

Nyla Khan: A voice for two worlds

A one-bedroom apartment on Lindsey Street in Norman, Okla., was a world away from a South Asian upbringing of tradition and privilege. Yet this small dwelling became a haven for Nyla Ali Khan, the place where she spent her days researching, reading and writing as a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma. Just a short walk to the English department where she studied post-colonial literature and theory, it was in this place and time when Khan began to find herself, and her voice.

More than 20 years later, she is using that voice as an advocate for women's rights and societal change. The author of five books, Khan has received the Oklahoma Human Rights Award from the Oklahoma Universal Human Rights Alliance and the Oklahoma City chapter of the United Nations Association.

In March she was appointed to a five-year term as a commissioner for the Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women. Khan is the first South Asian Muslim member of the commission. She provides research and information on societal violence and structural inequities that result from deep-rooted prejudices against women.

She gained her credentials and her humanity through hard-won experience, education, an enduring marriage and motherhood to arrive at this place — a confluence of academia, advocacy and diplomacy. At this intersection Khan sees the full potential of opportunity and for her message of equality to be heard.

"I have learned that if I want to make a difference, if I want to make a change, it is important to be heard," Khan says. "I used to think that the only thing that mattered was how sophisticated my paper was and how I delivered it. Now what matters is whether or not my message is getting through to the people in front of me, if what I am saying is making a difference."

Sitting in a trendy coffee shop in downtown Oklahoma City, Khan sips from an espresso cup and recounts her upbringing, one that set the stage for her evolution into the

open-minded and broad thinker she has become today. Fluent in English, Kashmiri and Urdu, Khan is a skilled orator and storyteller who clearly and precisely articulates her words, describing the life of a Kashmiri girl growing up in a beautiful, mountainous country in the shadow of a renowned grandparent and in the crosshairs of a political hotbed.

Born in a disputed border region of India, raised in a Muslim household, educated in a Catholic school, and now living in the Sooner state, Khan's life is a study in diversity. Her father is a retired physician, her mother a retired professor. Khan's maternal grandfather, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, was the founding leader of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference and the first Muslim prime minister of the region.

The ownership of Kashmir has long been a flashpoint of tension between Pakistan and India, two South Asian nuclear-armed powers. The northern state of Jammu and Kashmir has been sandwiched between the two since the region gained independence from the British Empire in 1947. The area is considered one of the world's most militarized zones. It has witnessed three wars between India and Pakistan, as well as a number of border skirmishes, one as recent as February, when

an Indian fighter pilot was shot down and held captive in Pakistan before being released a few days later.

Abdullah was prime minister from 1947 until 1953 and later spent 22 years as a political prisoner before returning to prominence in 1974. South Asian political debates still center on his ideas and political views as he openly advocated for Kashmiri independence.

"My grandfather opposed exclusionary Islamic identity for Kashmir," Khan explains. "He thought our socioeconomic interests would be safer within a secular, democratic country as opposed to a theocratic nation. As an only child, I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents and I traveled with my grandfather."

As a Catholic schoolgirl, Khan was encouraged to attend catechism classes and go to chapel. When she got home, a

Kashmiri academic and advocate finds a place to be heard both in the land of her birth and the place she now calls home.



Muslim teacher was there to teach her the Koran and way of prayer.

“All of this was perfectly fine with my family,” Khan says. “No one feared a conversion because we did not have the kind of exclusionary nationalism that we see today. The quality of education at my school was very high and the Irish nuns instilled in us a lot of discipline. I even played an angel in the Christmas play every year and know all of the Christmas carols like the back of my hand.”

An armed insurgency surfaced in Kashmir as Khan was

about to graduate from high school. The region became more volatile, precarious and unpredictable. Because of her family’s political history, her parents worried about their daughter attending college in such a hostile environment. So, in 1990, they sent her to Lady Shri Ram College for Women in New Delhi, which remains one of the preeminent colleges in the country.

“Going to New Delhi was quite a culture shock for me because the city is very crowded,” she says of that time. “On the surface it is cosmopolitan, but below that the city is quite

provincial. Up until then I had been very sheltered and protected and all of the sudden I found myself away from parents and family.”

Khan returned home after graduation to teach at the same college as her mother, accepted a semi-arranged marriage proposal and later decided to continue her education at a university in the United States. Her husband had a medical degree and wanted to join a residency program in the United States as well. They chose Oklahoma because she had visited a cousin there.

In 1998, Khan applied and was accepted into a master’s program in English literature at OU and moved into that one-bedroom apartment. The move was a good one for her but after several months, her husband wanted to return to Kashmir. Khan chose to stay to complete her graduate program. She was alone.

“We both had been raised in big houses, with lawns and domestic help and here I was in this little apartment by myself and I loved it,” Khan recalls. “In Norman I became my own person. I found my voice and saw my potential. That time was so encouraging. I became very independent because I had to do everything myself.”

After finishing her doctorate in 2004, Khan accepted a tenure-track position at the University of Nebraska-Kearney, a town outside of Omaha. Her husband was in a medical residency program in Queens, N.Y., and the couple had a four-month-old daughter. Again, Khan made her way, mostly alone, for five years in Nebraska, teaching, publishing, serving on committees, and going to conferences while raising her daughter.

“I did not know anyone there and it was a difficult, but good, time in my life,” she says. “I realized my own strengths and how much I could handle without my parents or my spouse. But it also was a time of isolation because I was the only Kashmiri woman in a small community, the only non-Caucasian Muslim on campus.”

The long-distance separation was hard on the Khan family. There was no position for Khan’s husband, rheumatologist Dr. Mohammad Faisal Khan, near her university in Nebraska, so he began practicing in Oklahoma City. Although she had been promoted to associate professor, she and their daughter returned to Oklahoma in 2010.

Today, Khan’s work focuses on grassroots advocacy and building alliances across a variety of spectrums. Khan is a *Let’s Talk About It* scholar for the Oklahoma Humanities Council, hosting book discussions as part of the program, including at women’s correctional facilities. She serves as a visiting professor at OU, teaches at Rose State College in Midwest City and is a regular contributor to local newspapers, as well as a



Keynote speaker Nyla Ali Khan addresses the audience on International Women’s Day 2018 at the University of Central Oklahoma. Khan was recently appointed to a five-year term as a member of the Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women.

commentator in Kashmir on the subject of her homeland and human rights.

OU Professor of Anthropology Betty Harris says that as difficult as it was to leave a tenured faculty position, her colleague and friend has adjusted well to her return to the Sooner state.

“Nyla is more connected to community than she might otherwise have been solely as an academic,” Harris says. “She gives public lectures frequently and has grown a broad network of people who are receptive to not only her ideas, but also to her as a person. Now, Nyla is able to work continuously on issues that are important to her, such as literacy, equal pay and equal participation, while continuing to work in academia.”

In addition, she continued, Khan’s writing has connected people within the States, as well as in South Asia. Her concerns for the civil and human rights of women, children and young girls resonate with populations around the globe.

Her ideas and theories are translated into Urdu for audi-



Khan, the author of five books, listens during a discussion group at Full Circle Bookstore in Oklahoma City.

ences outside the United States with help from a friend she met by chance in a grocery store five years ago. Dr. Lubna Mirza overheard someone on a cell phone having a conversation in her native Urdu. The Norman-based endocrinologist grew up in Pakistan and was intrigued to be hearing her language in an Oklahoma City grocery store. She lingered, not wanting to eavesdrop, until the call was over to introduce herself to the speaker. It was Khan. They exchanged business cards and later went to lunch.

“At the time I wanted to improve my Urdu because when I came to the United States I stopped using it, and when you don’t use a language you lose it,” Mirza says. “I had written a book about diabetes in Urdu and gave it to Nyla, and she gave me one of hers that was in English.”


In her effort to regain her Urdu language skills, Mirza offered to translate Khan’s book. Not only did she want to practice using her native tongue, the doctor also wanted to learn more about Kashmir.

Their working relationship and friendship continue to this day, with Mirza translating opinion pieces and various other papers for Khan to submit to Urdu publications.

“One of the reasons I continue to translate for Nyla is I want to educate myself,” she says. “Because South Asia is so

big, growing up in Pakistan I did not know a lot about Kashmir except that it was far away and very beautiful. I have learned a lot reading her books. Nyla is an authority in her field. She is also a politician and has to communicate in a certain way for the people of that region to relate to her.”

Now that she makes her home in Edmond, Okla., Khan says she is finding opportunities to continue her advocacy work in America and to give back to her country. Amidst ongoing insurgency and internal civilian unrest, Khan returns each summer to visit her parents and her homeland. She teaches at local colleges while there. Because she has continuously networked to build connections and alliances, Khan says her experience in what could be a difficult situation due to her family history has helped her develop listening and diplomatic skills.

She has long nurtured political ambitions and one day seeks to fulfill them. Ultimately, Khan wishes to live a meaningful existence, one that began to develop long ago in the small, student apartment on Lindsey Street. 

Susan Grossman is the director of development for the Myriad Botanical Gardens in Oklahoma City and a freelance writer who lives in Norman, Okla.