

# Kaahini

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She has continually crossed boundaries and produced vibrant challenging work. In 2000 she received a *Year of the Artist* Research & Development Award for *Destiny* - a digital poetic tapestry. As an inTer-aCt-ive artist her recent online writing includes [www.foundland.net](http://www.foundland.net), an Internet writing collaboration, and she was KODE Electronic Writer-in-Residence with Jubilee Arts [www.kodewords.net](http://www.kodewords.net).

Her stage plays include: *The Crossing Path* (The National Theatre: *Shell Connections*), *Playing With Fire* (TAG Theatre), *Sanctuary*, a multi-level interactive theatre experience (Yorkshire Women's Theatre), *Seeing* (workshopped at The Royal Court Theatre), *Kaahini* (Birmingham Repertory Company, Red Ladder Theatre Company; National Tour), *An Appetite for Living* (West Yorkshire Playhouse), *Splinters* (Bradford Theatre in the Mill / Talawa Theatre at The Lyric Studio). She was writer-on-attachment at the National Theatre Studio in 2002.



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# Kaahini

by Maya Chowdhry



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# Introduction

**...are we able to play with our gender and sexuality?**

It seems in the intervening years between writing *Kaahini* and its publication that boundaries have been crossed and views broadened, but the story at the heart of *Kaahini* resonates across the years into an imagined future where possibilities defy cultural stereotypes, gender roles and sexualities.

I wrote *Kaahini* because I am interested in identities; in the fluidity of the countless factors that make up our identities, the narrowness of gender roles and the osmotic relationship between culture and identity.

I have spent thirty-nine years searching for my identity and have discovered many identities which have changed over the years. I've uncovered inner and outer identities and unearthed an ability to transform according to the landscape of my life.

Unpicking my identity has been a matter of survival for me: sifting through the identities assigned to me by society; transforming and coming to an understanding of who I am; emerging defiantly from the image society has projected on me and finally being who I want to be.

In researching this play I have uncovered shamanic rituals in which men and women exchange genders. I have explored Hindu philosophy which recounts how the 'self' moves into time and emotions; feels desire and splits into male and female at the beginning of the world. Reflecting on the genderless nature of 'the soul' I reread the tale of Sikhandin in 'The Mahabharata', where King Drupada brings up his daughter as a son after a

dream in which Shiva tells him his Queen is bearing a son. I thought about the implications of the legacy of the 'Ramayana'; boys are told to be like Rama and girls to be like Sita, and the taboos this puts in place.

In writing *Kaahini* I wanted to put some of the ideas and information I've gained working with young Asian people into a play for and about their experiences, yet it was essential for me to push the boundaries of familiar themes and stories and find an exciting contemporary place to perform the play.

The play contains only the essential directions for the action which allows the director more freedom of interpretation in staging the play. When I write I see the play in an almost dream-like state yet I am always delightfully surprised by the look and feel of the production. Kully Thiarai, who directed *Kaahini* at Red Ladder Theatre Company worked with designer Kamini Gupta to produce an impressionistic set complete with musical soundtrack while Indhu Rubasingham, director and Nancy Surman, designer, produced a more naturalistic set complete with railway tracks running up centre stage for the production by the Birmingham Rep.

*Kaahini* was commissioned and developed by Red Ladder Theatre Company and toured nationally. It premiered at Bradford Theatre in the Mill, May 1997. The company wanted a play about identity that spoke specifically to young Asian women. The Birmingham Rep re-staged the play in 1998. The play was nominated for Best Children's Theatre by the Writers Guild.

**Maya Chowdhry 2004**

## Cast

- ESHA: an Asian teenager.
- FAROOQ: an Asian teenager, Esha's best friend.
- ANISHAA: Esha's mum, in her early thirties.
- NEELENDRA: Esha's dad, in his mid thirties.
- MYSTIC: Old man Neelendra and Anishaa visit. (can be played by Farooq's character)

# Scene 1

## (Prologue)

**NEELENDRA**, a young Asian man (17), wearing kurta pyjama, and **ANISHAA**, a young Asian woman (16), wearing a lavish salwaar kameez and a duputta, weave in and out of a fair, the sounds fill the night air.

They enter a tent and sit cross-legged. The **MYSTIC** is obscured, a small fire separates them, it emits a clear orange flame with little smoke which glows in the dark.

**MYSTIC**: Tell me your troubles.

**NEELENDRA**: I don't have any.

**MYSTIC**: Then why have you come?

**ANISHAA**: He's had this dream and wants to know – (what it means).

**NEELENDRA**: Nisha!

**MYSTIC**: Speak.

**NEELENDRA**: Well I dreamt, it felt like I was a (**pause**) woman in the dream and I was about to give birth. I look down to see that my belly has split open, blood surges out like a huge wave, it seems like my whole self is draining away. Then er . . .

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**NEELENDRA is sweating and mops his brow with a handkerchief, he looks at ANISHAA.**

ANISHAA: There was a, er, serpent.

NEELENDRA: Suddenly there is this sea serpent drinking the blood from my open belly. Then I watch a buffalo leave from the same wound, it floats up into the air and I know it's my soul.

**ANISHAA glances at NEELENDRA slightly surprised by the vivid description.**

MYSTIC: How did you feel about this dream?

NEELENDRA: I didnt really think about it.

**The MYSTIC chants quietly. A column of incense spirals into the air. NEELENDRA and ANISHAA look at each other nervously. ANISHAA nudges him.**

NEELENDRA: I was afraid (**pause**) my family think Ive made a big mistake with my love marriage.

MYSTIC: Do not fear your dream. What have you asked for in recent prayers?

NEELENDRA: Well, I've asked Lord Krishna for an answer.

MYSTIC: The buffalo symbolises prayer and abundance, it says, 'Ask and it shall be given to you, be grateful for your blessings and you will receive.' The dream indicates you will be given what you have asked for.

**The fire flares up. NEELENDRA looks away anxiously.**

MYSTIC: But it is more complicated than that. In the dream it is you who are the mother, this represents a part of yourself you cannot face, yet you are already a father.



ANISHAA: What!

NEELENDRA: I don't understand, the dream, you said it's an answer to my prayer.

MYSTIC: It is an answer, but in unravelling this, it may not be the answer you seek. The dream speaks of your destiny, remember your kismet is larger than your own life. **(Pause)** I see that you want a son for your life to be fulfilled, it's as if you believe you must have a son to prove your worth to your family. **(Pause)** Be careful – where needs and desires cross the path of destiny only chaos will be found. What you love in your life may slip away from you.

NEELENDRA: **(whispers)** Cross the path of destiny, what is he talking about?

ANISHAA: **(whispers)** You know, if you fight against what's destined for you and want what can't be, then things will end up a mess.

NEELENDRA: What should I do now?

MYSTIC: Nothing, it has been done, I cannot interfere with your destiny, you know it deep within. The dream is a reflection of this, its significance will unravel with your life. I cannot tell you any more.

**The flame in front of them flickers and dies. NEELENDRA lays some money down. ANISHAA and NEELENDRA get up and touch their foreheads as they leave.**

ANISHAA: Is that really what you dreamt? I don't remember all that. And praying, I didn't know you were – *(praying for an answer)*.

NEELENDRA: It sort of came back to me when he was asking the questions. What do you think's destined – *(for me?)*

ANISHAA: I cant be p . . . *(regnant)*

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NEELENDRA: What did he mean about a son and being fulfilled?

**ANISHAA strokes her belly.**

## Scene 2

**Sixteen years later. ESHA (16), an Asian lad wearing a school tracksuit, tosses a football into the air and practises ball-skills in an alleyway. He counts with a rhyme as he does it.**

ESHA: One for mummyji, one for daddyji, one for captainji, one for me. One for mummyji, one for daddyji, one for captainji, one for me.

**ESHA becomes daring and practises across the railway level crossing, jumping out of the way just as he hears a train coming, it thunders past. ESHA watches it go and shouts in time to the train:**

ESHA: One for me. One for me. One for me. One for me.  
**(Laughs)**

## Scene 3

**NEELENDRA (33, wearing a train-driver's uniform) sits at the kitchen table reading a newspaper. ANISHAA (32, wearing a green salwaar kameez) sprinkles some flour and then thumps some dough down onto the table in front of him.**

ANISHAA: Do you want roti?

**NEELENDRA answers from behind his newspaper.**

NEELENDRA: Rice will do.

ANISHAA: I can make if you want.

NEELENDRA: Not bothered.

ANISHAA: Shall I wait for Esha then?

**ANISHAA kneads the dough and starts to make rotia regardless. ESHA charges in carrying a Nike sports bag; he flings the bag under the table.**

ESHA: Goal!

ANISHAA: Take it upstairs love, tea's nearly ready.

ESHA: What is it? I'm starving.

ANISHAA: Lamb.

**ESHA sits at the table.**

ANISHAA: Hello Esha, hello dad.

ESHA: He's reading.

NEELENDRA: Good game?

ESHA: All right, some of the lads are slacking off and it puts the drills out.

NEELENDRA: You've a couple of weeks yet. If they exhaust themselves now they'll have nothing left for the match. They're not all as obsessively fit as you.

**ANISHAA continues to make rotia, laying them on the table beside NEELENDRA. NEELENDRA disappears behind the newspaper.**

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NEELENDRA: Help your mum.

ANISHAA: Just these rotia.

**ESHA opens a chocolate bar . NEELENDRA puts down the paper.**

NEELENDRA: Wait for your tea.

ANISHAA: Never mind, it's all that exercise. It won't be long love.

NEELENDRA: Oh he gets to spoil his tea, but I don't.

ESHA: Don't start you two, you'll give me indigestion.

**ANISHAA gazes at the uncooked rotia and then at NEELENDRA. ESHA stuffs the chocolate bar into his mouth.**

ANISHAA: How hungry are you?

NEELENDRA: Not very.

ANISHAA: Why didn't you say?

NEELENDRA: I said rice would do.

ANISHAA: I'm surprised you bother to stay for tea.

ESHA: **(mouth full of chocolate)** Stop it.

NEELENDRA: Don't you talk to your mum like that!

ANISHAA: Esha, don't talk with your mouth full.

ESHA: I'm talking to both of you.

ANISHAA: Well don't talk to your dad like that, he's had a hard day.

**ANISHAA starts to push the rotia back into the dough.**

ESHA: Yeah? He's not the only one 'round here whose days are shit.

ANISHAA: Esha!

NEELENDRA: Oh for god's sake Anishaa I'll eat them now they're made.

ESHA: Gotta dash.

NEELENDRA: Where do you think you're going?

ESHA: To the alley to practise.

NEELENDRA: No you're not. You can help your mum with the rotia.

ANISHAA: It's all right, he's probably got homework to do.

ESHA: I don't.

NEELENDRA: Don't you? I can ring Mr Qureshi and check if Farooq has any. I'm sure his father doesn't allow him to roam the street at all hours.

ESHA: Dad! Don't embarrass me. Anyway he goes out when he wants.

ANISHAA: I'm sure he doesn't, he's a respectable — (*boy*)

NEELENDRA: Anishaa! I'll deal with this.

**NEELENDRA bangs on the table with his fist, flour cascades onto the floor. ANISHAA jumps up and starts to clear it up.**

NEELENDRA: Well you're not going out, you're out too much these days.

ESHA: I'm not staying here listening to your bollocks. You never let me have any freedom.

NEELENDRA: Watch your mouth.

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**ESHA bursts into tears and runs out.**

NEELENDRA: You come back here.

ANISHAA: You're being too hard on him, he's a lot on with this training for the cup final. You know how seriously he takes his football.

NEELENDRA: Crying at his age? Just because he can't get his own way. He's too soft you mean. You've let him get away with too much.

ANISHAA: What does it matter whose fault it is?

## Scene 4

**ESHA wipes his face on his sweatshirt and tosses his football into the air. FAROOQ, (16) an Asian lad dressed in jeans and a shirt, watches from the side of the alleyway. ESHA doesn't notice him and starts his practice drill.**

ESHA: One for mummyji, one for daddyji, one for captainji, one for me.

**FAROOQ saunters over to ESHA.**

FAROOQ: What's that shit you're saying?

**ESHA kicks the football up and catches it in his hands.**

ESHA: Just my training man.

FAROOQ: What's your mum and dad got to do with it?

ESHA: Nothing!

FAROOQ: I don't get it.