, which lasted over six weeks, which meant I was in there every week talking to different people and that gave me real-life experience with people who'd actually been through homelessness and showed me how varied it can be for different people.

I'm not always good at talking about my novels, but with this one I could say I'm writing about a homeless person. My pitch was always a homeless person who goes on a *Wizard of Oz*-style adventure from Nottingham to Skegness. I think people, when they hear about homelessness, they think it's going to be a depressing story, and I wanted there to be some magic to this one as well. When I started talking about it, other people wanted to talk about it as well. They would volunteer their own stories of going through homelessness or other people they knew who'd been through homelessness.

**Speaking of the residency at the homeless hostel, how did that influence the idea for the novel in particular? Did it have any bearing on telling the story of homelessness?**

Molly's voice was really strong in my head already from having developed her in that previous novel, but definitely the little stories I heard along the way influenced other characters and what may have happened to them. I did read a story about a person who'd been sleeping in a shop doorway and ended up with these barriers around them and a little note on it saying 'this person has refused a place in a hostel'. I ended up putting that in the book because that was in Nottingham, where part of the novel is set. I heard little stories like that which I would drop in because you don't quite believe it would happen, but it does happen. It was mainly picking up these real incidents and thinking about how they would apply to different characters.

**You mentioned that in your research for the novel, you didn't find much homelessness fiction. Did that encourage you to write this book to fill that space? Or did you feel that there's a reason why there's this lack of homelessness fiction?**

Both of those things. There's a part of me that thought, 'why is there no fiction about homelessness? Is it because really it's not for anyone else to write about, or is it something nobody wants to read about?' But also I feel like fiction is where you can really slip into someone else's shoes, and pretend, and empathise, and be that person for a bit. So I really thought it was important to write a novel that does include homelessness. Because then a reader, like me, if you wanted to know what that life's like and what's the reality of it, you can enter into it and feel, and be in that world for a while, to see what it's really like and go on this adventure with the character. I think I'm always interested in books that deal with voices we don't hear from, and that's what I like to write as well, and the voices that are not as prevalent in literature.

**You've spoken about the character, Molly, and how it was Molly's voice that emerged first. Was it a simple choice for you to write from a first-person narrative perspective for this novel?**

For this novel, it was so clear what her voice was and it sounds strange but when this character came to me I could just hear her. She came with this voice and this backstory, and I knew something had happened to her, but I didn't know what her story was when she came in the other novel. She grew as I found out more about her. The research for the novel really helped influence the possibilities for her background. You do not know what her upbringing is for a while before you get into the novel. Then you find out she actually comes from a middle-class, quite well-to-do family and that not everybody who is homeless comes from deprivation. Before people go into homelessness, you

can come from any walk of life. That's what I discovered as she came along and was speaking to me. So it was first person and it was clear to me that I needed it to be in her voice and that's where the story was and that's how it was going to tell itself.

**I know that in academia and the third sector, there's been an increase in attention to first-hand accounts of homelessness from lived experience. Was it difficult to imagine and write as a person with experience of homelessness? And was the responsibility of authenticity and authentic representation a consideration when writing?**

It was a big responsibility for me to take on a story that is from a marginalised group and to get that right. What was clear in my head is I did not want to repeat any stereotypes that people had about homelessness. I was very aware not to reinforce them or, if I did, at least to show why some of those things are true. So, for example, a lot of homeless people do drink and will spend the money you give them on drink. The reason for that is it's freezing cold and they're in pain a lot of the time. They're sleeping on hard floor. They need something to limit it; it's not a nice life. The more I researched into it, the more I thought, yeah, I'd probably be drinking as well if I was living in those conditions!

But when I was writing this, honestly, we didn't have this big conversation on 'own voices' that we have now. I do sometimes wonder: would I still go there with this because I haven't experienced homelessness, and how would I feel about somebody writing about being South Asian who isn't South Asian? But I think the thing with homelessness that's slightly different is it can happen to anyone. You can't suddenly become a different colour, but you can suddenly become homeless.

When I was going to get published, I did meet up with a guy, his name was Lee, who ended up being in our local press because he was a homeless man who was beaten up on the street and the first place he went to was the library, because that place was his refuge. He knew lots of people there. I ended up meeting him because I found his story so fascinating and he loved reading. So I gave him a copy of the book before it had come out and asked him to come to the book launch, which was in Leicester Library. It was really important for me to have it in a library because that's where I learned my craft and I didn't really have many books around me growing up. Lee came to my book launch and he'd read it in four days, which amazed me because I'm a really slow reader. And I was really worried about his response. Did I get it right? Have I repeated stereotypes? And the first thing he said to me was, 'you got it bang on. You got it so right.' And it was just such a relief to hear that from somebody who had actually experienced homelessness. That was the best review I've ever had for my book because it was from somebody who has actually lived that life. And it was a concern of mine because it can do a lot of damage if you don't get things right.



**Although it's not always that prominent, there has been an increase in British homelessness literature in the 21st century. But your novel is one of the few contemporary homelessness narratives to focus specifically on a woman protagonist. Why were you drawn to write about women's homelessness in particular?**

I definitely started from that viewpoint, as it was Molly that came to me. Part of her story is that she has done sex work in the past and I was interested in the misconceptions around being a sex worker. I wondered what the realities of prostitution were. Obviously men can go into sex work as well, but predominantly it is women. I ended up working with this group that worked with sex workers in Leicester and got an insight into what that life is like, how women can fall into it, and how dangerous it is.

I think one of the other influences for this book was the television series *Five Daughters*, which was about the murders of five women in Ipswich who were prostitutes. It looked at their everyday lives and it was one of those moments which I hope I've given to other people when they read this book: when you watch it and realise these are just normal girls living their everyday lives and then this happens to them because they were prostitutes. There's extra vulnerability in that because there's a lot of violence involved, or can be involved, in that world.

**Did the subject matter for *How to Find Home* call for a specific style of writing?**

I was aware that this was a book about homelessness and I wanted people to read it. I would have to have an element that would draw a reader in. If I'd written a long essay about everything I found out about homelessness, the statistics and the reality of what it's like, it would have been very informative, but maybe nobody would have read it. I didn't want it to be a preachy book either. I wanted it to be a book that happened to be about a homeless person and you find out some things about what the homeless world is like. There's a story and a character that you grab onto and you want to go along with them on their ride. Like in the case of Molly, she can only survive because she's got this story in her head. She's got *The Wizard of Oz*. She thinks she's going on this adventure. It's the thing that keeps her going. And when she's abused as a child, she goes into an imaginary world. It's definitely something I know I used when I was growing up, going into a story land. We had a very sheltered life, we weren't really allowed to go out the house a lot, so I read and I made up stories in my head. The story element was really important to me for her as well as the reader, to keep them going through it.

**What did you want to achieve with this novel more generally? What do you think fiction's role is, or what place does it have in addressing homelessness for you?**

I think we can't really make massive changes in people if they don't want to change. You can't lecture someone into believing what you believe. But I think if you can walk in the

shoes of someone and see what it's really like to live a life that you haven't necessarily lived then you go into an empathetic zone. A lot of defences that you would normally have when somebody tells you something aren't usually there because you're in a story world. You're more likely to let things in, in a way that you might not otherwise. We have survived as human beings because we have learnt to empathise with each other. We wouldn't have such big societies if we weren't empathetic to people that weren't in our little tribe. I wanted to create a story that people wanted to read and would go on a journey with, but also empathise with a character that maybe they would never come across in any other walk of life or would never consciously choose to associate with or talk with. There's a part in the book where I write about how nobody ever looks at people when they're homeless, when you're sitting on the street. That's why I think I dedicated it to people who feel like they're not seen. But even if you can't give someone money on the street, just saying 'no' or 'oh, hello' or whatever, acknowledgement is huge and there's so many people that have said, 'now I do say hello to people', or say 'oh no, not today' to people when they do ask for money and it's little things like this that can make a big difference.

**I'm interested in what homelessness fiction can do to help regard people that sometimes feel invisible. One of the messages from your novel is to promote empathy over sympathy in relation to people experiencing homelessness and, through imagination, try to humanise and psychologise people that may be on the margins of society, on the margins of thought. How does this novel *How to Find Home*, relate to or differ from your other writing? You've noted in the past that you're interested in stories about the power of struggle and the power of conflict. But would you say the central themes of your body of work so far are exclusion, separation, or isolation?**

I've always thought it's the people we don't hear from. It's the unrepresented or not as visible, especially in fiction, which is changing now but hasn't for many years. Even in the case of my first book, *The Things We Thought We Knew*, which is about being a British-Bangladeshi girl in a council estate, I did not want to write a book that fell into the stereotypes of being South Asian because all the books I ever read or found, which was not that many when I was growing up, were about arranged marriage, samosas, that type of thing, and as time went on, terrorism. This seemed like the only literature or film that we had; Asian people were about terrorism. So I just wanted to write something about a person who happens to be British-Bangladeshi and happens to grow up in a council estate, because that has a lot of negative stereotypes. Having grown up on one, I'm very aware of them. But that isn't the main story. The main story is something else. She's just a person who happens to have these elements, and those

elements are important. I don't ignore those, but I'm interested in representing stuff that hasn't necessarily been represented before, which definitely influenced *How to Find Home*.

In my current novel I'm writing about an Asian family growing up in a predominantly white village. That is a bit of a stretch for me because I grew up in a very multicultural city, but I've heard from people who come from those environments how interesting the dynamic can be of being the only family of colour, where people aren't used to having different cultures. I'm very interested in what it is like to be the only one, or to be homeless, or to be from a council state, to be those that we wouldn't hear about.

There's a short story I wrote in a collection called *Hag* (2020), which is all of these retold, forgotten legends. The legend I got, which was such a fascinating one, was about a man in the 14th century who owned and managed exotic animals in Staffordshire. He happened to have a panther, as you do, and it escaped into the woods. The end of that legend was that he shot it through the head. I thought, how could I retell that story? Where did the panther possibly come from and how could it relate to the village of working-class people that it escaped into? I ended up writing about this Indian Princess who gets cursed, brought over, turned into a panther and then back to an Indian Princess at night, when she meets up with this village woman who's like the Miller's wife. I like to write about the people who haven't been written about, the women, and specifically from that time, the working-class women, women of colour.

**In your SI Leeds Literary Prize-winning first novel *The Things We Thought We Knew*, and your Bristol Short Story-winning submission, 'The Art of Flood Survival', the narrators are girls or young women of colour. But, at least in my reading, race is not really identified as much in *How to Find Home*. Was that a significant decision for you?**

It actually was at the time because with *The Things We Thought We Knew* I wanted to get the whole 'my life' bit, being a British-Bangladeshi girl on a council estate, out of the way. Not because I didn't like that story, but because I've done it. For the second novel I really felt like I wanted to write from a perspective completely not my own. We don't particularly find out what race Molly is, and I didn't want there to be some sort of misconception that if I write very specifically from the perspective of the South Asian homeless girl that this only happens to South Asian homeless girls in general. Because I think that's what can happen if you are from a particular background. I wanted it to be generic. I wanted her to actually come from a middle-class upbringing to show that it can happen to anyone. So, in a way, I chose not to be specific to race because I wanted it to be broad and write something different. Creatively, as a writer, to know that I can do that. I don't always have to write this themed story just because I have that particular

background myself. I feel I've got that out and now I'm far more comfortable writing about being South Asian or to write about the complications of being a person of colour because I've written about something that's completely not about that.

**In your speech for Creative Future Writers you referred to yourself as a 'marginalised writer' and perhaps marginalised in multiple ways, and in your article called 'And the rest of you are normal', you gently criticise the term 'BAME writer' when used in opposition to something like 'mainstream writer'.**

I think the thing with BAME, which has kind of dropped out of favour, is it's just another acronym that a lot of people of colour are used to seeing on forms and feels literally like a tick box. The term somebody told me recently is using 'people of the global majority' and to push the thinking away from us being minorities, because on a global scale, people of colour are the majority. There's a wariness I think people have about certain terms. For example, going on lots of panels that say this is a panel about diversity and everybody on that panel is a person of colour. Well, that's ethnic diversity you're talking about. That's not the same as diversity generally because we need disabled people, people from LGBTQ backgrounds, working class people. That would show more diversity. So I think there's an issue with terms and I'm aware that I don't quite have a term that covers everything that I'm fully comfortable with yet.

**That's interesting because you once described *The Things We Thought We Knew* as 'my novel that didn't fall into any cultural stereotype'. Bearing in mind your last response, I wonder whether you're resistant to cohering identity groupings and whether you're actually more concerned with the complexity of intersectionality or diversity across multiple identity lines?**

Intersectionality is a great word. I think that describes a lot of my experience, because growing up being working class on a council estate was one experience, being British-Asian on a council estate was another experience, and then being British-Asian in society was a different experience. And being a woman. So all of those experiences together meant that I didn't have a typical kind of life in any of those. I went to a secondary school that was predominantly Hindu and Indian, so British-Indian. I'm Muslim, British-Bangladeshi. I remember somebody saying to me in my adulthood, 'oh, it must have been nice for you to go to that school' with this assumption that I would somehow have been the same as everyone else, which I wasn't. I'd grown up on this very predominantly white, council estate, which I'd never properly fitted into. Then I went to the secondary school, which I didn't properly fit into because they were working class. Because their parents were working while we were from the council

estate, we were looked down upon. I was a geek, which nobody else was there. I never really fit in any group. And it's taken me a while to acknowledge why I write the books I do: because I don't fit in. That's why that first book is about a British-Bangladeshi girl growing up in a council estate, because that was my experience. We were the only people of colour at that time. It's now quite a diverse council estate, but at that time we were and that was my experience. I wasn't used to this concept that a lot of people have of big Asian families, big weddings, lots of food. We were just this little family on this estate that didn't really have anyone else around us. I think I write from those perspectives because that is my perspective. Growing up I did not have a typical or stereotypical upbringing in any of those groups.

**You were one of the ten writers commissioned to work on the 'Colonial Countryside' project, which was to communicate stories about African, Caribbean, and Indian connections to National Trust properties. As part of the project you've written ten pieces of flash fiction about Kedleston Hall. What was it like working on the project?**

It was a fascinating project to be part of because I think there's an assumption sometimes that if you're from a particular cultural background that you know a lot about the history of it. My Mum did not tell me anything about Bangladeshi history. The reason I was assigned to Kedleston is that George Curzon was Viceroy of India during the first partition of Bangladesh and India. So I ended up doing this research around the history, which I hadn't done before. Kedleston is really interesting because if you go into it, it's this very typical English countryside manor in most respects and Roman-inspired. There are a lot of flourishes along those lines. But if you go into the basement, there's this whole Eastern museum. It's full of ivory chairs, Indian jewellery, and a tiger rug that looks at you as you walk in, snarling at you. And all of these items from India were apparently given to George Curzon. We don't know entirely every single story, but he was given a lot of gifts because he was Viceroy that he brought back and made this museum.

When I did those ten flash fiction stories, it was about finding stories from people we haven't heard about. I wrote one from the perspective of a maid who would have worked in that big countryside manor. The servants who we don't normally hear about a lot. I wrote from the perspective of his daughters. He had three daughters that would have amazing stories of their own. Sophia Duleep Singh, a South Asian suffragette at the time and how Curzon had this whole thing about not giving women the vote and how those two stories interwove with each other. Indian nannies that came over here to accompany people on their travels with their children and were then dumped here and not given return fare. It was finding the stories that weren't just from Curzon's perspective, because a lot has been written about him, whole massive books I've read

about him. So I wanted to write about stories from that period, from people we wouldn't have heard from.

It was interesting for me to look into that history, which is my history, but also realise it's connected to British history because I think I always had this idea that British history and Bangladeshi history were very separate. And these big manor halls, which I remember going to on little trips when I was younger, just not having anything to do with me and then realising there are connections and that we are all connected.

**Across your two novels so far you're developing a theme of writing about location and region. They are set in Leicester and Nottingham, and across to the east, Skegness. Is regional writing something that you're interested in and does it continue with your next novel?**

It was really important for me to not only have the novels in the Midlands, but mainly just not to have them set in London because I feel there's so much literature already written about London. I started with Leicester. That's where I know, where I grew up, so it made sense to me. But then when I wrote the next one it was good for me to research Nottingham. It's not that far from me and I wanted to write something that was local, East Midlands. The next one is actually in Derbyshire so I've jokingly said this is like an East Midlands trilogy but I might one day write about somewhere like Birmingham. In the way that I'd like to write about voices we don't hear about, let's also write about places that we don't necessarily hear about. I don't think there's a lot of literature with Leicester or Nottingham or Skegness as the main focus or setting. It's quite interesting to see people's reaction when I mentioned Skegness, because some people are like 'really?' and then some people are like 'I love Skegness. I used to go there when I was little.'

**What kinds of stories would you like to see published in the contemporary age? What stories do we need at this time?**

I would like to see more good stories from writers from diverse backgrounds. By diverse I mean the whole spectrum. I don't think we see enough from writers with disabilities in particular. That's one of the groups that could get ignored more than any. More stories from working-class writers. There was a surge of working-class writing during the 1980s and that's dwindled. I think just stories that have been excluded because the publishing industry is very white and middle class and quite male at the top. To have people take on other stories that maybe they wouldn't normally take on because of the unconscious bias or the feeling that they don't relate to this story. To realise that just because you don't personally relate doesn't mean everybody won't relate.

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## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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