

Title of the Book: *Murder at the Mela*

By Leela Soma, Ringwood Publishing, 2020, £ 9.99, ISBN: 978-1-901514-90-2.

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New Depictions of Identity and Conflict in Scottish Crime Fiction

Early on in *Murder at the Mela*, as Caroline walks on in the Kelvingrove park, we are told that her golden retriever proceeds to mark her territory. The detritus of the Mela is "on the far side." When Caroline discovers a blood trail and discerns a pair of "legs covered in jeans partially hidden behind the bush," she calls the ambulance and explains, "Ambulance, please ... someone is lying here, blood all over, maybe a body." Nadia becomes the detritus that earlier appeared on the far side, to Caroline and to us. The remains of her body mark her murderer's territory, not hers. Thus begins DI Alok Patel's investigation into the crime.

Inaugurating an Asian DI in Scottish crime fiction, Leela Soma's *Murder at the Mela* is a curious intersection of the personal and the political. Soma utilises Nadia's murder to probe an investigation uncovering multitudes of intercultural conflicts that coalesce to form a picture of chaos. Here, rivalry is marked by differences in religion, nationality, citizenship, and culture. Social and political discord is rarely contained: cultural friction ruptures interpersonal romantic and platonic relationships, too. Nobody remains untouched by disharmony.

Soma sheds light on Glasgow's Asian communities, uncovering their relationship with the city and among themselves. An overt association of Hindu characters with India and Muslim characters with Pakistan does restrict the scope of dialogue, but the advantages of the constraint outweigh the limitations. At the heart of Hindu-Muslim social intercourse is the clandestine love story of Usma and Alok. Their relationship thrives despite frequent verbal assaults by unsympathetic family members. It is in their mutual affection that Soma locates the possibility of transnational solidarity, in spite of extant religious conflicts that mar such a vision.

Literature becomes a medium to strengthen the couple's relationship and overcome familial opposition. The Hafiz poetry collection, which is Usma's present to Alok following his successful investigation, is one such example. Their interest in attending Edinburgh Book Festival together is another. Soma's portrayal of literature as a means of cementing warmth and intimacy in Usma and Alok's relationship is striking because her novel, an imaginative contribution to Scottish literature, performs precisely the same function: *Murder at the Mela* becomes a beacon of hope for stronger cultural relations across Glaswegian communities.

Even when Soma deconstructs the oversimplified notion of the ‘Asian’ by hinting at the many dissimilarities and disputes among South Asian communities, she manages to preserve the Asian category to subsume the very differences she invokes. Usma and Alok may find themselves separated by religion, but an Asian identity brings them together, suspending, for a moment, the precarity of their relationship. Their union, otherwise susceptible to antagonism, becomes somewhat legible when they are viewed as Asians instead of Asian Hindus and Asian Muslims.

The many ways in which Soma captures the usefulness and limits of an Asian identity speaks volumes of her experience in her craft. Her expertise in writing helps her tap the true potential of her authorial voice. For instance, Soma’s depiction of interpersonal and sexual relationships among Asians undermines conventional narratives into which Asian women’s sexuality is enclosed. Her characters call into question desexualised or hypersexualised representations of Asian women.

Although Soma seems preoccupied with Asian communities in Glasgow, her novel successfully explores an unmistakable Glaswegian spirit among Asians in the city. An overarching emphasis on Glasgow isn’t limited to references to its geography. Everyday conversations dextrously synthesise the polyphonous voices shaping the city. Even the Mela, which represents a melange of cultures, exerts its spectral presence throughout the novel as a *Scottish* Asian marker, becoming, in effect, a unique symbol of transnational and transcultural diversity. In fact, allusions to Usma’s carb-free diet and Alok’s mother’s search for a ‘suitable’ bride — with “light skin and pretty face” — for her son cleverly blend colonial ideals of beauty in South Asia with wildly popular standards of global beauty myths.

The structure of a crime thriller allows Soma to capture such nuances with precision. Even the revelation of the murderer in the concluding pages brilliantly develops the novel’s sustained engagement with a complex conversation on identity and conflict. In *Murder at the Mela* lies the carefully written story of a crime propelled by personal motives arising from conflicts of political importance. Alongside its uniquely insightful presentation of crime and policing, the novel manages to respond to contemporary farragos of fact and fiction about Asian communities in Glasgow. Soma’s work deserves recognition for its magnetic charm and relevance.

References:

Soma, Leela. *Murder at the Mela* (U.K.: Ringwood Publishing, 2020).

Mridula Sharma is a scholar and a writer. She is currently working on a book length manuscript. Her work has been accepted by publishers such as Routledge, University of Delaware Press, and Vernon Press, among others. She has received grants and scholarships for her research from institutions in Germany, Scotland, India, England, and the US. In 2021, she was shortlisted for Speculative Literature Foundation's Diversity Grant.