

## Context and Summary

The transcript details the experiences of Karim Khan, a Muslim man who grew up in Oxford, England. His grandfather migrated to Oxford in the early 1960s, and subsequent generations of the family have lived in the city. The transcript explores Karim's family history, his parents and grandparents' experiences of finding community and building a life in Oxford, as well as Karim's own upbringing in the predominantly white, working-class neighbourhood of Littlemore. Despite having deep roots in Oxford, Karim felt disconnected from the city's central university district, which he viewed as a parallel world. As an aspiring writer and filmmaker, Karim has grappled with navigating the arts and creative industries as a Muslim creative. He describes his new-found sense of community among other Muslim creatives but notes the challenges of feeling compelled to represent his identity and experiences in his work. The transcript also highlights generational shifts, as Karim observes his younger cousins being raised with a stronger connection to their Muslim and Pakistani heritage compared to his own upbringing.

### **Aleena Din:**

So I guess for the record, could you please state your name?

### **Karim Khan:**

Yes, I'm Karim Khan.

### **Aleena Din:**

And could you tell me what year you were born in?

### **Karim Khan:**

I was born in 1994.

### **Aleena Din:**

And I'd be really interested to know about your family. How did your family end up in Oxford?

### **Karim Khan:**

Yeah, so my grandfather, my dad's dad migrated to Oxford shortly after his brother came here. So I think his brother came here first. He was part of Pakistani military, and he started working here and then he brought his brother over, my grandfather. And so I think my grandfather came in the early sixties. And at first, he spent some time in different cities around the UK, with different friends that he had, but then I think he realised that Oxford was the place that he liked the most, where he wanted to settle. And so he essentially built his life there. And then my grandmother came shortly after. So yeah, I think that's how we all ended up here.

### **Aleena Din:**

And how much do you know of your family's history from that period? Did, for example, your parents, your grandparents, really ever share their experiences of finding a house to live in or the type of community they were part of?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I feel like I know little snippets of... I think the impression I got was, I think there was definitely a big sense of community amongst other migrants, other Pakistani, south Asian migrants, who had come over and were in similar positions. And they essentially just became a family or a... And it's weird how we're still sort of connected to them to this day, we're still connected to them, almost as extended family members. Even though it's like two, three generations ago. So yeah, I got the sense that there was a big sense of community around that and I felt... Yeah, I think my grandparents were... I think the impression I have is that they were renting in different houses, and then eventually they had their own house and they started... They had some lodgers who were living there as well, and lodgers from different places, like from Jamaica. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

That's really interesting. What area of Oxford did they call home?

**Karim Khan:**

So they called home... I think there were a few different... When they first came, they called East Oxford home. So around Charles Street, Percy Street, that sort of area. And they lived there for a bit, and then they moved back to Pakistan. So my dad was born in the UK, but I think when he was three or four, they decided to go to Karachi in Pakistan. And they lived eight years there. And I think their intention was to live their life there and to not necessarily come back to the UK, but then eventually, they realised that their life would be better in the UK for them and for the outcome of their children. At that point, they had three more kids in Pakistan. So at that point, I think there was six children, they had. And then at that point, Cowley became their home. So they moved to Cowley. And that house, my grandma still lives in since then.

**Aleena Din:**

Oh, wow.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

So what did your grandparents do? Because heard from other people that their grandmothers or their mothers were seamstresses, for example, and a lot of men worked in the car factories. Is that similar to your grandparents' experience?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, quite similar to my dad. My grandfather worked in the car factory as well, so I think, yeah, that's what he was doing. And yeah, my grandmother, I don't think worked. I think she was volunteering, she was working at the school for a little bit, almost the primary school where she was helping children on break times, sort of thing. But yeah, my grandfather worked at the factories and I think he worked a couple of other jobs as well, but I can't quite remember what they were. But it's interesting, in Pakistan, he had a shoe shop there, and also a sweet shop as well. So he had those businesses when he was at that point.

**Aleena Din:**

It's really interesting, his occupation as a business owner there in Pakistan, to then come here and to work on the factory floor. And reading books about the history of Oxford and talking to people, it seemed like people had a really difficult time working in that environment. Did your granddad ever talk about his experiences working on the factory floor?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, because my grandfather died quite a long time ago, before I was born actually, so I've never really met him or got to talk to him about all of that. I don't know, I think the impression... It's difficult to gauge how difficult he found it. I think the impression I got is it seemed like he had worked really hard and it's almost like... Yeah, it felt like he had worked really hard and it felt like quite young, he was almost quite exhausted. And yeah, that's the impression I got, just from hearing things.

**Aleena Din:**

And I guess maybe moving on to your dad's experiences, you said, "He was born here and then he went back to Karachi and came back." Have you ever had conversations about his childhood experiences of growing up in Oxford?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I've had some conversations with him. So I think it's interesting because I feel like his childhood was kind of split into two. Some of his early years spent here, but I don't think he has that many memories of that time, because he was three or four, I think. And then Karachi, he spent eight years and it felt like his childhood was spent there. So I feel like I've heard... I get a glimpse into that how, from my understanding, it felt like he... It's almost like the education system was quite interesting. In Pakistan, it seems like the rote learning system was something he struggled with, and compared to some of his siblings who, I think their memories were better or something. But I think when he came here, I think he valued the education system a bit more, in terms of how it felt like... It seemed like he had lost a lot of confidence in Pakistan, in terms of who he was and that sort of thing.

But when he was growing up here, as a teenager, he really got interested in woodwork and that became his passion, and something that he felt like was his thing. And so, he did a lot of... He became a joiner and worked part-time with this company called Brian Gelta Joinery, a woodwork company. And he was working there even as a teenager, for a few years. And I think with education

like that, I don't know what... He wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do longterm, and I think the idea of having that professional career kind of came slightly later.

He told me about, there was a moment where he went to the Oxford Brookes Open Day and he was just looking at what courses were available. And there was a time where there was a course available for architecture, and there was some places available and he just made that sort of spontaneous decision to enrol in it. And it started a few weeks later, after that point. And then that was the career that he had after, for I think... Yeah, I don't know how many years, like 30 years or something. But that became his thing. But interestingly, he did say that his dad wanted him to be an architect, but he wasn't sure that was in him or that's who he could become. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, that's interesting. When did he make that decision? Do you know when him going to the Oxford Brookes Open Day, do you know when that happened?

**Karim Khan:**

I think it was maybe when he was... I think he did start later, so maybe 20, 21. I think something like that. At the time, he was a mature student. I think I was born at that point. And he was married and I was born, and so he started later. And even doing his A-levels, that was something he did at the local college, the Oxford City College, and was catching up on that. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, it's really interesting, I guess, maybe trying to map his experiences against legislation that made access to education or higher education possible. Because in speaking to an older generation, older-ish generation of people, welfare state was stronger, more funds being channelled towards supporting higher education. So I wonder if your dad was maybe a beneficiary of that.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah. I definitely got that impression actually, when he was talking about it, in terms of the maintenance loans and everything, and how there seemed like there were more opportunities in terms of to financially support him and to do it. Because he wouldn't have been able to afford a degree at that point at all. Because he was the second eldest, so it was my auntie and him, and my grandfather had passed away a few years before that, so it felt like they had a lot of responsibility to try and provide for the family and try and do things. Especially seven siblings, it felt like there's a lot of onus on them in terms of what they were doing and their responsibilities, and stuff like that.

**Aleena Din:**

Do you know much about your dad or even your grandparents' experiences of being Muslim in the city? Where did they find community? I know you mentioned earlier in the interview that it's almost a family-like dynamic and it still continues to this day, but do you have an impression of how those connections were formed?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think it's interesting. I definitely get the sense that there is such a strong sense of community. Everyone seems to know each other. And that even at the mosque, my dad would recognise quite a lot of people and know people from different places. And I think that maybe that's a combination of the people that he went to school with. So for high school, he went to Oxford Boys School. That's what it was called at the time, and that had a big Muslim, Pakistani community that went there.

So I think a lot of Muslim, Pakistani young men went to that school. But I think with my grandparents, I think, yeah, it is interesting because with my grandmother, even now she seems to have quite a lot of strong connections with people and within the community. And I'm not quite sure where that has derived from, but I feel like, I think there was a lot of onus on when someone's passed away or when someone's ill, you go and visit them. And that's something that my grandma still does. You hear things, you hear someone's unwell, and then you go and visit them and do those things. So it's like there was a lot of emphasis on visiting each other, I think.

And maybe with my grandparents coming back to the country and their decision making around whether they should stay in Pakistan, I think the impression I got when I was talking to my grandma about it was that the friends that they had within Oxford were very helpful to them, in making them understand where they should go, what they should do. And so there was a support system there I think.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, it's really interesting. It's really interesting to try and understand. There's a lot of, whether you're Muslim or you're South Asian, you are not necessarily linked to the people... You're tenuously linked to other migrants in the city. So it's really interesting to try and understand how those community networks were formed. And it's really interesting to hear your grandma's experiences of this mutual support underlying a lot of their friendships and relationships. Maybe focusing on your mum's experiences. So was she born in Oxford as well? What was her experience of coming to the city?

**Karim Khan:**

So yeah, she was born in Pakistan, and she came when she married my dad. So that was in the nineties, I think maybe '91. So three years before I was born. So that was her first time coming to Oxford, after having married my dad. And I think her experience of Oxford, it seems like she was living... So my mum and my dad were living with my grandma for a bit, I think for the first three years. And then after I was born, they moved around in a few different places. In the hostels, they moved around some of those different places in East Oxford. And then eventually, we went to Little North and lived in a council flat there. And then over time, kind of moved around a few different places.

**Aleena Din:**

And what does she do for work?

**Karim Khan:**

So she doesn't work and she didn't work. So yeah, I think I felt like she was more within the house and raising children, and that was what she was doing. And yeah, I'm trying to think about what her experience of Oxford. Yeah, I think I got the sense that she was... In terms of just the coldness, of how cold it is coming to this country, and I remember her talking about that and how she would find it quite cold and how to adjust to that. And probably the homesickness, being away from family, how to communicate with them.

**Aleena Din:**

And how old was she when she came here?

**Karim Khan:**

So I think she came when she was maybe 22. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, it's a big adjustment at 22, coming to a new country.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I couldn't really imagine it.

**Aleena Din:**

No, I couldn't either.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's pretty mad.

**Aleena Din:**

And in terms of maintaining her connection to her family in Pakistan, and your dad has a very different experience where his immediate family is here, do you have any memories of how she would do that? Was she sending letters or cassettes? And I guess, what was your experience of growing up, having that connection to Pakistan with her family?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's interesting that she would send letters, those airmail letters, to her family. And then also the cassettes as well. I remember her recording on the cassettes. I think my dad got a big cassette player where you can record and also play, and she would send those cassettes and background to Pakistan. And then I think, yeah, they would sometimes have phone calls, but I think at that point, my grandparents in Pakistan didn't have a phone in their house, so it was really difficult to communicate directly. I remember there would be moments where they would go to another house that had a phone, and then they would be able to communicate and talk over the phone. So yeah, and also the price of those five pound cards, which only give you five minutes or something. She would use those and it would just be so expensive to communicate. But it feels like so much has

changed since then. But yeah, I definitely got that impression. And then we did visit Pakistan a few times.

I was too young, I think I was maybe two or three at the time. We went to my uncle's wedding in Pakistan, so my dad's brother. And yeah, we went there, and my mom was pregnant with my brother at the time. And then the time after that we went was my other uncle's wedding from Pakistan, so my mom's brother. And that was in '99, when we went for that. So I've got some memories, some random memories of that. And then shortly after that, my grandfather, so my mom's mom, passed away, maybe a couple of months after that. So we went again in the winter, in December. And then after that, it felt like there was quite a big gap. It felt like there was a seven-year gap. Then we went again. And then, yeah, it feels like there's been a few massive gaps after every time we've gone. And I feel like even my mom's relationship with... It's interesting seeing it from her perspective, her relationship with her family feels like it changed, just how time impacts your relationship with your family.

**Aleena Din:**

And maybe now moving on to you, now that we've laid the groundwork of your family's experiences here in Oxford, and maybe we can touch on it as we're talking about your experiences. Can you maybe describe what it was like for you growing up in Oxford? I know you mentioned that by the time you were born, you're maybe the second-ish generation. How big of a community was there of, not just South Asians, but Muslims in Oxford when you were growing up?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's really interesting because I think, because we were living in Littlemore at the time, and still now, but I think it felt like the demographic in Littlemore feels so different to other demographics, like Cowley, Iffley and all of that area. It feels like maybe there's more of a South Asian, Muslim presence. But for me, it felt like it was a very white working-class community that I felt like I was in. So when I went to school, I felt like I was only one of a few South Asian or even people of colour. There weren't many. It was very white predominant.

And at the time, I felt like a bit of an outsider I think. But I felt like I wasn't really part of this community and I was a bit disconnected. And interestingly, because of my trips to Pakistan, quite a few trips during that time, that '99, when I was five or six and when I'd only just started school, at the time, I was speaking Urdu and Punjabi more than I was English. So my Urdu and Punjabi was really good and that's how I was communicating with my parents. And so I struggled because in school, I didn't really know how to communicate properly with everyone else, and I didn't know how to speak English properly. And at the time, my teacher said to my parents that, "You need to teach him, you need to speak English with him because he's going to struggle, he's going to be isolated, he's not going to be able to make friends."

And I think at the time, I decided that I wasn't going to speak Urdu anymore with them, and I was only going to start speaking English. And I feel like that still had a bit of an impact on my relationship to Urdu and Punjabi. I can't speak it as well anymore, because of that. And yeah, I just find it really interesting. Something about the education system in that time was very, I think so different to how it might be now in terms of bilingualism and this idea of speaking multiple languages, and what responsibilities a school think they have in that respect. And I don't know how

being able to speak a different language, how that's perceived by the education system and by schools. Because at the time, it felt like a black marker. It felt like something that othered you more than something that should be celebrated or something you should embrace.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah. I mean, I guess you're just navigating so much as a young person and just trying to fit in. It's interesting that your teachers would discourage that. Yeah, you're right. What does that say about the education system? It's so different now.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, definitely.

**Aleena Din:**

People embrace the idea that you can speak lots of different languages.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

So in terms of school itself, did you enjoy school? Was it something that you had an aptitude for or...

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think with school, I did struggle to focus a little bit. I don't think I was that great at school when I first started. In terms of primary school, I think my reading wasn't great. I was kind of below my reading age. And I think, yeah, I did struggle to... I didn't feel like, in school, I was validated for being... I wasn't perceived as being good at it, by the teachers or the school, but I think there was still a desire in me to work hard and to get better at it. But I didn't feel like I was part of the clever group necessarily.

And I also feel like I was quite... I realised even at that time, I was quite imaginative and I was almost like daydreaming more. I didn't enjoy the maths and that sort of element of it, the sciences and the maths. But I enjoyed just getting bored and daydreaming, and thinking about random ideas and things. But I didn't feel like, within school, that strand was necessarily celebrated or encouraged. I didn't feel that. And then even at secondary school, I felt the same thing. Quite early on, I felt like I kept getting put into the really low groups. When you are in different sets for maths, English, I kept being put in the bottom sets.

And then that started to really grate at me, in terms of, I didn't quite understand why I kept being placed in those groups and why my predicted grades were so low. I felt like I was always predicted really low grades. And even though it was some weird algorithm, as well as what the teachers were predicting, but I felt like I needed to prove myself to them and prove that I'm capable of doing better or I'm better than what they think I am.

**Aleena Din:**

Right. And do you think your creativity and your imagination, was that something that was embraced by your parents? Or were they, I guess in some ways, similar to your teachers, in that it was maybe a bit discouraged?

**Karim Khan:**

I think they really encouraged it. Yeah, definitely. Yeah, my dad was really encouraging of it. I think because he was always really creative himself, in terms of he was really good at art when he was at school, and with his joinery, becoming an architect as well. And I think he kind of really encouraged me to lean into all of that. And even with my mum, there was never a moment where she or my dad ever said to me, "You need to do something more academic or go down a more conventional path." I always felt like I was always encouraged to do what I enjoyed, I think. But yeah, never really... I don't think they ever put pressure on me either, to work really hard or to get good grades either. I think I wanted to get good grades and I wanted to work hard, but I think that came from myself, in terms of wanting to prove that I'm capable of better than how I'm being perceived by the school.

**Aleena Din:**

So when you were growing up, and it seems like you had strong ambitions at the very least to prove your teachers wrong. What was it that you wanted to do at that age? Did you have any career aspirations, what the future might look like?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't know, I think I did realise I wanted to do something creative quite early on. I'm trying to think when... I think when I was at primary school, I don't think I had a clear... I definitely went down that path, which all kids go down, where you're like, "Oh, maybe I could be a fireman or a policeman or all those things." Going down that random path. But when I hit secondary school, I think I felt like I realised I was enjoying drama and acting. And actually, even when I was in primary school, I started going to this drama club that was on every Sunday, and it would be in this local village hall and there'd be these kids who would... We'd be learning to act and putting on a play. And yeah, I really enjoyed that and enjoyed that process of acting.

So that was one of the first moments where I was like, "Oh, there's something here. That's quite fun." And then, yeah, while I was at secondary school, I was interested in films and film making. And then there was this local film club, called Film Oxford, and they are a local charity where they teach people how to make films, and they've got equipment. And I remember just emailing them and being like, "I want to learn how to make films and I want to do things." And they were like, "Most of our courses are for people who are over 18, but we do this festival called Summer Screen, where it's for young people, and it's about them learning to make films." And then I started getting involved with that and just realised I really enjoyed that.

**Aleena Din:**

And in getting involved in acting, drama, is that where most of your friends came from? And to what extent... I mean you were in Littlemore and you described that it was very white, working class.

Did you have friendships and connections to people who were from Cowley or Iffley, who you might not have necessarily encountered at school?

**Karim Khan:**

I don't think I had friends outside of school, or people from Cowley or anything. I didn't really have any Muslim friends growing up, or South Asian friends. I think in terms of friendships generally, I don't think I had many friends growing up. In terms of, at primary school, I think I struggled to make friendships and I was more of just a lone wolf I guess, just on my own, sort of doing my own thing. But I think that meant that I was more imaginative and was able to lean into my imagination more. And then at secondary school, I did have a few friends. And I felt like my time there, I was gradually building a bit of a friendship circle. But they were definitely sort of white, working class friends.

**Aleena Din:**

And I guess maybe exploring a bit more your experiences of being Muslim in the situation in Littlemore, where would you or your family go to worship? Would you travel into Oxford to go to the mosque? Or was there a place of worship in Littlemore?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, we would go to... So originally, so the Manzil Way Mosque is where that we've always gone. But there was originally a mosque in Bath Street, and that was the original version of that mosque. So we used to go to that mosque. And then once that changed and went to Manzil Way, we went there. So that's where we would go for worship. And yeah, it's really interesting with that mosque, seeing it evolve over time. Because seeing it start from nothing, and then how long it's taken to evolve and across so many years. And it feels definitely like a community project, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

And is that similar to things like accessing halal meat, for example? Would you have to come into Oxford to be able to do stuff like that?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah. So there wouldn't be any sort of halal meat, so Cowley Road and around that sort of area, Morglen Road, the halal butchers around there.

**Aleena Din:**

It's really interesting because we've been researching the history of the mosque and the community, the crowd, I guess fundraising efforts to build the mosque. You might not have any memories of this, but you mentioned that the mosque has changed a lot over the time. It feels like community. Can you maybe comment a bit more on that, how it's evolved over time and how you as a young person living in Oxford, your relationship to a place like that?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, totally. I feel like... I'm trying to think, with the Bath Street mosque, I don't remember it that well, but I remember it being quite small, completely different to the mosque that we're in now. And then with this mosque, I remember various different stages. I always remember it feeling like a build... It was always under construction and there was always that building work going on. And so I remember the downstairs area, I think it was only the downstairs part that was accessible. And then eventually, you got the upstairs part. And then the most recent addition is probably the dome of it and the chandeliers, and it just feels like it's kind of almost completed now. So yeah, it feels like bit by bit, you feel like things have changed.

But I do remember, I've got memories of during the Friday, they would say things like, "Oh, we're raising money for this, we're raising money for that, for the carpet, to get new carpets, or for the work on the roof." Or different things like that. So there would be different stages and intentions behind it. And then people would donate money, the bucket would go around.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, it is a really ambitious project.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, definitely.

**Aleena Din:**

I mean, it's really valuable to hear that this had to happen quite slowly and incrementally. And I know a lot of people who we've spoken to in the past take a lot of pride in the fact that money wasn't taken from the council, that it was all self-funded. I mean, how do you feel about that? Do you feel a sense of pride being from the city, knowing that people that you know or you're connected to, created this from nothing essentially?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it does feel quite incredible. It's weird, I've never really thought about it. I've never looked at it from a distance and been like, "Oh." Looking at it as this whole community project. But I definitely feel like it is one, and it is really impressive that they've been able to do it without any institutional support. And also, the mosque is... When I've taken friends who are not from the city to the mosque, everyone is very impressed by it and they're like, "Wow, it's such an incredible mosque."

And I think that in itself, they've put so much, they've invested so much into it to make it look really great as well, I think. So there is a lot of pride in it. And it feels like there's a few different mosques, with the Stanley Road one as well, but I definitely get the impression that there's no rivalry or anything. It feels like, sometimes when there's something going on, all the mosques seem to release a joint statement together and have almost a collective stand on things, which is really nice. So yeah, it seems like there is a good community, that there's good camaraderie between the different institutions.

**Aleena Din:**

So I guess maybe jumping to your experiences, you spoke of your dad's experiences of education, higher education in particular. For a lot of people from the outside, looking in at Oxford, the university seems to be really central in their impressions of Oxford. What is your relationship with the university or the centre of the city more generally? Because in speaking to people, it seems like, where tourists or people outside of Oxford would focus on this area, for a lot of Muslims or migrant families, it is places like Cowley and Iffley that are central to their experiences. So what is your relationship to the city in that sense?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's really interesting. I think growing up here, I feel like I would very rarely come into the city centre. And it almost felt like the university felt quite invisible to me. It felt like it was here, but it wasn't. I was never really aware of it in terms of what it was doing. And even now, to me, it feels like, the way I see it is, it's a parallel universe. It's almost like living in Oxford as a resident, and the university, feels like two different things which are coexisting together, but they feel like two different strands. And I feel very sort of disconnected from the university part. I feel like even though all these buildings are dotted around, I know very little about their history and I know very little about... Yeah, I don't know what they look like in the inside and what goes on in them.

And even when I take friends round, to show them around Oxford, they're always intrigued by the buildings and the architecture. And to me, it's almost weird looking at it from that perspective because these buildings have always existed here, but I've never... Yeah, for some reason, I don't feel like I'm a part of that. I feel like... Yeah, I don't know. It feels like two different communities I think, the student community and the town community. And even though you can feel there is a big student presence in Oxford, it just feels like they coexist, but they're not connected. And to me, it almost feels like a different city. And I applied to Oxford to do English, and I remember when I stayed at Brasenose College for the interview, for a couple of days, and I remember feeling like I had gone to a different city, even though it was 20 minutes from my house or 30 minutes from my house. And that felt like a very surreal experience I think, seeing it from a different perspective, like, "Wow, I don't think I belong in this place."

**Aleena Din:**

Did you ever meet students? Because there's such a massive student population here, did you ever meet Muslim students, for example? I don't know if they were ever using the mosque. And what did that interaction look like?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I'm trying to think. I think I have met Muslim students. Yeah, I think it is interesting because it does feel like... You just get the sense that their experience is very different to yours, in the sense that they're not from this city. But at the same time, because they're Muslim and from the diaspora, you still connect over the fact that you... Yeah, I think it would be very different to say for example,

meeting someone who's privately educated and white, middle class, for example. I think there is still a common ground in that and you understand how... I do know that Oxford is still a university that a lot of people have gone to, but you also hear stories about how it's almost like a university that a lot of people aspire for. It's an ambition for a lot of people. But also how tough it can be as well, and how maybe people don't feel like they belong here as well.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, because for the project, we've been doing some research on Muslim students and scholars who came here, and I guess for a lot of people, where their time here is so brief, for students, they're here for three years, whereas for you and for people who've grown up in Oxford, you've been here for generations. So it's really interesting to hear that there are parts of the city that just don't feel like yours, despite the fact that you've got roots here and you've been here for so long. And there are people who are here for three or four years, and they feel like this is the only part of the city that they really ever encounter or see.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, totally. I think it's also because these buildings don't feel accessible to the community. And I think in terms of community spaces, these buildings or grounds, they will never be community spaces. They will always be part of the university. And there's two days in the year you open Oxford, where the community can go into the buildings and stuff. But to me, that seems just a bit of a gimmick and it just seems not enough. Yeah, I don't know, maybe it's a question of how much the university sees itself as wanting to serve the community that's in its city, or not. But to me, it just seems like too random, very distant.

**Aleena Din:**

So your experiences of higher education, you just mentioned that you applied to Oxford. Could you detail that a bit further? What were your ambitions when you were leaving college? What did you want to do?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah. So I think growing up, I definitely wanted to get into filmmaking and that was my intention. And then weirdly, there was a moment where I went to sixth form at St. Greg's, and there's a moment where I was invited to go to an open day at Oxford by one of the teachers. And I was doing English for A level at the time as well. And I think just that gesture in itself was really surprising to me, because I was like, "I would never in a million years contemplate the idea of going to Oxford or studying at Oxford." And I didn't see myself in that way. I didn't see myself as academically... Even though I was trying hard and really focused, I didn't see myself in that academic space. But I think that really surprised me. And when I went to the open day, I was like, "Oh, maybe I could see myself here. And it does seem cool to do that."

And suddenly, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to do English at uni and apply to Oxford. And I think I also wanted to... And even the idea of doing English at uni was something I never thought I would do, especially because I struggled with reading when I was quite young and I didn't read many books growing up, and I didn't feel like that was something that I would be very good at. But

I noticed during my A-levels, that was something I was enjoying more of, and I thought maybe it might help my screenwriting or my filmmaking, in terms of understanding stories and being able to analyse stories and stuff. So that's what I decided to do. But I felt like there was also an opportunity to maybe do a filmmaking course instead, and I was like, "Oh, maybe I could have done that."

There was a scholarship for... There was a film school... I'm not sure if it's a film school, but there's this thing called SAE Oxford, and they teach film and sound audio engineering, in a few different locations. And there's actually one in Littlemore, that had opened opposite the Littlemore mental health hospital. And they had a scholarship to study filmmaking there. But it was still quite new, and I wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not. But I decided, "No, I'm going to do English instead." But I definitely felt like there was a fork in the road, in terms of, do I go down more filmmaking or down more something academic? But in the end, I went to UCL, to do English.

**Aleena Din:**

And what was that like, moving to London?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, so I didn't actually move to London.

**Aleena Din:**

Oh, okay. You were commuting.

**Karim Khan:**

I commuted, yeah. Which was quite tiring and exhaustive. But yeah, it was pretty crazy. I think it was weird, because growing up in quite a white, working-class community, it felt like to me, UCL and doing English there felt like I was in a white, middle-class community, and more of a private... The educated, white, middle-class community. And so I didn't feel like I belonged there either, but it felt like a very extreme difference to where I came from. And yeah, I think I felt a bit of imposter syndrome in terms of, "Well, everyone... I don't feel like I'm as qualified for this, in terms of studying English and doing well at it." But no, I did enjoy it as well.

**Aleena Din:**

And what was the process of finding community there? I guess maybe commuting might have made finding connections a bit difficult, but yeah, what was that like? And did you find community with other racialized minority students or Muslim students, for example? What was that like?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I did feel like I struggled to find a community there, I think. And I struggled to make friendships and be part of a social circle. I think because I was commuting, it felt like so much of my focus ended up just being on doing my degree and focusing on the work, and not really being part of the social part of being at uni. Which in some ways, I do kind of regret a little bit in terms of, I think looking back retrospectively, I feel like the social part of going to uni is such a huge part of it. But I was kind of so focused on the work and getting it done. Yeah, there were a few friends that I

made, but even with the Muslim community, I went to the ISoc society there, but even then, I was like, "I'm not sure if I feel connected to this community or not." And maybe things would be different now, but I felt like... I don't know if maybe at the time, I was quite introverted and quite shy and maybe socially awkward. So there was a struggle to connect, I think. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah. I mean, you've talked about your experiences, you had access to clubs and societies that helped you realise your passion for film and filmmaking and writing. Was that similar at UCL? Did you join any societies that allowed you to maybe sharpen those skills a bit more?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think my intention was to do that, but then I think in the end, I didn't really get involved much. I went to the drama society a little bit, but I was kind of quite intimidated by... It just felt like everyone... Yeah, it felt like people were just so involved and obsessed with it, and I felt like, "Well, maybe I don't quite belong in this world." It just felt like a very extreme space. But having said that, I was interested and more curious by theatre and my writing, wanting to write plays. And that's when I guess that thought kind of came to me that, "Oh, maybe I could start writing a play," at the time. But I wasn't really involved much in that, in societies or anything.

**Aleena Din:**

So where did your pursuit of writing as a career start then? Did it start during this period?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think definitely my fascination with theatre and wanting to write plays. And in the back of my head, I still wanted to focus on film and screenwriting as a possibility. And then I had my eye on this film school called NFTS, which is in Beaconsfield, and there's a number of different disciplines that they teach, and they do a screenwriting MA for two years. And I wanted to do that programme and learn screenwriting. But then, because the deadline was in May, and because my final year exams were in May, I was like, "Can't really focus much on building a portfolio for that."

So in the end, I was like, "I'm going to give myself a year to try and build my writing more, and then apply the following year." And then instead, I went to Warwick to do film and TV studies, a master's during that time, whilst trying to build my writing a bit more. And then I went to NFTS the following year. So I applied and then got into the programme the following year. I feel like that's where my career started. Doing that course laid the foundations for that, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

And I guess theatre, film, there aren't very many racialized minority or Muslim people in those industries necessarily. Were there any, I guess, role models or people who maybe shaped this ambition that this was something you wanted to pursue?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't think there were many South Asian or Muslim playwrights or anything, or screenwriters. So yeah, it was difficult to imagine yourself in that world. I think that's why it took me so long to sort of think about it. Because I always perceived theatre as it was almost like Shakespeare and this kind of white, middle-class, kind of intellectual thing rather than something that anyone else can do. So it did take me a while and I didn't really go to the theatre much as a kid, apart from with school trips and things. But I think when I was entering the world of theatre, I feel like over time, you begin to... I think that's where I've found my community, in terms of other South Asians, but also Muslims.

I think that's where... And even though that feels super recent and possibly even in the last maybe two years, it feels like that's emerging. And I feel like even last year seemed like a really exciting year for theatre for Muslims. It felt like there were so many plays that were written by Muslim playwrights, and they were [inaudible 00:56:49] theatres, and it felt like there's a growing community, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

Right. And does that reflect changes in the industry, or what would you think is causing that change?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think it's a combination of things. I think there is a change in the industry, in terms of maybe there's potentially more opportunities going around. But I think it's also people watching each other, people being inspired by each other and being inspired by each other creating things. And seeing more visibility, and theatres being like, "Oh, this play might have done well, and so maybe we can support another play that does that." I also feel like, maybe it feels like there's also more Muslim producers who are investing in it. So it's in quite an independent way, in terms of as a co-producer.

So if a play was going to go on a theatre, maybe an independent Muslim producer would try and support, come on as a co-founder and put some more money in, and try and fundraise. So it feels like there's more... People are making things happen themselves, and that seems to be happening more. And people feel like they're emboldened to do those things. But I definitely feel like the visibility is a big thing, I think. Even when my play was on, Brown Boys Swim, a lot of people were saying how they felt encouraged that, "Oh, we can write a play. Or we can put something on." Something like that. So yeah, hopefully there's just ripples of change, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

And then having, I guess a platform, and being able to creatively use your voice, what do you hope to evoke with your writing? Have you wanted to use that to maybe platform your own experiences of being Muslim or racialized minority in Britain?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, definitely. I think with my writing, I've always been clear about what my work would consist of, and I think I've always wanted my plays and my TV scripts to represent Muslims and South Asians. And that's almost the baseline of everything that I write, because I think it's important to represent

that, those communities that are not represented or not even given authentic representations. And their stories aren't being told on our own terms, I guess. And I feel like a lot of things need to be readdressed, but I think for me, it's a combination of things, of wanting to create stories that are entertaining, compelling, that take an audience on a journey and that feel joyous, but also are able to explore something quite interesting and deep about what it means to be Muslim or South Asian, what it means to navigate life in the UK or anywhere else, with that identity.

And I think for me, growing up with that circumstances of being a Muslim South Asian, in a white working-class community, trying to find my identity, I think that's something that I'm doing through my work as well, trying to find who I am and trying to find my place in my community. And I think my work is my way of exploring that, I think, trying to get closer to that.

**Aleena Din:**

And in that exploration, how has your relationship with Littlemore or Oxford changed over time?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, it is interesting. So with *Brown Boys Swim*, when I wrote that play, because that play is so much about... Oxford is almost like a big character in it. It's about Muslim boys in Oxford, so that's almost such a big theme and subject matter. So I think it's really interesting, my writing it, because the first thing is almost like, it's about two brown boys, two Muslim boys. But that's something that I didn't... A lot of people say, "Was that about your experience? Did you have a friendship like that?" And the truth is that I didn't have a friendship like that. So it's almost like a part of me... It's almost like considering what it would've been like to grow up with someone who shared the same identity and experience as me. And I feel like my friendships more recently feel more like that than they did when I was growing up.

But I think for me, I think understanding Oxford through that prism has been really interesting. And then presenting it back to Oxford, in terms of showing it at the North Wall, and Oxford communities coming into it and watching it. And interestingly, the theatre-going community and audience is often white, middle class. So I feel like inevitably, that story and play is going to provoke them and challenge them about what it's like to grow up in this city. I think the only thing that I felt a bit sad about, it's like, I wanted this play to be something where this community can feel seen and represented in.

And it's difficult to get that community to the theatre and to get them to engage with it, because I think that's more a symptom of how theatre isn't accessible for those communities, and theater's not doing the work to bring those communities in and make them feel accepted and invited. And that's something that I'm really conscious of and I want to work on, and try and readdress that. Especially because I'm working on another play at the moment, which is also going to be in Oxford. And again, I want it to depict a part of Oxford, and a part of being Muslim and South Asian in Oxford. And I'm really keen for that community to feel like they can come and watch it, and be a part of it. Yeah, so I think it's interesting. When you create work, you want that community to feel like they're able to engage with it, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

What was your family's response to your writing? Have they found a new way to explore their own identities through your work?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think so. For me, it's always daunting when I present my work to them and when they watch it, because it's so exposing and vulnerable, and it's almost like, how are they going to interpret it? But I think for them, maybe it does allow them to see things in a different way and to understand how things feel. And yeah, I'm intrigued. It's difficult to know how much it changes their view of the city or it changes... Yeah, I'm intrigued by that. Because I'm not quite sure.

**Aleena Din:**

And what are your ambitions moving forward? I mean in your writing more generally, but in terms of, you mentioned engaging with South Asian and Muslim communities. What do you hope to achieve through your writing over the coming years? It'd be great to know that.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, totally. I think community is a big thing. I think in terms of making a community feel like they can come to the theatre and feel like they're a part of a story, and making sure they feel engaged and a part of that, and they feel like it's accessible. Yeah, I think I want to just continue to create stories that keep representing different parts of what it means to be Muslim or South Asian, and the complexities of that. And keep offering new and exciting stories, that I think keep provoking and challenging everyone. And also just to... I think as I grow and change, I think to mirror that as well.

Because I think that's something I'm quite intrigued. And what I'm preoccupied with at the time, I would only be able to write that thing at that point in my life. So I'm constantly curious of my journey as a person and how that is reflected in my work, and the things I'm curious by and things that I want to explore. But I definitely feel like joy is important as well, wanting to create joyous stories and not making things feel too sort of... Yeah, I think allowing... Almost like inviting ourselves not to feel like we need to be too, I guess tarnished by trauma, I think. Allowing ourselves to feel joy on our own terms, and wanting our stories to speak to that.

But yeah, I'm really excited by the idea of even other creatives, that building, there being more people doing it, and more Muslim filmmakers and playwrights, and wanting to support that as well. And wanting to see other people come up. And especially for people where writing isn't accessible to them and where they can't imagine themselves in that position, for one reason or another, allowing that to become more possible. Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

And what are your thoughts about the extent to which theatre and the arts more generally, can challenge people's perceptions of being Muslim and being Muslim in Britain? Some creatives might use this as a way to channel their own politics. Do you think the arts plays a significant role in shifting those perceptions maybe?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think definitely that. I definitely see the arts as being vital in trying to challenge people's perspectives and impacting the way you feel about things. I think we're in such a dangerous time right now, in terms of politically. Kind of like the messaging that we're getting from the world and the increasing right-wing agenda that seems to be happening. And I think to me, it feels like our theatre, film, TV, is where we can offer something else and offer a new narrative. So yeah, I really believe it is important, but sometimes I don't feel like it needs to be political with a capital P as well. I think just representing your reality as a Muslim in itself is political, or is giving a message. Yeah, I sometimes feel like without writing and work, I sometimes feel like we feel a responsibility to carry a lot on our shoulders, in terms of wanting to convey just how difficult it is, just the pressures of being a Muslim in terms of in this world, and the barriers and obstacles.

But I feel like, I think sometimes the simplicity of creating a story about a Muslim, in itself is enough, that you don't need to overload it. I think in terms of, for example, Prevent is something that... I've seen so many plays about Prevent now, and I want to see Muslim writers feel like they don't need to respond to that provocation anymore. Because it feels like we don't need to tell Muslim stories in relation to state institutions like Prevent, we should be able to tell our stories on our own terms, I think. And then sometimes trying to unlearn those things is important. And I think even for me, I struggled with the responsibility as a Muslim artist representing my community. How can I represent them fairly and not tarnish the way I'm represented in my community? Not tarnish my community, explore some important themes, ideas? And yeah, I found all of that...

I think it is really difficult. But when I was part of the Pillars Fellowship, which is a programme where you're with nine other filmmakers who are all Muslim as well, I realised during that process that everyone else is dealing with the same thing. And finding that kind of community and camaraderie with each other, was really kind of freeing and liberating. It was like, we're all dealing with something here, but we've all got each other and we're all going to do it together. And not everyone... I'm not the only one here who has to tell every Muslim story, and I don't have to represent everything. And we're all going to do it together sort of thing. And I do really believe that you just only have to represent your truth, I think, and that will resonate with people, that will resonate with other Muslims and other South Asians, or something like that. So I think... Yeah.

**Aleena Din:**

I guess just a final point, it's fascinating, it's really encouraging to hear there's so much camaraderie amongst Muslim artists. This approach, how has that been shaped over time? Did you, at the beginning of your career, feel this impulse to, I guess react to what was in the newspapers or the violence of the state? When did you, I guess come to this realisation, it might have been slow, that you don't have to react, that you can just tell your story on your own terms?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I think it is such a gradual process actually. And I think there's even that one step before that, which is even more sort of scary to think about because it's almost like where you feel like you can only tell a certain type of story because of who you are. And I think it's almost like you have to... You almost are exoticising your own culture, and that story is your invitation to the table almost. And I think when I first started in the industry, I felt like that's the messaging that I felt that the

industry was giving me. In terms of that as a Muslim filmmaker, the only story I can tell is in relation to the way being Muslim is politicised in the world, in terms of... Yeah. And I think maybe that's more symptomatic of the times we were in, in terms of the late 2015, '16, '17, around that sort of time. But I think now, it feels like so much has happened, after Black Lives Matter and all of that, and so many movements have changed. And I feel like there's a growing Muslim filmmaking, theatre community.

I think the needle has moved. And it's almost like now, we should encourage each other to tell stories on our own terms and not feel like we need to be responsive to other people. But I think it is still really tough, because you're still going to have to navigate the industry and you're going to have to communicate with people who are not part of your community. And you're going to have to try and sell them what you want, and you have to try and convince them. And you're going to face backlash from them, face some knock-backs. So yeah, it's a tricky one, but I think it comes to a point where you have to preserve your integrity on certain things, and not feel like you can be so malleable as well. But I guess it's a constant balance and thing that you're constantly figuring out.

**Aleena Din:**

And I guess maybe a concluding question, you've had this broad reflection of growing up in Oxford and moving into an industry where there is still few, but a growing number of Muslim and South Asian representation I guess. In reflecting on that journey, is there anything in the interview that you haven't mentioned, that you feel is quite specific to your experiences of being a Muslim in Oxford?

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, I'm trying to think if there's... I don't think so. No. Yeah, I feel like we've kind of covered everything. I think, yeah, it's just interesting in terms of, because I grew up in Littlemore and felt like I was distant from where the Muslim community was, it's difficult to imagine what those spaces were where... Yeah, it's a weird one. I think looking back at it now, I kind of wish I grew up more rooted in the Muslim community. Because I feel like it's taken me a long time in my life to feel like I belong in a space. And the only space that I feel like I belong in is the Muslim creative community, like filmmakers and playwrights, who are doing things. And a lot of them are in London, some of them are in America through the Pillars Fellowship that I was talking about. But in Oxford, sometimes it's tricky to imagine, if I'd found a Muslim community earlier on in my life, who I would be and how I would be different.

But I was thinking, the school that my dad went to, Oxford Boys School, which is now Oxford Spires, but that still has a big Muslim community. And I wondered if I was to go there, would I have made more Muslim friends quite early on? So it is an interesting one, and I do see it in my cousins. I see in my younger cousins who have gone to that school, and they feel more connected to being Muslim very early on. And I also feel like something about the way they've been raised represents the times that we're in, which is different to the times that I was in. Where after school, they would do an audible class, and also a Quran class, and learn to perfect their Arabic and things like that, do all these extracurricular things which are centred on being Muslim and being South Asian and being Pakistani, and how that is so celebrated.

But during my childhood, I feel like it would've been challenging. I feel like at that time, you had to assimilate, especially in that's such a white, working class community that you are surrounded in. So

sometimes I am just intrigued by my younger cousins, feel like they have a different experience, just based on the times that we're in and what it means to be Muslim in Oxford and in the UK. And that's how that's celebrated more, I think, early on in your life. But I think for me, my appreciation of my culture is something that's crept up on me later on in my life as I've got older, through my writing, through the people I've met, and just me learning to love my culture again. But when you're a kid, you kind of shun it away because you're trying to survive and assimilate, I think.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, it's almost you're experiencing, you're seeing a generational change where your grandparents and your dad had very specific experiences to the times that they grew up in. You are in a position where you are sort of looking to another generation of people and comparing your experiences.

**Karim Khan:**

Definitely. Yeah, it's really interesting. And also, I'm noticing there's also a trend going on, just within my family, where my uncle who's got slightly younger kids, they decided to move to Pakistan. And he decided he wanted to raise his kids there, in Islamabad. And my cousin, who's also got kids, also younger kids, she's also going to go to Islamabad to raise her kids there as well. And I'm really intrigued by that because it feels like similar to what my grandfather might have done when he took my dad and my uncle and aunt to Pakistan, to raise his kids in Karachi. And I don't know if it's wanting... I think from my understanding, their intention is they want their kids to feel immersed in their culture more. They want them to feel more immersed in being Muslim, being Pakistani, and understanding their culture and being able to speak the language really well. But yeah, I'm really intrigued by what... It feels like that's becoming an increasing pattern, I'm noticing.

**Aleena Din:**

That it's even possible. This idea that's entertained is something you couldn't necessarily imagine a few decades ago. But yeah, it's an interesting experiment.

**Karim Khan:**

Yeah, definitely.

**Aleena Din:**

I think that concludes the interview.

**Karim Khan:**

Cool. Amazing.

**Aleena Din:**

Yeah, I guess that's everything.

**Karim Khan:**

Cool. Thank you.

**Aleena Din:**

Thank you.

**Karim Khan:**

No worries at all.