

TLC Showcase
Suhel Ahmed



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Introduction

A Note from the Writer

It was a bit strange returning to my novel *Broken Paths*, which I'd written some time back, to select an extract for this showcase. It was rather like being reunited with a family member after a long separation. As I skimmed through the chapters memories fizzed to the surface: the yelp of joy after writing the perfect sentence, the excitement at seeing a character come to life, the agony over trying to resolve a kink in the plot, the hours of being hunched over my desk at the cost of ignoring life outside the world of the novel. One might say that psychologically we were conjoined for several years. It also made me feel proud. Whether or not the world (and by that I mean the publishing world) allows it through its heavily guarded checkpoint does not affect the passion I feel for this novel.

The story centres on the relationship between a Bangladeshi single mother and the son she raises in Britain. In short, it is about a dysfunctional fatherless young man who begins resenting the woman he thinks is his mother, but comes to recognise her value. Through this novel I wanted to explore the vulnerable psyche of a first generation immigrant as well as her 'British' son who himself feels misunderstood. From the outset I wanted it to be a tender and poignant story – one that didn't tackle the big ideas but delved into the hopes, aspirations, disappointments and heartaches embedded in a dysfunctional relationship, and refrained from casting any judgements.

I was fortunate enough to have been awarded a grant from the Arts Council to write the novel and a prize followed soon after. Agents flocked to the scene, but for one reason or another things didn't work out and I moved on to my second novel. However, I felt I owed the novel a swan song and sent it to TLC for a reader's assessment. The manuscript was handed to the wonderful writer Jacob Ross (who has that rare gift of weaving poetry into his prose) and he delivered a most heartening report which started with the sentence: "I think that yours is a very, very strong novel and certainly worth the attention of publishers". Suffice to say his words restored my confidence, which had taken a slight battering and had decided to run and hide under the bed for a time.

Through TLC I also met its director, Becky Swift, who is a wonderfully warm person. She's been supportive and encouraging throughout. Angelic and understanding, she truly embodies the affectionate spirit of TLC.

Finally, I'd like to say that TLC is the perfect port of call for any writer caught in the storm of their writing, and who'd like advice which is professional and objective, yet parcelled in sensitivity.

Armour of faith

When Amina returned home after a late shift at work, she left the small packet of sleeping pills on the kitchen table and dropped a carrier bag filled with bedcovers in the lounge under the sewing machine. The bedcovers required mending. The job was for *Shiny Seams* – the dry cleaners on the High Street that employed her to provide its customers with *clothing alterations, adjustments and repairs at competitive rates*.

Amina unbuttoned her coat. She untied the knot beneath her chin and took off the green cashmere headscarf. She hung the coat in the small cloakroom under the stairs and left the scarf draped over arm of the couch in the living room. She then drew the curtains, closing the room off from the cold shards of moonlight falling in.

She switched the television on and crashed into the familiar seat of her rocking chair, and rested her elbows on the worn upholstery of the arms. She flung her head back and gave over to exhaustion, the muscles of her face relaxing into a serene and sleepy expression. Amina lifted her head a little and regarded the ceiling through the slits of her eyes. The ident of The Nine O Clock news danced as an opaque flash of lights on its bobbled surface. She fell back and closed her eyes again. The chair crooned as the bow rolled back and forth over the flattened carpet, her body succumbing to the spell of its movement. She listened to the newscast.

It was a bulletin on the War in Afghanistan. A news reporter was on board the USS Theodore Roosevelt somewhere off the coast of the Arabian Sea where he was speaking to a fighter pilot, who described it as an honour to defend the values of the Civilised World. Asked about his sortie, First Lieutenant ‘Woodstock’ expressed

relief at finally putting the years of training into a ‘combat situation.’ The tone of his voice neither suggested a passion for his job nor contempt for his enemies. He simply confirmed to the reporter that his mission had ‘come together like a finely oiled machine.’ The only concession was a smile as he looked directly into the camera and saluted the viewers with the regulation ‘v’ sign. Subsequently, the news report cut to an offshore army base where a battalion prepared for the ground offensive.

Amina rocked forwards and opened her eyes to see a fresh-faced Private Ramirez with a young man’s nascent stubble. He was dressed in sand-coloured khaki, kissing a Polaroid picture of his girlfriend. In the picture she was cradling their swaddled newborn in the crook of her arm. He held the picture up to the camera and promised to come home soon, but then emphasised that the boys had a job to do:

‘I love my country. And, as a soldier, it is my duty to fight for the freedom of my motherland to make sure we protect it for the future of our children.’

Amina pressed a toe into the carpet to stop the rocking motion; the crooning stopped too. She lifted her head and sat up. The light of the television screen fell across her face and illuminated the worry lines at the corner of her mouth. Private Ramirez looked about as old as Samir, she guessed: an olive-skinned boy about to fight a war so that he could feed and clothe his family.

A terrible thought came to her. With Samir now estranged from her, in years to come would her son’s children or their children’s children be lured into fighting a white man’s war like Private Ramirez? Supposing they were to be swallowed up by its ethnology, its mores, its neon seductions, its divorce-rates and disco-lives, could they so easily slough off their brown skin and turn their back on every value that had passed through bloodlines? Lately, when she lay awake at night she feared that on the Day of *Qayyamat*, Saufina would rise from the grave and point the finger accusingly

at her, screaming at the top of her voice: *he went against his own because of you!*

These were treacherous times and with Samir living elsewhere, anything was possible. Amina drew a hard breath and switched the television off. A black cloak of darkness momentarily left her sightless and in that sightlessness all she could see was Saufina's angry face blaming her for everything.

The doorbell rang. Amina re-tied her headscarf and went to answer the ring. On the doorstep a toddler was holding up a plate using both hands. He was dressed in his pyjamas but wore a thick toggle jacket over it. His mother stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders. She was eager-eyed; her heart was brimming with pride.

'Go on, Jake, just like Daddy told you.'

'Thank you very, very, very much for the... the... ' Unable to remember the word, he looked at his mother.

'So-mo-sas, Jake,' his mother said, pausing after each syllable and then glancing at Amina for confirmation.

'So-mo-sas,' Jake repeated.

Amina knelt down, took the plate from the child and ruffled his soft hair.

'Thank you.'

'They were delicious,' his mother added. 'The boys loved them, and so did my husband. He said that they were a lot better than the ones they serve at his local Indian. He loves Indian food.'

'Very good,' Amina said, tickling the toddler's cheek, who was suddenly struck by a bout of shyness and turned away to bury his face in the pleats of his mother's skirt.

'Your voice sounds much better,' the neighbour said, gathering Jake and lifting him into her arms. The boy began twirling a lock of her dark hair around his forefinger.

Amina smiled.

‘I now much better.’

‘I’m sorry if I offended you the other evening,’ the woman said.

Amina gave her a confused look.

‘I might have spoken out of turn.’

‘What you mean, out of turn?’

‘About your son.’

‘Fine.’

‘Well, if these somosas are anything to go by then I’m positive he’ll keep coming back for his mother’s delicious food.’

‘He good boy. Only little bit bad. We argue. Then he go.’

The young woman smiled.

‘I understand,’ she said looking lovingly at her own child. ‘It’s difficult to stay mad at them for too long. He does come to see you?’

‘Yes. He coming tonight.’

‘See. Just be patient with him.’

Amina stood still for a moment, smiling at the thought, buoyed by the white woman’s vote of confidence.

‘Insha’Allah,’ she said, in a tender tone, glancing up lovingly at the night sky.

‘Excuse me?’ the woman enquired.

‘God willing. Everything he knows.’

‘Bless you,’ the woman said.

‘You very friendly,’ Amina said, smiling.

‘And you’re very generous,’ the woman replied. ‘I’m Josie, by the way.’

‘My name is Amina’.

‘Ooh, it’s getting colder by the day,’ the woman said. ‘I better get Jake back indoors before he catches a cold. Do come round if you ever feel like a cup of tea or a chat.’

Amina smiled at the offer, although she had no intention to step into a house where there was alcohol.

‘Say goodbye, Jake,’

‘Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye,’ Jake repeated, this time without any help, his shyness a distant memory. He didn’t wish to be carried back indoors, so wriggled out of his mother’s grasp, and the pair walked back to the house hand in hand. Jake swivelled round to wave goodbye to Amina. Amina waved back and, watching, she thought that there was an absurd beauty in bringing up children that immediately absolved them of any wrong they could do as adults. She closed the door once the pair had gone inside. She then went to the kitchen and washed the plate thoroughly with washing-up liquid before leaving it to dry off on the rack. When she heard the salaat clock go off in her bedroom announcing the hour of prayer, she collected her new medication and whispered, ‘*Insha ’Allah, Insha ’Allah, Insha ’Allah*’. She climbed up the staircase to do her ablutions.

*

Half an hour later the key turned in the lock of the front door and Samir stepped into his mother’s house. Unlit and deserted, the hallway seemed to look at him accusingly, as if holding him responsible for its beleaguered gloom.

In the lounge he saw his mother sitting on the prayer mat, lit dimly by the lamp on the coffee table. She looked ghostly in her white sari. A waterlily in a pool of darkness. She was reciting her Qur’an, which lay open on its lacquered wooden stand.

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ
مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ
لَمْ يَكَدْ يَرَبُّهَا وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُّورٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

Respectfully he waited, not wanting to interrupt her, as he knew it would be sinful to do so. He listened to the recitation, her voice swelling in song. And, as he listened, he felt compelled by the strength of her faith. Her eternal source of guidance. He waited for her to finish reading the passage, and then in the intervening lull tried to draw her attention.

‘Amma?’

His call was awkward. His lips quivered.

‘Amma?’ he repeated.

Amina glanced up but carried on reading the next passage. She didn’t reply at first but finished the *sura*. She then marked her page with the ribbon, closed the book and touched it gently to her forehead to draw its blessings.

‘You’re back!’ she finally said, her voice sunny from worship. Samir sensed the hope in her words but said nothing. His silence was enough to imply that he would soon be off again.

‘Are you hungry?’ Amina asked.

Samir pulled his hood down. The hunger on her son’s face was stark naked.

‘There’s fish curry left over from yesterday,’ Amina said. ‘And I’ve saved some somosas for you.’

‘Fish curry’s fine.’

‘Do you want any chicken? I’ve cooked some chana bhaji, too.’

Samir's mouth watered. His stomach growled.

'Anything will do.'

*

Samir sat at the table, peeled. His hooded top hung on the backrest. He washed his hand and dipped his fingers into the food and began eating with a wolfish frenzy, chewing open-mouthed, his lips smacking - the gratitude pure in the graceless, animal display. Amina, meanwhile, sat at the sewing machine mending the torn valances. Every so often her attention broke away from the task and fell on Samir, her eyes momentarily awash with vindication at the sight of her son reduced to a ravenous chick, hoping that the abrasiveness of the outside world had finally rubbed off that juvenile fantasy of 'finding himself'.

She turned the wheel of the machine with a firm stroke and pressed down on the pedal. The burst from the jabbing needle filled the distance between them and perforated the tension. She looked up and noticed the haste with which her son was gobbling up the food.

'Watch out for the fish bones,' Amina warned.

'*Ami tik achi!*' he snapped without meaning to.

He was anything but OK, she thought. Wan and waiflike, it was hard to imagine how her son had survived alone. Away for only six weeks and the world had reduced him to this! It was as though a neglected animal had turned up on her doorstep - scruffy, shivering and gnawing at its limbs.

'Your grandma's sent a letter,' Amina said.

'How is she?' Samir asked.

‘She’s good.’

A pause.

‘She would like to see you again.’

Samir busied himself picking out fish bones. The one time he peered up he saw the needle flashing between her dexterous fingers and the treadle see-sawing under her feet, but averted his stare the instant she looked up.

‘Your cousin Rashid has set up his own taxi business now,’ she said brightly.

‘Balo.’

‘Yes, he’s doing well for himself. Your Uncle Kamal is looking for a bride for him.’

‘Balo.’

‘You boys are about the same age. He still remembers you.’

‘Balo.’

There was a pause. Amina steeled herself.

‘I was thinking, maybe we should fly back for a holiday this year. See your cousins, your uncle and aunt. Your Nannijee wants to see you too. Shall I read out her letter?’

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘You do realise you’re her first grandchild and that carries certain responsibilities. She isn’t getting any younger.’

There was an insensitive pause, which seemed to imply that her son was completely aloof about his extended family.

‘Do you remember your Nannijee?’

‘There are a lot of fish bones to pick out,’ Samir said.

‘You better be careful.’

Amina was used to the door slamming in her face. She tugged hard on the valance in her hand, thinking if only she could prise his mind open, step into his confused world and reorganise things with the zeal of a military coup.

‘How about your Uncle Kamal?’

‘What about him?’

‘Do you have any memories of him?’

Samir shrugged. Sometimes her son’s attitude was intolerable. Amina then remembered the book Uncle Kamal had posted to her after a phone conversation several weeks ago in which he suggested that a more instructive approach might fare better than constantly berating him.

‘Uncle Kamal’s sent you something.’

Samir looked up in surprise.

‘What?’

‘It’s a book. I have it here.’

Samir was secretly pleased and excited, wishing it was another gift from his father’s bookshelf: anything that would bring him closer to learning something new about him. Amina picked up the small paperback. She got up and handed it to her son. He glanced at the orange-coloured cover: *The Qur’an and Modern Science*.

‘Make sure you read it,’ Amina said.

‘I’ll try,’ he replied, noncommittally.

She continued to study her son, wondering why he was being so difficult.

‘You need a haircut,’ she said.

‘I haven’t had the time.’

‘It’s indecent to have hair hanging over your earlobes.’

Samir applied a concentration to his eating that excluded his mother's voice altogether.

'When was the last time you prayed?'

'I don't know.'

'What about the six months we spent in Bangladesh? You were such a good boy back then. The Maulana taught you all the suras for praying five times a day. When was the last time you stepped inside a mosque? Don't you remember all the things the Maulana taught you?'

Samir said nothing.

'How's the curry?' she finally asked.

Samir murmured his appreciation.

'You are Bengali. You have a Bengali stomach - the traditional rice and curry appetite. I don't know what kind of food you are eating but you've lost weight. Look at your eyes. They're sinking into your skull.'

'Stop exaggerating, Amma!'

Amina gazed thoughtfully at her son.

'I made the mistake of raising you outside a Bengali community,' she said.

'Well I'm raised now, and there's no turning back.'

'Did you know that when you were eleven, the Mithanis sold *Shiny Seams* to the current owner and moved away?'

'So?'

'The new owner took me aside and said he would understand if I wanted to leave, offering a small redundancy package, but was equally happy to keep me on.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

‘That’s when I made the mistake,’ Amina exclaimed. ‘I should have taken the money and moved to a Bengali community, somewhere in Tower Hamlets, Coventry, Luton or Leicester. It’s so much friendlier in those neighbourhoods. You would have then had a better schooling in your own culture.’

‘Why didn’t you do it then!’ Samir snapped.

‘I didn’t want to unsettle you.’

Amina turned away and pressed her foot down on the treadle once again. The truth was that she *was* tempted to make the move, but also considered it a minefield for a young, single mother. For a mother who had no desire to be pressured into a second marriage and be exposed once more to the *banji* stigma. At the time she feared any proximity to the mealy-mouthed matriarchs in these Bengali communities. She knew how those know-it-all village wives would have eyed her as a golden ticket for some poor nephew back home - *hmmm, a husbandless young woman with a British Passport, the bridge between the continents!* They would have then begun circling her like sharks, courting her with kindly words: *Poor beti, you can’t be expected to bring up a child on your own. I have a nephew back home.* In fact, Amina counted herself fortunate to have avoided such predicaments by living in a white town. Up until the last few weeks she had been quite happy to tend to her small life as if it were a window box, watering her dreams - her son a lone plant growing all the while to provide the shade during the winter of her life.

‘It’s a bit hot,’ Samir said, blowing his tongue.

Amina got up and went to the kitchen. She returned with a glass of water and put it on the table in front of him. A cough tickled her throat and she hacked, shielding her mouth with her forearm.

‘What’s wrong?’ Samir asked.

‘What do you care?’

‘Are you taking anything for it?’

She refused to reply. There was a pause.

‘I’ll get you some cough syrup,’ he said.

Samir then went on with his food. In the silence the tension frosted around them until Amina could no longer ignore it.

‘What do you intend to do with your future?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘Your future?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Meaning...?’

‘Meaning, I don’t know.’

‘You’ve got no direction. You’re wasting your life. These are precious years. They will never return to you.’

‘I’m thinking about becoming an art teacher,’ Samir said.

‘Out of all the things in the world, you keep coming back to that. How many times do I have to tell you that that drawing images of beings created by the Almighty is *haraam* and forbidden to Muslim eyes as swine is to our mouths. Art has always been a vehicle to idolatry. Why can’t you be a bit more like Mohan?’

‘Who?’

‘Mohan Das. I saw his mother today. Do you remember Mohan? He was a few years older than you at school.’

‘What about him?’

‘Well, he’s now opening his own business. He is also married and his wife is expecting their first child.’

‘Good for him.’

‘He was raised in this country too, but respects his parents’ wishes. He’s made a success of his life.’

‘Not everyone is blessed with his planet-sized brain, Amma.’

‘But you’re clever too. Why do you have to be such as *awara*?’

Samir felt himself bridle.

‘I have some money for you,’ he said. He pulled out the manila-coloured envelope, extracted the wad of notes and placed them on the table.

‘This should cover some of the rent.’

He did not stop to think how humiliating it appeared to her. But for Amina, the act cut much deeper. A scene flashed before her. It sent a chill through her as if history had sneaked in through the backdoor.

‘Why are you doing this, beta?’

‘Doing what?’

‘All this!’

Samir slackened his grip on the folded notes and left them on the table. The fold splayed open revealing the Queen’s royal smirk.

‘Why don’t you answer me?’ his mother demanded.

Samir face remained still, utterly composed.

‘What’s going through your head?’ Amina asked.

‘Nothing,’ he replied coolly.

Amina found her voice blistered by anger.

‘I have bought you up since your birth on my own! With so much love. And this is how you repay me. Soon I’ll turn old and what will you do, throw me into a hospice? Allah is my sole witness. He will see to it that you suffer by your own children.’

Samir clenched his jaw, knowing that the best way to calm his mother was to say nothing.

‘It’s not right what you are doing, leaving me the way that you have. You’re living with a bunch of *kaffirs*, sharing in their sins, eating from the same plates that have touched the flesh of swine. They’re guiding you into darkness. You’re not stupid, can’t you see? We should never have come to this deplorable country. This is a nest of devilry from where Allah has been denied and forgotten, and where you’ve been brainwashed. I don’t know what you’re doing with your life. You’re probably wandering the streets in stray groups, gangs, and other troublemakers.’

In the ensuing lull, her breath heaved with rage and anguish.

‘It’s so stuffy in here. The room needs some fresh air,’ Samir finally said.

He quickly left the table and pushed open one of the smaller windows releasing the dry air. He breathed in the fresh consignment and gazed at the world outside his mother’s emotional fortress. He wanted to return to his rented space, appealing to him because it was remote, indifferent, and far away from his mother and her oppressive regime of probity and emotional suffocation.

He sped to the kitchen, washed his hand at the sink and returned with the glow of renewed intention pumping through his body. He quietly slunk into his hooded top but the rip of the zipper betrayed his intention to leave. His mother peered over her glasses.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked, sharply.

‘I have to go.’

‘Why do you *have* to go?’

‘I have work tomorrow.’

Samir pulled his hood up.

‘I really have to go,’ he repeated.

Amina sneered in disgust.

‘You don’t know what you’re doing and you don’t know what you have become. When you look at a mirror you will never see a white face, don’t you forget that!’

She then got up and shuffled about the drab room, collecting the empty glass and cupping up the stray grains of rice off the table. The money lay untouched. Stacked notes, the sides splaying open. Worthless.

‘I’ll be back in a few days. I’ll even stay over,’ Samir said. Guilt told the white lie. So as not to offend his mother, he picked up the book and stuffed it into the pocket of his fleece and left the house.

When Samir stepped outside of the house and the rusty front gate refused to open, he gave it an angry kick, causing it to fly open. A shower of paint cascaded down exposing the rust underneath as the gate knocked uselessly against the bent catch, whining and wobbling. He was furious with himself. For while he had walked out of his mother’s house, he could not walk out of her life, now stuck in a split-nail arrangement, rejecting her plea to come back but frequently sniffing his way back to her house for food and a dose of her suffocating love. Why couldn’t he harness the courage to completely tear down the Bengali dream his mother had tacked in front of his eyes instead of making these pathetic perforations?

It took Samir several minutes to twist the metal catch back to something resembling its original shape. Afterwards, he stood there for a moment. He looked up and saw the last light shining out of the window of his mother’s bedroom. He then dropped his head and skulked off down the dark band that was the street, only glancing back once to see that the light had gone out, his mother now lying asleep in bed. She was safe. Little did he know that behind that brick and mortar his mother

held on to his parting words as she slipped underneath the bed cover. The promise that he would return. A sign that Allah would help to guide her son back. She felt protected by her armour of faith. In the dark she recited a quick prayer – *Ayatul Kursi* – and afterwards, as the pills plied the sleep, briefly considered what devil could have got inside her son to suck his heart dry and leave it gnarled and pitted like the seed of a *boroi* fruit? For a while she sifted through his childhood to see where she may have gone wrong in raising him.

About the Writer

Suhel Ahmed is a British-Bengali writer who spent much of his childhood in the verdant countryside of Bangladesh. He has worked as a researcher and journalist for Emap media, and spent several years editing illustrated non-fiction books at Dorling Kindersley.



Broken Paths is his first novel, which won the best unpublished novel award at the Muslim Writers Awards in 2009, a prize judged by the acclaimed writers Bernadine Evaristo and Robin Yassin-Kassab. Suhel also received a grant from the Arts Council England to complete the novel.

Suhel has written several short stories, one of which will be published by Hurst in its new journal *The Critical Muslim* in July 2012. Suhel is currently working on his second novel, a dark tale about a young woman who is the victim of an acid attack. The novel is also set in Bangladesh. Its working title is *Disinherited*.