

TLC Showcase

SHEILA CHAPMAN

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Introduction to *The Unbelonging of Taksheel Chaturveydi*

The *Unbelonging of Taksheel Chaturveydi* is commercial literary, historical fiction charting the paths of two families and set between India and England throughout the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

Unbelonging concerns Taksheel, a Brahmin, who in 1932 leaves his family in India for London where he hopes to make enough money to prop up his flagging and unhappy clan. Celia, the bipolar daughter of the upper class family he is staying with, falls in love with him and engineers an encounter that leaves her pregnant. Taksheel's clan in India are fraying at the edges and expecting him to return at any moment. Celia conceals her pregnancy until the last moment and alienates her family by refusing to give up her child. When Taksheel tells Celia his future is with his family in India she kills herself and he is left with a mixed race child in pre war England that no one wants. Meanwhile, a photograph of Taksheel with Celia and their child finds its way to India and shatters the hopes of his wife and four children who were waiting for their new life in England to begin. Taksheel remains in England and, twenty years later, one of the four children he left behind in India comes to confront him.

I felt compelled to tell this story because its central event (the abandonment of a woman and her children) happened to my Indian grandmother. Like one of my novel's central characters, Jalbala, my grandmother learnt of her abandonment via a photograph and my father made the journey from Rajasthan to England in 1956 to confront the father who destroyed his mother's life.

I started writing the novel twelve years ago when I lived in New York. I finished it, tore it up (metaphorically!) and rewrote it several times. In 2016 I submitted the first chapter to the Bridport competition which is sponsored by TLC. I heard that I had made the longlist of twenty in the summer and needed to submit 15,000 words. In September I was told I had made the shortlist of five and could I submit 30,000 words – the first third of the novel. I did this and waited. In October I heard that I had won. I was thrilled and am excited to have the chance to work with TLC as part of the prize, to get *The Unbelonging* into publishable shape.

Winning the Bridport Prize has made me feel like a "real writer" and, whatever happens next, that is a wonderful thing.

The Unbelonging of Taksheel Chaturveydi, by Sheila Chapman

Extract

The men walked in silence for a while. Taksheel glanced over to the chestnut tree under which sat his make-shift family.

“So what is left?” Taksheel said, half to himself. “I can’t take Celia and the child to India, of course. Where would they stay? In Sanik Farms? I could not bring that dishonour on my father, my family and on Jalbala...” his voice faded away. He tried to gather himself. “But it is not just for that reason. How could Celia live in India? The chaos, the filth, the degeneracy. Whatever hold she has on her sanity, on reality, would be loosed for good. And what of the child? I have already told you what the English doctor said about children with the blood of two races running through them. Awful things. Untrue things. But it would be the same there.” Taksheel’s despair was yielding to anger as it invariably did when he thought of the cruelty of the world in judging his daughter. He looked directly at Rabindra and spat out, “She will be *the bastard half-breed* wherever she lives.”

Taksheel had taken Rabindra into his confidence the night he returned from London having discovered that Celia had been carrying his child for half a year. Their friendship, up until that moment based on their common goals in business, their shared love of Indian classical music and cricket, quickly deepened and, as they walked together in the shade of oaks and birches Taksheel knew he had at last found true brotherhood.

“Then Celia and the child must stay in England.” Rabindra spoke briskly; he was a practical man who liked to understand the parameters of a problem and then close in on the solution. “You can provide a house and servants and anything else they might need. No one in India need ever know of their existence.” Rabindra nodded to himself, the solution growing ever clearer in his mind. “You will not be able to send for your family as planned. To have your family here would be too great a risk. You can stay here for some more years, we will work hard together, and then you will return to Jaipur, to your family. I will run the factories and you will come here for regular visits; to work and also to see the child.”

Taksheel looked resigned. It was the conclusion he had reached himself but to have it set forth like this made it seem absolute. He felt grief for the future that he had placed beyond reach. He had wanted to be the lion that everyone said he was - that he had believed himself to be - to send for his family in triumph; to install them in a palatial English home; to give his children every opportunity in the Mother Country and to provide all those remaining in Sanik Farms with a comfortable and secure future; so that his name would be blessed by generations to follow.

"In time, perhaps her mother and father will soften." Rabindra wanted to offer some hope.

"Perhaps, perhaps." Taksheel was unconvinced.

"I was weak for an instant, Rabindra. If only I could return to that moment, I would undo it." Taksheel spoke the words he had spoken so many times before to his friend. It was becoming a mantra that he was doomed to repeat over and over in hopes of expiating his sin. He continued and Rabindra listened as he had each time before.

"Celia was so kind to me. She sat with me day after day and night after night. I was completely alone but for her. We talked on all subjects freely. How could I have known that her mind was damaged? I did not know. I assure you I did not know. You believe me?" Rabindra said, yes, he believed that Celia's illness remained hidden. With the acknowledgement, Taksheel was able to continue. "It happened just once. Just once. I was still so feverish that it seemed like a dream. When I awoke the next day, I thought it was a dream. It is the truth. I am not trying to avoid my shame, Rabindra. I know I have burned my blood. I could have pushed her away. Even in my weakened state I could have thrown her from the bed." And here came the question that had come so many times before and to which neither of them had the answer, "Why did I not do it? Why did I not do it?"

The day's activities; croquet on the front lawn and a genteel game of cricket played by men in shirts and leather shoes, had petered out and guests lay desultorily on rugs on the grass; chatting and sipping warm gin and tonics. Reluctantly, people began to peel away from larger groups to get into their cars.

The sun, insipid throughout the morning and early afternoon, blazed in the afternoon and tempted Celia from under the shade of the chestnut to join Taksheel and Rabindra and the other guests on the terrace and front lawn. They sat on chairs

and watched a game of tennis. They exchanged light hearted conversation. Their chairs were on a thoroughfare of sorts from the tennis courts to the house and many people passed by; stopping to marvel at how beautifully the day had turned out or to invite participation in a game of bridge or badminton. It seemed that every successful Indian from Lancashire to the Home Counties had been invited and Rabindra and Taksheel shook many hands and exchanged many business cards. There were English people too; returned colonials for the most part so Celia's presence was unremarkable. Anyone who cared to give it a thought assumed the baby was fully Indian and was a temporary occupant of Celia's lap. These were enlightened circles after all and friendships between Indians and the English were known to have arisen; why shouldn't this white woman be holding the child of an Indian friend?

Shortly before they left the party a man from Madras who was visiting his relative in Leeds stopped to chat with them. He was extolling the many virtues of the Kodak he had purchased the previous day and at the same time asserting some complex kinship via his friend in Leeds to the Chaturvedi clan. The man was not addressing anyone in particular and was a bore. Taksheel flicked through the newspaper that someone had left beside his chair. The man buzzed around them. He was organising people into groups for posed shots. Would Taksheel mind standing up behind the lovely lady with the baby? He did so. Celia pulled the blankets away from the child's face so she could be seen.

As with so many things, it was only later that Taksheel realised the folly of what he had permitted to take place.

The day had had the desired effect on Celia. As they packed up their belongings and bid farewell to their host, she seemed calm; content even. Taksheel would broach his proposal for her future on the train home. He would ask Miss Thorpe to take the child into another carriage so they would be undisturbed. He knew the life he would describe for her fell far short of the hopes she had once held for the three of them but he hoped she would see that it was the least unsatisfactory of the limited options they had.

The quiet branch line saw few passengers on the weekends. It was used mostly during the week by the plant workers at Longford. At her employer's request, Miss Thorpe took the baby to a different carriage. They would reunite on the platform at Hall Green where the car was waiting. Taksheel would drive Celia, the baby and Miss

Thorpe to the cottage and return to his lodgings.

Taksheel and Celia took their seats opposite one another in the empty carriage. She looked better for her day in the fresh air; less fraught.

"Have you had a pleasant day, Celia?" Where once he had felt it so easy to talk to her on any subject, on the infrequent occasions they spent time together now, he restricted himself to observations on the weather, enquiries after her health or talk of the child.

She nodded her assent to his question.

"How do you find living in the cottage? Is it to your liking?" Again, she offered a single nod of the head in answer.

"Would it please you to remain living there with Priya and Miss Thorpe? When I took the place, it was just for a few months but it will be quite easy to extend the lease; to make it a more permanent arrangement. Or of course, I could purchase a cottage for you and Priya. In that area or, if you prefer, elsewhere. What do you think?" He was speaking quickly, rushing to fill the silence.

"The place is as good as any, I suppose." Her tone was flat and her gaze had drifted from him out of the window.

"Well, what should I do then? Shall I speak with the landlord and extend the lease? You would like to remain in occupation?" He could hardly bear to listen to himself.

"By all means, extend the lease. After all, where else are we to go?"

"Celia, you are not obliged to remain anywhere that does not suit you. I will find you somewhere bigger or in a different location or ...". He was cut off by her interruption.

"Taksheel, my mother and father want nothing more to do with me. You wish to have nothing more to do with me other than to be my, I don't know what, my patron? All I wanted is for my daughter, *our* daughter, to have a family; for her to be taken care of."

"But Celia, she will be taken care of. She will have you to take care of her. Who better than her mother?"

For the first time since they had sat down in the train carriage, she turned to face him.

"I think it is exquisitely clear to everyone, including you, that I am not well placed to take care of anyone, not even myself."

Some confused impulse to be polite, or gallant, caused Taksheel to demure but he did so half-heartedly. Celia continued with a degree of coherence and certainty that she had not shown since the week of euphoria she felt after her delivery when she had felt that anything was possible.

"We both know that you hired Miss Thorpe to minister to both of us; not simply as a nursemaid for Priya. I am just as helpless as the baby; just as much of a burden to you."

"Celia, it is not as you say."

"It seems that my daughter's golden future will be an isolated life with a mad mother who she will end up having to care for without the assistance of any other family."

They would soon be at their destination. It had not gone as Taksheel had anticipated. He was more afraid of her cold certainty; her abandonment of hope; than he was of her manic delusions of harmony and universal love.

"Celia, you and Priya will never be without my assistance. Even when I return to India, I will remain in contact through Rabindra and I will make trips here..." Taksheel had to raise his voice over the sound of the brakes being applied and the hiss of pressurised steam being released. This is not how he meant to deliver the news.

"You have decided to return to India then?"

"I have no immediate plans to do so, Celia, but yes, one day, I must return to my family." The train came to a final stop. She picked up her shawl and stood by the sliding door to the carriage waiting for Taksheel to open it. He did so and followed her out of the carriage and into the narrow corridor. He reached out through the open window of the door and yanked the handle. He stepped down to the platform, turned and offered his hand to Celia. She took it and joined him on the platform at the same time that Miss Thorpe emerged with Priya from the adjacent carriage. Celia went over to Miss Thorpe and extended her arms to be given the child. She pressed her lips close to her daughter's ear and whispered to her. Her face was serious as if she were imparting important truths.

"Miss Thorpe, would you mind running to the car? I have a terrible headache and I'm afraid I simply can't take another step until I've taken my pills. I'm so sorry to be a nuisance."

"Surely, Ma'am. I'll be back momentarily. Why don't you go and sit yourself down in the waiting room over there?"

"Thank you, Miss Thorpe. Perhaps I will."

Miss Thorpe left Celia, Taksheel and the child on the platform to make the short journey to her employer's car. Taksheel and Celia stood side by side on the platform. Celia held the baby up to her face and pressed her cheek against the soft cheek of her daughter. There were no other passengers on the platform and everything was still except for the faint rumbling of an approaching coal train.

"Celia would you like to sit in the waiting room?" Taksheel asked.

"No, thank you," she replied without looking up from the child. Taksheel had little appetite to continue their conversation and in any case, Celia was wandering down the platform away from him, engrossed in the child; nuzzling and murmuring into her neck. They waited in this way for a few minutes. The rumbling beneath their feet grew louder and the air began to suck at Taksheel's coat and Celia's dress.

Taksheel looked around for Miss Thorpe. He looked at his watch although he had nowhere he needed to be. The freight train blew its horn in one insistent honk to signal it was not stopping at the station. Taksheel caught sight of Miss Thorpe. She was striding efficiently towards them, medicine jar in hand. He needlessly raised his hand to signal where they were. The draught from the train picked up and Taksheel put his hand to his head to keep his hat in place. He turned to Celia to indicate they might leave now that Miss Thorpe was in sight. She was walking towards him as if she had had the same thought. The noise from the train prevented him from speaking. She seemed to be holding the child out to him. He rarely touched his daughter but there was no way to decline. The noise of metal wheels on metal track was thunderous. He took the bundle from Celia who turned and took five steps to the platform edge and, without hesitation, one more step over the edge.

The sound of the train faded and the air was filled instead with the sound of Miss Thorpe's screams.

About the Writer

Sheila lives in north London with her husband and three young children. Having worked for many years as a derivatives lawyer in New York and in the City, she has recently changed paths and is now a school governor, member of the board of a men's prison and trustee of charity that tackles fuel poverty and promotes sustainability. She is a member of the Fabian Society and currently enjoying being a mentee on their programme for women interested in political life.



During her time in New York, Sheila did a novel writing course with the Gotham Writers' Workshop. Sheila went on to complete a Masters in Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London in 2014 and her work features in *Bedford Square 8*, New Writing from the Royal Holloway Creative Writing Programme published by Ward Wood Publishing.

In 2016 Sheila was honoured to receive the Peggy-Chapman Andrews Award for a first novel (the Bridport Prize) for her manuscript of *The Unbelonging of Taksheel Chaturveydi*. Having spent twelve years writing, tearing up and re-writing this novel, she hopes to work with The Literary Consultancy to make it suitable for publication.

Sheila grew up in St Albans, the only child of an Indian father and Scottish mother whose amazing histories and inclination to tell tales sparked her interest in writing about families, journeys and the search for belonging.