The BiblioFiles: Nidhi Chanani

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Nidhi Chanani, the author and illustrator of the graphic novel, *Pashmina*.

Priyanka Das has many identities – friend, high school student, comic book artist. She also has many questions, about her absent father, her single mother, and India, her mother's home country.

Unfortunately, her mom isn't willing to give any answers. Then Priyanka discovers a beautiful pashmina hidden in a suitcase. When she wears it, she is transported to a fantasy version of India, where an elephant named Kanta and a peacock named Mayur are happy to show her the amazing sights, smells, and tastes of her mother's country.

But there's also a shadowy figure trying to send messages. Now, Priyanka is even more determined to travel to the real India to learn both her mother's story and the story behind the mysterious, magical pashmina.

Pashmina is Chanani's debut graphic novel. And it is fantastic. Primarily drawn in grayscale, Chanani uses glorious bursts of color whenever the pashmina casts its spells, accentuating the magic and wonder.

Chanani tackles difficult subjects with empathy, honesty, and a gentleness that is incredibly respectful to the characters and to the readers. *Pashmina* is a powerful, uplifting story, particularly for girls and young women.

An artist, illustrator, writer, and teacher, Chanani was honored at the White House as a Champion of Change in 2012. Nidhi Chanani, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

NIDHI CHANANI: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

DR. DANA: How long did it take to create *Pashmina*?

NIDHI CHANANI: Four years. Four very long years. And I say that with the caveat that it wasn't the only thing that I was working on. I was also working on other projects and freelance work. It was four years with other work interspersed.

DR. DANA: Wow. Which came first, the illustrations or the story?

NIDHI CHANANI: So for *Pashmina*, definitely the story came first, the outline. And because it was my first attempt at writing something this long and working on a comic of this length, my publisher actually asked me to provide them with a full manuscript. And so I was working on the full manuscript while I was pitching.

They wanted to see it complete. And moving forward now, where I'm at with my new book, I'm not doing the manuscript. So much changed from the manuscript to when I actually combined the words and the drawings that I feel that-- and this is not true for every comic artist, of course, but for me, the manuscript wasn't necessary.

It was necessary, I think, for *Pashmina* though. Because I learned a lot in every step of the process. And it was also necessary to sell the book.

DR. DANA: You were born in India but grew up in Southern California. Did you, like Priyanka, travel back to India?

NIDHI CHANANI: I did. And I went when I was younger, mostly for family funerals. And I didn't go back again until much later in life. I think I was 16 or 17, around similar age as Priyanka.

So it was a very important trip. It was a reaffirming trip in a lot of ways for me. And it was also complicated too. You know, I think any trip like that, when you're surrounded by the culture but haven't made it back to your home country. And so, I think that there's a lot of me in Priyanka even though she's very different than I am.

DR. DANA: So the pashmina takes Priyanka to a magical representation of India, or a fantasy version of India. When she gets there, she finds it very different. Was that your experience too?

NIDHI CHANANI: It was my experience. I grew up in a large immigrant community, and so I heard stories. You hear about how your uncles and aunties and parents grow up. You have all the customs I think it is similar to taking all the good things and all the storytelling, all the narratives, and experiencing that.

And then when you go to the place that all those things are originated from, there is so much more than just the good things and the stories. There's the reality.

And there's the reality of poverty, economic disparity, change. Modern India is very different than when my parents were there. So there were a lot of new things and a lot of different things. A lot of things that my family and the immigrant community don't know about because they haven't lived there in "x" amount of years. And so there was just a lot to absorb.

DR. DANA: Did you find a lot that surprised you as well?

NIDHI CHANANI: Yeah. I definitely felt surprised, pretty much from the get go. When you exit the airport and you're accosted by people. There's droves of people. Either they're asking you to get in their car and take them for a ride, or they're panhandling. And just the sheer amount of

people and the different smells, the different sites, the different ways buildings are developed, the sheer wealth of colors.

And I don't know. I think that was really, just out the gate, from the moment that I stepped off the plane until I came back onto the plane, everything was something new and something to think about. So, yeah.

DR. DANA: *Pashmina* is a story about magic, but it's also a story about relationships. Priyanka's single mother and her past. Priyanka's aunt in India and her dynamic with her husband. Priyanka's jealousy of her uncle's new baby, and more. Was it a challenge to convey these relationships through comic panels and dialogue?

NIDHI CHANANI: Yes. I think the one thing that I give a lot of credit to my editor for, and through the process of making *Pashmina*-- as I said it took me four years. And much of that four years wasn't in the manuscript stage. Nor was it in the final art stage. The bulk of it was in the thumbnail stage, which is when you draw really loose drawings to plan out your layout and figure out how you want your scenes to progress. And how you want the page to lay flat. Right?

And just figuring out those kinds of things—but, my editor had made this comment in the, probably, initial run of the thumbnails, which is to really focus on body language. And to have Priyanka and the aunt and her mom and the uncle, all of those characters really, show how they're feeling.

Because that's one of the challenges when you have something that's static, that you're not able to describe. I mean, you could through captions. But I didn't do captions in *Pashmina* to describe what the character's feeling, what they're thinking, and how these interactions are affecting them.

And so, I did that a lot in that visual language of, either a head turned down, or a furrowed brow, or a smile. Smiles are a lot easier, of course, to read. But it's that subtle body language that I really had to push myself. I had to push myself as an artist to really go beyond the smile. Go beyond that and be able to visually communicate what I wanted the reader to take away from how the characters are feeling page by page.

DR. DANA: This story is full of amazing food.

[LAUGHTER]

There are tasty snacks, characters calling each other affectionate food names. There are shared meals. What role does food play in your life? And how did this translate to your graphic novel?

NIDHI CHANANI: Food is my-- what is that called? Achilles tendon or something? I don't-- I'm so bad with idioms. One of the things that I love about any language is idioms. And I always get them wrong.

But I love food. I also am currently on a salad diet. But food, I think for me, is such a gateway to culture. It's a lot of people's first experience with a culture, with different names, different tastes, and practices, and just an entry point that's pleasurable.

And so food is definitely how I positively related to my community and culture. And so much of what we do that's celebratory and positive is around food. You know, you have a function. You have a special meal.

That part of *Pashmina* was really fun. I also am admittedly in love with European and Western desserts and have never been a fan of Indian sweets. And so when Mayur called Priyanka all these different sweets and she has that reaction, that's so me. That she didn't want to hear that she was a gulab jamun or a sandesh or anything like that. Because it's just, she doesn't like those sweets. But if you called her, maybe, a chocolate croissant-- I don't know-- or a cookie, she would be fine with that. And it's those kinds of things that I felt I was be able to imbue her character with. Nobody ever called me a gulab jamun. But things that feel familiar but also allow you to understand who she is and her relationship with her culture.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask you about the illustration on page 92. It's a full page illustration. It's in color. And it's Priyanka wearing the pashmina under the ocean with rain pelting down on the surface of the ocean.

NIDHI CHANANI: Mm-hmm

DR. DANA: It comes at a time in the novel when things seem uncertain and perhaps a little ominous. And the illustration is connected to a story about the goddess Shakti. Can you tell us the story of Shakti? And then tell us a little about what's happening in the illustration.

NIDHI CHANANI: This is a great question. When you brought up page 92, I was thinking, man, I should probably know what you're talking about. I'm glad that you described it. Because moving forward, working on another book, I'm not as familiar with the pages.

But I really loved creating that page specifically. That, I felt-- I remember the feeling of finishing that drawing. And showing it to my husband and being really proud of what I pulled off. Because I wanted to pull off that connection of Priyanka being in a similar place as what Shakti was in in the beginning of the story. But not in composed, as Shakti was.

So the story is, and this is a very small folk tale. But it's not necessarily something a lot of people know about. When I was doing research into Shakti and Shakti stories, I came across the story about how she was worried. And she had gone to the other gods and goddesses and asked them what she should do about being worried. And they suggested to her to just be calm and kind of ride it out.

And so she went and sat and meditated. And while she was meditating, rain started to fall. And the rain became so much that it pooled around her. But then it didn't just pool around her. It kept rising like she was under an ocean.

And eventually, she was under the ocean. But still, she meditated. She was calm through the whole thing. Because she's a goddess. And because she was really connecting with who she was and the meditative place that she was in and wasn't letting the worry get to her. And the difference is, when Priyanka is in the fantasy world and rain starts to fall and she is underneath all the water, she is not composed. And she is worried. And she is feeling all of the questions of her life.

Question of where she came from. Who her father is? Who this shadow is? What is she doing with her life? And who is she?

And that, when she finds herself underneath that water-- so the water is a symbol of how she's feeling. And how she feels like she's drowning in all these questions. And all these places of her life that she wants to know more. Is she ready to know more? Can she go into that knowledge calmly? Or is it going to send her in a tailspin?

You have to follow her on that journey to figure it out. You know, to see how she handles it.

DR. DANA: The thing that I loved the most about your graphic novel was its message for women, especially young women who grew up in India.

NIDHI CHANANI: Yeah.

DR. DANA: Where women don't appear to have as much choice. Did a certain woman in your life inspire you in a difficult time, and in turn inspire parts of this story?

NIDHI CHANANI: I mean, definitely. My mom is the central inspiration for my work, my life, and a lot of things that she's gone through. She moved here with my dad. They ended up getting separated later on. They had a very kind of fiery relationship.

Seeing her come out of that relationship and take a stand to be separated, was huge. And it also ostracized her from the Indian community. From what I understand, that community here now is very different. And I don't think the same thing would happen in this time.

But in the 90s, that's what was happening. You know, my mom had to set up a whole new friend base. And being an immigrant, being ostracized from the community, going to parties where everybody asked you where is your husband, that kind of thing makes it really difficult where she's unfamiliar with the culture. And also can't interact with the culture that she is familiar with because there are so many barriers.

So seeing her deal with that, cope with that, come through it, with scars and also with victories, being able to create her own friend circle of women who've also gone through different things. And seeing her choose to be happy. She was happier on her own.

So definitely, the mom in *Pashmina* is very much like my mother. Of course, she's her own character. And definitely, my mom influences a lot of how I live my life. And as much as we

don't want to be our mothers, so I try not to be like her. But her threads definitely inspired me a lot.

DR. DANA: What was one thing that surprised you when you were creating *Pashmina*?

NIDHI CHANANI: How much work it was.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, I think when you do-- I did single illustrations for a really long time. And then I did short comics. And I had never-- this is kind of interesting.

I teach in a Master's program. I teach a Master's comics program in the California College of Art. One of the things we advise our students to do is to really start small. And then go medium. And then go big. Because each one of those things will teach you different things.

And I did not take, now, the advice that I give my students. I went from creating very short comics that were maybe a page or two, to creating a 167 page graphic novel. And so, in the process of skipping the line, and skipping the process, what I didn't know was all of the things that I learned along the way. That if I had done something that was smaller, even a 20 pager, I would have learned a lot of things that would have built up my comic muscles. So that when I got to *Pashmina* maybe it wouldn't have taken me four years.

And so I think the awareness of how long it takes to actually make a graphic novel was really surprising to me. And the other part of it, the flip side of that, is it takes you four years. And it could take somebody 45 minutes to read your book. Because the visual, it's different than a prose novel.

So it takes kids a very short period of time to finish the book. And the only upside-- well, not only upside. But the upside to that is, a lot of kids have told me that they'll finish the book in 45 minutes. But as soon as they're done with it, flip right back to the front and reread it. So I think that there's a benefit that being able to read it quickly means that your book will potentially be read multiple times.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

NIDHI CHANANI: I am working on my second graphic novel. It's called *Jukebox*. It's about two Muslim American cousins who find a jukebox that takes them back in time. I am drawing and writing and doing it. You know, I'm doing all the drawing and all the paneling and everything. But the writing part I'm doing with my husband. So that's really-- that's a new thing. And really fun and exciting and I'm in the thumbnail process right now. So this is the fun part.

DR. DANA: Nidhi Chanani, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today!

NIDHI CHANANI: Thank you so much for having me.