

TLC Showcase

SHAZIA ALTAF

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Introduction to *Jammed*

Jammed tells the story of Ishrat, a woman with a needling secret that threatens... when her husband plans a surprise trip to Kashmir things start unravelling, about the secrets we keep, the lies we tell ourselves, and to the people we say we love. Those things almost forgotten, but are they ever forgotten, let alone forgiven?

An endearing cast of characters of Ishrat, her husband Allam, daughter Dua, Dua's best friend Rafe and Rafe's mother Sally. A continent, character, and decade spanning novel, moving between fictional towns Chakothi in Kashmir and Bidborough in England, seeing what happens when grief and guilt twist in a journey that ultimately lead Ishrat and her family to a place where there may be no return from...

The raw nerve to put yourself out there took some time, years actually to overcome. I wanted to do a manuscript assessment for a long while, but could not afford the fee, but The Literary Consultancy are very generous, and they regularly offer opportunities, I learnt when looking into this, for writers through their TLC Free Reads and the Creative Future Award for writers to access manuscript key support. I entered the Creative Future Award mainly for the possibility of the TLC Manuscript Chapter and Verse programme. The win in 2021 shocked me, and meant I found two incredible Editors at TLC in Rose Billington and Thalia Suzuma, who both provided me with thoughtful, insightful feedback to sharpen the manuscript. When you have written something with twists and turns, a multi layered plot with subplots, you sometimes don't even know what the hell it is you have even created... You need a fresh pair of eyes on the work, it can get a bit muggy seeing your own words. Rose and Suzuma raised vital questions to help refine the story, and try to hone the focus, giving me the choice of ideas to choose what could be done, for which I am grateful. Manuscripts are built and rebuilt.

Jammed travels down rabbit holes and tries to make sense of the senseless. Drawn to the poetic and the absurd. *Jammed* was inspired by a year's beautifully inspiring but troubling stay in Kashmir when I was a small child. It had a profound effect on

me. I come from a family of secret story tellers... I saw this image one night in my mind of a person hiding, stuck in the wild green labyrinth, in the sticky damp dark... It would not leave me that picture, it stayed digging its nails for the longest while. In my writing I want to try and make the reader laugh a little, maybe cry, if possible, and break their heart into a tiny million pieces... that's all I want.

Extract from *Jammed* by Shazia Altaf

Chapter One

Raw Spirit

Kashmir, Chakothei, 1968

Ishrat knew a false step could be it. A plunge. The end at the beginning. Crossing jagged ancient steps root arteries snaked cliff faces offering secret footholds, whilst grassy clumps hid lopsided elevation. The fields cradling mountainous hills were usually dead, without a soul's shadow stalking the waves. Ishrat was knackered after the trek back from the morning's mind-numbing lesson. The teacher's drone beckoning the sleep chamber. *How many repetitions?* To see straight into the distance was hard, the sun's rays cut at the eyes in slices. Acrid temperatures spun off earthy soils, the smell of it laced with roasted branches was a heady mix, and could turn anyone feral.

Ishrat's ears pricked the insects that scuttled in the undergrowth, a communal collective humming, a clicking of invisible legs. The place held unknown things that tip toed. Ishrat traced the red-black dye on her wrist, followed the curved edges. She wondered if her cousin Baraiya was in better spirits today... *Since his self-imposed exile.*

Her eyes reached a little way towards the burnt sloping terrain where the grass yellowed like dead worms beneath a gawping crowd. She squinted her eyes. *What new daftness was this?*

A sunlit shifting shadow creature moved with unease on a tight rope branch, wide eyed and vigilant. High up on the tree's ladder, all around her craniums tilted to catch glimpses. A few determined watchers threw casual pebbles, as if shooting across a river's head. Watching a muscular creature wearing a grey baggy fur coat elegantly poised, paws draped holding an uneasy court.

A wild leopard inside the tree's neck. They are there in the lands and not there. Rarely, if ever seen. Ishrat had never seen one before, never this far nor close. It looked for a way out. It saw her. Irises met. Hands covered eyes to watch like a salute. This was the summer where the sun orb came for paper skins.

Cool blue flowers stood about lackadaisical, leafy hands twisted as if in pockets shrugging. Two farmers, one threadbare headed, the other a wispy mane past his shoulders, towards the front of a cluster of people Ishrat recognised from the upland farms, clutching fat ropes with a kill in their eyes.... Cold anxiety prickles the base of her neck. The leopard turned its shaggy body, its glassy eyes staring away almost resigned. It was done for. The ground was a cracked clay mosaic.

Keeping her distance, she remained curiously fixated. Within the tilted heads, she spotted Baraiya, that unmistakable jawbone you could cut glass off, she made for his direction. *Was he really back?* Freckles across Baraiya's face like freshly spilled chia seeds were darker somehow. Hair blades fell spikily over her forehead, as she pivoted off towards him.

'What are they doing?' She whispered tip toeing.

'For skin and bones what else...' Steam inside rose pinching his cheeks.

Baraiya's frame appeared beat, worn-out, the latest visit to the outer edges of the jungle last night for quite what she was unsure... After pleading with the nervy eyeballing farmers alongside Babba mitta, the village cake man but gaining nothing, Baraiya snapped his head scowling, and without another word led her away. The crowd flickered their pin-dot eyes following as one large blob before returning to their subject.

She began mourning the creature whilst it still breathed. Morning glory bindweeds climbed the ground and droopily hung their willowy basket heads. A couple of jittery goats galloped dropping a load of black marble balls.

Their house and aunty Qulthum's house were a stone's throw away from one another, they flitted between them. The paint on the walls stripping blurred into different

colours unclear which colour came first, where one started and another finished. Dusty fugue shutters allowed little to no light. Baraiya was quiet on the walk.

Jigar, their pet pheasant barely batted an eye at them. He was really up himself, usual disdain residing his beak, jacking his head backwards and forwards traipsing a strip, a tiger print ran down his neck and above, a blonde quiff full of theatrics. Almost detaching itself like a comical two-headed creature.

On a narrow veranda on a peeri seat her aunty Qulthum beckoned her with a whip of her hand. Midge dizzy, whined hypnotised in a circular gathering near the bushes. The late afternoon heat pressed its foot on the jugular.

Inside the kitchen smoky hoops sprang out from aunty Qulthum's lips, taking their time in the air before disappearing, gripping the lit hookah pipe's neck in one hand, the other playing with fraying bits of the seat, staring into nothingness like an expanse to dive into.

'Go and wash up, I'll make you some choori.'

Baraiya's eyelids stitched to a close to admit sleep, skin waxen, beside him a metal cup of steamed milk, the best natural remedy her grandma always said, the malai, skin already congealed atop untouched.

'Don't disturb him he's tired.' Broken capillaries ran on aunty Qulthum's cheeks, black hair straggly streaky grey. Intoning prayers under her breath, aunt Qulthum blew them invisibly above his forehead. Sūrahs spring out for protection to make the sniffing devil go on his way.

Scudding across the ceiling at breakneck speed a chipkali, gecko snuck out. Its feet noisy scratching the cement for a settled spot, its slit pin holes unmoving, yet always alert. Ishrat failed to notice Baraiya's arms where reeds had ripped patterns and red veins crawled. His sandaled feet thick with mud and blood hung off the ends.

What was happening?

Baraiya was the one who taught her stuff, schooled her, how to get kindling lit with the thirstiest wood, to search for wild edibles in the forest, which ones poisoned lips, and to find the landmarks to guide her feet if lost. Old Baba Posti's Shrine being the key one. Aunty Qulthum meanwhile plumed roti puffs, normally her aunt spun stories but not lately. Silence pervades creating new ones.

She remembered asking her Amma questions when things started turning. When familiar faces cloud wavering in the shadows. But the adults shushed, shooed her questioning mouth away. When the first rips appeared in their little closeted world. When Baraiya first eyed her with suspicion, with new pools in his amber sockets, when he started to disappear...

She knows there in the tangled vegetation where tree sap can bind reside rosetted skinned leopards, limbless snakes, grasping scorpions, and other nameless creatures with unknown faces. Secrets congealed in the dirt. She thinks of the scorpion she saw in the water-tank, two clubbed claws eternally raised holding a cherry ball of poison inside its segmented backside ever ready.

'Why does he have to go to the jungle?' Ishrat persisted this time with her Amma, who she found in the outhouse. Amma stopped jerking the pink floppy udders squirting creamy strands from the bored buffalo, its black liquid gold, and met her gaze. Wiping her brow and escaped hair back with her hand.

'It's better for him and others until he feels better...'

She imagined Baraiya sitting in the mangled branches, beyond black, no khat nor blanket alone drops lead in her stomach. 'But how can he stay there...? He will have to come back before night time won't he?' Trying to keep her rabbit heart still.

'The jinns are devious they won't leave him be, taubah istaqfarullah.... He's better off there...'

Her chest dropped into itself. She thought it wasn't the jinns, but there wasn't any point to argue, Amma would hardly listen anyway. Not all jinns were supposedly bad characters there were good ones, her teacher had once told them. *Made from the fire and they from the dust...*

About the Writer

Shazia J. Altaf is a writer from Middlesbrough, in the North East of England, from a working-class background. She studied History, has worked in libraries, government, call centres, trained as a teacher, as a shop merchandiser (stock replenisher which she loved), as well as other things. She started writing after the birth of her little girl Ayah. She was the metaphorical push and the literal one. She always knew she would write a novel someday, even as a teenager in school, but never said it out loud.



Shazia won the 2021 Creative Future Writers' Award Platinum Prize for her short story '*Essential Thread*', which was published in CFWA's 2021 anthology, *Essential*, and which she performed at the Southbank Centre, London. Her debut novel, *Jammed*, was shortlisted for the inaugural Primadonna Prize in 2021, and her work was also listed for the 2021 Exeter Short Story Prize for '*Lepidoptera*'. Short story '*Selling Oil*' will be published in the Bricklane Anthology 2022. She has been awarded an Arts Council England Grant. Shazia is signed up to the magical Marianne Gunn O'Connor Literary, Film & TV Agency.

Currently, Shazia is editing *Jammed*, and researching her second work, a historical fiction novel.

You can find Shazia on here sometimes...

Twitter: @ShaziaJAltaf