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Does sisterhood exist?

THERE have been recent debates about sisterhood and when asked to write about the topic, I was torn. A part of me thought, no it absolutely does not and people just think about themselves. Then another thought was that it was something very powerful. When I put this out to my social media followers, my thoughts began to change. I now believe that true sisterhood does exist, but that a lot can be done to improve how women support each other.

Let me tell you about an ex-work colleague who I didn't ever have the courage to stand up to. I feel like this person was constantly trying to show me up, get ahead of me and be one step ahead. I always wanted to tell her that work wasn't a race and that we can help each other. I was never able to tell her how I felt, but I hope one day that person understands what sisterhood really means.

There are so many ways we can integrate sisterhood into our lives and this needs to begin from a young age. Whilst on a holiday in Greece, my friend told me that her friend, who has young twin girls, makes sure she takes them along whenever she is out for dinner with her girlfriends. It encourages her daughters to recognise sisterhood and will engrain the notion of being around your friends, and supporting one another from a young age.

We also need to make sure that we intensely support our female friends and family members whenever they need something. They should know that you're going to be there regardless of the situation and be there to show support whether it is with a key decision, new venture or helping them through difficult times.

If you want to understand sisterhood, I urge you to watch chick-flick *The Sisterhood Of The Traveling Pants*. It follows the journey of four girls one summer who visit different parts of the world. They are all different women, but are connected by one pair of shared jeans, which fits them all.

I think what summed the term sisterhood for me perfectly was something that talented New York-based writer Sweta Vikram said to me, which was "you have to find your tribe." This means the following to me; sisterhood is to want the best for someone without trying to compete with them, outdo them or show them up. It's about having respect and supporting a friend, work colleague, family member or a mutual individual.

I'll leave you with a quote from Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another, and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it among ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy, and that serves us no purpose."

What lies beneath a perfect marriage

JEEVANI CHARIKA'S NOVEL EXPLORES COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS

by MITA MISTRY

HAVING lived in diverse places, including Sri Lanka, has enabled prolific writer Jeevani Charika to deliver an interesting array of work, including her latest novel *A Convenient Marriage*.

The versatile British-born writer, who also pens romantic comedies under the name Rhoda Baxter, has delivered another page turner with a neatly crafted novel that revolves around a young woman torn between her duty to family and life in the UK. This leads to a marriage of convenience between two unlikely individuals hiding life-changing secrets.

Eastern Eye caught up with Jeevani Charika to find out more about her latest novel, writing and inspirations.

'Need more universal stories'

As a writer, what draws you to a subject?

I'm usually drawn to odd situations that people (usually minor characters in films) are in. I look at them and think 'I wonder how they feel?'. A lot of my books are explorations sparked by tiny moments. For example, *This Stolen Life* was sparked by that moment when your child first calls their nursery key worker 'mummy'.

What inspired your latest book?

I wrote this book in my twenties, when some of my Sri Lankan friends were meeting partners introduced by their parents. In England, a friend of mine once met a man sitting on a park bench, crying. He told her about how he was desperately unhappy because he was in love with another man, but was married and loved his kids. These two ideas collided in my head. Not long afterwards, I was doing a creative writing exercise and (the characters) Gimhana and Chaya showed up. *A Convenient Marriage* is their story.

Tell us more about the story and the characters?

Chaya gave up the love of her life to avoid upsetting her family and devoted herself to her career. She doesn't want to get married, but her family

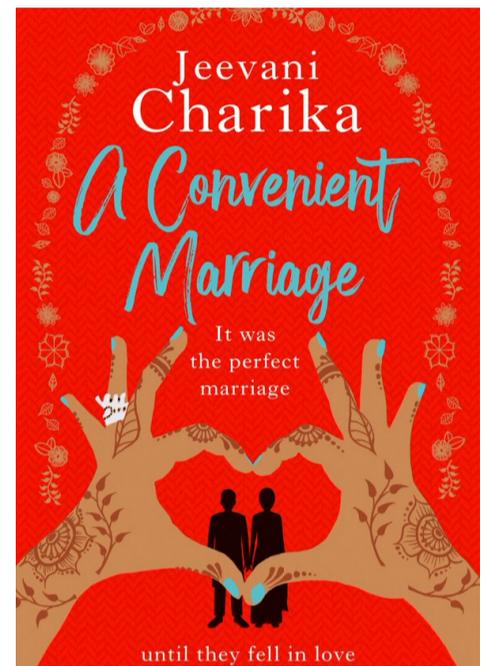
are pressuring her. Gimhana is gay, but passes for straight and needs to get married in order to progress at work. They decide that marrying each other will free them to get on with what they want to do. Together they create a perfect looking marriage, with two successful careers.

Tell us more...

But when Gimhana falls in love with another man and Chaya sees her lost love again, they have to choose between following their hearts and destroying everything they've built together. Gimhana has a mix of charm and vulnerability that I love. Chaya is reserved and anxious, but underneath it she's kind and caring. As a pair, they are fun to watch.

What was the biggest challenge while writing the book?

The biggest challenge is getting the words down. With *A Convenient Marriage*, I was writing a story that spans 17 years, so I had to balance the different time frames. I also hadn't written a gay man's point of view before, so I had to ask a gay friend to look through the manuscript and check that I had not messed up.



How does this compare to your other books?

This book is always going to be special because it was the first one I wrote. It just so happens that I published 10 other books before this one was published. Reading it again to edit it, I fell in love with Chaya and Gimhana all over again. It's also the book with the most about Sri Lanka in it. A lot of it is set in Colombo in the 1990s and early 2000s, which is a setting I knew quite well.

Who are you hoping connects with this book?

I'm hoping anyone who likes character-driven women's fiction will like it. Chaya struggles with anxiety and depression, but to the outside world, appears to be functioning well. She keeps telling herself it's fine and soldiering on until she breaks down. Many of us do this. If one person reads this and realises they can get help with anxiety and depression, then that would be wonderful.

What can we expect next from you?

I would like to write a story about PCOS and fertility issues, featuring Sri Lankan characters again. Obviously, these aren't issues that are particular to Asian people, but I think we need more stories that are universal, but just happen to have main characters who are Asian. Under my other pen name Rhoda Baxter, I write light-hearted rom-coms with British-Asian characters, because there aren't enough of those around.

What according to you makes for a good novel?

A book that lets you experience the story through a character's eyes and leaves you feeling satisfied, ideally with a smile on your face.

Who is your own writing hero?

Terry Pratchett. His later books are thought-provoking and beautiful. I love that he uses the fantasy world to talk about ideas that affect people in the real world.

What inspires you as a writer?

I used to write to amuse myself. I still do, but now I'm aware of my children too. If I can help people understand other people and become a bit more tolerant, I'll be making the world a better place for my children.

■ *A Convenient Marriage* by Jeevani Charika is out now. Visit www.jeevanicharika.com
Twitter: @rhodabaxter



REAL ISSUES: Jeevani Charika; and (top inset) her book *A Convenient Marriage*