The Ground Beneath her Shoes

Sikeena Karmali, author of award-winning novel 'A House by the Sea', talks about her muse

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Sikeena Karmali

You were born in Kenya to Gujarati Indian parents and grew up in Canada, the US, Italy and Egypt. Will you please share this experience with us?

I was born in Nairobi, Kenya and grew up in Tanzania and Canada. I was educated, meaning I pursued my university education in Italy (University of Bologna), Canada (McGill University), Egypt (American University in Cairo) and the US (UCLA).

Your "A House by the Sea", as Jaya Tripathi in South Asian Women's Network has put it, wanders between continents and culture. There we see you use Urdu-Hindi words with some brilliance. Let me quote Jaya again: Kathak (the dance) is Khatak (onomaetopic for gun-shot), imli (tamarind) is imbli (the 'b' makes the word sound more like imbecile or imbroglio) and ganthia (chickpea flour based snack) is ghatia (meaning of sub-standard quality), Gul-shan is Ghul-shan, ('gul' meaning rose while 'ghul' is to mix or amalgamate). Why this fascination for a language in which you are not writing?

You must also remember that the transliteration from various South Asian scripts into English script is not straight forward, especially not in North America where one has to battle with publishers and editors merely to retain the foreign words. Secondly, you must be careful not to impose your own prevalence/preference for the usage and meaning of these words. In Kutchi and in Gujarati which are my mother tongues and to which A House By the Sea refers for the most part, it is for example "gathia" and not "ganthia" as the n is silent, and should you happen to purchase the chickpea flour snack in Gujrati run Indian grocery in Canada the package will