Shelina Janmohamed

STORY OF NOW

Let's talk about the British Empire



Illustrated by Laura Greenan

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WELBECK

For my Mum and Dad, who gave me the tools to find my story, write it, and to know its worth - my worth.

For Maryam, Aamina, Hana, Anayis, Zayd, Ali, Iman, Muhammad and all my children, I am so excited to see how your stories unfold. Never underestimate their power and importance.

In honour of those who came before me, whose stories have led to mine: Suleman, Sherbanubai, Rukiyabai, Hasham, Maanbai, Hassanali, Janmohamed, Nathibai, Rashid, Bandali, Wadimaa Bandali, Jenabai, Chowdhury and Yasmin.

And always, and most importantly, for the One.

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Chapter Two

Once upon a great big blank (which I filled in)

When I was growing up, I didn't really know anything about the British Empire. A big fat zero. But I wish I had, because the story of my life has been completely shaped by it.

I started by asking my parents, grandmother, uncles, aunts, friends... literally anyone who had a story to tell (and once you get them started, people love telling stories). Through snippets of information, photographs, and research online, I managed to piece

together my story. I felt like a detective uncovering the Biggest Secret History Ever. I wondered, why has no one ever told me this before?

It's one of the reasons I wanted to write this book, so that you might be inspired to find your *own story* (see page 233). Because by knowing where you've come from, you can know truly who you are today.

When we know our own individual stories, we can share them, and that helps us to understand each other better, allowing us to compare notes about our different feelings and experiences of the past, and our ideas about it. Understanding your own story and the place you live are among *the most important things you can ever do for yourself.*

A tale of two journeys

My family were originally from Gujarat, India. They were busy minding their own business when the East India Company arrived in 1608, and when it established its rule in 1757. In 1858 India was officially named as the British Raj, or the British Empire, and Queen Victoria (who was the Queen), became Empress of India.

Towards the end of the 19th century, my great grandfather decided to leave India and travel to East Africa by boat. It might have been because between 1876 and 1878 the Great Famine took place in India, including Gujarat, which led to the deaths of ten million people. Some reports suggest the huge number was made worse by British policies that continued to send vital crops out of India to sell, along with not wanting to spend money on the welfare of Indians under their rule.

Or it might have been because around the same time, many Indians were travelling to East Africa where the British were also taking indentured labourers to build railways. Perhaps they thought they could have a better life in East Africa, which had recently come under British control.

Whatever the reason, my great grandfather made the perilous journey across the *kala pani*, the taboo black waters of the Indian Ocean to what is today called Tanzania.

One of my grandfathers worked in Aden before going to East Africa, a bustling port set in what

is today's Yemen, which the British Empire established to control the sea-trade routes around Arabia.

My family were called Overseas Subjects of the British Empire. The taxes they and their communities paid and the contributions they made to Britain all played a role in how Britain became wealthy and powerful. My family had to speak English even though they were Indians living in Africa. Some of my aunts went to convent schools taught by nuns who had come all the way from England!

In the 1960s, already having been in one part of Britain (Tanganykia, now Tanzania), my mum and dad decided to come to a different part of Britain – the UK. They settled in London. And I was born here. All of which means my family has lived across three continents of the British Empire, and we've been British for more than 200 years, contributing blood, love, sweat, tears – and taxes! – to make this country what it is today.

That was my story. What's yours?

The British Empire might be tied to your story too, or those of your friends or neighbours – whether your family has lived forever in the English countryside, whether your family was part of the Windrush generation (see page 221), whether you now live in a town where mining or manufacturing were once the main industries, or whether it is something else entirely.

Maybe you can find out about your own great grandparents. You might have a story like mine, affected by famine, poverty, economic opportunity, global politics and migration. Or perhaps your families' lives changed by moving from agriculture to working in factories; by introducing new spices and foods into their cuisine, or by joining the navy for trade or war. Or your story might be about coming to Britain today.

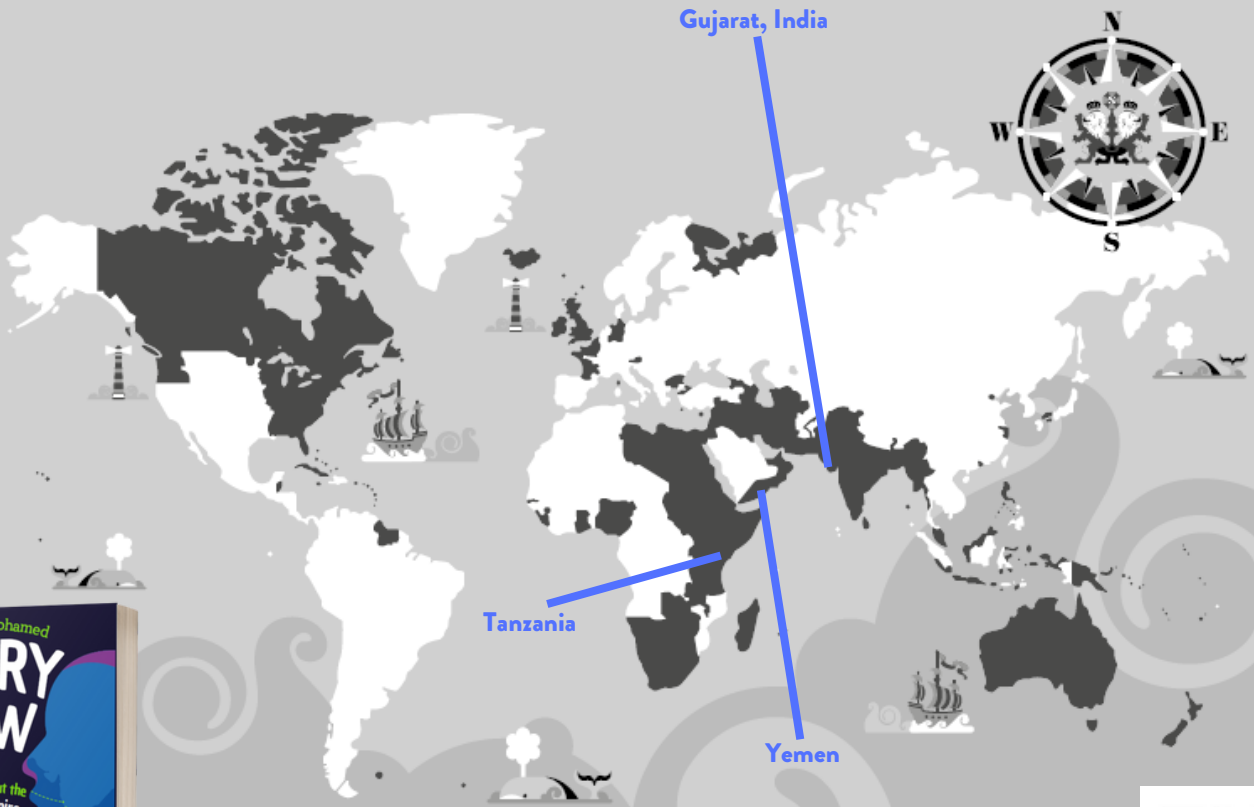
You will almost certainly discover something that you never knew before.

On the map below you can see the locations of Shelina's Empire story. What locations appear in your Empire story?

The "Pink Map" of the British Empire c. 1920s

This map was known as the "pink map" and it shows the territories of the British Empire as it would have looked in the 1920s. This is when the Empire was at the height of its power. Clearly in this book it's not pink (sorry, it's a black-and-white book). But remember we talked about children, like you, living a hundred years ago? Well, this is the map that might have hung on their classroom walls.

In this map, north faces up and Greenwich is centred. This makes places further from the equator look bigger. So, Africa should really be 125 times bigger than Britain and twice as large as Canada. Britain wanted to look much bigger than it really was, to appear to be at the centre of the world, and show off its vast, well-connected territories. This is excellent for projecting world domination!





Extract taken from Story of Now by Shelina Janmohamed.
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