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Reading the Crisis: Culture with Sheena Patel

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K Biswas
Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. I'm K Biswas. I'm a critic and chair of community radio station Resonance FM. I'm delighted to welcome you to the fifth conversation of our third series of Reading the Crisis, which is part of the Stuart Hall Foundation's programme In Search of Common Ground. Inspired by the life and work of British-Jamaican intellectual Professor Stuart Hall, this series asks what kinds of tools and strategies are needed to confront this conjuncture and where are the intersections where current solidarities can be built. So the format this year sees me and Aasiya Lodhi present six in-depth conversations online with significant writers and thinkers, covering what we consider to be the most pressing issues of our time. Today, we discuss culture, while elsewhere in the series, we talk about the economy, technology, migration, democracy and the climate. Running until November, each one-on-one conversation will hopefully help to demonstrate how engaging in conjunctural analysis, as Hall envisioned, can enrich creative and political practice and deepen academic and organising work. Hall's approach to making sense of the current political moment encourages us to ask ourselves what roles can we play in the pursuit of a more just world. In today's conversation, we consider culture with Sheena Patel. We will look to cover key themes in her amazing novel I'm a Fan, and also look at one of Stuart Hall's essays, The World of the Gossip Column, from 1967, which can be found in the Duke University collection Writings on Media, published in 2021. Please have your questions ready for the second half of this conversation, when there will be 40 minutes or so for a Q&A. Please submit comments using the chat box at any time during the event, and remember, live captions are available by clicking the CC button in the Zoom bar. So I'd now like to welcome our guest, Sheena Patel. Sheena is a writer and assistant director for the film and TV industry. Her debut novel, I'm a Fan, won the British Book Award in the Discover category, and has been longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize, and was a finalist for the LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. Welcome, Sheena.

Sheena Patel
Hi!

K Biswas

Delighted to speak to you. I thought it might be good if you read a brief passage from I'm a Fan for our audience, and perhaps tell us broadly what the book is about.

Sheena Patel
Sure. So, thanks, everyone, for being here through dinner time. I'll read just the first section from the book. It's basically about one person losing their mind, but then having very legitimate reasons as to why they're losing their mind. "Do I". "I stalk a woman on the internet who is sleeping with the same man as I am. Sometimes when I'm too quick to look at her stories, I block her temporarily so she doesn't know I absent-mindedly refresh her page fifteen times a minute while Netflix plays in the background on my laptop, my stomach flipping sick with delight when her profile picture is ringed red. She has tens of thousands of followers, is verified, and is the daughter of someone famous in America. An endless stream of white people fawn in the comments under her posts. She has opinions about household objects which I have never given a thought to before; firm tastes in the types of beeswax candles to burn, lays exquisite cloth on her table in anticipation of dinner, knows where to buy limited edition pottery from well-regarded potters, she will happily spend $300 on a vase where she displays really, really organic fennel flowers, by which she says there is organic and then *organic*, buys a $500 ring for herself during a time of financial strife for the rest of the world and shows it off in a selfie. She uses a filter on Instagram which burns up her flaws, it thins down her cheeks and radioactively erases the two thick lines shaped like spooning 'v's which are carved in her forehead and erupt from her face more prominently when she raises her eyebrows. A sick sense of satisfaction rips through me when I see them. She orders take-out from the right restaurants, seems to know everyone in the higher echelons of society, is accepted into the kinds of circles which seem out of reach to me. Sometimes I wonder if I ever met her, what would I say to her, would I tell her of our connection? Would I tell her I know where she lives, would I tell her how I guessed that she broke up with her boyfriend. Will I tell her I know why the tone of her stories changed because the man we are both sleeping with, the man I want to be with, shamed her for exploiting her privacy the last time they saw one another. Would I tell her that I know who her ex-husband is, I've seen his new family and he seems happy now, happier than the photos I've seen of the two of them, would I tell her I know who all her friends are and I watch their stories too, would I tell her I screenshot the photos she takes of herself and study her face so intently sometimes I fear I've picked up some facial expressions or tonal inflections from her because I listen to her speaking with her father on YouTube over and over before I go to sleep. Would I move in closer to smell her and feel what he felt when he felt her – *would I taste the inside of your mouth to find out what was so compelling, would I press into you, I want to know exactly how your body moves when you are turned on – to know for myself why he cancelled fucking me to fuck you.*"

K Biswas
Wonderful. Thank you so much. So, your novel, I'm a Fan, it depicts a life mediated through screens. It offers the promise of intimacy, and yet, these screens encourage feelings of envy and alienation. We've had a conversation earlier in this series about technology, but I wanted to know if you think digital devices, which are occupying more and more of our time, what do you feel has been lost from the human experience?

Sheena Patel
Well, when I wrote this, it wasn't that… The way that technology is in our lives even now, like, six years on from when I wrote this is so much worse, because when I was telling people, you know, my friends, when I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'm writing this thing and I think about someone who's stalking people," and they were like… You know, "I do do that." It was sort of shameful, and now everybody… It's just like a matter of course that, you know, everybody does it, and you've done your research on people. Which I don't do. I don't google anyone before I meet them, because I'm just like, oh, I'll just meet them, but I don't do that research. But I don't know. I mean… What's been lost… We're at the end of something. I mean, Adam Curtis says this so wonderfully, that we're at the end of a story and we're looking… We're in the intermediate moment, we're in that awful in-between moment of trying to find another one. Like, we've been told a story for the last 60-70 years about who we are and how we behave, and that just doesn't ring true any more, and we don't know yet what we're going to be. So it feels like we can look back at the world… like, you know, we're all so enraptured by the '90s, or at least I am so enraptured by the '90s. I, like, watch Love Story four times, being like "take me back!" Yeah, but this world where people felt like they were out in the world and they were really looking at each other, but also, that was a time of a lot of financial and economic turmoil. It looked smooth because we look back, but I don't know if it was. It just looks fantastic.

K Biswas
I feel that, like, celebrities were projected onto us in this time of boom, and there was this kind of optimism and aspiration that kind of spread across society, and I do not feel that any more!

Sheena Patel
No, and, you know, I feel like for me, music, fashion, film between '88 and '96 was incredible. Like, what an incredible period for… The mood in the country as well, and also just everything felt really exciting. Like, you look at catwalks, like Alexander McQueen and you look at Kate Mo— like, everything, and I watched this really amazing documentary with Isaac Mizrahi, but I cannot remember the name of it right now, but it's amazing. Just, I love documentaries where the camera's just hanging out and there's lots of, like, guff in between.

K Biswas
There's the incredible documentary that Jeremy Deller did called Everybody in the Place, where he shows a group of, like, well-behaved, multicultural East London sixth-formers what life was like in 1989 to 1994, and the live clubbing scene and the way that people behaved contrasted with these, like, well-behaved students sitting in a class watching Jeremy Deller give a lecture. The space is… It's only like 15 years of difference, or 20 years between those two periods, and I feel that something has been lost.

Sheena Patel
But that's not necessarily true, because I've decided to go back to the clubs in a really, really big way this year, and it's not, it's not dead. Like, you still go… There's one that's off the A406. I definitely thought I was going back to my parents' house, because it was so far down the A406, going through all of these roundabouts, and even the cab was like, "Where

are we going?" We were like, "Ooh, we don't know!" And it did feel like that. You know, and you're out till, like, whatever with your friends, dancing, and… I don't know. I think it says more about us to be like, "Oh, it's gone forever," you know? No, it's not gone forever. It's still there if you look for it, I think. There's still parties and there's still people trying to create stuff, it's just got so much harder. Like, people like Gillian Wearing and… Oh, my God, I can't remember the name, but that generation of artists could be on the dole – and Hanif Kureishi talks about it as well – could be on the dole for ten years. You know, they were literally supported by the government just to fuck about and then become who they are and then create a lot of capital, and, you know, bring that money back in some way. Like, the arts creates so much profit, but they just… Nobody really thinks about it like that, but that's not the aim of art. But, like, that kind of hanging out and not really knowing what you're doing, like, to be supported through that is… It pays itself back later, but people need that hang-out time to just figure out who they are, and we don't have that space right now because of how expensive things are, how precarious housing is, how expensive food is. I think those things feel scary. And also, maybe we had an overarcing narrative of, like, "We're the good guys, we're spreading democracy, this is a good light for the world. We're kind of progressing. That dark time of World War II won't happen again," and we're not… That's not what's happening right now. We've kind of gone back to a more, like, mediaeval time, I feel, narratively, at least. It feels like there's, like, feudal lords of AI, you know? They're talking about AI like it's… I mean, I fucking hate those two vowels with a passion! But they talk about it like looking for God, you know? Like looking for a god in some way.

K Biswas
I mean, this is it. The protagonist in your book kind of presents her experiences against the backdrop of these, like, big issues – structural racism, ravages of capitalism and conflict, the impending climate collapse. And how do you think that news cycle affects your generation of cultural producers, many of whom, as you say, are dealing directly with things like precarious housing, the gig economy, the rising cost of living?

Sheena Patel
I don't know, I mean, I can't talk about my generation, I can only talk about me. But… You know, because, again, some people are doing really well out of it, out of this time, and other people aren't. But… I don't know. I think we're in a… I don't know. I'm really battling with, like, belief and meaning, I guess. Like, you've got these machines that can do everything that would take us centuries to figure out, or a lifetime to figure out, and now they can do it very quickly, so it's like, where does that leave you as a maker, I suppose. Or if this is going to be imposed upon you, in what ways do you fight back or resist in some way creatively, or even as a person? I don't know. I don't know. I think we're very… You know, we're dancing apes, aren't we, as human beings? That's kind of what we are, and we sort of believe in magic and that everything's alive, and then you get narrowed down into something, and then you become that narrowed-down version of yourself. So I guess it's just… I don't know, it's just kind of finding the pockets of where you can be, I suppose. I don't know. Am I speaking very esoterically?

K Biswas

No, no, I think that's a really good point. So it's the idea that as a maker, you're almost... You know, you're an individual. You're kind of a child of Thatcher as a maker, and back in the day, there used to be this state support for cultural workers, four or five decades ago...

Sheena Patel
And, like, in a very unofficial way, you know? Like, school didn't cost anything, you could go to uni... It's just, there was a lot of space to just be, and, yeah, there isn't so much any more. It isn't. Why would you make something when you have to pay rent, and your rent is over a grand? At least in London, you know? And you're getting told to go on the housing ladder, and you can't get there because, in London, houses and flats... They are so expensive, but then you're being told the bottom's falling out of the flat, and then you're like, "Oh, my God, I'm going to put my little, tiny little nest egg into this thing and then it's going to explode!" It's like... I don't know, there just doesn't feel much room to breathe financially in order for you to be able to think. I mean... it's not for me. I think this question is probably for people who are, like, 18 or 19 or something. They're more on the... you know, frontier of this.

K Biswas
I also think there are these sort of broader cultural shifts as well. So there was a big squatting culture.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, huge squatting culture, yeah.

K Biswas
I think that's where fashion, British fashion...

Sheena Patel
Yeah, 100%.

K Biswas
...developed its arm. You would have these grants for five grand from the Thatcher government if you were an independent creator. It's basically where stand-up comedy came out of, in my opinion. And you also had these organisations like the GLC, who were welcoming creative workers, people in theatre, photography.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, yeah, just to be able to do stuff. They're doing that in Ireland. Ireland have got this amazing programme where... I don't know if it's happening still, but I was in Dublin last year or the year before, and it was the day that everybody got 20 grand from their arts council! I was like, "What?!" And they were just making stuff. They were, like, making... They didn't have to prove what they were... They didn't have to do anything to deserve the money. They were just given the money to survive. But they were, like, oh, we'll make this zine, we'll go do this, we'll go do that, and everybody was just out on the streets all the time. Like, they were just together, and I think that's where a lot of it... But, like, a pint now costs, like...

K Biswas
Eight quid.

Sheena Patel
…seven quid, eight quid. And a glass of wine, it's not… Those things, it's like, why would you do that? When a night out might have cost 20 quid, now costs 80 quid, you know? It's like those little things that just stop you just being together.

K Biswas
And this is the thing in terms of cultural production. What we've noticed recently is, it's the sons and daughters of…

Sheena Patel
Yeah, oh, my God. Don't get me started on this!

K Biswas
…who are… Well, I am going to get you started! Who are occupying all of these…

Sheena Patel
Yeah, they are, they are.

K Biswas
…art, fashion…

Sheena Patel
100%.

K Biswas
Just look at Wikipedia and check what the dad did.

Sheena Patel
Yeah. The blue link.

K Biswas
Yeah, the blue link. And I think your book brilliantly draws these battle lines in culture. Not only, like, Britain and America – America is where all the money is…

Sheena Patel
Yeah!

K Biswas
…but also, like, normal people versus nepo babies in this cultural space. How do you feel in… what you look at, how do you feel these struggles are manifesting themselves at the moment?

Sheena Patel

Well, it's just weird to see that that... I mean, I guess it's always happened, that the sons and daughters of people that were famous become... I mean... You're surrounded by it, I suppose, but I guess when you're not from that place and you want to make something... Like, to me, publishing was so far away. It might as well have been Mars, you know? Like, it was just so beyond anything I understood. So I was like, oh, I'm just going to make stuff by myself or rope my friends into it. And almost just say, that world, that kind of official world is not for me, because I can't get in. There's no way of getting in. But, yeah, it is funny to see how many people are the sons, the daughters, the nephews of, like, whoever. And then that stuff also is a cheat, because even in a small way, even being surrounded by someone... Being near someone who has published a book or made a film or something, like, the words... The words and that world are so much closer to you, so you feel like it's achievable, but when you don't have those words around you, at all, of film-making or books or whatever it is that you want to do, you have to start from scratch. You're like 10 years behind from the off, you know, 10-15 years behind, so it just takes you longer to get somewhere, and then you might not actually get there at all.

K Biswas
Yeah, and I suppose in your wonderful book, which I have a library copy of, there's a chapter quite early on called There's No Business Like... where you discuss, I suppose, vulnerability that people of colour, women of colour, feel when disseminating their own personal experiences in cultural spaces. I mean, do you feel that the lives of second-generation migrants to Britain are often exploited by the cultural industries, and how?

Sheena Patel
Well, that took me ages to write, that bit. It took me, like, up until we published it, really, because I just couldn't get to the heart of what I was trying to say. I was like, I'm trying to say something and the words aren't coming out, and then I remember just editing, editing, editing, and I finally did it. But I found me going up and doing my crap poetry and being like, "Oh, I'm hurt!" There was this weird relationship in it, actually. I read Minor Feelings by Cathy Park Hong, which... I did this night... Well, it was night for me, because it was night, but in Covid, did these writing courses, and everybody was giving discounts and stuff, and I did one in America, that was in America, so it was like 11 o'clock at night, I was trying to think, which is not the optimal time for me to think, but was really glad I did this course, and the girls on the course told me about this book and I read it, and I actually almost vomited. I felt sick... And, like, I'm too scared to... I've never read it again. It's glaring at me on my shelf! But I read it and I was like, oh, my God, I've been totally played, and I've played myself. She just talks about, like... I mean, she goes for Jhumpa Lahiri, which I thought was mad, because she's like an auntie! And like really goes for her, and just says that her stories don't have any engine and they're, like, scooped out, almost, so that... Like, people can take over the story without having any of the baggage around it. To be honest, I can't really remember what the essays are, but I just remember it made me feel sick, and I was like, oh, my God, I've got to put this in I'm a Fan in some way. But I thought the idea of me going up, being like... You know, "Ooh, I'm bleeding," you know? Like, "Look, I've got red blood like you," to an audience that could then go home and be like, "Oh, you know, I'm really glad that I saw those 4 Brown Girls." You know, "I'm not a racist." And I'm like, oh, thank God I got to have my moment... You know, my egotistical moment in the sun. It's like a trade-off for that.

K Biswas
I mean, there was that brief moment, wasn't there... There was a brief moment when diversity and representation...

Sheena Patel
I know, and it's not now! It's over now!

K Biswas
After George Floyd was murdered, we had these moments...

Sheena Patel
Yeah, we did.

K Biswas
It was superficial changes to the aesthetic make-up of panels and platforms.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, yeah.

K Biswas
And now there's this huge backlash, not only in Britain, in America and everywhere else.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, in America, yeah.

K Biswas
And people of colour in these spaces have their backs against the wall, I think.

Sheena Patel
Well, there was a... Well, for me, I was like, it's not just something... What I wanted to do with I'm a Fan so much was not be a victim in it, and not have this victimised narrative which I felt like was in every book by a brown person that I'd read, which is the same story, and I was fed up of it. So I was kind of attacking us, and I was very nervous about putting that in the book, because I was like, I'm going to get cancelled and no-one's ever going to want to hear from me again. But I really wanted to go for that idea... Because we know what we're doing when we do that. There is a trade-off. It's like, oh, I'll tell you about this kind of exotic bit of me, how I couldn't fit into Britain, how my parents came with nothing. But, you know... And then I'll get a book deal and I'll get to go up and make people feel guilty.

K Biswas
I mean, maybe it's always been like that in relation to class as well. There was that era of 'poverty porn', as they described it, which was dominating the charts. Yeah, and yet, again, back to the class thing, it's almost like... We might look back at that period between the Second World War and 2020 as, like, the golden era where voices outside the elites managed to at the very least occasionally penetrate the cultural establishments, and I

suppose it's most obvious to me in places like the art world. And I feel that I'm a Fan does this amazing pivot to art criticism every few chapters, and you cover works by Martine Syms and Marina Abramović, the Gee's Bend quilt makers and Abbas Zahedi. What is it about the art world, or the sort of ludicrous nature of the art world, that continues to fascinate you?

Sheena Patel
Well, I wanted to write... I don't really know anything about art, I just go in there and I'm like, "Ooh, does it feel good?" I don't know. It's very... Not intellectual. I don't know any theory or anything. I didn't study it. And I have always been quite intimidated by those spaces, but less so now, but was very, like, didn't even know where to put my body, was very like... "Ooh!" Felt like a spaghetti in art spaces. I was like, "Where do I stand?" Or, like, "What do I look... What am I looking at? I don't even know what I'm engaging with." So it's something I've had to teach myself just through, like, exposure therapy. But I just wanted to try to write it, just to see if I could do it, and also what I wanted to do was, like, these fragmentary entries of this book of fragments... I was trying to say that I know that I'm speaking to a canon. I'm aware that there is work that precedes me. I know I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel or say that no-one's ever done this before, because it's been done before. And I wanted to kind of tie it to artists that I love and work that was really resonant for me, that also used fragments to create a story, but also, you know, there's... When you're... Like, the gap, that white space on the page. Like, I'm very new to Anne Carson. I feel like a criminal saying it, but very new to her, but she was saying you need that space to think, and without reading her beforehand, up until, like, last week, that's what I thought, was, like, that white space, you need to kind of breathe a little bit, and fragments allow for that. So, like, Abbas Zahedi is a fantastic artist. I think he's come from, like, a medical background. But I went into this show that was open for, like, nine days, and it's all like little... Just touches on this building. It's hard to tell what was art, what wasn't. So, yeah, it was just really amazing, the way he took wood from the basement and then turned it into a staircase that... He said the ghosts of the workers in that building could see out of the windows, because the windows were put so high so that they wouldn't daydream. So he was kind of enacting a revenge for them. And with the Gee's Bend, they were just taking fragments of material and then making what is now regarded as early examples of abstract art in Mississippi.

K Biswas
I think that those Gee's Bend quilt makers are phenomenal.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, they're amazing.

K Biswas
There's a wonderful...

Sheena Patel
But they're splattered with blood, and... Well, it looked like blood to me. I'm sure it was blood. But it wasn't anywhere in the descriptions, and, yeah, I was just trying to say, like...

I don't know what I was trying to say, but I was like, why is there blood, but they're not speaking about it? I don't know. It just seemed kind of...

K Biswas
I'm on a similar journey in the art world to you. I went to the Whitechapel Gallery yesterday and there's this amazing new exhibition about a South American artistic creator, and the wonderful head of Whitechapel, Gilane Tawadros, she helped found Iniva with Stuart Hall in the 1990s, and I think there is this wonderful understanding that people have always been making art, and yet the art industry, I think, talks about inclusion, but from the kind of top up. It's the elites saying, "OK, now women, now poor women, now poor women in the global south are allowed into our spaces," whereas someone like Gilane and to a certain extent Stuart understood that this art's always been there. Indigenous art is as legitimate as what, you know, Brian Sewell in the Evening Standard deems good work or whatever, you know.

Sheena Patel
But then, no-one said it has to be, like... Just making stuff in a DIY way and then having something, you know, in Waterstones or Sainsbury's, you know? It's like, you can make stuff, and actually, that stuff is so exciting. The stuff that's made in the margins is exciting. But in I'm a Fan, I wanted to really implicate our need for visibility, and, like, what that visibility has meant, but also, there's points at which our invisibility hurts. And so, yeah, it's just the complicated... I was just trying to figure it out, basically. The complicated nature of that.

K Biswas
I mean, it really is phenomenal. I think now might be a good time to read a passage from Stuart Hall's essay The World of the Gossip Column. So this is from 1967. It's from a Richard Hoggart collection called Your Sunday Paper. In it, Stuart analyses gossip columns in an attempt to decode aspects of print media, and I think it showcases an early example of cultural studies in the wild, which both Richard and Stuart would develop at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. And me and Sheena had a really good gossip before this started so I'm sure we're going to continue that! So this is from Stuart's essay The World of the Gossip Column. "By gossip, we mean easy, informal and largely inconsequential ‘chatter’ about people and social events. Items of gossip in a gossip column are always more informally reported than other items in the newspaper. They're basically ‘inside stories’ about people and events. They are written in a familiar style which suggests that the writer moves easily in the social world of the people about whom he's writing, or is close enough to their orbit to pick up odd stories and incidents about them. These stories usually, but not always, touch the private lives, interests and doings of ‘celebrities’, but they are not entirely private in character. They reveal an aspect of their lives not generally known, and they may lean towards the scandalous. But they are often written in such a way as to suggest that the incidents retold will illuminate something about the public character of the subjects: and it is assumed that we are interested because they are famous, or near-famous." I think that resonates with a lot of the themes in I'm a Fan, from the protagonist's point of view. So with personalities now able to address their fans directly through social media and various other ways, do you

feel that celebrity gossip functions in a different way now compared to, say, 60 years ago when Hall was writing his essay?

Sheena Patel
I couldn't answer that, because I wasn't alive 60 years ago! But... No, because, I don't know, in the pandemic, there was a rumour that Paul Mescal was going out on dates in the park and then running away from people, and it was really funny!

K Biswas
You say rumour...!

Sheena Patel
And that was going around...

K Biswas
Yeah, I've... We've had that verified by various people, don't worry!

Sheena Patel
And it was really funny. Whether it was true or not, it kind of didn't matter. It was just funny as a story. But I guess, in a way, that's sort of how conspiracy theories work, because they work in a similar way to gossip, isn't it? It's like, "I've put these two things together," or, you know, you look at clues, at the thing, and then... you know, people do it with Taylor Swift, where they're like... In a similar way, I was like, Taylor Swift is very similar to Trump, like, her base is very similar to Trump, in the sense that they're very dogmatic and look for signs, for being communicated with. But again, it's very replicative of God again. I think all of this stuff is like a real... The missing of something bigger than us. You know, we've destroyed God and now we look for other things, other idols. But, like, fame, the need for fame... I didn't want to also, just to take it back to your previous question, but I didn't want to just castigate people for going for it, you know, and even myself for wanting it. It does act as protection. Like, there is a political need for fame, you know? And gossip is sort of a side dish to it, but there is a political need for fame for protection, for having a name, so that if something bad happened to you, somebody would come looking for you. You know? There would be somebody that would care about where you are, rather than just disappearing off the face of the earth.

K Biswas
I think that's a really good point, and it's the idea that the media has always played a role in fame, even for, say, leaders of liberation movements or people putting alternative points of view. There's an understanding that there is a thing such as the media that you can communicate your message to.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, yeah.

K Biswas
Not only to your base, but also to power, which you're challenging.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, challenging or channelling. You're doing both of those things, aren't you? But, yeah. Power was a really important thing for me to think about, and I think power is really interesting. I've just read this book called Parallel Lives, because I've read Helen Garner, again, her diaries, and I think they're fantastic. And I was listening to this podcast while I was doing my face one day, and she was saying, you should read Parallel Lives, because she says whenever you talk about power, people end up talking about love, and when you're talking about love, you mean power, and I was like, ooh! That's really amazing. Like, the two things are incredibly... They're very interchangeable. People interchange them when you should be thinking about power, you then talk about love.

K Biswas
I think that is wonderful, and I suppose, in terms of the kind of mediation between the public and power, the press have always played a role. You used to have the era of the press barons.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, but that was really mean. It was mean back then!

K Biswas
It WAS mean! I think it still is mean.

Sheena Patel
Still mean, but it's not mean like in the noughties. That was like... horrible. They were, like, hunted. It was awful.

K Biswas
It was awful, but the people who were making money, the sort of press magnates of that era, I suppose their power has a diminishing influence on the British psyche. You know?

Sheena Patel
Yeah, but that's... even in Succession, that's what that... That was such a good transference from a traditional media to then selling... What is it, the company? Selling it to the... Waco?

K Biswas
Waystar Royco.

Sheena Patel
Waystar. Selling it to a social media person, you know, like a tech person, because that is what happened, and I guess, like, famous people wanted to do that, speak directly to the fans so that other people wouldn't make money off their face, you know?

K Biswas
And perhaps the gossip column has been replaced by, say, TMZ or a website like that, and the curators of those digital platforms almost... Not only are delighted by the influence that they have on the public, they also make a lot of money out of it. I don't think that

gossip columns necessarily function in the same way. You and Stuart Hall seem to both consider that most of us, the people, are closed off from a kind of social world of insiders. Do you think there is this possibility that we're able to create our own scenes, or will we always have to negotiate with the cultural establishment to tell us whether our creative work is worthy of praise?

Sheena Patel
I mean, everybody likes praise! But, no, I think I'm very much a believer of making things with your friends and telling everybody to stick it, basically. That's where I... I genuinely thought that's what would happen with I'm a Fan. I didn't make it for anyone but me, and Rough Trade Books are very... You know, they're mighty, but they're small, and an indie, so I was... You know, a small press, really, so I just wanted to make something, and it wasn't supposed to go anywhere. I just wanted an object to look at, and then I would have done something else. I think if I don't have a project on, I kind of lose my mind, but, yeah. I think you make your own scene and then you make that whatever it is come to you. Or if not, it doesn't matter. Like, I just genuinely think most establishments don't know what's going on.

K Biswas
I mean, you've previously published work in this collective, 4 Brown Girls Who Write. How does working in a collective affect your cultural output, your cultural practice?

Sheena Patel
Well, we're not so active any more, but when we were, the girls are integral to me writing, and we found our voices with each other. Also, you're like a union, sort of, like you advocate for one another. You're stronger because you're together, because I've got a strength, or one of the others has a strength that I don't have. So one of us was, like, really good at networking, whereas I just stick with one person in the back of a room! I'm really crap at it. And could find connections, could find leads, and then we would chase it. Like, I was always good with the admin, and you were just... Yeah, it just felt like having a crew a little bit, and then you can create that energy. It's so hard to do that by yourself, to stay motivated and also just to have that energy, because I'm just such a believer in people.

K Biswas
I think that's what Stuart Hall also felt. I mean, Stuart often wrote in a collective. Some of his most famous work, from Policing the Crisis to Familiar Stranger... I mean, Familiar Stranger was written with Bill Schwarz, his long-time friend.

Sheena Patel
Yeah.

K Biswas
So it's the idea of writing in dialogue with people before you, like, present it to the public.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, and also just being able to share the responsibility of it. I think it's like a motivation thing, but it's also just... I think it's hard when you're by yourself, and also, you don't really

know what the rules of the game are, so you could just be like, well, should we do this or should we not? It's just having somebody to check in with, really.

K Biswas
I suppose I'm a Fan as well is very good at depicting what feeling alone is, and actually, a lot of the chapters are set in a kind of domestic setting. You cover issues around family and, I suppose, romantic relationships. It's this kind of impatience, almost, a sort of private rage that one has on their own, and I wondered what you thought the role of rage and anger could play in cultural production.

Sheena Patel
I mean, it's scary, but it's also... It's a scary emotion, but... When one of my friends gets really depressed, she becomes really funny, so when she gets funny, I'm like, "Oh, my God, you're in a really bad place, aren't you?!" But she's like, "Yeah, yeah, I am." And it's just really... I think when you are in a dark place, that is where your sense of humour comes from. Well, that's where my sense of humour comes from, is being able to laugh even when you're raging. But I don't think it's obviously an appropriate emotion all the time, but I have less anger now than I did before. But I think it is a good one to harness. It was good to find humour in your rage against the machine. This is part of the joke.

K Biswas
Yeah, but also just, like, the sharing of the rage with, say, a partner or with your parents. There are some really vivid descriptions in the book. That kind of relationship with your parents, who are first-generation migrants, and the characters, is also. That generational divide, and I suppose the difference between an anger of a later generation and a sort of quiet dignity of an earlier generation that just, like, gets on with it, is something that I've definitely felt. I wonder if it's something that you have.

Sheena Patel
Again, that's not... You know, you've got the Southall Black Sisters, you had protests in Southall. That's not necessarily completely true. You had Cable Street, you know, people turned up, and... Yeah, there's been so many protests that that's not entirely true. But, yeah, there is that prevailing thing of, like, just keep your head down, don't draw attention to yourself, just do a staple thing and get on with it. But then, again, it's like you are able, as a second-generation immigrant, able to ask "who am I?" I mean, I say that in I'm a Fan. You're able to ask "who am I?" in a way your parents just never were able to, so there is a privilege in that, being able to be like, "Who am I, in between these two cultures?" You know, your parents would just be like, "Shut up, get on with it! What are you talking about?" They just don't care!

K Biswas
Maybe the pay-off, as well, is we get to feel that kind of anger and the questioning of the world, but we also get to go to these places that you mentioned in your book, like Shoreditch House or Peckham Levels...

Sheena Patel

Yeah, and I think we're just not on the front line in the way... I mean, apart from on class lines. But I just think the frontier of all of that is gone somewhere else, it feels, and we have the acc... So much of our privilege is the voices we have and the accents we have, you know, that immediately tell you that you've assimilated in some way. Like, I drop my Ts like a Londoner. There's that privilege of having a voice that can get you through. You know, it doesn't get you completely through, and I'm, like, making blanket assumptions here, but yeah, I just think that there are people where it's... They're living lives that are more difficult than "will the art world let me in?" You know? It's like... There's, like, a gradation of need, and I don't think, like, "let me into the art world!" is one of them!

K Biswas
I also feel that that's so well depicted in the novel, that there is this great backdrop of extractive capitalism and a sort of need and want that's going on in the world, and it almost exacerbates one's personal, like, anger at themselves for wanting...

Sheena Patel
I read The Five really recently, like a year ago or something. It's incredible. It tells the story of, I think, five of Jack the Ripper's victims – not that that's how I want to describe them – and goes back to their story, like their grandparents' story, their parents' story, their story up to their death, and I was thinking, my God. I mean, it was awful to be working class in London, in the UK. The utter desecration of their lives. Like, a man would leave and then they would fall into abject poverty, was just horrific. And I was thinking, "Oh, my God, it's so good that it's not like that any more," and then read in the Guardian how migrant workers have to split up from their families and come over here and don't know their... And it's the same story, and I was like, it's not gone away, it's just who it's happening to has moved, and again, is invisible to people, if they want it to be invisible. So, yeah, I think... Yeah, I don't know. I'm trying not to... I just don't want to fall into that victim thing at all. And also, I'm a Fan in a small way changed that need, what happened with it after publishing it.

K Biswas
Yeah, I definitely want to come to that, and if audience members have questions, please drop them in the chat box. Who were your kind of inspirations? Who did you read when you were growing up?

Sheena Patel
I mean, everything. I read everything.

K Biswas
Yeah.

Sheena Patel
But I love Rebecca. Like, Rebecca's really present in this, because I love how it twists. Well, it twisted from when I was a teenager to... I read it in Covid again, in one of the lockdowns, and I was just like, oh, my God, all my sympathies have moved, just because I got older. But, I mean, I read everybody, and now I can't think of anybody I've read!

K Biswas
Well, I think when Stuart was growing up, he had a very classical kind of education in English literature when he was studying in the Caribbean, and he became a huge fan of Henry James. I wanted to read something very quickly from Familiar Stranger, Stuart's co-written autobiography with Bill Schwarz, about his love of Henry James and what he's able to do, because I feel that your book also...

Sheena Patel
Oh, my God! Am I Henry James?! No...

K Biswas
Well, it kind of covers it. He's talking about Portrait of a Lady, and he says that James "intuitively grasped the moral vacuum at the centre of worldly wealth and aesthetic sophistication, the corruption secreted at the heart of a refined class, self-confident in its own ethical superiority."

Sheena Patel
Yeah. I mean, that's...

K Biswas
And I feel that that really came across in your book. Did you...

Sheena Patel
But we're all subject to that superiority, you know? There is a certain superiority in... There is a... we're all looking for that, because that's ego, and we all have an ego. I think there is always that in everybody. But, yes, definitely with this 'in circle' that can spread their message of eco-whatever, whateverisms.

K Biswas
Not that you want to give it away, but who were the kind of scenes that you were following to make such a vivid picture of that world that you yourself are distant from?

Sheena Patel
Well, it was books, but it's also just like being on the internet and just seeing that there are women who set up these, you know, labels and those brands and stuff, and how they're sold to you, and this lifestyle that's sold to you. But, I mean, it's taste, really, the issue of taste and how class-dependent that is. And how you acquire that knowledge. It's really difficult to know what is good, what isn't, what is timeless, what isn't, what's a good bottle of wine, you know? Like... ...yeah...

K Biswas
And I suppose those famous people, they relish in their kind of high status. They like being part of a hype machine. They really want, like, adulation and idealisation, and we're the people viewing on our phones their lives. We sort of help them.

Sheena Patel

Yeah, we give it to them. We give it to them. So I was thinking, I was walking on the Underground and I saw this poster for a play, and they're two people from TV, and I was like, oh, God, they will never put somebody unknown in a play. But they wouldn't do that unless there was an appetite for it, so we have to take responsibility for that too, you know? Like, we can't say that there's... There wouldn't... It wouldn't be there if there wasn't an appetite for it, so I don't know. There's a culpability on both sides. It can't just be one thing or the other, I think.

K Biswas
But it then leaves us damaged, the feelings of self-loathing and failure, and it's sort of a non-relationship between you, the observer, and them, the creators.

Sheena Patel
But I don't know if that's true, though, because of, like, parasocial relationships. I think you can have a relationship like that, and those relationships have been even before phones. You know, I've been a crazy fan. I have been a crazy fan when I was a teenager. I know what that's like, to love someone and have a relationship with them in your head. I mean, it's obviously not...

K Biswas
Can I ask what you were a crazy fan of?

Sheena Patel
Well, just... I was a crazy fan, and so I know what that devotional thing is where you, yeah, yeah, you have a relationship with that thing.

K Biswas
But do you think that relationship extends to just the ability to just leave comments under a post that may be read by someone's PR? Is that... Are we denying the reality of what that relationship is to kind of stay sane?

Sheena Patel
As in, what do you mean?

K Biswas
So, when one writes a comment under a post that a famous person has supposedly posted themselves, do we know that it's likely that they're only doing this for their PR machine, and it's probably not them posting?

Sheena Patel
I couldn't answer that. I don't know.

K Biswas
Interesting. Because I almost feel that this... You know, the era when people sort of wandered town squares to promote political ideas, you'd have these things like town hall meetings, whereby politicians would be present within communities, they would have that direct relationship with the public. I feel that politics now has tried to take the idea of

the well-dressed statesperson, but hide behind sort of layers and layers of machinery – their PR person, their speechwriter, their image consultant, you know – even with someone like David Cameron, their hairdresser, who I think ended up in the House of Lords, but... I will check that! So I feel that almost... Have we become more distant from the famous, or was it always thus, would you say?

Sheena Patel
I don't know. I don't know. But I think you can... Well, fans bully people, don't they? They bully, and it's not this helpless relationship, I don't think. I think that's too, again, one-dimensional. I think there's a dialogue. I think... Fans have become less deferential, potentially. Which is a good thing. I think fandom is a really interesting thing. I wouldn't... I'm not here to be, like, oh, fandom's weird and shouldn't be there. I think it's funny. It can be really funny, and... ...it's nice to belong.

K Biswas
It is...

Sheena Patel
Like, football is so interesting, because when Arsenal won... ...whatever cup they won and everybody piled into the Emirates, and it was a real, like... And even the World Cup. It was fun to walk around London and see people just do these pop-up barbecues and set up screens. Like, that's a fun culture around a thing that enabled people to come together. It enables us to come together, so it can only be a good thing, things that... Well, not always, but something like the World Cup or football or a pop star, and that physically bringing people out to form relationships with each other, is a good thing.

K Biswas
I remember after... on that Arsenal parade day, just strangers talking to each other, including to people like me, on the Tube, and it was the broadest demographic that I've seen kind of interacting in a joyful way probably since the pandemic. I haven't seen...

Sheena Patel
Yeah, I mean, today, I saw somebody be like, "Gooner!" to somebody in a van, and then he was like, "All right!" It's like, that's a nice moment of connection. I don't know, it's not just... It's not just this depressing thing. It's actually... it can be very joyous, and also, like, the art that comes out of it is really DIY and democratic and funny.

K Biswas
I mean, completely. OK, are we going to go to audience questions and audience statements? We've got our first comment from Alice. "Hello! Fantastic conversation. Thank you both so much." In quotes, "I drop my Ts like a Londoner! I often pitch I'm a Fan as the best British book of the past ten years."

Sheena Patel
Whoa!

K Biswas

"When will you drop a second? Please, no pressure!"

Sheena Patel
I'm trying! I'm trying, but it's hard!

K Biswas
Go on, give Alice the scoop.

Sheena Patel
There's no scoop. I'm just writing and failing, basically! But thank you for saying that. That's sweet.

K Biswas
Are you planning an adaptation for screen?

Sheena Patel
No.

K Biswas
That to me is interesting, because I, like Alice, whenever I'm asked what did you enjoy from culture, it's my go-to answer, and I think it's ripe for a screen adaptation. But that might just be me! Isabel has said, "Thank you for bringing together the overlapping structural inequalities like class, race, gender, impacting people, particularly women, of the otherhood. It's so refreshing. A question: How do you feel when navigating the fight for space in the elitist world of art and trying to avoid the so-called victim perspective whilst at the same time not avoiding ensuring that the structural inequalities are contended with?" So, navigating the fight for space in this elitist world of art.

Sheena Patel
Well, I'm not in the art world. I was just peering over the wall. But in the sense of making stuff... Again, just didn't really care about... I mean, I did desperately care, but also just didn't really think that I would have a book that would have a... You know, like a big five publisher. I was so grateful to meet Will and Nina, who gave me a lot of permission to make and have so much patience with me, and also really encourage me and believe in me, and the attention they gave me through the making of this book, I never would have got anywhere else, so I was in exactly the right place that I needed to make something. And I met them by... Because the 4 Girls, we were putting on events and stuff, and we were making books, like, printing them... Finding printers and making them, these booklets and books, ourselves, and thought she was the shop, and just kind of ran into her like that, through Instagram. So it's not like... It is a place that, for me, I wouldn't be writing if it wasn't for Instagram, really, because it gave me Nina and then it gave me Will, who was my editor. So, yeah, they just kind of legitimised me in a way that I just wouldn't have had before, because I was just sort of flailing about, but also was very happy to just try stuff and make stuff. I wasn't, you know, looking for the Nobel. I just wanted to make things and be a maker and try and... I was just trying to find my voice, really. And still trying to find it. It's not like it ends, but I'm very happy with how it happened and that it's still got this very long life. Yeah, I'm, like, proud of myself for making it. I've just got to do it again!

K Biswas
Wonderful question, Isabel. Thank you so much for asking it. We've got a question from Joanne. "I work in the north of England with fine art students and see how much pressure they are under just to survive."

Sheena Patel
Yeah.

K Biswas
"So many jobs, hours to work, so many issues affecting them. It feels so difficult for them to find the time to think and make. I wonder what advice you might have for working-class creatives trying to find out who they are and what they can do in these times and circumstances." I mean, that's a key theme of your book, right? Precarious gig economy work.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, it is. I mean, it still is. It's... Oh, God. I'd say that we need them. I mean, the way that I make stuff is, I work and then I try to fit it in, but that's not the ideal situation. The ideal situation would be to have the space to be able to think. I had ten years where I just sort of fucked about, really, but really didn't think about my career in any sense, and sort of just became who I was. But that's so difficult in the UK at the moment. I mean, the last six years/ the last three years have been unbelievably painful financially. Because it feels like you have to be on, like, 300 grand just to feel OK, which is insane. I mean, that's an insane amount of money to be thinking about.

K Biswas
And of course, a lot of these free spaces have been privatised and closed down over five years.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, and, I mean, the only thing I would say is, like... Which is so Tory, and I kind of hate myself for saying it, but it's like, you have to want it. I think you have to want it. But the way that you have to, like, patchwork a life, it's really difficult to do it. I did a foundation much later. I was 26 when I did it. And I worked at an advertising agency for, like, six months. Somehow struck this job. Probably could have had... They offered me full-time work and I said no to it, because I wanted to do this course, and I saved up the most pitiful amount of money you could save up, but enough to cover the course and, like, a year of living, and then just... I don't know how I did it, really, if I think about it, but then was just, like, doing the course, trying to work, and I was barely making it. By, like, pounds I was making it. But, yeah, I just think... That is so hard, because the cost of living is so much higher now than it was before, and it's such a struggle. But that's the only thing I can think, is, like, if you're going to do it, you do it together.

K Biswas

I completely agree. I oversee this radio station called Resonance FM. It's this idea that there is, like, a free space where you can create radio, you can create radio art, and most importantly, no money changes hands.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, yeah, that's so important.

K Biswas
You get a good idea, you work with people with technical skills and all of these things, and I've found, actually, throughout my adult career that the more, I suppose, job instability I've had, the more kind of creative and confident and, dare I say, happy I've been. When I was in a sort of boring civil service job after university, I was miserable. The stability and, you know, the monthly pay cheque – absolutely miserable. Couldn't get my brain to function, was deeply uncreative, and there was this degree of precarity that kind of spurs you on to meet like-minded people, know who will turn up for you. Also...

Sheena Patel
But then, that is also balanced with, like, sometimes people have families that can support them through that, and I didn't have that, and so, yeah, not having that safety net is really scary, because if I was young now, I'd probably be like, I'm going to be a finance bro, because I don't want to suffer, and I don't want to make anything, you know? Like, why would you choose something hard now when everything is hard? It's difficult. It's difficult. But I think you need... I think we need art, though. It's just... I can't imagine what it would be like to be 18 right now.

K Biswas
I agree, and when also the state services that used to help cultural workers survive are now pivoting to... Do you remember there was this advert that the government put out under Rishi Sunak of the ballerina...

Sheena Patel
Yeah, I know. But do you know what? That is not what anybody actually wants to do. Everybody wants to be an artist, because everybody can be an artist. Or, like, everybody can make something. Genuinely, if you had all the money in the world, you'd probably just sit in your room and paint or something, you know? Like, "oh, I'm going to try stand-up" or whatever. Genuinely, that is what you want to do. So I think if you've chosen that path, that it is the more difficult path, but I think by doing it, you will get better, and by doing it, you will do it, you know? Like, it will be difficult, but nothing good is easy, I suppose, and I just... I don't know. I think there should be more support, more governmental support for people that make stuff.

K Biswas
I agree.

Sheena Patel
And, like, fees for university – you're in crippling debt. It's crazy. I was thinking about doing a BA in fine art, but then I was like, what am I actually paying for? Because we got so much

attention in the foundation course and then virtually none for the BA, and I was like, oh, I could just... I think I can't do it. I can't afford to do that, to pay £9,000 a year. So I was like, I'm just going to have to figure this out myself, and so that's where I was hunting for people that would do this with me or could do this with me, or... So, yeah, I think together is the way to do it.

K Biswas
Completely. Collaborating with like-minded people, enjoying getting your hands dirty and not reliant on, let's go with artificial nudges from a machine to push your artwork, which it seems that there's this... Even in the last year, an understanding within cultural industries that AI's a central part of creating a film or making an album or going on tour with a band or producing even fine physical bits of art, and I don't buy it myself. I think that humans make these things!

Sheena Patel
Yeah. We might not have a choice, though, in the future! That might be rapidly taken away from us.

K Biswas
I believe there's a future where Fatima doesn't join cyber and pushes to be a ballerina herself.

Sheena Patel
Yeah.

K Biswas
We've got another question from Rachel, who says, "I also want to know who Sheena was a crazy fan of! But also want to know more about what you think about parasocial relationships and power, and the dimensions of beauty and connection that those relations can offer too."

Sheena Patel
Ooh. Can you say that again?

K Biswas
Yeah. "I also want to know who Sheena was a crazy fan of." You can answer that! Go on, tell us one person.

Sheena Patel
No, I'm not saying!

K Biswas
OK! Or the second part of the question is, "I want to know about what you think about parasocial relationships and power, and the dimensions of beauty and connection "that those relations can offer."

Sheena Patel

Well, it's very easy to have a parasocial relationship. I think when Instagram first started, it was like the first democratisation of fame, where you'd walk around and be like, "Oh, my God, I know that person from Instagram," and it wasn't like this high-on power that was deciding who would be famous and who wouldn't be. Even though, like, looking back on it, actually, it's kind of amazing that you would find somebody at a shopping centre and then decide that they were going to be a supermodel. That's kind of like Stars in Your Eyes things, you know? Like "it's going to be you!" But now you can buy those things. You can buy followers. There's... things that felt real, that feel real, aren't real. So I don't know. Sometimes, you know, you can manufacture all of this stuff. But... I think parasocial relationships, we're all susceptible to them, I think, and the idea that you know someone because they post... Because you do, actually, because sometimes you do. Like, even your own... My own friends, if I haven't spoken to them for a while and they see my stories, they're like, "Oh, you went to..." And it's like, I haven't actually told you that, but it is kind of weird, at the same time! But I think... I don't know what to say about beauty. Beauty's in its whole Substance era, so I don't know about that. It's a bit scary.

K Biswas
I think when celebrity was born, there were these conversations. It was the kind of feckless children of the landed gentry who would be the first people mentioned as, I suppose, modern celebrities. They'd be mentioned in the gossip columns...

Sheena Patel
Fantasy, isn't it, really?

K Biswas
It's complete fantasy. And the press would report their attendance to a social event, their beauty was described in, you know, terms that... Flushed terms.

Sheena Patel
I do feel this about Dua Lipa, though. I feel like she's got... Like, God just gives Dua Lipa everything, and I'm like, "Why?!"

K Biswas
Have you not been invited on her podcast yet?

Sheena Patel
Have you? Oh, me?!

K Biswas
No, have you! Yeah.

Sheena Patel
No, God, no, but... Yeah, it feels like that sometimes, when you're shown someone's life and you're like, "Why her?!" But, yeah, it's kind of funny. And also, you see everybody... like, them getting married and them moving there and moving over here, and seeing their outfits. It's weird to live your life alongside people you don't know because they're posting and you're posting, but your lives are totally different, the access you have is totally

different. It's kind of weird to have that channel open. But then, maybe that's always existed, like you say. You know, you'd know what the Royal Family were doing. Maybe it was more the Royal Family, and now we've got pop stars and other influencers. Though I do think the age of the influencer might be over.

K Biswas
Oh, tell us why.

Sheena Patel
I don't know, I just think it might… Everyone's going to get tired of it eventually and we'll want something new, and maybe in, like, 10, 15 years, we'll be like, "What the hell were we doing, posting on Instagram?!" Like, it will become a graveyard. Or it'll only be, like, us on it, and people won't take it on. You know? Like, it will die with us. Or people will just start doing it less, because it's like, actually, I don't want to tell everybody what I'm doing. I'm just fatigued.

K Biswas
Well, then, what happens to the woman that your lead character is obsessed with, who is posting about wellness and also what she's eating and what she's growing…

Sheena Patel
But that's, again, always… Well, it's like Nara Smith, isn't it? It's like, it's always going to happen. Everyone's transfixed by her, by Nara Smith, because she's… Again, it's ridiculous to have these, like, four kids, whatever, in these haute couture, cooking meals from scratch. Like, it's bananas, but also really soothing to watch someone do something really well and do it in a way that you would never do it, you know? There is something soothing… It's like mukbangs. I'm just so transfixed by them, because it's like… They're just relaxing. It's weird, though.

K Biswas
I do find it terrifying that the people who really leaned in to 21st-century celebrity culture, like Paris Hilton or the Kardashians, were themselves kind of nepo baby types whose parents would be able to give them the money and the access to people to make them stars, whereas we're told that this is a special era of democratisation of stardom.

Sheena Patel
Are we?

K Biswas
I think the implication by our mass use of social media is that it's democratic. If you are good…

Sheena Patel
But it's fleeting. It's like that girl that came up with ‘demure’. Like, you have your 15 minutes. It's like what Andy Warhol said, isn't it? Like, you have your 15 minutes and it goes. You've got to cash in and then go. It's like everybody will have it, but it won't last for long.

K Biswas
Do you think everyone's too worried about being cancelled or...? Because the way that I'm seeing it, everyone who's cancelled usually gets the chance to come back, and it's part of a character arc, certainly when it was men implicated in #MeToo...

Sheena Patel
No, I think it's attention. It's attention, it's your audience. If you get cancelled, you come back, it's because you're appealing to another audience. And also, I think cancel cult... Like, the left is very didactic and it can be very silly. It's as silly as the right, you know? Like... Sometimes we bring about the problems on ourselves, I think.

K Biswas
That is interesting. I suppose...

Sheena Patel
We're not... this righteousness that used to be the right, like, the right used to be of the establishment and "This is the way you do things," and the left were like, "Burn it!" And now we've swapped places, and the left have been like, "No, these are the things and these are the rules, and we're going to tell you what's right and wrong," and the right are like, "Burn it!" And it's like, it's weird to have swapped seats. I think that righteousness is very annoying. Like...

K Biswas
But then, our political leaders on the left, the sort of modern iterations of them, are also kind of... We're projecting our hopes and dreams on them in a way that...

Sheena Patel
I know, but that's because we want saviours and, you know... We want Mamdani to be the mayor of the world, basically!

K Biswas
Yeah! Zohran Mamdani in New York... Even, to a certain extent, Andy Burnham in Britain.

Sheena Patel
Well, we'll see about that!

K Biswas
We'll see about that, but, no, it's a public not wanting to project onto it. And I feel that when, say, Harold Wilson came to power, Stuart Hall was very sceptical of an ability of a... You know, ‘ordinary person’, in inverted commas, being able to control the kind of wheels of power. I think Stuart was always sceptical of Labourism, and certainly the Wilson era, when he was writing. He would provide these kind of wonderful critiques. Who's doing our critiques on our kind of...

Sheena Patel

But everybody does that. Everybody has a take on a take on a take on a take. Like, it's still there. You'll get somebody do a thing, then you get a reaction video, and then you get a reaction video on the reaction video. It's like... It all still exists, and I think that kind of needing a saviour is... To me, feels like pop culture coming over to politics, and the reason why Starmer didn't... There were many reasons why Starmer failed, but one of them was his inability to be camera-ready, whereas Andy Burnham's much more comfortable in front of a camera, and, like, with people. People feel comfortable with him, like how they do with Nigel Farage. Well, again, we'll see where that goes. But there's this kind of literacy around being visible that I think is there now, where pop stars have to do that. Writers have to bloody do that! Like, we're doing this, you know? I want to be a writer like in the '50s, where Doris Lessing wouldn't brush her hair or whatever. It would be much better!

K Biswas
I think the great irony about the Starmer situation was, this was an incredibly, like... This was a man interested in culture. He liked, you know, Japanese music from the 1980s, and fanzines, and the real him was not allowed to emerge, or he denied himself the emergence of someone interested in culture, and with Andy Burnham, he's almost leading on the kind of professional cultural northerner, always mentioning Northern songs from the 1990s, like Oasis songs. He came on to conference to All Together Now by The Farm from 1991. You know, it's almost the use of culture by politics to make people seem more down-to-earth. Do you find that as pernicious as I do?

Sheena Patel
No, it's a strategy, isn't it, I suppose? I don't know, that's above my pay grade! I couldn't answer that!

K Biswas
OK. Well, what about your cultural... What stimulates your culture? You know, famously Stuart Hall was a huge jazz fan, Miles Davis fan, and he would listen to Miles Davis and it would help him think. What are the things that help you think from the cultural sphere?

Sheena Patel
So I just wanted... Who was that person... Who was the lady that asked me about the kids? I feel like I did them a disservice with that answer.

K Biswas
OK. The north of England student, Joanne.

Sheena Patel
Yeah. Feel like I said bad things, but... If she's still here...

K Biswas
Yeah, go for it.

Sheena Patel
But I want a grade on my answer! I just don't know if it was despondent as I... I just hope I wasn't negative.

K Biswas
No, give Joanne a positive...

Sheena Patel
No, but I just wanted... I didn't want to, like, throw it away, the answer. What did you ask me?

K Biswas
OK, so Stuart loved jazz, he loved Miles Davis, it helped him think. What are the types of cultural output that you enjoy that help stimulate your work, or just, like, make you happy?

Sheena Patel
That make me happy... Music makes me really happy. I mean, I love everything. I love soaking up everything. Like, I went to two shows today, I'm reading more... I'm trying to read more, and trying to put my phone down more. But I feel, like, open to everything. I think what people say is really funny. I think people inspire me, and I like thinking a lot, so I like putting things together in my head or trying to, and I love being around people that make stuff, or that are really good at the thing that they do. It's really inspiring to be with people that are also trying to figure stuff out, and it's been so nice to discover Anne Carson so late in the day, but to have this wealth of interviews where she doesn't know how to do stuff, or, like, just tries to... ...find her way through an idea. I mean, all of that... There's this great podcast I listened to this morning. It actually made me cry the tears I needed to cry for, like, the last week. It's with this mathematician on The Daily. He talks about how AI has figured out these centuries-old or decades-old problems, like, really quickly, and he's so emotional, and it's so beautiful, because he goes into the Bible, and then I was googling the book he was talking about and read that, and I was like, "Wow, that's got an idea. There's surely an idea in that." It's like, people are so interesting. I think every person is so interesting, can be interesting, and can surprise you. Like, I work in telly, and the amount of people that you're thrown with that you would never, ever hang out with, and it's so funny how close you can get, you know, when you've got a shared cause, and I think... Yeah, I think that. And also clubs and dancing and... Everything, really. I think we're so lucky to be in Britain and have the sense of humour that we do and the culture that we do. We've got, like, the best. Except it's being strangled. But it is the best.

K Biswas
I agree.

Sheena Patel
It's hard to find our kind of sense of humour anywhere else.

K Biswas
No, I agree. I do think there is something kind of wonderful about the British sense of humour that has failed to travel to America. I feel that watching American comedies and not laughing...

Sheena Patel
Not really getting it.

K Biswas
No.

Sheena Patel
We're so lucky, like, Peep Show and Extras and... Like, absolutely everything we've ever made is just funny, and it can be so funny, and it really inspires me.

K Biswas
I wanted to ask you a sort of final question from me, which is, do you feel culture still has the potential to stimulate revolutionary passions? It's a big question, obviously.

Sheena Patel
Well, I mean, again, that question's huge, and I'm no expert, but I think no. I don't think so. I think it can reflect... I don't know. I'm not sure. I think your body, in this age, has to physically be on the street, and I think that's how you elicit change, and then culture can aid it, but I don't know if it can instigate it. Maybe it could have one day, but I think we're in a time where you have to gather, physically gather.

K Biswas
I feel that all political upheaval needs culture to, like, rouse the spirits. The slogans, the banners, the romance of the struggle.

Sheena Patel
Yeah.

K Biswas
And I feel... I feel confident that people are getting that now, you know? Like, culture being an important part of political strategy and struggle, but not in, like, a formal way, just a sort of natural release of the human spirit. When the rest of politics is micromanaged, you have these public expressions of, you know, joy and rage at the system. But, yeah, I think your book, coming back to your book, does very well at channelling that individual's rage against the system, and then, as you say, when we're out on the streets and when we find like-minded people, maybe that's when political change can happen.

Sheena Patel
We should end there! That was a really nice thing to end on.

K Biswas
We're going to end on Joanne! Joanne's comment...

Sheena Patel
Oh, what did Joanne say? Joanne?

K Biswas
She said, "I love the phrase 'patchwork of life'. 'Patchwork of life'. That's definitely a positive I will share with the kids."

Sheena Patel
Aww! Tell them, keep making stuff. They've got to.

K Biswas
And then join a collective of people.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, make them band together.

K Biswas
Yeah. Try, try and fail, and fail again and fail again, and create an amazing body of work over a long period of time, and history will remember you, you know?

Sheena Patel
Or even your friends will!

K Biswas
OK, final, final, final question for you, which is, give the audience one recommendation from the world of culture. What should they go off and immediately see or watch or listen to or do or hear or read? I've got mine, so...

Sheena Patel
Oh, God, I've got so many. London Falling, read that. Read Parallel Lives. On YouTube, watch Mark Leckey's films, because they're bloody amazing and I love him. And also, watch Adam Curtis on iPlayer, because he's a gospel disciple or something. He gets everything. I'm watching The Trap at the moment, and it is amazing.

K Biswas
The Trap is insane.

Sheena Patel
And also, Stuart Hall's in one of them as well. He's, like, quoted in one of them. Yeah, The Trap is great.

K Biswas
Yeah, Stuart's definitely in one of them, and you do see Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural studies kind of infuse Adam Curtis' work over the last 25 years. Maybe next season, we'll try and get Adam on.

Sheena Patel
Oh, my God!

K Biswas
I just met Boots Riley, the American film director.

Sheena Patel

Oh, yeah?

K Biswas
He's got his new film out, I Love Boosters, which is incredible. It's about a band of people who steal clothes from a major fashion conglomerate, headed by Demi Moore, and it also shows how the sausage is made, so there's many scenes in Chinese garment factories, and there is a solidarity between the Chinese garment factories working for better conditions, the people trying to unionise the massive fashion conglomerate and also the Oakland thieves who are stealing the clothes and selling them for discount prices to their communities. It is a beautiful film. Boots is a great person. So that's my recommendation, for London Film Week.

Sheena Patel
I saw Decision to Leave earlier this year, and that was incredible. It's so funny and ridiculous, but that idea of... That kind of cost-cutting and progress, it's so funny. Is it Decision to Leave?

K Biswas
Sorry to Bother You? His first one?

Sheena Patel
No, it's the one that came out today. Oh, I've said the name wrong. It's not Decision to Leave. But it's the one that came out this year. It's so good. I can't remember the title now! It's gone. ...under pressure!

K Biswas
Well, I'm certain we'll be seeing Sheena in the cultural sphere...

Sheena Patel
Oh, yeah!

K Biswas
...for the rest of my life. It's so lovely to speak to you today. I've had such a good conversation.

Sheena Patel
Yeah, thank you for having me.

K Biswas
And thank you, audience, for your wonderful questions, and please do go back to the north of England, Joanne, and say "carry on making culture" to the kids! Thanks, Sheena, for today. Thanks to Tayyab Amin for producing this event, and also to our funders, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Hollick Family Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Power of Pop Fund. A huge, huge thank-you to all of you for joining us today. There'll be a recording of this event available in the next few weeks. Please sign up to our newsletter and social channels, and do keep an eye out on the Explore section of the Stuart Hall Foundation website, which has an ever-growing free-to-access set of digital

learning resources. That's at stuarthallfoundation.org And finally, please join us for the next Reading the Crisis conversation, where Aasiya Lodhi will be talking to Tao Leigh Goffe about climate on Tuesday, 17th of November from 5:30pm UK time. Hope to see you there. Thanks and goodbye for now. Thanks, Sheena.

Sheena Patel
Bye!