

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ACTING ENGLISH

BY SHAPPI KHORSANDI

Shappi Khorsandi is an Iranian born comedian. In the mid 1970s, at the age of three, her family temporarily moved to London, where her father got a job as satirical writer. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, he fell out of favour with the new leadership and the family eventually became refugees; as she puts it "... long before it became fashionable". catbox5ive (2009). The cultural shock and subsequent experiences are the cornerstones of her debut literary work entitled *A Beginner's Guide to Acting English* which was published in 2009 by Ebury Press.

When you first pick up the book, you are immediately stricken by the visual impression of the book's covers - they are filled with playful, almost childish typography intertwined with golden ornaments and a silhouette of the family - all of which took its inspiration from *Catch Me if You Can* graphics. It gives the impression of a light holiday reading or some sort of 'chick lit'.

(Bennett, S., 2009). Apart from silhouettes of the family running from a typical Iranian dwelling to an English one, the graphics do not give the content a proper introduction. They might even put off some prospective readers. Conversely, the content itself does not contain any images.

Contrary to the first impression, this is an autobiographical work of childhood and early teenage memories narrated through the eyes of a child who is going through a transition between cultures - transplanted from native land, culture and language into a different land with strikingly different culture and language. For the most part in chronological order apart from three flashbacks, which provide some backup information, it is a story of learning how her culture at home differs from what she experiences outside 'Maman did not keep any of the English teatime delicacies in our cupboard at home' Khorsandi (2009, p.6); exploration of the new environment when she and her brother discovered Hyde Park; meeting Father Christmas; being invited to her English classmate's house for lunch; recollecting how 'Baba gave us five pound every Saturday so we could go to with the other kids to McDonald's at lunchtime ' Khorsandi (2009, p.219); and not least of family love. It's also a story of rejection by peers for being of middle-eastern origin "You're all terrorists innit" (Khorsandi 2009, p.296), and trying her best to speak proper English,...."called me 'posh cow'"(Khorsandi 2009, p.297).

Not knowing the language young Shappi is at first limited in her observations about the people she meets, their presence and habits. Her encounters with 'Englesee' are not always pleasant and give us some insight into politically 'incorrect' attitude of the British at the time; for example Shappi is repeatedly called a 'Paki'. Fortunately for her, Shappi does not focus on the negative things; rather she takes in as much of the good as she can and learns from bad experience "...which made me feel really bad and I wished I was good as Zenith." Khorsandi (2009, p.119) Gradually she adopts 'the way of the English' as her own. This transformation provides an interesting insight of the differences between the two cultures and also how one influences the other and vice versa. Here, Shappi's humorous nature is manifested in witty descriptions and thoughts. "I love cheese... Mrs Thompson brought in our plate of neatly cut triangles of white bread, what lay in the middle was not what I knew as cheese. It was yellow. Cheese was white at my house and crumbly....These blocks of yellow cheese were horrible. They were thick and rubbery and sat between two slices of bread so white and spongy it was more like foam. I learned to swallow without tasting." Khorsandi (2009, p.219)

Through the process of becoming 'English' Shappi avoids temptations to make fun of either English or Iranian culture. She does notice the differences but accepts and incorporates them into her daily life. Or rather they become a part of her. In this light, *A Beginner's Guide to Acting English* differs from George Mikes's work *How to be an Alien*. Latter is a very direct, frank, humorous and satirical take on the habits of the British. The author also offers foreigners advice how to act and what to say when in Britain. The work, albeit written in a satirical way, can act as a 'How to' guide. In contrast, the work of Shappi Khorsandi does not really come across as a guide or satire. As a result, the only thing these works have in common is that they talk about the interaction with British culture from a foreigner's perspective.

Despite the light comedic touch, the story has a darker side to it. It conveys the pain of losing people who are dear and close to Shappi (her uncle dies in protest at the dawn of the Iranian Islamic Revolution; and her friend Rana who accidentally dies after falling out of the window).

In addition, Shappi and her family are faced with worries about the rest of the family back in Tehran who are caught amidst the revolution; and finally have to fear for their own survival, when her father's political writing makes him into 'an enemy of the Iranian state' and is threatened with assassination. This eventually leads in Shappi to a subconscious fear and loathing of being Iranian. "As a result, I did everything I could to become English," "I didn't want anything to do with being Iranian because to me it was just bleak and scary." Khorsandi in Merritt (2009)

All in all, this is a fairly unexpected book for an established comedian. It does not follow the theme and tone of her stand-up routines, nor is the book laugh-out-loud funny. Instead of delivering punch lines it narrates the trials and tribulations of an immigrant family, but more importantly of one child's view of reconciliation and merger of two very different cultures. It does not attempt to answer the question of what it means to be English or define 'Englishness'. Rather, it portrays the cultural transition from being an outsider to fitting in.

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