



Exploring universal experiences through multicultural voices

AUTHOR SHARON DUGGAL DISCUSSES HER NEW NOVEL, WRITING CHALLENGES AND INSPIRATIONS

by MITA MISTRY

HAVING grown up as a part of a large extended Punjabi family in Birmingham and being one of six siblings, Sharon Duggal often retreated into books as a way of finding her own place in a busy household.

Books being a connection to a wider world, beyond the parameters of a close knit-community and supposed trajectory, led her towards writing, which became a creative outlet. Although writing remained with the naturally creative mind, it wasn't until her children were of a school-going age that she managed to pursue writing seriously.

The result has been Duggal's widely acclaimed debut novel *The Handsworth Times* and her short stories appearing in various anthologies.

The talented writer recently delivered her second novel *Should We Fall Behind*, which is a multi-layered story of emotions and people who live side by side, but don't notice each other until a newly arrived young man changes everything.

Eastern Eye caught up with rising literary star Sharon Duggal to speak about writing, inspirations and her new novel.

How did you feel when your first novel was published?

My first novel, *The Handsworth Times*, is a fictional account of people like me: British Asian people living in a very multicultural inner-city area with all the challenges that brings. My characters are not the kind of people that regularly (or ever) appear in published literature, so I was both surprised and elated when Bluemoose Books said they wanted to publish it. When it did eventually



CONNECTING LIVES: Sharon Duggal; and (inset right) her second novel

get published, I was nervous about what people close to me might think, but my friends and family were incredibly supportive. Unfortunately, my father never had the opportunity to see me as a published author. He always encouraged us to be who we were despite the pressures to conform from elsewhere. He was his own person and I know he would have been incredibly proud to see me becoming the author I always dreamt of being.

What led you towards writing *Should We Fall Behind*?

I knew as soon as I finished the first book that I wanted to write another, so it was inevitable really.

So, what's the story about?

Should We Fall Behind is about people who live side by side in a busy city, but hardly seem to notice each other until one day, someone called Jimmy arrives and things begin

to change. It is a book about the stories behind ordinary people, who could be any of us. Essentially, I wanted to write about the universal human experiences, which connect us all regardless of our backgrounds.

What was the biggest challenge of writing this novel?

I juggle writing with having to make a living and family commitments, so practically, time is always a challenge. I was making the final edits to this book when the pandemic hit, which was difficult for many reasons, including the fact I suddenly had a full house with my kids and partner, all studying and working from home. So, finding a quiet space was a challenge. I found it difficult to focus when everything appeared to have shifted in the world due to Covid.

What other challenges were there?

Artistically, the challenge was writing a story from multiple points of view. The cast of characters in the book are multicultural and multigenerational and each of them needed to be authentic and distinctive. I really hope I have managed to do that.

Who are you hoping connects to the novel's story?

I hope the book appeals to all kinds of people. It has recently had positive reviews in a range of publications, including *Prima Magazine*, who have chosen it as their book of the month for November, which is a really good sign. Ultimately, I will be pleased if any reader cares about the characters and is drawn in by the story.

How much does the critical acclaim that you have received so far mean?

I'd be lying if I said this kind of thing doesn't matter because it is good re-

views that encourage people to pick up the book in the first place, and writers are nothing without their readers. But I understand that taste in anything is subjective and there will almost definitely be some negative responses to the book, and I will have to deal with that.

Did you learn anything new, including about yourself, when you wrote the book?

I have proved to myself that I have more than one book in me. I am already thinking about the third book and itching to get to it. Writing is a long and solitary pursuit, but I love it, which probably says something about the kind of person I am.

'It is about ordinary people'

Who is your own literary hero?

I don't have one literary hero as such, but there are many writers I admire very much and wouldn't narrow that to just authors. Stories are told through music and film as well as literature, so, songwriters, film directors and many other artists sit among my literary heroes. Among those I would include are John Steinbeck, Bob Dylan, Jhumpa Lahiri, RK Narayan, Patti Smith, Leonard Cohen, Elizabeth Strout, Satyjit Ray, Annie Proulx, Roald Dahl, Toni Morrison, the list is endless.

So, would you tell us what's your all-time favourite book?

That is very hard to say, but if I had to pick one then it would either be *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez or *The House of Mr Biswas* by VS Naipaul.

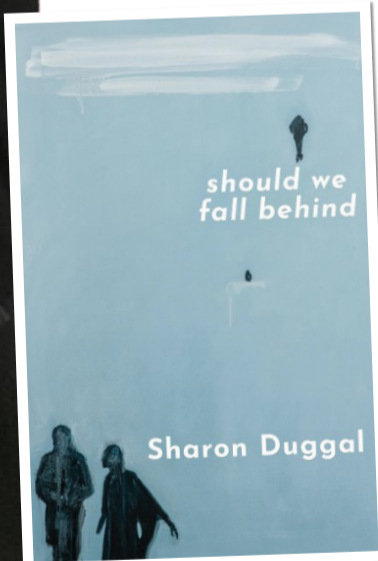
What inspires you as a writer?

I am very much inspired by the urban multicultural communities I am intrinsically part of, and specifically by experiences, and stories of people from immigrant backgrounds like my own family.

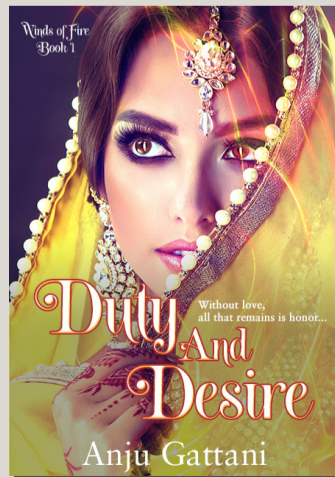
Why should we pick up your new book *Should We Fall Behind*?

If you haven't read my work before, then perhaps to take a chance on a relatively new writer, and one who might be writing about the sort of characters who could resonate with you.

■ Visit Twitter: @MsSDuggal and www.sharonduggal.com



BOOK REVIEW



Novel opens up a world of desi grandeur, deceit and lies

★★★★☆

Author: Anju Gattani
Publisher: Scarsdale Publishing

THE debut novel of author Anju Gattani took her 19 years to complete and tells the story Sheetal Prasad who is forced to marry millionaire playboy Rakesh Dhanraj, instead of Arvind, the man she loves. Her family does not approve of Arvind due to his social status and would prefer their daughter to marry Rake-

sh, who is also marrying for the sake of his family's status. Sheetal reluctantly marries Rakesh, but isn't happy, neither is she treated well. After the death of his father, Rakesh is the head of the family business, which has flourished since he took over. Sheetal hardly gets to spend time with her new husband because of

the amount of time that he spends working. She is forced into a predicament, should she stay and honour her family and son, or follow her love? Should she put up with the way she is badly treated by her husband and her in-laws or be disowned by her family and society forever? The Dhanrajs are

extremely wealthy and will do anything to hide the secrets that have been clouding the family for years. Sheetal slowly discovers the Dhanrajs are not what they appear to be from the outside. The enjoyable and free-flowing book was extremely easy to read. With vivid attention to detail, the atmospheric story almost has a Bollywood vibe to it and gives an interesting insight into how the insanely wealthy live in rural

Raigun, India. This is a book for desi ladies looking for real escapism, an easy read and something similar to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. If you are looking for a book to break away from the pandemic and crawl into a world of desi grandeur, deceit and lies; this is a good fit. The book is available on Amazon and is part of the *Winds of Fire* book series, which has got off to a strong start.

- Priya Mulji