

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to 'Eye of the Garden'

E*ye of the Garden* is a contemporary novel about two sisters, Noor and Nadine who are very different from one another but find themselves dealing with the same problems – love, sex and reputation. The sisters along with their family live in Iraq, Baghdad during sanctions and war.

Nadine, the older sister, is in love with Hussain. Her parents, without telling her the true reason for their disapproval, won't allow her to marry him. Ambitious, materialistic and headstrong, Nadine plans an elopement that goes wrong with disastrous results for her family.

Noor, the younger sister, is infatuated with Ibrahim who has fled Baghdad for London after the assassination of his father. Devout, fiery and proud, Noor can't accept Ibrahim's westernised attitudes that conflict with her own and is convinced that love turns people into monsters. Nonetheless, Noor is drawn to him.

As the sisters mature into young women they are each searching for solace, each trying to make their hearts and minds come together despite the external and internal obstacles in their way.

I wrote the first draft of *Eye of the Garden* during my Masters in Creative Writing in 2010 simply because I couldn't get the characters out of my mind. I wanted to write a story about the Arab and Muslim world, as I knew it not and not as it had always been recounted to me by the media. *Eye of the Garden* offers a different narrative to that which is often congested in the mainstream about what it means to be an Arab and Muslim woman living in modern times.

It's often been said that writing is a lonely occupation. Cliché but true. However it felt lonelier not knowing what to do with my manuscript after completing the ninth draft. The euphoria that comes from creating and developing characters and worlds is especially powerful when the writer finishes what they have been working on. But then comes another completely different feeling. When the writer looks at what he's created and asks himself, 'is it any good?'

The question, simple as it may seem, speaks volumes not only of the work the writer has created but also about the writer himself. This obsessive, paranoid, anxious

thinking can be overwhelming. At one point when I thought that perhaps it was time to move on, that no one would really ever be interested in reading *Eye of the Garden*, someone told me to Google TLC.

I knew that the only way for me to understand whether *Eye of the Garden* was any good, had any potential and whether I should continue to write, was to hand my manuscript over to be looked at by an objective and expert eye.

After contacting TLC, my work was read by editor and talent scout Kavita Bhanot. Reading her report about my work has been one of the most defining moments for me as a writer. Kavita's observations of the story, character and plot were priceless and her words of encouragement helped me to believe in my work and myself.

To add to this TLC and specifically Aki Schilz have been amazing. Their support, encouragement, honesty and advice has helped me to understand more about the publishing world and reminded me that despite the road to getting published can be a long it doesn't have to be that lonely. You can always find the right support if you know where to look.

Extract from 'Eye of the Garden' by Maán Jalal

NOOR

Iraq, Baghdad, 1992

Noor was dreaming of a gigantic eye blinking when a scream woke her up. It was her mother. Racing to her parents' room, Noor found her mother sitting on the floor, face in her hands, rocking back and forth. Noor wanted to run to her, to hug her, but something about her posture, the tortured look on her face, froze her stiff. Aunty Samira was there in the black dress she always wore these days, trying to get Noor's mother to stand up. Noor's father was sitting at the foot of the bed, elbows on knees, his face covered. He looked like a rock.

'What happened?' Nadine asked, running up from behind Noor.

'Read The Opening Prayer for Ibrahim's father,' Aunty Samira said.

'Take your sister outside,' her father ordered.

Noor saw her father's face as Nadine pulled her out. It was red, blue, almost black, his eyes bulging.

Uncle Ali was her father's best friend. They called each other brothers of childhood. Noor knew that her father had been angry with Uncle Ali for some time. Everyone heard them yelling at each other from the study room whenever Uncle Ali came to visit. Uncle Makki, another friend of her father was somehow involved. Nadine and cousin Zena would scurry back and forth trying to eavesdrop until Aunty Samira caught them, where she reprimanded them only after they told her what they'd heard.

Nadine and Zena discussed the matter in front of Noor, comparing what each overheard from their parents.

'My mother said that Uncle Ali is a deaf man in a party and doesn't know why he's dancing,' Zena said, 'the more you swim in shit the more you're convinced it doesn't smell, that's what my mother said.'

'I heard my father say that Uncle Ali has new friends and their fire will burn all his wood,' Nadine said, 'what does that mean?'

'Noor, go upstairs and play,' Zena said.

Noor was always sent away, she was used to it.

After they found out that Uncle Ali had been killed that morning, Noor was sent away, again, with Nadine. They spent the morning in her room until her mother came to fetch her.

'Let's go to Aunt May's house,' she said in a defeated voice. 'Everyone else is there. Nadine, you'll go with your father to your Grandmother's house.'

Noor's mother wore black and the air was scented with gardenias when they stepped out of the house. They crossed the road holding hands making their way to Uncle Ali's house across the road from their own. As her mother adjusted her loose veil, Noor heard her whispered prayers. There were cars in the driveway of Uncle Ali's house, some parked on the curb. Noor heard a sparrow singing on the branches of the tree ahead.

Trying hard not to cry, Noor tried but couldn't imagine what it would feel like if her father died. The face of Ibrahim, Uncle Ali's son, kept coming to her. As they walked through the gates to Ibrahim's home, Noor looked at the large curled mulberry tree with its thick trunk behind the gate of the front garden. The singing sparrow hopped from branch to branch some of which curled over the high gate and onto the main road. A rope that Uncle Ali had tied to one of the top branches for them was swaying. As Noor and her mother approached the house, a man was walking out. It was Uncle Haroun, Shareef's father, another neighbour of theirs.

'Mariam, my condolences,' Uncle Haroun said.

'Thank you, Haroun. The cars outside are far too many. It draws attention. We don't need any more grief,' Mariam said, holding Noor's hand tightly.

'I know, I've told some of the men to leave,' Uncle Haroun said, looking back at the house, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

'You were here when they brought Ali and Makki this morning, weren't you?' Mariam asked, her voice breaking.

Uncle Haroun nodded.

'How is Makki?' Mariam whispered.

Uncle Haroun pulled Mariam a few steps away from Noor who was looking up at the mulberry tree with the swaying rope and the jumping sparrow. Would it cheer Ibrahim up if he sat under it? Ibrahim always laughed when he swung off the rope with her cousin Nabeel, but Noor couldn't imagine any of them swinging off the rope now. A breeze through the tree made a crackling sound masking Uncle Haroun's voice for a moment.

'Makki's not good. When they brought him back, they threw him on the porch. His wife thought he was dead, until he began spitting blood. No finger nails, no toe nails, his face is unrecognizable, butchered . . . are you sure you want to know this, Mariam?'

Noor didn't hear her mother's answer. She looked down at her hands and imagined them with no fingernails.

'Allah protect us, Allah protect us,' she whispered as she'd heard her mother and Aunts whisper before.

Noor turned to see her mother and Uncle Haroun looking down at her. Uncle Haroun waved his hand as though remembering something then pulled from his pocket a small gold cardboard box.

'I brought you something from our trip. Shareef chose all the chocolates for you inside,' Uncle Haroun said, handing Noor the box.

'Thank you Uncle.'

'Thank you, Haroun, but you shouldn't always bring her gifts,' Mariam said.

'It's nothing, she's like our own daughter,' Uncle Haroun said, smiling, 'where's Nadine? We brought her some chocolates too.'

'Laith took her to his mother's house. Laith isn't doing well, as you can imagine, under the circumstances. I think he and his brother will be getting drunk tonight. We should move, come on Noor,' Mariam said, walking ahead, dragging Noor along.

Inside, the house was stuffy. The Quran was being played in the living room and from where she stood, Noor could see legs of seated men on sofas and chairs. She and her mother walked down the hallway towards a low moaning.

Aunty Samira slipped out of a room holding a tray of empty glasses. Her face was puffy and smeared with traces of make up.

'Is she in there?' Mariam asked.

'No, she's in her bedroom with Juwan,' Aunty Samira said.

'How is she?' Mariam asked.

Aunty Samira said nothing. Shaking her head as she put the tray down on a coffee table next to them she embraced Noor's mother and started to cry. Noor looked down at her grey summer dress, that used to belong to Nadine, then glanced around the hallway.

The walls were covered with large framed photographs of different landscapes. She noticed a door to her right was slightly open. Inside, Ibrahim was sitting on a rocking chair and looking straight ahead.

'Come on, Noor, let's go to Aunt May,' Mariam said.

They walked down the hall to the right, toward brown double doors with golden knobs. Aunty Samira opened them and laying on a small ottoman, was Aunt May, her head on Aunty Juwan's lap.

Aunt May remained motionless when the doors opened and Noor's mother ran to hug her. Her face was so pale that Noor thought her mother's best friend might also be dead. The only signs of life were shallow breathing and slow blinking eyes staring into nothing.

'She won't talk, won't do anything since they brought him this morning,' Aunty Juwan whispered.

Aunty Juwan was the most fun of all of Noor's aunts. She loved to paint Noor and Nadine's fingernails, comb their hair into silly hairstyles and teach them how to dance. Today though her face was drained as she patted Aunt May's head and the bags under her eyes looked grey. Noor realised that when someone died everyone who knew them became sick.

'My sweet May, my love,' Mariam said, caressing Aunt May's hair and then motioned for Noor to come closer, 'come give Aunt May a kiss.'

Noor hesitantly walked forward. The woman looked like Aunt May, lying on the royal blue ottoman, but at the same time she wasn't Aunt May.

'Give her a kiss sweetheart,' Mariam whispered. Noor kissed Aunt May on each cheek.

'May Allah keep you the rest of your life, Aunt,' Noor said as she'd rehearsed with Nadine that morning on the proper term to use when someone was grieving.

Aunt May looked around, confused, as though only realising that there were people in the room. She began to shake and quickly covered her mouth as a muffled scream began to escape. Noor stepped away from her, trembling all over. Aunty Samira silently motioned for Aunty Juwan to follow as she pulled Noor out of the room. Aunty Samira closed the door behind them.

'She's been like this all day hasn't she?' Aunty Samira asked.

'On and off, we had to restrain her at first. Her brother had to pin her down. She kept hitting herself, screaming. Then she was still, then screaming again,' Aunty Juwan said, shaking her head, rubbing her face.

'She must be thinking of what they did,' Aunty Samira said.

'Before you came, we crushed a Valium into her water and I made her drink it. I think it's taking effect now,' Aunty Juwan said, leaning against the wall, one hand over her stomach.

'It's a miracle they let Makki go, but who knows how he'll recover after this . . . and Ali, may Allah have mercy on his soul,' Aunty Samira whispered.

Noor knew they'd forgotten that she was there. Aunty Samira never liked to talk about such things in front of the children, the things adults talked about when they were alone in the house, inside a room with the doors and windows closed. The things that Zena once said were words that if spoken in front of strangers could get them all killed.

'May is ruined. How will she live after this? She'll be targeted by every dog who was involved in killing Ali. She can't stop them from coming here if they want. The wife

of a husband who was assassinated for betraying the government. She'll be dough in their hands. She should wear the veil and stay in black, yes, so they can leave her alone - but that won't stop the animals, will it? We are her only friends now Samira, all of them will stop talking to her. Her father is too old to protect her and her brother - his wife will never allow it. Ali you idiot, what did you do?' Aunty Juwan said covering her face with her hands and crouching down against the wall, 'Ali, poor Ali, the state of him . . .'

'What? You saw? You were here?' Aunty Samira whispered, crouching down next to her.

Noor stood, looking down at her black shoes and the white marble floor with grey lines shaped like lightning. Her Aunts looked like little girls on the floor, both crying and Noor was so scared that she began to cry too.

'That son of a dog put him on the table in the foyer, covered up in a white sheet. I tried to pull May away, but I couldn't. She moved the sheet and his face . . . it looked perfect. I swear it looked perfect, like he was smiling a little. I thought for a minute this was one of his jokes. He didn't even have a bruise. And then that man, that son of a dog, said no funeral allowed. He said to May, "Your husband doesn't deserve mourning." He pulled the sheet off and his body, all of it just holes, shreds.'

Aunty Samira didn't let her go on, quickly covering Aunty Juwan's mouth with her hands.

'No, I want to finish,' Aunty Juwan said, pushing away Aunty Samira's hands, 'you have to know what he said. You have to tell other people, other women, so they can tell their husbands not to get involved. May screamed when she saw his body and that man said, "That's all he gets, he's only allowed the scream of his wife." He said he'd come back if he hears of anymore screaming, crying or mourning. We've told people not to come, tell them not to come, Samira,' Aunt Juwan was saying between raspy breaths, 'They might be watching this house, right now.'

'We have to cook for them, start cooking now, to last them a few days. Stay the night,' Aunty Samira began saying.

Noor didn't want to hear more. She decided to sit by herself somewhere to eat Uncle Haroun's chocolates. As she walked away her Aunts began to talk of a neighbouring

family having another secret funeral. Aunt May's face, unblinking and white, kept reappearing in her mind. Noor wanted to forget that she'd ever seen it.

Aunt May and Uncle Ali always came to her home, so Noor didn't know their house too well. The large photos of landscapes, palm trees and deserts on the wall meant nothing to her. Noor stopped at the slightly open door she passed earlier. Ibrahim was still sitting inside, staring ahead. It was strange that he was alone. Ibrahim and Noor hardly spoke even though their parents were close friends. He was always playing with her cousins, Bashar and Ghaith, but mostly with Nabeel and like everyone else, he thought of her as a baby.

Ibrahim glanced at Noor as she entered, then looked back at a framed photograph of his father and mother that hung on the wall. Below the photo was a desk with many framed photographs and piles of papers, music tapes and video recording equipment. The room was filled with magazines and records piled against the wall and more framed photographs of Aunt May and Ibrahim when he was a baby. Ibrahim sat in front of a small table covered with more framed photographs and three cameras.

'Hello Ibrahim,' Noor said, standing next to his chair.

'Hello,' he said, as if his voice was too small for his throat.

'How are you?' Noor asked.

Noor wasn't nervous or scared, as she'd been with his mother and she didn't have to think about what to do next. Ibrahim's face twitched in different parts, his bottom lip and chin curled into themselves. Noor hugged him.

'My father died,' he whispered.

'I know, may Allah keep you the rest of your life,' she said.

'I feel sorry for him,' he said.

'No, don't Ibrahim, he is with Allah now and he is at rest. You should feel sorry for those who are living.'

Noor didn't understand the phrase, but she'd heard scary Grandmother Thouraya repeat it at moments like these, moments she was getting used to.

'I don't want to cry. He said he'd come back if he heard that we'd cried,' Ibrahim whispered, 'but I don't care if he comes back and kills us. I'll kill him.'

Noor didn't know what he was talking about but hugged him harder.

'Don't say that, you're a good boy.'

'My father was killed for his dreams,' Ibrahim whispered in her ear.

Noor pulled away as he looked down, sniffing, wiping his eyes with his arms. Tears left a dark streak on his light blue sleeve.

'What?' Noor asked, confused.

'My mother and father fought at night. They thought I couldn't hear,' Ibrahim said, 'he would come and sleep in my bed and tell me stories about Iraq. He said that he and my mother were arguing because he wanted to fight for his dreams and she didn't want him to. It's dangerous to fight for your dreams, he told me, but you have to do it.'

'What was his dream?' Noor asked entranced.

'He said he had many,' Ibrahim whispered, 'but the first one was for me to be happy.'

They looked at each other in silence, the moment seemed endless. Noor knew that she and Ibrahim were sharing the same thought. Uncle Ali's dream had failed.

'How's my mother?' he asked, 'They won't let me see her.'

'It's OK she's with my mother is with her,' Noor said.

Noor saw that he was staring at the photographs on the coffee table, probably looking at all the ones of his father. Maybe he was waiting for Uncle Ali to say something, to tell him what to do, to comfort him from inside the frames. Nothing happened though, no one talked, the room was silent.

'We might leave soon,' Ibrahim said with a sniff.

'Where?' Noor asked.

'My Uncle wants us to go to Jordan,' he said, then gripped her by the wrists, his eyes full of urgency, 'don't tell anyone. No one is supposed to know.'

'I promise, I won't tell anyone,' Noor said.

Ibrahim nodded, looked again at the photographs. Noor wanted to say more, do more for him, but she didn't know what or how.

'I don't want to leave. But I'll come back, I promise I will,' Ibrahim whispered to the photographs in front of him.

There was a grumbling noise. Ibrahim put his hand over his stomach.

'Are you hungry?' Noor asked.

He nodded.

'Have these,' Noor said, handing him the small box of chocolate.

'Thanks,' Ibrahim said, taking it.

'Noor, where are you?' Aunty Samira called in a hushed voice from the hallway, 'where is that girl?'

'You're welcome,' Noor leaned over and gave Ibrahim a kiss on the cheek, 'I'll be back when the food's ready, I'll bring you a plate.'

Before she walked out of the room Noor glanced back to see Ibrahim open the box and eat a chocolate.

Instead of going to the kitchen, Aunty Samira took Noor home. Three days later in the middle of the night Aunt May was at their front door, crying and hugging Noor's parents, telling them goodbye. Ibrahim wasn't there. Zena told Noor and Nadine that they would probably never see Ibrahim and his mother again.

Noor dreamt of Ibrahim that night. A sheep made of bones was eating the grass around a flower bush, by the water fountain in their garden. The sheep froze and flowers grew in its stomach. Ibrahim was there chasing after a football. The skeleton sheep chased after him playfully, and as they ran into the bush on the other side of the garden, Ibrahim called out for Noor to join him. Noor didn't, she couldn't move. The sheep emerged from the bush and back to the fountain, its white fleece growing with flowers. Noor waited for some time, but when Ibrahim never came out of the bush, she slipped into the fountain and went to sleep in the water.

About the Writer

Maán Jalal can't remember a time where he wasn't writing or reading stories. Born in Dubai, UAE, he is of Iraqi, Kurdish, Yemeni descent and grew up in Auckland, New Zealand where he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (2006) and then a Masters in Creative writing (2010) both at the University of Auckland.

Currently working as a journalist in Dubai for one of the biggest English language newspapers in the region, Maán covers arts, culture and entertainment. He has written for a number of publications including *Khaleej Times*, *SWR* and *Miss Muslim*, where one of his pieces went viral.



His website [Maan of the Hour](#), features creative non-fiction about his life and experiences, with a twist of humour. One of his stories *Maánhood* got over a three thousand hits when it was first posted.

Maán runs a YouTube channel also called [Maan of the Hour](#) dedicated to his love of literature and conversing with the world about issues that matter to him. The channel consists of book reviews and discussions with a leaning towards contemporary Arab and Muslim centric narratives and writers, video essays discussing issues pertaining to the Arab identity within the frame of pop culture, as well as videos where Maán has frank discussions with varying regional and international personalities to discuss social and political issues affecting the Middle East.

Other than his dedication to reading and writing fiction, Maán is big collector of books, magazines and newspapers (he has a sizable collection of very old *Punch* magazines), is a frequent visitor to art galleries and the cinema and isn't ashamed to say that he's a fan of all kinds of reality shows.

You can find him on Twitter [@maan_jalal](#) or contact him on maan.jalal84@gmail.com