

The Writing Life: Awais Khan

Paula Robinson

Foyles in London launched Awais Khan's debut novel, *In the Company of Strangers*, last summer, followed by a UK book tour and numerous speaking engagements, including at the Dubai Literary Salon.

A graduate of The University of Western Ontario and Durham University, Awais studied creative writing at Faber Academy in London. His work has appeared in *The Aleph Review*, *The Hindu*, *The Missing Slate*, *MODE*, *Trip Fiction*, *Daily Times* and *The News International* and he is the Founding Director of The Writing Institute in Lahore. Awais has just completed his second novel, which addresses the issue of honour killing in Pakistan.

www.libertybooks.com/IntheCompanyofStrangers)

In both of your novels, your protagonists are female. What drew you to explore the depths of the feminine experience in modern Pakistan?

That is a very interesting observation. I was actually not thinking about exploring the feminine experience in modern Pakistan. You could say that the characters found me. Mona from *In the Company of Strangers* was the culmination of years of observation. From afar, the lives of Pakistan's elite class look opulent and deliriously happy but, up close, that is not always the case. Domestic abuse is very common, but swept under the rug, as is any hint of scandal. Back in 2012 when I started thinking about writing a book, Mona came to me and I knew there would be no looking back. However, with my upcoming novel about honour killing, Abida's character was more the result of lots of dedicated research into this gruesome practice.

What influence do the arts have on your work? The prologue of *In the Company of Strangers* has a specific cadence—are there any musical influences there?

You'd be surprised to learn that I am not musical at all! However, growing up, Bollywood definitely influenced me as a person. I don't know if the Shahrukh/Salman/Aamir films informed my writing, but they were my first introduction to the ideas of love, pain, betrayal and loss. Nobody does melodrama like Bollywood! I remember watching *Anjaam* as a child and it was the first time I realised that not all stories have happy endings. I was traumatised for days when Madhuri Dixit sacrificed herself just to ensure Shahrukh Khan died alongside her. Similarly, films like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* showcased the importance of love, happiness and family values—all of which played a part in my novel, *In the Company of Strangers*.

Which authors have inspired you most in our life? Whom do you hope to inspire and why?

As a child, I was greatly influenced by Enid Blyton. I remember reading *The Secret Seven* series and wondering whether one day I might create such characters or get to solve a mystery. As I grew older, I started expecting that letter from Hogwarts, which never arrived (obviously!), so you can imagine what a huge effect J.K. Rowling had on me!

As an adult, I have been inspired by Donna Tartt and Tolstoy. Reading *Anna Karenina*, I realised how similar Imperial Russia was to modern Pakistan. I decided that I would like to write about Pakistan's high society, which so few people outside of Pakistan know about. That was the moment when the idea for *In the Company of Strangers* took root.

I hope that my journey as a writer, my successes and failures, will inspire aspiring writers in Pakistan who feel too hesitant about putting their work out there. I want them to know that the key to any kind of success is perseverance, and that if it can happen for me, it can happen for anyone. Some argue that talent is innate, but I am a strong believer that the art of writing can be learned. I am a living example of it!

How does inspiration come to you? Do you have a writing routine and, if so, how did it evolve? When writing, are you what is known in publishing as a 'planner' or a 'pantser'?

For me, inspiration comes from observation. Many people ask who my characters are based on, but they are the result of years of observation. To me, being a writer is being an observer and a reader. I find inspiration in both these activities.

I don't have a writing routine as such. It depends what I'm working on, but I work well with deadlines. I love writing in coffee shops. All the noise helps me to focus!

I would definitely classify myself as a 'pantser'. I wish I could be a planner, but the most I can achieve is a vague outline. I find that my characters work best when they are not shackled by the needs of the plot—although this can make editing harder!

The publishing industry has many 'writing rules'. Do you feel that they constrain writers' creativity and how do you address this issue at The Writing Institute?

Yes, there are a lot of 'rules' associated with writing and endless books extolling the virtues of linear narrative, sharp dialogue, show, don't tell, etc. I think all these rules can sometimes overwhelm writers. We are expected to write about the hero's journey and all its associated struggles, but what if we don't want to write about that? Writers from Virginia Woolf to Ocean Vuong have broken the rules, but is every writer allowed that same level of creative freedom?

The Writing Institute is a place for aspiring writers to express themselves freely. The focus remains on learning and enhancing the art of writing. I try not to worry my students unnecessarily about the rules. Sure, there are major lectures devoted to the art of writing, but it is equally important to bring out a writer's inner voice. That's the only way they'll write a convincing and captivating tale. The primary focus is always on helping students understand and embrace their writing—to be proud and confident about it.

How is Covid-19 affecting your career as a writer? What changes do you foresee in the publishing industry once the pandemic is over? Will authors do more book tours and speaking events online and might this work better for both authors and readers?

I have found Covid-19 to be very disruptive for my career as a writer. I function best writing in a café and, with that option now closed to me, let's just say that my productivity is at an all-time low!

In the Company of Strangers' launch in Lahore was scheduled for 20th April with over 500 people attending, but it had to be cancelled along with major events at bookshops and universities across the country, plus a second book launch in Karachi. Like many authors, I had to improvise and devise a remote marketing strategy. Instead of physical appearances, I decided to launch an Instagram Live show where I talk about books and publishing with publishers, agents and authors. Social media has also helped me promote my novel amongst readers in Pakistan.

Many believe that the lack of physical events allows writers more time to write and that perhaps this should become the new norm, but I strongly believe in the importance and effectiveness of book launches, university tours, book tours and success parties. They are necessary if an author wants to stay relevant.

You like to divide your time between Lahore and London. How does the diversity in culture affect you and inform your writing? What influences from each culture would you like to see more of in the other?

For starters, I wish I could spend more time in London! There is something about that city that just immediately lifts my mood, and I find inspiration everywhere. It really is the strangest thing. I think London is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world and you can always find something to do, and it is hard to be lonely there.

I would love for Lahore to embrace the reading culture of London. There you see people reading everywhere, even when they are traveling for work. In Pakistan, we don't have many bookstores, and while we have lots of coffee shops, very few do much to promote literature. Wouldn't it be great to see coffee shops hosting book clubs and fostering a love of reading not only among adults, but children too?

Paula Robinson is a former columnist for The Sunday Times and The Sunday Telegraph in the UK and is currently editing her first novel (www.paularobinson.com).