

My writing journey

by TRISHA SAKHLECHA

AS A child, I always loved writing and for the longest time, I thought my future was as a journalist.

Though I chose to study science and mathematics in high school, the only subject I genuinely enjoyed was English. My library card was always maxed out, I wrangled my way onto my school's editorial board and when the time came to apply to university, my first choice was a BA journalism degree at Delhi University.

It was a prestigious course and part of the admissions requirement was a three-hour-long entrance exam that tested applicants on everything from grammar and composition to general knowledge and current affairs.

I sat for the exam feeling confident and perhaps a little smug. I had just graduated from one of the best schools in Delhi, I had always been told I was a good writer, and I took particular joy in correcting my brother's grammar. An entrance exam? Easy. I would sail through.

Turns out, it wasn't easy at all.

I failed. I did so badly that I didn't even make the waitlist, let alone the course. It was my first real taste of heartbreak and god, did it hurt. Like all devastating teenage heartbreaks, though, I survived. I studied design instead.

Over the next decade, I moved to London and built a career in fashion, returning to my love for writing time and again, but always sideways – helping a cousin with an essay, writing the odd piece about the latest fashion trends or far more frequently – and secretly – scribbling in my journals.

Though the idea of going into fashion journalism was never far from my thoughts, I refused to give myself the permission to pursue it as a career. There was no point. I couldn't even get into an entry-level journalism course – which I knew by now wasn't quite as prestigious as it seemed at the time, a fact that only made my failure feel bigger.

The truth is, I was scared. Was my fear simply a reaction to that early failure or something deeper, cultural conditioning that led me to believe that an Indian girl couldn't realistically expect to make a living as a writer? I don't know. But I under-



stood what I wasn't. What I couldn't be.

Even when I joined a creative writing course years later, it was because I was desperate for a distraction. I was trying to pull myself out of a very messy, very toxic marriage. I needed space to discover who I was again; and for me, the best way to do that has always been through writing.

I write to discover what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling and quite often, what I'm trying very hard not to feel. Writing was an escape, perhaps even a lifeline, but it was always a hobby. Never in a million years did I think that the novel I wrote to try and make sense of what was arguably the worst period of my life would end up getting published or open up a whole new career for me.

Even harder to grasp was the idea that not only did a major publisher want to publish my work, but they also had so much faith in my writing that they were willing to offer me a contract for my second, yet-to-be-written book on a 50-word synopsis. The fact that a few sentences got me a book deal when thousands of carefully written words all those years ago couldn't get me into a degree programme still feels utterly, completely unbelievable.

Despite that, as I prepare to pitch my next novel to my editor, that old fear resurfaces – do I have it in me? Can I be a real writer?

My second novel, *Can You See Me Now?* has just been published. It's a psychological thriller set in India that deals with toxic female friendships, power and privilege. It was a difficult book to write, one I'm particularly proud of and as I look at the copy on my shelf, I remind myself that I do have it in me to be a real writer. I am a real writer. I just need to keep the faith. And this time, instead of looking outside for validation, perhaps I need to look inside.

■ Trisha Sakhlecha is the author of *Your Truth or Mine?* and *Can You See Me Now?*

'You get a detached view of things as an outsider'

WHY TRISHA SAKHLECHA ENJOYS 'HAVING ONE FOOT EACH' IN INDIA AND THE UK

by AMIT ROY

THE novelist Trisha Sakhlecha, who has been hailed as an exceptional new talent on the literary scene, has spoken to *Eastern Eye* on two subjects close to her heart.

One is the continuing abuse of women in India, which she has worked into her new novel, *Can You See Me Now?*, a psychological thriller with a shocking twist that few have been able to guess. This merited a favourable mention in *The Sunday Times*.

The other is the need for the colonial history of the empire to be taught in UK schools.

Sakhlecha, 35, moved to London when she was 22. She attended Delhi Public School, an elite co-educational institution in the Indian capital, and then studied fashion in Mumbai and Bangalore before making London her home. She had no inkling she had the makings of a novelist until she took a creative writing course at the Faber Academy. But she also runs a business as a freelance fashion consultant.

She attracted favourable notices with her debut novel, *Your Truth or Mine?*

"It deals with an expat Indian couple and the unravelling of their marriage," she explained. "It's also a psychological thriller, there is a crime, a missing woman and an investigation to deal with that. It's 70 per cent set in London, 30 per cent in India."

She goes on: "The proportions are the exact opposite with *Can You See Me Now?*"

The tale is about 16-year-olds Noor Qureshi and Sabah Khan at Westcott, an exclusive school in India, who are joined by Alia Sharma, an arrival from London. They become best friends, but then the story takes a dark turn, ending up with Noor's funeral. Since the events move backwards and forwards 15 years in time, she used a spreadsheet to cope with the "many moving parts".

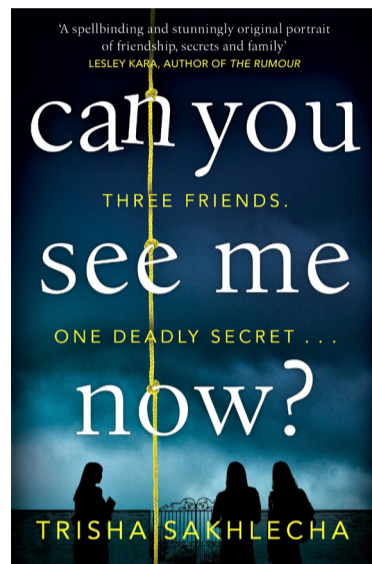
Sakhlecha should be in London right now, but she has spent lockdown in India in Madhya Pradesh's capital city of Bhopal, where her father, Om Prakash Sakhlecha, is a state government minister for the Bharatiya Janata Party. Her late grandfather, Virendra Kumar Sakhlecha, was once Madhya Pradesh's chief minister. She, though, chose not to go into politics.

A sex scandal involving Noor, which is at the heart of the novel, is very similar to an incident which occurred at Delhi Public School in 2004, a year after she had left. Sakhlecha remembers it was the girl who was blamed and shamed, while the boy got off unscathed. Her anger at the hypocrisy and justice not being done is reflected in *Can You See Me Now?*

She recalls what happened in 2004 when she was a teenager: "All anyone was talking about was what the girl did wrong, how stupid she was, how she shouldn't have trusted a boy or how this is what happens when there's too much westernisation in the country. But no one was really addressing the fact that the girl had also been a victim."

Sakhlecha happened to be visiting Delhi when a young woman was gang-raped on a bus in December 2012 with fatal consequences. "It felt like there was a constant stream of such reports. But there were also a lot of sexual harassment cases coming to the fore. And it made me think about where it all starts – it felt like it started in those conversations in school. That's why I was so keen to connect the two strands together."

Two of the girls in her novel are Muslim, while the third is Hindu. This was not intentional. "There was no reason why I shouldn't have that mix. But as I started plotting it, it became all the more poignant to have that divide between them, and then to bring in a sense of religious intolerance and fanaticism.



That actually ends up playing quite a crucial part in the plot."

Sakhlecha says that living in London but not being "British Asian" has its advantages and disadvantages. "Sometimes, it feels like being the perpetual outsider. Yes, having lived in London for so long now, I'm an outsider when I am in India. But I'm an outsider in London as well. Which is very interesting from a creative point of view because that's when you get the best observations. You can see things from a detached point of view. But I've been very lucky that I've been able to travel between the two countries very frequently. So I've managed to keep one foot in either continent. And I love having that freedom to assimilate or step away where I choose to."

The India she grew up in is not the India she finds on her visits to the country. "The news is afire with stories of Muslims being lynched for everything from supposedly carrying beef to making a speech in a liberal university. Neither is illegal, but when it comes to Muslims – a minority group in most parts of India – it feels as though different rules apply. There's no denying the extreme religious intolerance brewing in India. It's a sad reality that Hindu-Muslim violence, sometimes organic, sometimes spurred on by political agendas, is frequent. In a country where politics and

religion are inextricably knotted together, this really comes to the fore in election season."

Again, such sentiments are woven into her novel. Sakhlecha is also able to take a nuanced view of British rule in India. It's a subject she is able to address with passion and eloquence.

"As much as I love England and as much as I love being part of the London scene, you cannot dismiss the fact that there were lots of atrocities that were done," she said. "It left India in a place where we still grapple with the effects of colonialism, maybe not in an obvious way, but we still do. There's still the sense of white superiority that you find as you walk around in India and have conversations with people. And I think it's possible to acknowledge that colonialism was not the altruistic, benevolent idea that a lot of people like to believe it was.

"At the same time, we enjoy living in London, and enjoy the relations that exist between the UK and India now. In terms of teaching colonial history, whether you're British Asian or British, it's important to know where you came from and what's brought you to where you are. Who contributed to that and in what way? Once that understanding comes, a lot of the issues that we deal with now, in terms of the racism and stereotyping and around immigration, we will start to see resolved. Education has a huge role to play in that."

■ *Can You See Me Now?* by Trisha Sakhlecha, £8.99, is published by Pan Books.

POWER OF WORDS: Trisha Sakhlecha; and (above) her latest novel

