



TLC Showcase

TLC PEN FACTOR WINNER SPECIAL

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Introduction to 'Kololo Hill'

Kololo Hill is my first novel. It's set in 1972, when recently-married Asha and her family are forced to leave Uganda within 90 days by brutal ruler Idi Amin. They seek refuge and a new life in England, leaving everything behind except the devastating secrets that threaten to break their family apart. Through Asha's family, as well as their houseboy December, who faces danger as a member of the persecuted Acholi tribe, the novel explores the themes of displacement, loyalty and freedom and asks, how far will we go to protect those closest to us?

I was inspired to write the novel by my own family, who left India to make new homes in East Africa and later in England. I wanted to write about the exile of 80,000 Ugandan Asians and the murder of an estimated 300,000 ethnic Ugandans, which haven't been widely explored in fiction before.

The TLC Pen Factor Live competition is the first writing competition I've entered, so I was thrilled to be shortlisted, let alone to win. I was nervous on the day but Aki gave us all some useful tips on pitching. The other finalists were also a friendly and supportive group with a diverse range of beautifully written pieces. The opportunity to hear what industry professionals thought of my work was incredibly useful and I was also given encouraging feedback from some attendees after my reading.

I'd always planned to contact TLC about a manuscript assessment for my novel so winning one as part of the generous prize package means I can spend the money on more books instead!

Now I need to bring my head down from the clouds (only a little though, I'm a writer after all) and get on with the task of finishing my work. Nothing guarantees a novel will be published, but I know that taking part in Pen Factor Live and working with the brilliant TLC team gives me the best possible chance of achieving my goal.

An extract from 'Kololo Hill', by Neema Shah

Chapter 1

Asha, Uganda 1972

They'd be back before curfew, Asha was sure of it. She got out of the car and looked out across the water, where the Nile flowed into Lake Victoria. In the late afternoon light, the mosquitoes glowed gold, like embers from a fire.

'Be quick, won't you?' Jaya called out from the car window, pulling her sari chundri tighter over her silver hair. 'And careful.'

'Hush Jaya, she's not a child. Besides, we can see her from here,' said Motichand, the car swayed like a rowing boat as he hoisted himself along the back seat for a rest.

Asha took off her *chumpal*, the blades of grass tickling her toes, the dragonflies dancing at her feet, and shook her hair free from her ponytail, aware that Jaya was probably looking on ('Loose hair for loose women').

There used to be more people around in the old days of course, the sweet, smoky scent of roasting *mogo* carrying across the breeze; tinny transistor radios buzzing in the distance, now all she could see were a few fishing boats out across the way and the crotchety maribou storks with their black feather cloaks, gathered in the shallows.

Asha walked out towards the vast water, stretching so far that it looked more like an ocean. She'd met Pran for the first time by Lake Victoria, down by Entebbe. But she wouldn't waste the day thinking about him. She was still angry, sure that her husband was keeping something from her. As she moved further along, she spotted a twisted shape, jutting out at the water's edge. A strange mass that seemed to grow from the banks, blackened in parts, ashen in others, protruding from the soil. But this wasn't the rotting roots of a plant. It was sinewy muscle, twisting tendon. Upstream there were more.

Hacked bodies, sodden and swollen, bobbing in the billowing lake.

A crackle of fear ran through her body. She turned so fast, twisting on her toes, that she had to stretch out her arms to steady herself before rushing back to the car. She

slowed her pace as she reached Motichand and Jaya, not wanting to alarm them.

'What happened, why were you hurrying?' Jaya eased herself out of the car.

Motichand sat up, voice full of sleep, 'What's going on?'

'It's been a long day. Shall we go?' Asha tried to steady her breath, not wanting to prove to Jaya that she'd been right to worry.

'I thought you wanted to spend some time here?' said Jaya.

'I did, I just feel a bit tired now, that's all.' Asha stood by the car door, wishing Motichand would hurry up and put his shoes on. What if the soldiers were still here? She looked out towards the road, no sign of them, thank God. Asha had convinced herself that the rumours about dead bodies had been embellished, words added here and there as neighbour told friend told colleague. But now it was clear, Idi Amin and his soldiers didn't seem to care that the bodies were on show for all to see, even intended them as a warning to others. Amin might not stop until the whole river ran red.

'Ba mentioned you stopped off at the lake on the way back from your parents?' Pran asked, pulling the bedcover back.

'Mmm,' said Asha, smoothing on her face cream, in no mood to pretend everything was OK between Pran and her whilst their earlier argument lingered in the air and the image of the bodies festered in her mind.

'Your parents will come and visit too, won't they? We can spend time together then,' Pran said, watching her as she got ready for bed. 'I'm sorry we couldn't leave the dukan today, it's so busy now that we've expanded the shop.'

Asha climbed into bed and tucked in the last section of mosquito net. 'I told you, I understand.' The more he ignored her anger, the angrier she got. 'You can turn off the light.'

As they lay in silence side by side, the electric ring of the cicadas outside seemed to get louder. 'Why won't you tell me what's going on?' said Asha.

'This again?'

'You and Vijay had to stay and look after the *dukan* today. And yet you have no problem with him going off to London?'

'That's different, Asha.'

'How exactly?' She turned her body towards him, struggling to keep her voice down now.

'Papa will help. And it's only for a few days.'

'Your father?' Asha thought of Motichand, the model businessman, turning up late and giving out credit to friends and strangers. 'What were you whispering about with Vijay yesterday anyway?'

'We were talking about the *dukan*, Asha. I'm not allowed to talk to my own brother in private now?' Pran's voice was taut.

There was more to it, Asha was certain. Pran and Vijay had looked serious, grave even, when she'd seen them whispering in the sitting room. And what was so private about the *dukan* that they needed to hide it from everyone else? They'd looked guilty when she'd interrupted them and the more Pran had brushed her questions away that morning, the more she thought it odd. The suffocating tension filled the bedroom, but she was too tired to push him about it. She wanted the day to end. A day of terrible firsts: the day of their first argument and the day she'd seen her first corpse. And yet, whilst Pran fell asleep, Asha lay awake, staring at the sliver of moonlight that cut across the ceiling.

The next morning, Asha woke up as she always did, her body curved into a question mark next to Pran's, still in slumber. Outside, the house had its own rhythm, a secret language that she was still trying to learn: December, their houseboy, pounding the washing in the yard; Motichand and his booming sneezes; Jaya and her prayer songs.

She watched Pran's flickering eyelashes as the morning light crept across the room. Perhaps she'd got it wrong, perhaps it was nothing? After all, Pran had never hidden anything from her before. And after seeing those poor people in the water the day before, her argument with Pran seemed petty now. No, she'd wait for him to wake up and tell him what she'd seen, hoping that by then, the strange and heavy pull in her chest would be gone.

Chapter 2

Vijay, Uganda 1972

After lunch, Vijay hovered in the kitchen, waiting for his friend Jacob to come and pick him up.

Looking out of the kitchen window, he saw Asha coming out of the bedroom. She crossed the sakti, the yard that was the centrepiece of the house, running her fingers through the jasmine shrub as she went. She hurried into the kitchen and poured herself some water. She always seemed to be rushing, dashing into rooms, maxi dress swirling around corners, sari chundri trailing behind her, brushing over chair tops and across door handles.

'Pran and I are going to watch a film. Want to come?' Asha stood by the table, painted toes peeping out from underneath her bell-bottom jeans.

'Which one?'

'Bonnie and Clyde.' She gulped the water down in one go. Vijay looked at the pool of sunlight shone onto her bare shoulder, imagined a finger tracing along the curve.

Like falling off a cliff.

'No thanks, not if you're seeing that,' said Vijay.

'Why not?'

'I know what happens at the end.'

Asha rolled her eyes. 'So where are you going? Off to the bar?'

'Well, the ladies won't talk to themselves,' he said.

'Are you sure about that?' The flicker of a smile as Asha turned towards the door.

Vijay was about to respond when Pran walked in.

'Let's go, Asha,' said Pran. 'We'll talk later, Vij.'

Two whiskeys and a *Warangi* and coke later, Vija only just made it back from the bar in time for the curfew.

'You left it so late, it's nearly 7 o'clock,' said Jaya.

'There was an accident on Kampala Road, Ba. We came back as fast as we could.' As Vijay helped his mother close the last of the window shutters, at least there were no soliders out in the street tonight, waiting to catch people who were late back for curfew. Staying out of the army's way had become a way of life now, and social calls were squeezed into daylight hours. Gone were the days of heading out into the night for some fun, now he was back home before the sun had even set over Kololo Hill.

Pran, Asha and his father joined them in the sitting room where the radio was on. Pran was acting like the doting husband and son as usual, surprising them all with gifts he'd recently bought. A necklace for Asha, even though it was no longer safe to wear it out; silk saris for Jaya; and the latest albums, L.A. Woman and Who's Next, for Vijay, two copies of each for when the vinyl inevitably wore out from overplaying. Vijay had done his best to smile, not that Pran noticed anyway.

When Asha expressed surprise at the expense, Pran explained it all away. 'You know, the new space in the shop, more stock, more sales,' he said, throwing words into the air and hoping some of them would stick. A tiny wrinkle appeared between Pran's eyebrows, so tiny that only Vijay noticed it. After years of getting into and out of trouble together, he knew when Pran was trying to hide something. Still, Vijay was surprised, in awe even, at the ease with which Pran could lie to his own wife's face.

But perhaps Pran wasn't as good as he thought he was though. How else could you explain the little shadows that appeared at the corners of Asha's mouth when she smiled, or the weariness in her eyes when she looked over at her husband?

About the Writer

Kololo Hill is Neema Shah's first novel, partly inspired by her grandparents who left India for East Africa during World War Two and her parents who later came to England.

Neema has developed her writing through a UEA Writing Fiction course, a Writers' Workshop Self Editing Your Novel course and an online writers' group.

Since completing a law degree at University College London, Neema has worked in marketing. She was born and raised in London but spent many holidays in East Africa. She also once ran away to join the circus in New York but that's a story for another time...

