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A conversation with Ausma Zehanat Khan

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Abstract

Ausma Zehanat Khan is a multi-award-winning author of crime and fantasy fiction that features Muslim protagonists and Islamic cultural milieus. Her work also engages with a wide range of contemporary global issues including genocide, terrorism, police violence, and refugee crossings. To date she has published 12 novels, which include two mystery series and the fantasy series *The Khorasan Archives*. Her first novel, *The Unquiet Dead*, which opens her Khattak/Getty crime series, was the winner of the Barry Award, the Arthur Ellis Award, and the Romantic Times Award for Best First Novel. Her latest crime series is set in Colorado and introduces us to a new detective who is female and Muslim. In this interview, Khan discusses the influence of her Pashtun roots and her work as an international human rights lawyer on her writing, the importance of diverse characters in genre fiction, the challenges of “translation” in the process of publishing and marketing books, and the global nature of her chosen genres.

Keywords: crime fiction, fantasy fiction, Ausma Zehanat Khan, Islam, Muslim protagonists, human rights, book production, book marketing

Ausma Zehanat Khan is an award-winning author of crime and fantasy fiction that centres Muslim protagonists and Islamic cultural milieus. Her first novel, *The Unquiet Dead* (2015), which opens her Khattak/Getty crime series, was the winner of the Barry Award, the Arthur Ellis Award, and the Romantic Times Award for Best First Novel. This series features the Canadian Muslim detective Esa Khattak, whose roots are similar to Khan’s own as a British-born child of Pakistani immigrants raised in Canada. However, the series is told equally from the perspective of Esa’s white partner, Rachel Getty. As Khan discusses in the interview, this allows her to reach across to non-Muslim audiences and facilitates a speaking back to the negative representations of Muslims in the media and public discourse. Such negative portrayals extend to the crime genre itself, in which Muslims have typically appeared only as terrorists or criminals (Lynx-Qualey, 2021; Simon, 2010). This novel leads its characters to uncover atrocities committed against Muslims in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre during the Bosnian war. Khan’s choice of topic is deeply tied to her profession as an international human

rights lawyer, and the focus on justice continues in the other books in the series: *The Language of Secrets* (2016), about a terrorist cell in Canada; *Among the Ruins* (2017b), set in the midst of the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran; *A Death in Sarajevo* (2017a), a novella which returns to the Bosnian war; *A Dangerous Crossing*, about the plight of Syrian refugees; and *A Deadly Divide* (2019a), about a mass shooting in a mosque in Quebec.

Her foray into the fantasy genre, The Khorasan Archives, is a quartet made up of *The Bloodprint* (2017c), *The Black Khan* (2018b), *The Blue Eye* (2019b), and *The Bladebone* (2020). In this series, Khan sets a strong female cast of characters in a world inspired by the richness of Islamic culture and mysticism. It is also a world governed by the Talisman, an oppressive patriarchal regime that seeks to destroy knowledge, literacy, and freedom for women. As she says in this interview, there are clear links to the real-life regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which allows for a critical exploration of “how religion has been weaponized against women and minorities” in the region. While non-Muslim readers can enjoy the series as purely a work of high fantasy, Khan mainly wrote it with Muslim-heritage readers in mind, embedding many geographic and religious references, as well as double-entendres between English and Arabic, that only readers with specific heritage and knowledge would be able to understand.

Khan returns to the crime genre with her latest series, set in the fictional town of Blackwater Falls outside Denver, Colorado. The series introduces a new detective, Inaya Rahman, and addresses many of the pressing struggles at the forefront of the American psyche, including police violence, suspicion of migrants and refugees, and the rise of white supremacy. The series links the concerns of Muslim Americans like Inaya to other groups like African Americans and Latinx communities who have also been subjected to over-policing, heightened surveillance, and racial profiling. As the series progresses, Inaya and a multi-racial cast of investigating characters turn the eye of the law inward to expose the hypocrisy

at the heart of America's system of justice, both at home and abroad. With this series, there is no white assistant to "translate" for a non-Muslim audience, but Khan hopes she has "brought her readers along" with her and encouraged them to become more informed about Islam. She has published two novels in the series so far, *Blackwater Falls* (2022) and *Blood Betrayal* (2023b), and I am eagerly awaiting the third instalment.

This interview was conducted on Microsoft Teams in October 2024, with Ausma Zehanat Khan in Washington, DC, and Lucinda Newns in Lincoln, UK. Some edits have been made for clarity and length.

Lucinda Newns (LN): You've got quite a varied background. You were born in the United Kingdom, lived in Canada and now the United States. You also come from a South Asian Muslim family. Can you say a little bit about how these different connections have informed your writing?

Ausma Zehanat Khan (AZK): Oh, that's a great question. Well, as you know, crime fiction has only started to become more diverse in the last decade. We're seeing a multiplicity of voices, and more pluralism in the genre. I grew up reading crime fiction, and I always noticed the absence of anyone who spoke or looked like me or had roots like me or heritage like me. When I approached writing my first novel, it was really important to me to write characters from my own background. One, I could render them with authenticity. And second, because I thought I had a unique point of view as a Muslim born and raised in the West but deeply connected to my Pakistani heritage and the Pathan culture that I was raised in — Pathan or Pashtun. I'm also a Muslim woman who is heir to the Islamic tradition and who's greatly influenced and informed by that, both in my crime writing and in my fantasy writing. These are the things that interest me most. With a former career as a human rights lawyer/professor, it was also an opportunity to talk about global human rights issues, particularly in the context of how they impact large parts of the Muslim world and Muslims who live in the West. I

thought there was a lot that I could bring to the genres that I'm writing in that I haven't seen much of before: a kind of counter-narrative or speaking back. I think I was doing a lot of that in my early work, speaking back and trying to claim space for myself and for Muslim voices and for Muslim women's voices. But now I think my stories have moved beyond that, where the new series that is set in Colorado is much more part of the American fabric and there's less to establish and more to examine.

LN: Yes, there is a clear move from the previous Khattak and Getty series in which you explain Muslim culture and aspects of faith and include the white, non-Muslim sidekick figure as a kind of mediator, to the new series where you've taken that out and it seems to be generally less didactic about faith even though faith is still very much at the centre of the character's identity and experience. It seems there isn't that need to explain and clear ground in quite the same way.

AZK: I'm hoping that I've carried my readers along with me. Now all the back story and background that they might have needed, they've either seen it in those books or they've gone and done some reading on their own, or they relate to it because they know Muslims or they've subsequently met Muslims. So, I feel like there's kind of an ease and familiarity between me and my readership now that lets me be a lot more to the point in what I want to write.

LN: Yes, I can definitely sense that in the more recent work. You touched a little bit earlier on what you saw, or rather what you didn't see, in crime fiction. I know you've also spent time as an editor of *Muslim Girl* magazine. Can you say a little bit about what your experience was of getting your work to publication? Did you face any challenges or pushback against the kind of work that you wanted to produce?

AZK: My first novel was published because of a very fortunate coincidence where I had entered a mystery writing contest and the editor who looked at my submission really liked it,

even though it was pretty raw and needed about 25,000 words cut from the manuscript. That would end up becoming *The Unquiet Dead*, but my editor took an interest and sent me a really long edit letter and said if I made all these changes then she might consider making me an offer. So, I had this sort of Cinderella-like experience where it's a fairy tale and everything worked out.

Having said that, there was a manuscript I had submitted previously, a prequel to *The Unquiet Dead*, which didn't get any traction. Maybe that was a bit about editors being unable to connect with the character, but I just think rejection is a huge part of the business and you keep getting better as you go too. Also, it's typically people who are quite liberal in their mindset who work in publishing; they're young people — all the people I work with are twenty years younger than me. They have a different outlook on the world, more accepting and more plural. They've demolished a lot of barriers in their own thinking, and they're very open to new ideas and new characters, so people that I work with have been very receptive to what I'm doing. I've had some editorial pushback in the sense of, "Don't over explain things. Less is more." Or in some cases, "You're taking this for granted because you know it, but it will be unfamiliar to readers. So explain this more."

And then I've had a few issues of translation in the sense that it's been difficult to communicate my point of view, not for lack of receptive hearing, but because of lack of information and understanding of the context in which I'm writing. So, one example I frequently cite is that I had written the third Khattak novel, *Among the Ruins*, which was set partly in Iran, and the cover that was initially presented looked like an older woman in a traditional black abaya, and my novel was really about the fallout from the Green Revolution in 2009; it was about modern, contemporary Iran and the shifting picture of Iran. I came back to my team and said that maybe 20 per cent of the population dresses that way — the ones who are regime supporters and very devout in that particular way. But there's been a huge

disassociation from religion. The hijab is imposed on so many women in Iran so they wear it much more casually. They try to show as much hair as possible, so this cover is very much out of touch. My team came back and presented a different image which was more suitable. But one thing that was really interesting to me was that the face in the new image looked — in the paperback cover — like a white woman. And I said, this is not a Persian woman. This is definitely a white woman and I sent pictures and said, this is what Persian women look like. Yes, they can be light-skinned, but these are Caucasian features without a doubt, and it was a very hard thing to explain what I meant, and it was hard for them to understand because when the editorial team, who are mostly white, looked at it, they all said this looks like an Iranian woman. But when I showed it to all my friends of colour, they all said this is definitely a white woman. So, these were the little issues of translation.

Another example I can give is, I had a very distinct idea for the covers of *The Khorasan Archives*, my fantasy series. I really wanted those covers to represent Islamic geometric art, which is so beautiful and so expressive. And both on the inside and the outside, it was very hard getting people to understand what that looked like and, no matter how many images I would send, they would just keep sending back this very Orientalist take on what that might be. And for me, that was so frustrating that I just eventually gave up asking because they tried really hard to meet me halfway, and it wasn't that they didn't want to. I just felt that there was a huge gap of information and knowledge.

These kinds of things were frustrating and you don't want to get a reputation as a writer who's difficult and fussy and can never be satisfied. So, you end up making compromises even though you *are* feeling dissatisfied. If you look at the difference between the UK covers and the US covers of *The Khorasan Archives*, you'll see that the UK artists really tried hard to understand what I was saying. Then the Americans did a very American thing where my first cover of *The Bloodprint* (Khan, 2017c) looks like it's in Mordor. And the

last cover of *The Bladebone* (Khan, 2020), even though I picked the model myself for the lead character Arian, her attire is kind of a mishmash of harem fantasy and South Asian dress. I remember at one point my editor asked me if the lead character should be in harem pants. And I said, God, no. And I think he really was just trying to understand what the representation should be. I just found it hard to communicate across the gap.

LN: So, there's a willingness, the intentions are good, but it's the translation and the knowledge that are lacking.

I also wanted to talk a bit more generally about genre. You've worked across both crime and fantasy. What were the attractions of those genres for you? How were they useful as tools to represent these different characters and to say what you wanted to say?

AZK: In both cases, I love the genre. I'm a fan, so I read them and I have since I was a kid. In the case of crime fiction, I really love the idea of a puzzle that you have to solve because I love solving puzzles, especially in books, so I would always try to race ahead and figure out who the killer is in the crime novel, and if I could beat the author to the reveal. So, it was a very natural transition to move from the kind of voluminous reading experience I had of crime fiction to translating it in my own work because I understood the conventions of the genre very well. I understood about pacing and plotting and suspects and clues and the reveal, so that was a good fit for me. But it was also a good fit in the sense that crime novels are about the pursuit of justice, typically trying to get some kind of redress for a victim. It was a very natural continuation of my work in human rights, which is also about the pursuit of justice and trying to shed light on the motivations behind these gross abuses of human rights that you see around the globe. So that was a great fit because it allowed me to combine two of my major passions in life: to speak about human rights issues that I know intimately, and then also to do so in the format of a genre that lends itself really well to that conversation.

However, when I was writing the crime novels, particularly the Khattak series, I really felt like they were for the western gaze or the white gaze. They're explicating Muslimness, particularly Muslim maleness, to a western and largely white audience that is used to a very different portrayal of Muslim manhood: of the terrorist who slaps women around and who's abusive and who plants bombs because he hates our values and hates our freedoms. Very reductive, very regressive, very dehumanizing. Very demeaning. The character of Esa and the Khattak novels were a way of speaking back and saying this is what Muslim maleness is to people who've grown up in those communities. who live with Muslim fathers and brothers and husbands, who've been cherished by uncles. It's nothing that you've seen or think you know. It also shows a person who is very observant in his faith, because a lot of the likeable Muslim characters you see on film and TV or in fiction are very distant from their faith. They drink, they womanize. They do all these things that are typically not associated with observant Muslim behaviour. I wanted to show someone whose values come from his faith and whose pursuit of justice through his crime work is *because* of his faith, and all of that was intended for the western gaze. It was a way to seize control of the narrative, to push back against the awfully dehumanizing stereotypes about Muslims in general and to be educational as well as entertaining, which is always difficult, because you have to figure out, am I just merely lecturing people, or am I actually telling a story well? And that's a craft that you develop, the more you write.

Of course, when you're writing a crime novel, you're restricted by the conventions of the genre. You have to deliver things in a certain way. By the end of the book, there has to be a reveal. The readers have to be fed enough clues that they don't feel cheated at the end, so you have to follow that. And then in my case in particular, because I was writing about global human rights issues, there was a huge amount of fact checking and research that doesn't typically come into a crime novel but was really important so that people couldn't turn to my

books and say, this is simply inaccurate, it didn't happen like this. Even though I really love writing these books, it's limiting in a way. And it's a very tense process. Whereas when I was writing my fantasy series *The Khorasan Archives*, I wanted to speak to my own communities, the communities that I grew up in and the Islamic heritage that I'm connected to. Not just in Pakistan, but by virtue of Islamic history — places like Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina, and all around the Muslim world. You're connected to a lot of different communities by virtue of your faith and a lot of different ways of practising that faith. You're connected to the artistic legacy, the architectural legacy, the musical legacy, the calligraphy, everything you can imagine. So, I wanted to celebrate the beauty of all of that, because portrayals of Islam in western media are typically so ugly and they seem to emphasize a culture of ugliness. To quote one of my huge influences, the Islamic scholar Sheikh Khaled Abou El Fadl, who is also a phenomenal writer and a human rights lawyer: "I want to speak back to that culture of ugliness with a culture of beauty", which is what I explore in the four books of the *Khorasan* quartet. I was also speaking to the communities I came from, and doing this delicate dance of celebrating the beauty, but at the same time, as a Pathan/Pashtun woman, really influenced by what the Taliban had done in the communities that I come from and that my heritage was linked to. I was able to speak critically, self-critically about how religion has been weaponized against women and minorities in these Taliban areas, which is part of a larger Wahhabist train of thinking about faith and doctrine. It was about reclaiming scripture for the women of these lands as a tool that's very empowering. In that sense, I felt really free; I didn't feel limited at all. I felt that I could write with a great deal of sincerity and authenticity and familiarity and with a right to my own heritage and history, as layered as it was all across the Muslim world. I really wanted to bring out the concept of ummah, or the global Muslim community, through this series, and do this delicate dance of celebration but also be very self-critical. That was purely for the communities that I come from and was raised in and for

Muslim readers. I know that there's a way to read *The Khorasan Archives* purely as text. If you don't know any of that history, it will read to you like a straight fantasy quartet. But if you know any of the languages involved, Arabic or Urdu or Persian, or you know any of the region, some of the cities, you would immediately pick up on the subtext, touchstones and Easter eggs, that I plant, and how the word play is bilingual. There are Arabic words that have English connotations, like the magic system in *The Khorasan Archives* is called "the Claim", but it's taken from the word *kalam*, meaning "word" or "speech" in Arabic. I've taken a lot of Arabic words and anglicized them, and I know Muslim readers, Arab readers, Pakistani readers would immediately pick up on all that, whereas western readers might not. It was kind of like an exercise in celebration and joy and maybe a little bit of self-indulgence, but a wonderful way for me to express my creativity. If you just look at the glossary of *The Khorasan Archives*, you'll see I had so much fun with it.

LN: It's great that fantasy can offer that kind of freedom. You're literally not bound by this world and its fact checking. Yet, you were able to weave this doubleness into it, where there's a kind of insider audience who gets something different than an outsider reader, but an outsider can still enjoy it.

You were touching on the human rights aspect and the way that crime allows you to combine your interest in the genre with your background in international human rights law. You recently wrote an essay where you talk about the anger of one of your characters of Palestinian heritage at the erasure and dehumanization of his people (Khan, 2023a). I wondered if you could say a bit about why you wanted to write a character like this, especially given what you just said about the stereotypes about Muslim men? Also, what sort of response have you had given the heightened climate that we're in and the escalation that's been happening in the region recently?

AZK: Ok, that's a multipart question [laughs].

LN: Sorry, that's a huge question!

AZK: We're going to tackle it. I have always wanted to write about Palestine and the occupation of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza. I think it's a core part of Muslim identity to be taught about the Occupation from a very young age, to have parents and grandparents who know about the Occupation and who have always supported the human rights of the Palestinian people. That's just a rite of passage for every Muslim kid of my generation that I know. Some of us become more politicized, some of us become less politicized. Then it's amazing to me to see what generations beyond us are doing, how much more informed they are, how much smarter they are about their advocacy, how much more passionate they are, how many more risks they're willing to take. My generation was still extremely cautious. It was my father who first taught me about the issue. I always had a propensity for issues that relate to justice and to me Israel's Occupation of the Palestinian Territories seems very much like what we've done in the Americas with Indigenous peoples. It's just a horrifying example of ongoing colonization that dispossesses an entire population and refuses to recognize their human rights or even their humanity. That became one of the major influences on my writing from a very young age, in my teens. I would write newspaper articles, essays, poems, and songs all relating to Palestine. The only creative writing course I ever took was in my undergrad at the University of Toronto and the portfolio that I submitted was a collection of poems on Palestine called "Sand and Stones". It was hugely influenced by the work of Mahmoud Darwish, considered the national poet of Palestine, who I could only read in translation since I don't read Arabic as a language, I can only read Quranic Arabic, and that kind of poetry really inspired and moved me. Young people are very passionate and easy to engage in these questions and that's exactly how I was. I remember we used to do events like Jerusalem Day. I was vice president of the Muslim Students' Association at my campus. Deeply, deeply involved. I had a lot of Palestinian friends, which informed a big part

of my consciousness. Then when I went to law school, and the older I became, I was able to interpret the structural injustices much more clearly.

Then I did my study abroad year in Ramallah. I didn't actually do the whole year. I did maybe three and half months. I lived in Ramallah in a hostel with Palestinian girls and taught English to three sections of Palestinian students at the famous Birzeit University. I went on all kinds of cultural tours. I went to demonstrations. I experienced, at a remove with the protection of my Canadian passport at the time, the realities of the Occupation, the brutal dehumanization of the Palestinian people. One of my best friends there was a girl from Gaza who would take these risks coming to Jerusalem with me so I could go to the Dome of the Rock knowing that she could get sent back to Gaza and not be able to return to complete her education. It was just a very different way of seeing and living and being. I had so much fear of being in that machine gun culture and being stopped at checkpoints so often and being interrogated, and yet none of the Palestinians around me shared that fear: not the elderly, not the girls, not the little kids. It was such a routine part of their existence and they had nothing but contempt for their colonizers. I was just so astonished by that level of bravery and it was a very eye-opening experience, so it continued to inform what I thought about the issues. It deepened my understanding.

I knew I would keep writing about it and my second novel, *The Language of Secrets* (Khan, 2016), does refer to Palestinian issues quite a bit, as well as Palestinian poetry. I remember thinking that this is a place where I *could* write about it and always keeping it in the back of my mind that I haven't written my Palestine book yet. I think of my books like this: *The Unquiet Dead* (Khan, 2015) is my book on Bosnia, *Language of Secrets* is my book on terrorism, *Among the Ruins* (Khan, 2017b) is my book on Iran, *Dangerous Crossing* (Khan, 2018a) is my book on Syria. And so I thought, you still have to write your Palestine book and you still have to think about what you want to say. At that time, I had no idea this

was coming, the 7 October attacks and everything that came after them. Already I had thought with this new Inaya Rahman series, which is more civil rights than human rights based — it's about American policing and all the issues that come out of that — that I can give my characters these different backgrounds: if I make Inaya Rahman part Afghan, I can write about Afghanistan, which I do a little bit in *Blood Betrayal*. I'm hoping to do more as the series continues. I got my feet wet a bit, but there's so much to say and I really wanted to write about the American exit from Afghanistan. So back when I was planning this series, I'm thinking down the road that this will give me the opportunity to talk about certain things.

I've already written a very devout Muslim detective in the form of Esa Khattak and I didn't want to repeat that. I wanted to write a man who is disaffected, from faith and heritage, and is putting up a strong barrier to both, but I wanted to give him complex reasons for doing so. I created the character of Waqas Seif, who has an Iranian mother, because I was thinking one day I'll be able to go back and write about the Iranian regime post-Green Revolution. I told myself to keep that in my back pocket. It'll give me a reason, a way to connect. Then I made Seif's father Palestinian and I made his back story that of a father who's murdered by Israeli forces and the family can't recover the body or get any explanation why this has happened. As a result of all this pain and being thrust into the position of having to support his family from a young age and his two younger brothers, Seif thinks that the only way he can get ahead is not to be Palestinian, not to be Muslim. I've written him as this complicated guy who's refusing to come to terms with who he is. But over the course of the series, and right from the first book, *Blackwater Falls* (Khan, 2022), where Seif engages with a Syrian suspect, the mother of the dead girl in the novel, he's being forced back into his identity, and as he grows more and more attracted to Inaya, he's realizing that the only way to be with a woman like her is to go back to who he used to be, who his parents wanted him to be. That's a struggle for him because he's walked a very different path. He also believes that heritage

and faith are career killers for him. He can't advance. He can't provide for his family. So instead of being erased, he's erased himself, which I think was a really interesting thing to do with the character. I planned to unfold his Palestinianness a little, novel by novel, not realizing that 7 October was coming, and then when it did, I thought, now's the time to write the Palestine novel. Now you can take Seif and work him back to the crucible of his own identity.

LN: Sticking with that series, your main protagonist, Inaya Rahman, is quite different from the typical image of the lone detective. She's deeply connected to her family and her community, as well as, of course, her faith. Why did you think it was important to write her in that way?

AZK: You're right, she is very different from the troubled, tormented, alcoholic detective who can't sustain any normal relationships. I don't know if I was consciously doing that, but I think Inaya Rahman is the character that I've written who's the closest to my own identity. She is the most like me, although in many ways she's also very different from me. She's a heck of a lot braver. She stands up to her parents a lot better than I do [laughs]. But I wanted to write someone that I knew really well.

I come from a huge family that's extremely close, extremely interfering. Everybody says that I'm the most interfering member of the family, but I feel like everybody else is, and there's a lot of jostling for position. But there's also so much love and humour and understanding and inside jokes, and that's one of the reasons that I wanted to write it. And just from a craft perspective, when you give a character a big family, there are a lot of storylines you can work on down the road that relate to the family and that keep bringing the character back to the heart of the family. I thought it was also interesting because in my own life, I've experienced so much surprise from non-Muslim friends and colleagues about how long we stay with our parents and how often the girls live with their parents until they get

married, just like I did, except for periods when I went away to school. I wanted to show that it's something very normal. Inaya is almost 30, but she's living in the family home, and she's doing that because she likes being there, but also because she has a sense of obligation in terms of her parents' well-being and her younger sisters' well-being. And that's very normal and common in our families and communities. I just wanted to represent that on the page.

There's also a lot of humour that comes out of her family situation and I thought I would flip the roles and show the mother and father different from what people expect — that the mother is the strict, more controlling one, and the father is very much like my father was: very gentle, very supportive, not someone to stand in his daughter's way. To me that was a continuation of speaking back because Inaya's father is an Afghan male of Pashtun background, exactly the kind of men who make up the Taliban. And yet here he is with his own war wounds, his own tragedies, his own secrets, and his deep, deep love for his three daughters. Having no sons and only having daughters is not a source of shame for him, it's a source of pride. A lot of people who come from countries where police are deeply corrupt are very wary of and contemptuous of the police and yet he's still very supportive of what his daughter's trying to do, changing the system from within, whereas her mother's view is, "What the heck are you doing? You're mingling with the low lifes of society and you're putting yourself in danger." And Inaya's community thinks, "Isn't this kind of a betrayal of us? What you're doing, joining the forces of law and order?" And here she is, poor girl, having come from Chicago, trying to work on police accountability and get justice for people who've been victims of police violence. She is misunderstood on all counts, except by her father and her sisters, and from a craft perspective again that gives her a lot of good conflict to work with. I find if you put it in the family context, it's much more humane; it's softer and more palatable to readers. It's a way of communicating tensions without getting overwhelmed by them. Then there's this celebratory aspect of it that I really enjoy, how lovely it is to be

with family and surrounded by family even when you do have those conflicts and different points of view.

LN: Yes, that family is not this oppressive thing that it always seems to be presented as in relation to Muslim contexts. Thinking about a character like Inaya but also Esa and Muslim detectives in general, given that Muslims in the West, in America and Britain especially, are always these communities of suspicion subject to heightened police surveillance, it seems especially poignant to have Muslim detectives whose very job it is to reveal what has been hidden. Is that a reversal that you were thinking about when you set out to write these characters or is that just a happy accident of the form?

AZK: Maybe a little bit of both. I also wanted to show how much prejudice there is and how many obstacles all officers of colour face within the force. There are so many career limitations and automatic suspicion. In fact, a section of what I'm writing in the new book in the Inaya Rahman series is Seif's experience of having been hazed in the FBI to get where he is, and I took that from a story about a young Muslim cadet in the Marines who was put in an industrial sized dryer and suffered burns to his body as part of this hazing ritual. People just can't imagine that these are the realities that officers of colour are going through and how extreme they can be. In the new book, I'm giving that story to Seif, that this is what he's been through. I wanted to illuminate the challenges that they face both inside, in the system that they're working to change from within, and then as you see very clearly in *Blackwater Falls*, how much suspicion Inaya faces from Muslim communities in Blackwater, where they say, "You're on the wrong side of the line. What are you doing?" In *Blood Betrayal* (Khan, 2023b), Inaya has to decide what she's going to do about these protests against the police by communities of colour and figure out which side of the line she's going to stand on. And even Seif has to figure that out.

Narratively, it's very rich material to put a character through those kinds of internal and external conflicts and make them doubt themselves, which is kind of the equivalent of the alcoholic detective who's lost all his family, but just about a different set of issues. It's also a way of examining structural racism and systems and institutions where power works against marginalized communities. You see it on the individual level through the characters, but also through the system that they have to navigate, and the effect that that system has on people that they interview and their own family members, and so on.

LN: In *Blackwater Falls* and *Blood Betrayal* there are really harrowing scenes of forced unveiling of Muslim women. There's Inaya's own experience of this — which is a kind of hazing as well — by her co-workers in the police force. And there is also the first victim, Razan, who undergoes a similar experience at the hands of boys from her high school. These violent acts seem really driven by a desire to make these women knowable, to see beneath the concealment, bringing issues of revelation and concealment that are central to the detective novel and its mechanics to the forefront. What was your thinking in wanting to include those episodes, especially since they become quite central in how the plot unfolds in both books?

AZK: I don't know that I was thinking about unveiling in the same way you've described. I had just been through the pre-Trump election years then all the years of the first Trump presidency, absorbing all the anti-Muslim rhetoric, tracking hate crimes in the country, personally impacted by the Muslim ban because my husband's Iranian. I was living with a level of tension that was previously unknown to me, despite having every advantage known to man: a Canadian passport, an American passport, English as my mother tongue, being a lawyer, and yet still feeling unsafe, wary, self-censoring, all of those things, and so I couldn't imagine how it would be for people in a less privileged position than myself.

There was also during that period a huge number of crimes that I was tracking, and the discourse that was happening internally in Muslim communities was about gendered

Islamophobia. A lot of my girlfriends wear hijab. My mother-in-law wears hijab. There was a period in my life when I wore it. I was hearing about the hostility and the insults and being pushed on the subway platform and all of those kinds of things. I actually wrote a short story called “The Yellow Line” (Khan and Jakubowski, 2022) about a Muslim woman in hijab who gets pushed on the subway platform. I was just getting progressively angrier and angrier at this gendered Islamophobia, this hatred of expressions of Muslimness, this desire to eradicate us and, when you’re not inside of it, sometimes you don’t even see it. Once, I was at a bus stop and there was a young Somali girl who had a hijab on. I asked how she was doing and she told me that she regularly gets chased on her way to work by a big, burly white man. She was a tiny little slip of a thing, wearing a black hijab. And I asked her, “How do they treat you at work?” And she said it’s not great. There were hundreds of stories like that that I heard.

My friend from Canada was coming down to the States at the height of this anti-Muslim rhetoric and she’s hijab-wearing and she asked me, “What kind of precautions should I take?” Just someone even asking me that question made me so angry. I told her to try to wear a hat instead of a scarf, especially when you’re going to places like the Grand Canyon, and try to be very conscious of your surroundings. Don’t stand too close to the traffic at a crossing. Just little things that I wasn’t used to thinking about. So, I put myself and the women of my community into Inaya’s shoes, into Razan’s shoes. There is this hatred of the hijab manifested in Canadian laws in Quebec, just frankly racist laws and racist rhetoric, which is multiplied to the nth degree in France. There are laws all over Europe which are dedicated to striking at expressions of Muslim identity. For me that all coalesced into this representation of Inaya and Razan. To many in the West and many non-Muslims, the hijab is understood very differently from how we understand it. Part of me writing about it was to help people understand what it actually means. There’s so much discussion about hijab and so

little understanding of its meaning and purpose. There's such a reductive quality to the dialogue where a woman is reduced to the cloth on her head and not what she feels about it or who she is as a person. And men so often insert themselves into a conversation that is purely personal between a woman and God: whether it's Muslim men or non-Muslim men, whether it's legislators or the average Joe on the street who's waiting to push you into traffic.

It was important to me to have the opportunity to explicate some of that, more from Inaya's perspective than from Razan's, and to understand why, now that she's not wearing the hijab, why she's wearing her hair a certain way, and to understand that the whole point of it is about a promise of modesty and decorum in your conduct before God that has absolutely nothing to do with a man insisting you wear it or don't wear it. That's how I was looking at expressing that aspect, which I think is given too much emphasis externally when internally to us it's like your grocery list. You don't spend all your time thinking about your hijab, and all Muslim women wear hijab at some point: when they pray, they put something on their head, when they go to a gathering with elders. If I go to visit my family in Pakistan, I will wear it if I go out in the streets, I might put a full of abaya on even though these are not things that I would normally wear. It's just such a normal part of our lives. We don't spend the kind of time investing it with meaning that others ascribe to it, and that meaning is so hostile — that we're oppressed or subservient or somehow mindless. But, in many ways it's so ignorant too that it almost seems laughable if it wasn't dangerous. That's what I was trying to get at with this issue. And, though I hate to say it now that I've said so much about it, it's my least favourite thing to talk about when it comes to Muslim identity, because I feel like it's just missing everything that's truly important.

LN: Yes, completely. There's been some reports done here in the UK where the researchers specifically point to genre fiction as one of the areas of book publishing that is still lagging behind in terms of diversity (Kean, 2015; Saha and van Lente, 2021). Why do you think it's

important that popular genres, and not just literary fiction, are representative and have writers and protagonists of colour, or maybe particularly Muslim protagonists?

AZK: I don't know that I've thought that deeply about it. I didn't start out on a crusade of any kind. That's just what I like to read. It feels to me that there should be space for all of our voices. It gets boring reading the same kind of detective over and over again: the guy with family problems and the drinking problem, who's laconic and macho and all of that. Then the other option is cosies, which have seemed so formulaic for so long. Now it's just like a breath of fresh air to see writers from all different backgrounds bringing their perspective and their detectives and their cultures and their biracial or multiracial identities onto the page through these different characters and setting them free, which is really fun and different to read. It's more representative of the world as it actually is, and I think it's important that all literature is like that, that it shouldn't be designed exclusively for one audience.

I do think it is very hard for writers of colour to reach a broader audience. A lot of people think that our books are niche books that are meant for just a very specific and select audience. The communities that we come from are also lagging behind in terms of finding our books and supporting our books. Then, not only do we not have our niche audience, but it's difficult to reach a broader audience. I think that has something to do with marketing budgets. There is a really good article that a journalist wrote about the big publishing lawsuit stopping the merger between two of the "Big 5" publishers, and a lot of information came out about publishing as a business (Grady, 2022). The article reported how many books the typical author sells, and it's usually around 1,000, and some of my numbers are like that. It talked about where publishers allocate money in their marketing budgets and why and how that budget basically sustains the publishing industry for the rest of us, such as midlist authors or authors who aren't even midlist. That was really interesting to me because in the beginning it had felt really personal to me that my books weren't breaking through more because I

thought they had a strong element of novelty, the kind of crime fiction that other people are not writing. My novels are also very contemporary, they relate to things that are going on right now — I was writing *A Dangerous Crossing* at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, for example, and I just couldn't find the audience. But when I read this report on how publishing really works as an industry, it made a lot more sense to me, that it's not targeted at me. It's not about me or my skills. This is a business model and it's important for writers to understand how the business works.

Ultimately, I just want to tell stories. And the kind of stories I tell are not going to be the kinds of stories that another writer might tell.

LN: It's interesting that you talk about the difficulty of finding your audience because I read an article which suggested that communities that have been subjected to over-policing and police surveillance are generally not great readers of the crime genre (Lynx-Qualey, 2021: 203). I wondered if you found that true of Muslim communities, and in general what has the response been to your work among those communities?

AZK: My purely anecdotal take on this is that there is, across every community, a huge readership in the Young Adult sphere, including Muslim communities. Readers are really interested in those books, particularly Young Adult with romance, or fantasy with romance, or romcoms that are not even Young Adult but maybe have characters in their 20s or 30s. Everyone is reading those books, every community across the board. They have a huge audience.

Crime fiction, in my observation, has a very big audience in older white women. It seems to be less discoverable. I've met so many people from my community who've never heard of my books or of me as an author, despite me writing characters who are like them, specifically for them, and even if I tell them about the book, there are still going to be only a handful of people who want to read crime fiction or anything that reminds them of our

current very painful reality. There's that disconnect as well. I've had that experience so often now, as have my fellow Muslim writers, that we are concerned that our books aren't reaching our communities because we know that we're not crossing over either. Where's the audience then? We're talking about things like creating our own book festivals and websites and better outreach, but the process of writing itself is so exhausting that there's not that much left over for other creative endeavours that really require dedication and focus. However, I believe that these are growing pains. Two generations after us will be much more established than we are, they'll do much better when it comes to book sales, and hopefully we're doing a little bit of the ground-breaking work and the younger writers coming up will be able to benefit from it down the road. As we would say, Inshallah.

LN: That's a really nice way of thinking about it, in a hopeful way rather than in a frustrating way. At the same time, within South Asia, crime seems to be having a bit of a moment, like the Bangalore Detectives Club series that's done really well.¹ And, as you already mentioned, you've contributed a story to a global anthology of crime writing (Khan and Jakubowski, 2022). The issue that this interview is going to appear in is about genre fiction in a global context, so I wondered what your thoughts are on what it is about crime that is so adaptable to different cultures and geographic contexts?

AZK: I think that it's because people across cultures around the globe love a puzzle. The heart of the crime novel is a puzzle, and sometimes the puzzle is just who did it and people are curious to race to the ending and see if they can figure that out. But I think the real attraction is the puzzle that is the human heart and what motivates the people who commit the crime, what motivates the people who cover it up and what motivates the people who investigate it and the people whose lives intersect with it. To me, that's what I've always found the most fascinating. When I was a kid reading tons and tons of age-appropriate crime fiction or mystery novels, I would have nightmares, and these are not gory and terrifying or

descriptive books I was reading — we're talking Ngaio Marsh, Golden Age queens, that kind of thing. But the reason I would have nightmares is because I would picture the murderers' intention of taking a human life, which was terrifying to me. And so, I think that's deeply compelling to most people, to understand character motivation, and then there's also the sheer joy of unravelling the puzzle.

LN: Yes, that really is quite a universal, cross-cultural thing. And then you have these different cultural and geographic inflexions to it. I think that's a nice place to finish, thinking about the way that crime has the ability to reach lots of people because of the human puzzle at the centre of it. Thank you so much for your time today.

Notes

¹ See the article by Vaibhav Parel on this series by Harini Nagendra in this issue.

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