



## TLC SHOWCASE

SUAD KAMARDEEN

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## Introduction to *Freedom, here I come*

I've always craved a story that explored the nuanced struggle of being a black and visibly Muslim woman. It's a very particular experience that is sometimes hard to pin down with words. But I've also read enough stories to know that nothing is impossible in literature. With this in mind, I turned to Toni Morrison's quote, 'if there is a book you want to read, and it is not yet written, then you must write it yourself.'

Earlier last year, my family suffered a tragedy, and I struggled with maintaining the kind of tenacity needed for a novel. But the short story, though a great love of mine, was also a form that terrified me. Winning the SI Leeds Literary Prize 2022 with my young adult novel gave me the validation and courage that I needed. My stories mattered and there were people in the world who wanted more of those stories.

Part of the perks of winning the prize was a TLC full manuscript assessment as well as an editor 1-1, both of which have contributed to my growth as a writer. During my editorial 1-1 with Julia Forster, we explored what it means to inhabit the body of your character and ways in which to inhabit my own body when off the page. This opportunity to bounce off ideas with someone else who also cared about the story I wanted to tell gave me room to push the boundaries of my story and tap into avenues I may not have previously considered. Our conversation encouraged me to be brave on the page. Better to write a short story and fail, than not write one at all.

With 'freedom, here I come', I'm curious about the illusion of freedom, the hopes we hold onto, and the stories Black and visibly Muslim women have to tell themselves in the face of prejudice. I also wonder about how much a person can bear when faced with both societal and familial pressure. How long until they snap beyond repair? Until they swap optimism for cynicism.

## Extract from *Freedom, here I come* by Suad Kamardeen

Jamila presses the power button on her phone to silence the vibration from her mother's call as she wheels her suitcase to the boarding queue. After a thirty-minute delay, they are finally boarding the plane to Berlin. She stops in the middle of the aisle, nearly bumping into the man with grey sweats ahead of her, to confirm that all she's done is muted Mama's call, not end it. There would be no end to her mother's speech if that happened. She slips her phone into the front pocket of her backpack, and continues forward with a huge smile on her face. She'd practised this walk – her walk of freedom – in front of her bedroom mirror so many times in the past few days. It didn't matter that her heart wasn't entirely where she wanted it to be.

As she steps on the plane, walking through the aisle to find her seat, her brain takes note of the sea of faces and makes its usual observation; she's one of the only two non-white people on this flight. Jamila grew up not caring about such logistics, until she was told far too many times than she'd like to count, that she didn't belong here, wherever here was. So, she prepared for this day with this in mind, dressed in all muted colours – black mom jeans, all black converse trainers, grey jumper – to blend in. She traded her usual bright-coloured hijabs for a dull navy blue, though she would've preferred if it matched the colour of her skin. Lucky for her, she has the window seat adjacent to the wing of the plane. She fixes her gaze outside, watching the workers wheel away the stepladder, her noise-cancelling headphones in hand, ready to go on right after the flight attendants make their announcements.

She has one mission for this short flight: consume as much German as she can. She'll revise the words, the intonations, listen on twice the speed to the audio of a German children's storybook she downloaded – the one with the brave räubertochter – and repeat the words after the narrator. Jamila is determined to prove her mother wrong.

When she'd first announced that she was moving to Berlin, Mama said, in her usual way of drawing hurt instead of stooping so low as to express her sadness, 'You're looking for a hiding place to be promiscuous, eh? You want to throw yourself at men where my eyes won't reach. Well, if I don't see you, Allah is watching you.' Jamila bit hard on her tongue and shook her head.

Mama tried another angle. 'You couldn't make it in London – where even a fool would have thrived. You think you'll survive in a country where you don't know the language?' She cackled.

That was Mama's last proper sentence to Jamila.

Other than that, their conversations – when they had them – never went beyond pleasantries and lots of ah-ing and deep sighing from Mama's end, and heavy breathing from Jamila, until one of them (mostly Mama) said, 'Ah, prayer has just come,' and as if broken from a trance they both hurried to hang up the phone like it would kill them to stay on a minute longer. Knowing Mama never joked with praying on time, Jamila learnt to call her a few minutes before prayer to move things along faster and get the criticisms and questions out of the way. But there were rare times when her mother held out a little longer, and even though Jamila was on her period, and therefore wasn't praying, she never let another minute go by before she uttered Mama's phrase, 'Prayer has just come in.' On such days, Mama let out a deep, disappointing sigh.

The man in the middle seat in a dark grey long-sleeved turtleneck, one half of the middle-aged couple next to her, turns to Jamila as she lifts her hand with the headphones.

'Are you going to Berlin on holiday?' he says, as he twists slightly towards her. His partner whispers something, but he shakes his head and shrugs her off.

'No, to study.' Jamila is anxious to turn her attention back to the window and begin listening. She needs all the time she can get. She still hasn't figured out if her 'ich' has enough throatiness to it or whether she should give up trying and simply say 'ish', but she's wary about offending the locals. One of the articles stressed that Germans didn't appreciate it if your German was crap and were likely to ignore you or respond in English to put you in your place. She will not be sussed out as new to the city – eine ausländlerin.

He cocks his head to the side, revealing his surprised and impressed expression. 'To study? Sprichst du Deutsch?'

'Nur ein bisschen,' slips out of her so easily, she resists the urge to pat herself on the back. The lessons are already paying off.

He smiles, then it stretches into a grin. 'That's a good attempt...but you need to hold the hiss on your "bisschen" a little longer.' He nods his head towards her. 'Try again.'

Jamila's tongue sits firm in her mouth. Now's her chance to show off her skills, to show him that her previous 'bisschen' was a mistake and she can do it right, but all the German words she's accumulated in the past weeks fly out of her head. She gives him an awkward smile, then shrugs.

Just as he's about to speak, his partner taps him on the shoulder and whispers. He offers a brief apology to Jamila as he pulls up his backpack and begins a frantic search.

Jamila returns her gaze to the window. She nudges her mind to remember the many videos she's watched on how to pronounce words with two 'ss' but she fails. She bites hard on the inside of her cheeks. With all the hard work she's put in, Mama may have been right all along.

Before Jamila packed her bags for Berlin to study Software Engineering, she committed a few days to researching the city and several weeks to a German crash course. She swapped her thank you for *dankeschön*, *entschuldigung* replaced sorry, and she slipped *genau* into every conversation whenever she could, whether or not she agreed with the point in question. She knew from experience visiting Lisbon, Copenhagen, Cordoba, Rome, Sofia, Nice etc., that European cities weren't always so welcoming. And unlike London where people were polite with their racism, the Europeans fell on the opposite sides of a spectrum – they either straight up told her to sod off back to her country, the jungle she emerged from, or they, in their open-mindedness, couldn't damn well see what all the fuss was about this thing called racism.

'Everyone experiences racism. Just last week, on our way from the park my friends and I experienced it,' says one of the very many white men at Jamila's previous workplace during the Diversity and Inclusion roundtable, not bothering to expand on what racism he'd faced. When another colleague prompted him, 'But what happened, Mark?' Mark shrugged, and said, 'Just the usual racism.' The word, instead of grating on Jamila's nerves, sounded like something off a grocery list like bread or jam or peppermint tea.

The other activity she committed her time to was scouring the internet for every article and video she could find about Berlin, particularly seeking ways to blend in, to come across like a local and not another annoying tourist. Every evening after work, when she completed the last of her prayers in her cramped studio apartment – filled with stacks of books wherever they could fit including one of the two cupboards in the kitchen area, such that she survived on one of every utensil needed – which only had one window and almost always smelled like burnt crispy wings because it sat right above a chicken shop, Jamila changed into her leopard print onesie – the last gift from her father, Baba, before the cancer decided it'd have the last laugh –, pulled her dreads into a high bun, swapped her contacts for her Malcolm X glasses – same everything down to the half-rim – and crouched at her multipurpose (dining, dressing, ironing,

working) desk either muttering words in German to herself or watching another American talk about how life changing their move to Berlin had been, 'Oh God, I wish I could move here again and feel the experience anew. Berlin is my city – not Charlotte, North Carolina, where I was born or Greensboro where I went to college. This is where I found myself, so this is home.' Jamila sniggered. How easy it was to claim home elsewhere when you were white.

In a desperate attempt to find herself and shrug off her eldest daughter responsibilities, Jamila signed up for the first promising course she could find, one with prospects for a high paying job, and away from the ever-lurking eyes of her mother, who never failed to point out Jamila's shortcomings. And what better place than Berlin, 'the most international city in the world', the city where 'you could fully be yourself' and 'couldn't possibly be the weirdest person in the room'.

## About the Writer

Suad Kamardeen is a British-Nigerian Muslim writer, editor and photographer. She is a Founding Editor of [WAYF Journal](#) and the Managing Editor of [Rowayat](#). She is also a Creative Writing Masters student at the University of Oxford. Her young adult novel won the [SI Leeds Literary Prize 2022](#) and her adult novel was shortlisted for [Stylist Prize for Feminist Fiction 2021](#).

Suad runs [Qalb Writers Collective](#), a community to support Black and Muslim women writers with knowledge and resources. Suad is committed to bearing witness to the lives, histories and cultures of Black and Muslim women. Her work explores themes of intersectional identities, shame, belonging, family, female friendships and love.

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