

# The Mother of the Child in Question (1988)

walkway *gangbro*  
social worker  
*socialrådgiver*  
survey *se hen over*  
acre *område*  
credentials  
*bemyndigelse*  
puddle *vandpyt*  
dazzled *var*  
*blændende*  
crammed *proppet*  
thorough *grundig*  
cushion *pude*  
plump *buttet*  
tunic *bluse*

High on a walkway connecting two tower blocks Stephen Bentley, social worker, stopped to survey the view. 10 Cement, everywhere he looked. Stained grey piles went up into the sky, and down below lay grey acres where only one person moved among puddles, soft drink cans and bits of damp paper. This was an old man with a stick and a shopping bag. In front of Stephen, horizontally dividing 15 the heavy building from pavement to low cloud, were rows of many-coloured curtains where people kept out of sight. They were probably watching him, but he had his credentials, the file under his arm. The end of this walkway was on the fourth floor. The lift smelled bad: some- 20 one had been sick in it. He walked up grey urine-smelling stairs to the eighth floor, Number 15. The very moment he rang, the door was opened by a smiling brown boy. This must be Hassan, the twelve-year-old. His white teeth, his bright blue jersey, the white collar of his shirt, all dazzled, 25 and behind him the small room crammed with furniture was too tidy for a family room, everything just so, polished, shining. Thorough preparations had been made for this visit. In front of a red plush sofa was the oblong of a low table, and on it waited cups, saucers and a sugar bowl full 30 to the brim. A glinting spoon stood upright in it. Hassan sat down on the sofa, smiling hard. Apart from the sofa, there were three chairs, full of shiny cushions. In one of them sat Mrs Khan, a plump pretty lady wearing the outfit Stephen thought of as 'pyjamas' – trousers and tunic in 35 flowered pink silk. They looked like best clothes, and the ten-year-old girl in the other chair wore a blue tunic and trousers, with earrings, bangles and rings. Mother wore a pink gauzy scarf, the child a blue one. These, in Pakistan, would be there ready to be pulled modestly up at the sight 40

of a man, but here they added to the festive atmosphere. Stephen sat down in the empty chair at Mrs Khan's (Stephen particularly noted) peremptory gesture. But she smiled. Hassan smiled and smiled. The little girl had not, 5 it seemed, noticed the visitor, but she smiled too. She was pretty, like a kitten.

'Where is Mr Khan?' asked Stephen of Mrs Khan, who nodded commandingly at her son. Hassan at once said, 'No, he cannot come, he is at work.'

10 'But he told me he would be here. I spoke to him on the telephone yesterday.'

Again the mother gave Hassan an order with her eyes, and he said, smiling with all his white teeth, 'No, he is not here.'

15 In the file that had the name Shireen Khan on the front, the last note, dated nine months before, said, 'Father did not keep appointment. His presence essential.'

Mrs Khan said something in a low voice to her son, who allowed the smile to have a rest just as long as it took 20 to fetch a tray with a pot of tea on it, and biscuits, from the side board. They must have been watching from the windows and made the tea when they saw him down there, file under his arm. Hassan put the smile back on his face when he sat down again. Mrs Khan poured strong tea. The 25 boy handed Stephen a cup, and the plate of biscuits.

Mrs Khan set a cup before her daughter, and counted five biscuits on to a separate plate and put this near the cup. The little girl was smiling at – it seemed – attractive private fancies. Mrs Khan clicked her tongue with annoy- 30 ance and said something to her in Urdu. But Shireen took no notice. She was bursting with internal merriment, and the result of her mother's prompting was that she tried to share this with her brother, reaching out to poke him mischievously, and laughing. Hassan could not prevent a 35 real smile at her, tender, warm, charmed. He instantly removed this smile and put back the polite false one.

'Five,' said Mrs Khan in English. 'She can count. Say five, Shireen' It was poor English, and she repeated the command in Urdu.

40 The little girl smiled delightfully and began breaking

peremptory  
*bydende*  
essential *væsentl*  
annoyance  
*irritation*  
Urdu *indisk sprog*  
prompting  
*tilskyndelse*  
mischievously  
*gavtyveagtigt*



Government-  
funded  
statsstøttet  
tuition  
undervisning  
woeful ulykkelig  
soothing  
beroligende  
peevish vranten,  
sur  
perfunctory  
ligegyldig

up the biscuits and eating them.

'If your husband would agree to it, Shireen could go to the school we discussed – my colleague William Smith discussed with you – when he came last year. It is a good school. It would cost a little but not much. It is Government-funded but there is a small charge this year. Unfortunately.'

Mrs Khan said something sharp and the boy translated. His English was fluent 'It is not money. My father has the money.'

'Then I am sorry but I don't understand. The school would be good for Shireen.'

Well, within limits. In the file was a medical report, part of which read, 'The child in question would possibly benefit to a limited extent from special tuition.'

Mrs Khan said something loud and angry. Her amiable face was twisted with anger. Anxiety and anger had become the air in this small overfilled overclean room, and now the little girl's face was woeful and her lips quivered. Hassan at once put out his hand to her and made soothing noises. Mrs Khan tried simultaneously to smile at the child and show a formal cold face to the intrusive visitor.

Hassan said, 'My mother says Shireen must go to the big school, Beavertree School.'

'Is that where you go, Hassan?'

'Yes, sir.'

'My name is Stephen, Stephen Bentley.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Your father should be here,' said Stephen, trying not to sound peevish. There was something going on, but he could not make out what. If it wasn't that two daughters were doing well at school Stephen would have thought perhaps Mr Khan was old-fashioned and didn't want Shireen educated. (The two girls were both older than Hassan, but being girls did not count. It was the oldest son who had to be here representing the father.) Not that there was any question of 'educating' Shireen. So what was it? Certainly he had sounded perfunctory yesterday on the telephone, agreeing to be here today.

Mrs Khan now took out a child's picture book she had put down the side of the armchair for this very moment,

and held it in front of Shireen. It was a brightly coloured book, for a three-year-old, perhaps. Shireen smiled at it in a vacant willing way. Mrs Khan turned the big pages, frowning and nodding encouragingly at Shireen. Then she made herself smile. The boy was smiling away like anything. Shireen was happy and smiling.

'Look,' said Stephen, smiling but desperate, 'I'm not saying that Shireen will learn to read well, or anything like that, but ...'

At this Mrs Khan slammed the book shut and faced him. No smiles. A proud, cold, stubborn woman, eyes flashing, she demolished him in Urdu.

Hassan translated the long tirade thus. 'My mother says Shireen must go to the big school with the rest of us.'

'But, Mrs Khan, she can't go to the big school. How can she?' As Mrs Khan did not seem to have taken this in, he addressed the question again to Hassan. 'How can she go to the big school? It's not possible!'

Hassan's smile was wan, and Stephen could swear there were tears in his eyes. But he turned his face away.

Another angry flood from Mrs Khan, but Hassan did not interpret. He sat silent and looked sombrely at the chuckling and delighted little girl who was stirring biscuit crumbs around her plate with her finger. Mrs Khan got up, full of imperious anger, pulled Shireen up from her chair, and went stormily out of the room, tugging the child after her by the hand. Stephen could hear her exclaiming and sighing and moving around the next room, and addressing alternately admonishing and tender remarks to the child. Then she wept loudly.

Hassan said, 'Excuse me, sir, but I must go to my school. I asked permission to be here, and my teacher said yes, but I must go back quickly.'

'Did your father tell you to be here?'

Hassan hesitated. 'No, sir. My mother said I must be here.'

For the first time Hassan was really looking at ham. It even seemed that he might say something, explain ... His eyes were full of a plea. For understanding? There was pride there, hurt.

to frown rynke  
panden  
demolish bide af  
tirade ordstrøm  
wan bleg  
sombrely dystert  
imperious bydeni  
admonish formar

dismal trist  
subnormal  
retarderet  
stultify  
latterliggøre  
lunacy vanvid  
balustrade  
gelænder

'Thank you for staying to interpret, Hassan,' said the social worker. 'I wish I could talk to your father ...'

'Excuse me, excuse me,' said Hassan, and went running out. Stephen called, 'Goodbye, Mrs Khan,' got no reply, and followed the boy. Along the dismal, stained and smelly 5 corridors. Down the grey cement stairs. On to the walkway. A wind was blowing, fresh and strong. He looked down and saw Hassan four storeys below, a small urgent figure racing, across the cement, leaping puddles, kicking bits of paper. He reached the street and vanished. He was 10 running from a situation he hated: his whole body shouted it. What on earth ... Just *what* was all that about?

And then Stephen understood. Suddenly. Just like that. But he couldn't believe it. But yes, he had to believe it. No, it wasn't possible ... 15

Not impossible. It was true.

Mrs Khan did not know that Shireen was 'subnormal' as the medical record put it. She was not going to admit it. Although she had two normal sons and two normal daughters, all doing well at school, and she knew what 20 normal bright children were like, she was not going to make the comparison. For her, Shireen was normal. No good saying, this was impossible. For Stephen was muttering, 'No, it simply isn't on, it's crazy.' Anyway he found these 'impossibilities' in this work every day. A rich and 25 various lunacy inspired the human race and you could almost say the greater part of his work was dealing with this lunacy.

Stephen stood clutching the balustrade and gripping the file, because the wind was swirling noisily around the 30 high walkway. His eyes were shut because he was examining in his mind's eyes the picture of Mrs Khan's face, that proud, cold, refusing look. So would a woman look while her husband shouted at her, 'You stupid woman, she can't go to the big school with the others, why are you so stub- 35 born? Do I have to explain it to you again?' She must have confronted her husband with this look and her silence a hundred times! And so he had not turned up for the appointment, or for the other appointment, because he knew it was no good. He didn't want to have to say to some social 40

worker, 'My wife's a fine woman, but she has this little peculiarity!' And Hassan wasn't going to say, 'You see, sir, there's a little problem with my mother.'

Stephen, eyes still shut, went on replaying what he had 5 seen in that room: the tenderness on Mrs Khan's face for her afflicted child: the smile on the boy's face, the real, warm, affectionate smile, her afflicted child, the smile, at his sister. The little girl was swaddled in their tenderness, the family adored her, what was she going to learn at the 10 special school better than she was getting from her family?

Stephen found he was filling with emotions that threatened to lift him off the walkway with the wind and float him off into the sky like a balloon. He wanted to laugh, or clap his hands, or sing with exhilaration. That woman, 15 that *mother*, would not admit her little girl was simple. She just wouldn't agree to it! Why, it was a wonderful thing, a miracle! Good for you, Mrs Khan, said Stephen Bentley opening his eyes, looking at the curtained windows four floors above him where he had no doubt Mrs Khan 20 was watching him, proud she had won yet another victory against those busybodies who would class her Shireen as stupid.

'Bloody marvellous,' shouted the social worker into the wind. He opened his file against his knee then and there 25 and wrote, 'Father did not turn up as arranged. His presence essential.' The date. His own name.

peculiarity særhed  
afflicted syg  
swaddled svøbt  
exhilaration  
opstemthed  
busybody  
geskæftig person  
class stemple

## Background:

1. Use the Internet to find information about the British Empire and about immigration to England from e.g. Pakistan.

## Pair/group work:

1. Translate the title into Danish.
2. Describe the setting, both the area and the flat, in the first paragraph.
3. What is your impression of the Pakistani family's lifestyle?
4. What is Stephen Bentley's task?

5. How does Hassan behave towards Stephen, Shireen and his mother, respectively?
6. Explain Hassan's role in the story.
7. What is the matter with 'the child in question'? Characterize Shireen.
8. Characterize the mother and explain her attitude to the problem.
9. Explain the father's absence.
10. Explain Stephen Bentley's reaction, as described in the last two paragraphs.
11. Which of the characters is the most important one, i.e. the main character?
12. What is the main theme of this story?

### Topics for discussion:

1. Who should be responsible for children's education?
2. Should abnormal children be obliged to receive special tuition?
3. Look at the opening paragraph again and establish the writer's attitude to tower block housing of the kind described here. In your opinion, what kind of housing should be provided by society?
4. In this story a culture clash occurs – give other examples of this phenomenon and discuss it.

### Written work:

1. Write an essay about typical problems in a multi-cultural society.
2. Write a summary of the story, in which everything is seen from Hassan's point of view.
3. Using the Internet, or an encyclopedia, find background information about emigration from Europe to the USA around 1900, and write an essay on this subject.