

Identity and Islamophobia in Twenty-First Century British Muslim Novels

Lewis Ridgway

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which contemporary British Muslim novelists are exploring Muslim identity and depicting Islam in a context of heightened Islamophobia. The authors have been chosen for the ways in which they are complicating and re-shaping established literary forms and genre expectations, including the *bildungsroman* and 'family marriage plot', and reworking established issues and themes, including racism in Britain, family and friendship. The works have been selected for their engagement with British Muslim identity as represented and dramatised in the media and popular culture, and for how they intervene in contemporary debates about state multiculturalism and secular liberalism, not least how the role of religion is shaped differently in different diasporic contexts and how anti-Asian racism is fuelled by Islamophobia. In order of discussion, the primary texts are: Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004); Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) and Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008); Samir Rahim's *Asghar and Zahra* (2019) and Monica Ali's *Love Marriage* (2022); Tariq Mehmood's *Song of Gulzarina* (2016) and Nadim Safdar's *Akram's War* (2016); and *The Study Circle* by Haroun Khan (2018). My readings encompass how Muslim novelists are positioned in Britain by publishers and reviewers, the 'burden of representation' British writers who are Muslim are expected to carry, and the pervasive (neo-)orientalist discourse that continues to shape how Muslim characters are read, or risk

being read. I consider how contemporary 'framings' of Muslims in Britain are filtered through government programmes like the Prevent strategy, and how the novelists I have foregrounded are mounting a critique to address as well as explore the deleterious effects of surveillance on Muslim communities, as well as delimiting representation and characterisation. The thesis explores how these contemporary British novelists are building complexity into representation of Britons who are often maligned.

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Introduction

Race is something people cannot choose and it defines nothing about them as people. But beliefs are what people choose to identify with: in the rough and tumble of argument to call people stupid for their beliefs is legitimate (if perhaps unwise), but to brand them stupid on account of their race is a mortal insult. The two cannot be blurred into one - which is why the word Islamophobia is a nonsense (Polly Toynbee, 2005).¹

These words from *Guardian* journalist Polly Toynbee would be rightly condemned if used to describe other forms of discrimination such as antisemitism, yet her opinion is echoed in different ways by established figures, including individuals who purport to be on the liberal left in Britain or in the US. Proponents of this view have included novelist Martin Amis, comedian and talk show host Bill Maher, and neuroscientist and author Sam Harris, and they illustrate a blind spot in which bigoted attitudes towards Muslim religious and cultural identity are adopted uncritically and accepted tacitly.² This is why it is important to turn to researched

¹ Polly Toynbee, "My right to offend a fool," *The Guardian*, 10/6/2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jun/10/religion.politicalcolumnists> accessed 26/11/2023.

² Martin Amis said, "There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suff--er---ing? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-

and clarifying definitions of Islamophobia that help to keep the problem in view, like that provided by Imran Awan and Irene Zempi in 2020:

A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and nonMuslims [sic], both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.³

The terms 'Islam' and 'Muslim' as they appear in opinion pieces and political rhetoric, or even as the subject of books, though, are often so ill-defined as to become a generalisation that is fixed in place as a problem but abstracted. Rather than recognising and respecting a diverse group of Britons, the risk is that Muslims are

searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.'" Quoted in Sarfraz Manzoor, "Something Amis," *The Guardian*, 5/2/2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/feb/05/somethingamis> accessed 20/1/2024; Bill Maher has made numerous incendiary remarks about Muslims. He is quoted as saying: "I don't have to apologize, do I, for not wanting the Western world to be taken over by Islam in three hundred years?" Bill Maher in Hamid Dabashi, "When it comes to Islamophobia, we need to name names," *Al Jazeera*, 31/3/2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/31/when-it-comes-to-islamophobia-we-need-to-name-names> accessed 5/11/2023 ; Hamid Dabashi describes Sam Harris as Maher's "sidekick" and a member of his "fraternity club" of liberal Islamophobes, Hamid Dabashi, "The liberal roots of Islamophobia," *Al Jazeera*, 3/3/2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/3/3/the-liberal-roots-of-islamophobia> accessed 5/11/2023.

³ Imran Awan and Irene Zempi, "A Working Definition of Islamophobia: A Briefing Paper," *UN Human Rights Office*, November 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Islamophobia-AntiMuslim/Civil%20Society%20or%20Individuals/ProfAwan-2.pdf> accessed 28/10/2023.

represented in contemporary British culture only as a challenge to liberalism, multiculturalism, and secularism, and as a security threat to a national and 'civilised' identity. Sadia Abbas describes this use of 'Islam' as "a discursive site, a flexible and simultaneously constrained signifier, indeed a geopolitical agon, in and around which some of the most pressing aporias of modernity, enlightenment, liberalism, and Reformation are worked out".⁴ In 2006, Martin Amis caused considerable controversy with the assertion that Muslims in the UK "will have to suffer" in order for what he defined as a homogenous "Muslim community" to "get its house in order". He extrapolated on what he meant: "not letting them travel. Deportation — further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children..."⁵ In an essay he expounded this sentiment as a response to intense security following terror attacks; he described how watching airport officials meticulously searching his six-year-old daughter's rucksack made him want to tell them to "stick to people who look like they're from the Middle East".⁶ He was taken to task by literary critic Terry Eagleton who summarised: "Amis's panic-stricken reaction to 9/11 is part of a wider hysteria that has swept over sections of the liberal left, one to which creative writers

⁴ Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 1.

⁵ Martin Amis quoted in Manzoor, "Something Amis".

⁶ Martin Amis, "The age of horrorism (part two)," *The Guardian*, 10/9/2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety1> accessed 6/7/2024.

seem particularly prone”.⁷ In another controversial essay journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown assessed that “Muslim-baiters and haters, these days [are] as likely to come from the Groucho and Garrick clubs as the nasty, secret venues used by neo-fascists”.⁸ In this construction, Muslim minorities risk being scapegoated for societal problems, with a homogenously constructed ‘majoritarian’ (white) society figured as benign by contrast. Histories of violence perpetuated through colonialism and its legacy in racist British governmental policies and attitudes risk being either elided or redeemed by a presentist focus on the so-called ‘war on terror’ and on the perceived threat of Islamists above all other groups. Moreover, mediated accounts of Muslims provide scant insight into the complexities and challenges of life in Britain, and it is against this context that literary fiction offers an intriguing means of exploring contemporary debates and ideas from the multiple perspectives of British Muslim characters, as this thesis will do.

Introducing a collection of stories tellingly entitled *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough* in 2011, Kavita Bhanot asserted that “British Asian identity as we know it today” emerged in the 1990s, with the work of Hanif Kureishi, and that when British

⁷ Terry Eagleton, “Rebuking obnoxious views is not just a personality kink,” *The Guardian*, 10/10/2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/10/comment.religion> accessed 6/7/2024.

⁸ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “It’s time for civilised and honest engagement” *The Independent*, 8/10/2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131009183433/http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/yasmin-alibhaibrown-its-time-for-civilised-and-honest-engagement-394480.html> accessed 6/7/2024.

Asians first saw themselves represented “in the mainstream” on television and in film, they were inspired with confidence that “allowed us to think that there could be a similar interest in our own creative work”. But, she believes, thereafter a set of clichéd narratives ensued that have been focussed on generational conflict inside families, stories that pit assumptions about an “exotic India” against a “political Pakistan” and set both against a white Britain conceived as primarily “secular, liberal, and middle class”, which has led to a series of what she summarises as “unthinking dichotomies”.⁹ In different ways and with different but converging emphases, the writers foregrounded in this thesis explore her concern that “Asian” and “Islam” are simplified and that religion, ritual and lived faith are “stripp[ed] of specific traditions”.¹⁰

Broad studies of contemporary British fiction have typically been inclusive of Kureishi, but even in Dominic Head’s *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (2002), marketed as “the most exhaustive survey of post-war British fiction available”, Islam is only considered in relation to the “Salman Rushdie Affair” over the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and, then, covered only in a page or so. When British Muslims are mentioned, it is in the context of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and the satirical depiction of the character Millat travelling from London to Bradford to protest against *The Satanic Verses*, a “dirty book” which he has

⁹ Kavita Bhanot, “Introduction,” *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2011), vii.

¹⁰ Bhanot, “Introduction,” *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough*, xii.

not read, because he is seduced by the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, with its ridiculous acronym KEVIN, and he “recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands”.¹¹ Fiction by British Muslim writers does not figure in this capacious study, then.¹² In another survey of contemporary British fiction, Nick Bentley examines Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) under the broad banner of ‘postcolonial fiction’, leaving readers with little sense of the burgeoning sub-genre of British Muslim writing beyond these high-profile novels.¹³ Another critic, James Procter, contributing to *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (2006), charts changing approaches to representation from the fiction of Farrukh Dhondy in the late 1970s and 1980s through to Rushdie and Kureishi in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but neglects the work of a British Muslim writer, Tariq Mehmood, whose realist representations drew heavily on his experiences of racism and signalled a distinct break from the “cheering fictions” that Kureishi decried as “right on” and characteristic of British writing.¹⁴

¹¹ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 233-234.

¹² Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2002), 181-82, 184-85. The description of the work as “the most exhaustive” is in the summary on the back cover.

¹³ Nick Bentley, “Writing Contemporary Ethnicities,” and “Narratives of Cultural Space,” in *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 65-93, 160-189.

¹⁴ James Procter, “New Ethnicities, the Novel, and the Burdens of Representation,” in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. James E. English (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 101-119. Kureishi coined the term “cheering fictions” to criticise “right-on” fictional portrayals that emphasise “positive” images to counter racism. Hanif Kureishi, “Dirty Washing,” *Time Out*, November 1985, 14–20 cited in Nahem Yousaf, “Hanif Kureishi and ‘the brown man’s burden’,” *Critical Survey* 8:1 (1996): 14-25.

Though often overlooked in studies of contemporary literature, British Muslim fiction has received sustained attention in the work of several prominent critics, the most prolific of which include Amina Yaqin, Peter Morey, Claire Chambers, and Rehana Ahmed.¹⁵ Ahmed's *Writing British Muslims* (2015) examines literary representations of Muslims in fiction and in memoirs in the context of increasingly polarising debates on multiculturalism. Ahmed is as intrigued by what the texts she selects do not say as much what they do, and investigates their "curious gaps, elisions and omissions" for how they can reveal the "ideological pressures" behind wider and external perceptions of Muslims and of multiculturalism in contemporary Britain.¹⁶ This approach is exemplified in her examination of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) wherein she examines some of the questions that emerge at the edges of the narrative, contrasting what she asserts can be understood as the author's "retreats" from representing an assertive Muslim identity; if a robust representation of Muslim lives is muted or tamped down in the novel, its reception ensured the issues were taken up.¹⁷ Ahmed also unpicks liberal assumptions when

¹⁵ Claire Chambers has written extensively on British Muslim fiction, notably in a two-book project beginning with *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780-1988* (2018) which maps a literary history of Muslim representation and critically explores fiction, travel writing and autobiographies. This was followed by *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2019), a study of recent British Muslim writing examined through the lens of sensory criticism. Amina Yaqin has also written articles about how British Muslims are represented in fiction and, together with Peter Morey, wrote *Framing Muslims* (2011) which is discussed below.

¹⁶ Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 17.

¹⁷ Rehana Ahmed, "Locating class in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and its reception," *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 124-153.

situating critical backlash against aspects of the novel as an issue of creative freedom versus minority rights, pointing out the underlying power relations that complicate this reductive framing. Peter Morey is similarly interested in what reductive attitudes can reveal about liberal sensibilities. His book *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018) examines how writers of contemporary fiction respond to anti-Muslim sentiment. His study underlines how conflicted and contradictory Islamophobia can be when he contends that it is “a thing of shreds and patches ... riven with anxieties and contradictions”, rather than a “unified, monolithic discourse”, and argues for extending analyses of Islamophobia across its cultural formations as a means to expose and undermine its traction.¹⁸ Critics have called attention to how publishing and marketing shape perceptions and prevailing attitudes among the reading public towards British Muslim authors in ways that delimit expectations about the subject matter that they will deploy, leading to tokenism when those expectations are surpassed and exoticisation when they are not. In this thesis, I focus on authors who identify self-consciously the ways that publishers, reviewers and critics, and indeed readers, can facilitate malignant stereotyping to examine how British Muslim writers are contending with Islamophobia in novel ways, and with complexity in ‘slow’ and ‘quiet’ novels that cut through the noise of contemporary debates.

¹⁸ Peter Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 28-29.

I draw upon Rachel Sykes' conception of a 'quiet' novel which she defines as having "a slow, contemplative prose style that denies the teleological drive to conclusion by largely eschewing narrative event".¹⁹ Such texts contrast markedly with the bold, cacophonous novels of a previous generation of writers, which in my context are epitomised by Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* and Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* (2007). Sairish Hussain's novel *Family Tree* (2020) could be seen as a representative example of a 'quiet' novel insofar as Hussain has said that she was at pains to write a book "about a Muslim family that is not about them *being* Muslim". Tellingly, her publisher had suggested that she depict 9/11.²⁰ I explore what 'quiet' can represent in different contexts, and its pertinence to contemplation of the role that religion takes in Britain, as in the political quietism of Sufi philosophy that is sometimes suggested in these texts as an antidote to both Islamism and Islamophobia. As part of my conceptual framework, I incorporate the notion of the quiet novel with Rob Nixon's idea of 'slow violence', defined as a form of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all".²¹ While Islamophobia can be understood as structural violence,

¹⁹ Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2018), 17.

²⁰ Hussain quoted in Claire Chambers & Sairish Hussain, 'Rethinking Muslim narratives: Stereotypes reinforced or contested in recent genre fiction?', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 59:3 (2023): 290.

²¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

and indeed systemic in Britain, when the UK media focuses on Muslims in both local and global contexts it seeks out the spectacular, terrorist attacks, beheadings, burqa bans, and grooming gangs, at the cost of eliding the sustained violence of racism and structural inequality that informs the lives of ordinary Muslims in Britain. Some of the novels I have selected may be identified as 'slow', as well as 'quiet', in the sense that they provide context and perspective by casting back to the plight of previous generations of British Muslims and thereby build complexity into characters in developmental narratives which feature equivocal endings that offer space for serious thought rather than easy answers to systemic political and social problems that influence how Muslims have typically been framed.

My focus is fiction published in the twenty-first century but among the authors considered here, Tariq Mehmood began publishing much earlier. His work is not featured in studies of Asian writing *in* Britain (my emphasis) or in studies of contemporary British fiction. Mehmood is a British writer who depicts indubitably British experiences in novels featuring British Asian characters in, for example, *Hand on the Sun* (published in 1983 and finally re-issued in 2023), *While There is Light* (2003) and *The Song of Gulzarina* (2016), which is analysed here. He also draws on his own experience of being arrested along with eleven other young men on 30th June 1981 on charges of terrorist offences, including conspiracy to make explosives for unlawful purposes, in a high-profile case known as the 'Bradford 12'. Following a long trial, the twelve men were acquitted on 16th June 1982 on the basis that their actions had

been taken in self-defence. That terrorism charges had been applied to self-defence against a racist mob is illustrative of the measures civic and legal authorities were willing to take to criminalise youth protest and can be understood within a context of hostility towards immigrants on the part of the government. In 1978, Margaret Thatcher, as leader of the Conservative Party, stated that:

I am the first to admit it is not easy to get clear figures from the Home Office about immigration, but there was a committee which looked at it and said that if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.²²

Her words conveyed a fixed 'British' identity under threat from immigrants that suggests a tacit support for racist sentiment. In 1981, as Prime Minister, Thatcher refused to recognise the racism and high levels of unemployment that had contributed to riots in Brixton and Toxteth, saying, "[n]othing, but nothing, could

²² Margaret Thatcher, "TV Interview for Granada World in Action ("rather swamped")," 27/1/1978, online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485> accessed 6/4/2024.

justify the violence that we saw that week".²³ This resonates now with the ideologically mythologised figure of the 'Islamic terrorist' and of 'British' fear of 'radicalised' Muslim youth.²⁴

Mehmood's debut, *Hand on the Sun*, was written during his imprisonment and is evocative of his experiences as a young man in Bradford. Its focus on racial injustice would continue throughout Mehmood's oeuvre, which includes children's books and documentary films, demonstrating the profound impact that the trial and its aftermath had on him. His second novel, *While There is Light* is loosely based on events leading up to the trial, charting racism and abuse from the police. It even fictionalises the statement Mehmood made following his arrest in 1981 in which he claimed the right to self-defence in response to "skinheads invading Bradford" and denied the use of any weapons.²⁵ Attesting to the harassment he received after making a complaint about police inaction, Mehmood told a journalist in 2022 that he struggled to find work after the trial due to "backlisting [sic]" and claimed that racism now "is infinitely worse than during our time", particularly "Islamophobic

²³ Margaret Thatcher, "Speech at Conservative Party Conference," Blackpool, 16/10/1981, online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104717> accessed 6/4/2024.

²⁴ A report on the impact of counter-terrorism policies on ordinary Muslims found that "[c]ounter-terrorism laws are not experienced in isolation but contribute to a wider sense among Muslim participants of being treated as a 'suspect community'. While some Muslims are responding to this through greater engagement, in challenging the misperceptions about them, many more report feeling increasingly alienated and isolated," Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, "The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities," *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 25:3 (2011): 151–81.

²⁵ Tariq Mehmood, *While There is Light* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2003), 217–218.

racism".²⁶ In *The Song of Gulzarina*, Mehmood situates Islamophobic racism by exploring connections between racist attitudes in 1960s and 1970s and post-9/11 Islamophobia through the character of Saleem and his daughter Aisha. Aisha's politicisation is configured as a reaction to Islamophobic attacks, and her developing religiosity situated as a defence as well as a balm for increasingly disenfranchised and alienated young people in Britain. In this thesis, I examine Mehmood's novel together with Nadim Safdar's *Akram's War* (2016) which imagines the life of Akram who grows up in the West Midlands and becomes a British soldier fighting in the war in Afghanistan. Like Mehmood's protagonist Saleem, Akram experiences harrowing racism and develops resilience, but that erodes when he returns to Britain as the result of injury and suffers the loss of a close friend. Some of the events in the novel may draw on Safdar's own experiences in the West Midlands during the 1970s, but it is intriguing that both novelists return to this period now that the far-right is again on the rise and driven by Islamophobia.²⁷ That they set their fiction in Bradford and the West Midlands also stands in contrast to the London-centric novels of Rushdie and Kureishi. The primary texts selected for this thesis move beyond

²⁶ Tariq Mehmood quoted in Shawna Healey, "Acquitted but exiled from home. Reliving the story of the Bradford Twelve, 40 years on," *Asian Standard*, 27/4/2022, <https://www.asianstandard.co.uk/acquitted-but-exiled-from-home-reliving-the-story-of-the-bradford-twelve-40-years-on/> accessed 5/3/2024.

²⁷ The charity Hope Not Hate published a report finding Islamophobia as a "key driver" of the rise of far-right movements in the UK. Hope Not Hate, "State of Hate 2019: People Vs The Elite?", online at: <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/state-of-hate-2019-final-1.pdf> accessed 5/3/2024.

metropolitan concerns to consider the post-industrial North, Scotland, and rural Britain.

Nadeem Aslam was born in Pakistan and moved to Huddersfield as a teenager. He is among a group of writers including Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif and Kamila Shamsie whose fiction has explored Pakistan's turbulent historical past, but his second novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), which I examine, is set in a working-class Muslim community in a town in the North of England known only in the novel as Dasht-e-Tanaii (Wilderness of Solitude), a name that symbolises alienation from language and place as experienced by the first Asian immigrants to settle there. Violence abounds, from the murder of two young lovers who are considered to be "living in sin" to that of a young girl beaten to death by clerics during an "exorcism", and speaks to Aslam's experiences of living in Huddersfield; he told one journalist that each incident in the novel is based on a real case.²⁸ Aslam's brave novel confronts sensitive topics head-on, including 'honour-based violence', as well as the racism that underpins a confused sense of belonging for his British Muslim characters. In my reading of the novel, I contemplate the contemporaneous backlash against multiculturalism that manifested in the rejection of the findings of the Parekh report (2000) following its hostile reception in the press, which may have set the tone for subsequent policies and attitudes, including David Cameron's call

²⁸ Marianne Brace, "Nadeem Aslam: A question of honour," *The Independent*, 11/6/2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-a-question-of-honour-731732.html> accessed 9/3/2024.

for a “muscular liberalism” and rejection of multicultural values.²⁹ In his depiction of a Muslim community, Aslam deploys a rich array of similes and metaphors that draw comparisons with life in the Indian subcontinent, evincing the sense of alienation his characters experience in Britain. He also uses a lyrical present tense narration that may comfort some readers, but that in my view serves also to attune readers to this British community.³⁰ A similar effect is produced in an article in which Aslam writes:

At home I open an old notebook and see an orange poppy glued in there: I remember visiting Leeds in July 2005, where the suicide bomber Shehzad

²⁹ The ‘Parekh report’: “A Community of Communities and Citizens”, *Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, October 2000, online at: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/a-community-of-communities-and-citizens> accessed 6/4/2024; in a speech in Munich, David Cameron said “we must build stronger societies and stronger identities at home. Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism.” The Rt Hon Lord Cameron, “PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference,” 5/2/2011, online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference> accessed 6/4/2024.

³⁰ Carolin Gebauer identifies Aslam’s use of the simple present and its effect in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. She writes: “the fog from the lake nearby Shamas’s house is portrayed as incense in the air, and the wooden jetty becomes a xylophone. And all these tropes use the simple present, reminding readers of the lyric present they know from poems. With its highly poetic language, the opening scene of Aslam’s novel creates a subjective, even idiosyncratic image of the storyworld: Although the story is actually set in an industrial town in Northern England, readers get the impression of a pastoral scene in calm and peaceful countryside,” Carolin Gebauer, “Narrative of Reminiscence: Intercultural Understanding and Narrative Empathy in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004),” in *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 207.

Tanweer's house had just been sealed with metal sheets by police – I had found that flower in his front garden.³¹

Aslam's use of the simple present, a tense more typical of poetry than journalism, and his decision to make a poppy the subject rather than the 2005 bombings, directs readerly attention to the mundane, provoking reflection on Tanweer's home and his life in Leeds rather than headlines and a terrorist attack. Like the contrast between flower and terrorist, Aslam's aesthetic in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is to depict the bleak circumstances his characters face with tenderness. He carefully creates a sense of the novel's enclosed space and a community's isolation. His sometimes transient and ghostly characters are emblematic, and, as one critic suggests, Aslam uses the Gothic mode to illustrate the silencing effect Islamophobia has on a whole town and "the impossibility of confronting certain issues, such as the novel's central 'honour' killing, in public for fear of reprisals."³² It is one example of the way that the writers examined here are challenging the stifling and stale narratives that Bhanot identified as falling into "unthinking dichotomies".³³

The chapters test how writers are rethinking genres, and sometimes signature stories such as the "family marriage plot", for the twenty-first century. A number of

³¹ Nadeem Aslam, "Nadeem Aslam: 'I take delight that my initials in Urdu look like a pen by an inkwell'," *The Guardian*, 8/4/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/08/my-writing-day-nadeem-aslam-books> accessed 6/4/2024.

³² Sarah Iltott, "Postcolonial Gothic," in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 26.

³³ Bhanot, *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough*, vii.

British Muslim novelists have conjured with the “marriage plot”, including Salma El-Wardany in *These Impossible Things* (2022), Kasim Ali in *Good Intentions* (2022), and Tasneem Abdur-Rashid in *Finding Mr Perfectly Fine* (2022). This is a burgeoning sub-genre that has a particular appeal, perhaps because the domestic setting is a vehicle through which to explore societal issues in a disarming way, seducing readers with a familiar plot and thereafter complicating or nuancing their assumptions and views, particularly if they are non-Muslim readers. Describing the influence of Jane Austen on her writing, for example, Monica Ali says: “[Austen] wrote constantly about courtship and engagements and marriage, but through that supposedly rather narrow domestic prism, she actually showed us a lot about the society of the time about money”. For Ali, the ‘domestic novel’ is a “very useful lens, on to some of those wider aspects of society”.³⁴ Such lenses afford writers opportunities to unpick delimiting stereotypes about Muslim women in particular. Zara Raheem writes, “[f]or those of us with hyphenated identities, mirrors rarely exist”, and she points out that so many depictions of Muslim women rely on lazy “good” and “bad” binaries and on one-dimensional characters like “the religious type. The modest hijabi type. The rebellious type. The ‘progressive,’ marries outside her faith type”, none of which, she underlines, capture the complex, “often contradictory”

³⁴ Monica Ali quoted in Miwa Messer, “Poured Over: Monica Ali on Love Marriage,” *Barnes and Noble*, 7/5/2022, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/poured-over-monica-ali-on-love-marriage/> accessed 10/3/2024.

experiences of Muslim women in Britain.³⁵ A desire among writers to create mirrors and to counter popular misconceptions is equally evident in anthologies like *The Things I Would Tell You: British Muslim Women Write* (2017) which foregrounds a range of topics from Brexit to Islamic Tinder, while illustrating the breadth and diversity of British Muslim fiction. Two of the novels that I have selected to examine in this thesis, Samir Rahim's *Asghar and Zahra* (2019) and Monica Ali's *Love Marriage* (2022), demonstrate a keen awareness of how Muslims are read in the terms that Raheem describes, and defy putative readerly assumptions with wit and complexity. I am particularly drawn to how Rahim and Ali both imagine the impact of reading and storytelling on their characters, revealing how the ways in which we read, and what we choose to read, influences our perception of others, and, in turn, may also result in micro-behaviours, silences, secrets and lies between families, friends and partners. Certainly, relationships are a feature of all the novels examined in this thesis. In different ways, their focus on family relationships, friendships, and marriages, ordinary lives and communities in Britain, serves to highlight the everyday impact of Islamophobia as well as the fact that Muslims are Britons living British lives.

The majority of the novelists I have selected also write non-fiction, from newspaper articles and magazine op-eds to documentaries and book-length studies,

³⁵ Zara Raheem, "Mirrors Rarely Exist: Zara Raheem on Finding Muslim Women in Fiction," *Literary Hub*, 2/6/2023 <https://lithub.com/mirrors-rarely-exist-zara-raheem-on-finding-muslim-women-in-fiction> accessed 16/6/2024.

which illustrates a deep engagement with the ideas they raise in their novels.³⁶ Robin Yassin-Kassab, together with Leila Al-Shami, published *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (2016) and regularly contributes essays and short stories to the quarterly journal *Critical Muslim*. Leila Aboulela contributes book reviews and opinion pieces to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* among other publications.³⁷ Monica Ali has written several articles for *The Guardian*, including one that followed the publication of her debut novel in 2003 in which she discussed her positionality as a writer and how her fiction is received by readers and critics.³⁸ It is a question she returns to and it features prominently in my reading of *Love Marriage*. Samir Rahim is a literary journalist, and Nadeem Aslam writes essays and short stories for the literary magazine *Granta*.³⁹ On the one hand, fiction can be a safe space in which to approach sensitive topics; Nadeem Aslam claims, “I like to be on the margins. I firmly believe the job of a writer is to be a voice that is not the majority voice”.⁴⁰ On the other hand, literary fiction can feel visceral because of the personal experiences

³⁶ Nadim Safdar and Haroun Khan are exceptions to this, with neither writer engaging with other literary forms substantially. Khan’s essay ‘My Political Novel’ published ahead of his novel’s release outlines some of his views on writing. Haroun Khan, “My Political Novel,” 17/8/2017, online at: <https://deadinkbooks.com/my-political-novel-by-haroun-khan/> accessed 3/3/2024.

³⁷ Leila Aboulela’s website lists her non-fiction publications online at: <https://leila-aboulela.com/short-stories/other-writing/> accessed 3/3/2024.

³⁸ Monica Ali, “Where I’m coming from,” *The Guardian*, 17/6/2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/17/artsfeatures.fiction> accessed 3/3/2024.

³⁹ Nadeem Aslam’s articles are listed on the Granta website online at: <https://granta.com/contributor/nadeem-aslam/> accessed 3/3/2024.

⁴⁰ Nadeem Aslam quoted in Rafia Zakaria, “I Like to Be on the Margins: An Interview with Nadeem Aslam,” *Literary Hub*, 23/8/2017, <https://lithub.com/i-like-to-be-on-the-margins-an-interview-with-nadeem-aslam/> accessed 3/3/2024.

of the authors; Aboulela claimed that moving to Scotland from Sudan in her twenties triggered such strong emotions that she felt “compelled to write” and that when she began she wrote not for pleasure but “like someone possessed”.⁴¹ Her fiction emphasises complex feelings, including the trauma of dispossession and a sense of religiosity, and emotions which could be lost if ‘explained’ in a non-fictional form.

Aboulela, whose novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) is one of my focal texts, is based in Aberdeen and described in *The Daily Telegraph* as “the kind of writer British people need to hear”, praise that both distinguishes her writing as British and risks distinguishing her from British people.⁴² It is typical of responses to immigrant novelists and an attitude that Aboulela’s characters also come up against. In *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), Aboulela explores stark binaries between secular, materialist, liberal, or Marxist characters and characters with faith, but through Muslim characters she shows Islam in a positive light in Britain; despite their marginalisation, her characters thrive and even succeed in converting non-Muslims to the faith. As Geoffrey Nash has observed, Aboulela’s positive portrayal of Muslim identity “has attracted readers, and not only female Muslim ones, but others who recognize the conditions of possibility within which Aboulela writes, and

⁴¹ Leila Aboulela quoted in Keija Parssinen, “Writing as Spiritual Offering: A Conversation with Leila Aboulela,” *World Literature Today*, October 2019, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2020/winter/writing-spiritual-offering-conversation-leila-aboulela-keija-parssinen> accessed 3/3/2024.

⁴² Rachel Cusk, “Women in a ring of confidence,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 21/7/2001, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4724633/Women-in-a-ring-of-confidence.html> accessed 5/3/2024.

out of which she translates her otherwise unfamiliar message to a wider readership".⁴³ *The Kindness of Enemies* moves between contemporary Scotland and nineteenth-century Caucasus via Natasha, a university lecturer who specialises in Islamic history and who is researching the Caucasian resistance leader Imam Shamil. Natasha hides her Muslim identity at work and is irreligious but when one of her students, Oz, is arrested and questioned in relation to terrorism offences, Natasha is triggered to contend with her own feelings of unbelonging. She is also forced to consider her role in monitoring students as part of the UK government's 'Prevent Duty', a counterterrorism programme designed to prevent vulnerable people from becoming 'radicalised'. The rhetorical association of Islam with violence and Muslims with a security threat are features of a 'securitisation' discourse that has emerged and combined with the Prevent policy so that British Muslims have come to be viewed as a 'suspect' community, with state surveillance exacerbating Islamophobia.⁴⁴ I examine how Aboulela traces this discourse as it emerged from British attitudes towards Imam Shamil in the nineteenth century to jihadist groups in the novel's present of 2015. For Aboulela, policies such as Prevent cannot begin to account for myriad interpretations of Islamic concepts like *jihad*, and presentism denies historical and other complexities, as when Oz's enthusiasm for Islamic history is read flatly by the authorities as evidence of radicalism. Aboulela told an

⁴³ Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012) 49.

⁴⁴ For a summary, see, for example, William Shankley and James Rhodes, "Racisms in Contemporary Britain," *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*, ed. Bridget Byrne (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), 203.

interviewer, “[w]hen I sit and write, I feel that what I am doing is completely personal”.⁴⁵ If *The Kindness of Enemies* reads as a political novel, it is indicative of the extent to which Muslim identity has become politicised as a result of Islamophobia.

Edward Said once observed that hateful generalisations about Islam are “the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West”, and that claims made by mainstream media outlets about Muslims can no longer be made about other groups or religious identities.⁴⁶ With Muslim identity highly politicised worldwide, and Muslims blamed for social problems and castigated in malicious forms of Islamophobia, how that is addressed and contended within British contexts and in British fiction is important to uncover and to situate, especially when the global context is so fraught. When US President Donald Trump instigated travel restrictions under an executive order entitled *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States* in 2017, it was referred to by critics and proponents alike as a ‘Muslim ban’ because it targeted citizens of Muslim-majority countries. It is only one egregious example of the ways in which Muslims continue to be demonised by policy that supposedly relates to the ‘war on terror’ which commenced after the September 11th, 2001 (‘9/11’) attacks in the United States.⁴⁷ In

⁴⁵ Leila Aboulela quoted in Keija Parssinen, “Writing as Spiritual Offering: A Conversation with Leila Aboulela,” *World Literature Today*, October 2019, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2020/winter/writing-spiritual-offering-conversation-leila-aboulela-keija-parssinen> accessed 3/3/2024.

⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Data from the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs suggests that Muslims were substantially impacted by the ban: “the number of immigrant visas issued to

India, the rise of Islamophobic hate speech which draws on conspiracy theories about Muslims has resulted in widespread attacks targeting businesses and individuals, often linked to elections in Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled states.⁴⁸ For Rana Ayyub mosque attacks, hijab bans and violence committed against India's Muslims are "a new reality in a country where hatred against Muslims is the easy route to win elections, and gain popularity and acceptability in a society suffering from an imagined victimhood".⁴⁹ Muslims are being targeted through legislation too. In 2019, Narendra Modi's government passed an amendment to Indian citizenship law that was roundly criticised by civil and human rights groups and opposition parties because it grants citizenship to religious minorities from neighbouring countries but excludes Muslims.⁵⁰ In countries where Muslim minorities are persecuted, structural Islamophobia has been shown to exacerbate violence and contribute to acts of genocide, as in the case of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and

citizens of these Muslim-majority countries dropped sharply — from 1,419 in October 2017 to 69 in January 2018." Vahid Niayesh, "Trump's travel ban really was a Muslim ban, data suggests," *The Washington Post*, 26/9/2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/26/trumps-muslim-ban-really-was-muslim-ban-thats-what-data-suggests/> accessed 2/11/2023.

⁴⁸ "Anti-Muslim hate speech in India spikes around elections, report says," *Al Jazeera*, 26/09/2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/26/anti-muslim-hate-speech-in-india-spikes-around-elections-report-says> accessed 2/11/2023.

⁴⁹ Rana Ayyub, "What Modi won't show the G20: Muslims killed, harassed by the police and abused in school," *The Guardian*, 9/9/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/09/what-modi-wont-show-g20-muslims-india> accessed 2/11/2023.

⁵⁰ Bilal Kuchay, "What you should know about India's 'anti-Muslim' citizenship law," *Al Jazeera*, 16/12/2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/16/what-you-should-know-about-indias-anti-muslim-citizenship-law> accessed 28/2/2024.

Uighur Muslims in China.⁵¹ In other ways, Islam has become the focal point through which conflicts between communities and nations are read, which is clearly represented in Palestine, Chechnya, and Kashmir, where Islamophobia has fuelled violence and intensified societal polarisation.⁵²

These global contexts intersect for Britain's Muslims in troubling ways. A sizeable minority at 6.5% of the total population, many British Muslims have diasporic connections throughout the Muslim world and beyond but are often homogenised as a monoculture or associated with a particular ethnicity.⁵³ In the UK, Muslims have had established communities since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and their presence is often associated with Britain's imperial connections and latterly with postwar immigration in the twentieth century.⁵⁴ However, Daoud

⁵¹ Naved Bakali points out that the 'war on terror' narrative has been used by governments in the Global South as a means to justify state oppression and violence towards Muslim minorities: "In the cases of India and China, as with Myanmar, the state evokes the 'war on terror'; in part, presenting these state measures as necessary for policing and containing the dangerous Muslim man under the spectre of terrorism" Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: the Rohingya genocide and the 'war on terror'," *Race & Class*, 62:4 (2021): 68.

⁵² Amy-Clare Martin, "Antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crime soars after Israel-Gaza war," *Independent*, 29/12/2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/antisemitic-islamophobic-hate-crime-soars-israelhamas-b2470404.html> accessed 5/1/2024.

⁵³ This figure is from the 2021 census in Britain, and quoted in "2021 Census: As UK Population Grows, So Do British Muslim Communities," *Muslim Council of Britain*, 29/11/2022, <https://mcb.org.uk/2021-census-as-uk-population-grows-so-do-british-muslim-communities/> accessed 2/1/2024.

⁵⁴ Humayun Ansari notes Muslim migrations to Britain took place in the mid-nineteenth century and claims that many settlers were connected through Empire from Britain's colonies at the time, with established communities forming in "Manchester, Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields and the East End of London. These consisted primarily of sailors but were joined by merchants, itinerant entertainers, servants, princes, students and a sprinkling of people from the professional classes." Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 28.

Rosser-Owen claims that the first contact between Celts of western Britain and Muslims occurred in the 7th century through trade with Palestine and Egypt, and that Arab and Spanish Muslims were present in Britain in the 13th century, primarily for trade.⁵⁵ Contrary to popular assumptions, Hisham Hellyer also emphasises that,

British Muslim history did not begin in the latter half of the twentieth century, nor were relations between Islam and Britain prior to then insignificant or ineffably unpleasant: at some points, the UK's relationship with Muslim countries took precedence over relations with other Christian European states. Alliances were formed, trade was pursued and Muslims certainly walked across the British Isles much earlier than Pakistani immigrants in Bradford did: perhaps more than 1,000 years before.⁵⁶

Despite this shared history, as I discuss in more detail below, the presence of Muslims in Britain and across Europe has emerged, for some, as a crisis of the contemporary era. As well as the so-called 'war on terror', events including the 'Rushdie Affair' (1988), the controversy over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed in Denmark in 2005, and the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in 2015 have had a polarising effect, with many journalists, academics, and politicians, and even

⁵⁵ Daoud Rosser-Owen, "The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview," 1998, http://members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_in_the_bi.html accessed by Hisham A. Hellyer 12/5/02 [weblink is now broken]. Cited in Hisham A. Hellyer, "British Muslims: Past, Present and Future," *The Muslim World* 97:2 (2007): 258.

⁵⁶ Hisham A. Hellyer, "British Muslims: Past, Present and Future," *The Muslim World* 97:2 (2007): 230-231.

imaginative writers, effectively reinforcing a binary distinction between liberalism and Islam that extends to the freedom of speech, multiculturalism, and the rights of religious believers in secular nations.

This is a long way from the statement that Home Secretary Roy Jenkins (Lab.) made in 1966:

I do not think we need in this country a melting pot, which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman ... I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.⁵⁷

Two years later, Enoch Powell, Conservative MP for Wolverhampton Northeast, would be declaiming to the Conservative Association in Birmingham:

We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Roy Jenkins' speech before the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants (NCCI) in 1966 is quoted in Nahem Yousaf, *Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 35.

⁵⁸ Enoch Powell quoted in "Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech," *The Telegraph*, 6/11/2007 [original 20/4/68], <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> accessed 23/3/2024. Powell's address provoked hostility towards

In 2019, the Muslim MP Nusrat Ghani, who grew up in Birmingham, was bombarded with emails from a Conservative activist, that were copied to other members of her party, telling her that the UK should be governed by “our own people, not people from a different culture”. Ghani, who later became Minister of State for Industry and Economic Security, condemned the emails, as did the Conservative Party, but the Party was also in the throes of addressing Islamophobia within as well as without.⁵⁹

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi has been raising the issue of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party for years and been vocal about it in the press. She told the BBC in 2019 that her Party had become “institutionally Islamophobic” and that Party officials were “in denial” of this fact.⁶⁰ In February 2024, Conservative MP Lee Anderson made the spurious claim to *GB News* that “Islamists” had “got control of London” and of its Labour mayor Sadiq Khan.⁶¹ Anderson lost the whip as a result, but Suella

immigrants in his own constituency where upholding a ‘colour bar’ became a means of showing support; the North Wolverhampton Working Men’s Club unanimously voted to keep the ‘colour bar’ a day after the speech. Numerous racially motivated attacks were meted out as a direct result of Powell’s words. In one case a “slashing incident” occurred at a Black christening in which white youths attacked those present while chanting “Powell”. Shirin Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell, Race, Locality and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 58-59.

⁵⁹ Rajeev Sayal, “Tory activist sent Muslim MP emails praising Enoch Powell,” *The Guardian*, 17/4/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/17/tory-activist-sent-muslim-minister-emails-praising-enoch-powell> accessed 8/6/2024.

⁶⁰ Baroness Sayeeda Warsi in “Theresa May’s ‘head in sand’ over Tory Islamophobia, says Warsi,” *BBC News*, 5/3/19, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-47454993> accessed 18/3/2024.

⁶¹ Eleni Courea, “Tory MP Lee Anderson claims ‘Islamists’ have got control of Sadiq Khan,” *The Guardian*, 23/2/2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/23/tory-mp-lee-anderson-claims-islamists-have-got-control-of-sadiq->

Braverman, the Home Secretary for two short periods in 2022 and 2023, wrote in *The Telegraph* that Islamists “are in charge now” with no punitive repercussions.

Braverman’s claim that “[Islamists] have hijacked a by-election in a deprived town in northern England” in reference to George Galloway’s victory in the Rochdale byelection, implies that seeking to address concerns about the war in Gaza is un-British.⁶² The Labour Party has also been subject to complaints about its Islamophobia, as when the Forde report (2022) found that factionalism within the Party resulted in a “hierarchy” of racism, and that anti-Black racism and Islamophobia received less attention than complaints of antisemitism.⁶³ It is a damning indictment of the extent to which Islamophobia remains a political ‘football’ that is weaponised in British politics.

The media response is a telling indication of similarly entrenched attitudes that influence government policy despite sociological evidence to the contrary. One journalist described the 2019 general election as the “Kashmir election” in reference to the BJP’s indirect support for the Conservative Party, leading to widespread support among British Hindus, while many Muslims sided with the Labour Party,

[khan#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20don't%20actually%20believe,to%20lose%20the%20Tory%20w hip](#). accessed 18/3/2024.

⁶² Suella Braverman, “Islamists are bullying Britain into submission,” *The Telegraph*, 22/2/2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/22/islamists-are-bullying-britain-into-submission/> accessed 18/3/2024.

⁶³ One of the people interviewed for the Forde report said, “I’ve been distraught in the lack of urgency for other cases such as Islamophobia, Racism and Sexual harassment due to the organisational priority being Antisemitism.” “The Forde Report,” 19/7/2022 online at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Forde-Report.pdf> , 90, accessed 19/3/2024.

threatening a dangerous factional politics for Britain's minorities as a result.⁶⁴

Tensions between some Hindus and Muslims in Britain came to a head in September 2022 in Leicester when a group of more than 300 masked Hindu men marched through Green Lane Road, a predominantly Muslim area of the city, and were followed by a group of Muslim men to Belgrave Road, a majority Hindu area where violence ensued.⁶⁵ Events in Leicester were, predictably, reported with sensationalist spin and loaded terms, with one article describing "riots" involving a "mob" of "hundreds of thugs", epithets applied to both groups indiscriminately.⁶⁶ BBC reports failed to mention the Hindutva-inspired ideology of the masked Hindu men.⁶⁷ The

⁶⁴ Sunny Hundal, "After the worst election campaign in memory, Britain's religious minorities must unite," *The New Statesman*, 12/12/2019, <https://archive.ph/20220925042431/https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2019/12/after-worst-election-campaign-memory-britain-s-religious-minorities-must-unite#selection-1201.0-1201.86> accessed 31/12/2023; "Institutional Islamophobia at the top of the Conservative Party: MCB calls for Independent Inquiry," *Muslim Council of Britain*, 23/1/2022, <https://mcb.org.uk/institutional-islamophobia-at-the-top-of-the-conservative-party-mcb-calls-for-independent-inquiry/> accessed 31/12/2023.

Theorists of diaspora suggest that elements of cultural identity are shaped by myriad processes. Avtar Brah coins 'diaspora space' to explain "where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed ... Here, tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time," Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 205.

⁶⁵ Jessica Murray, Aina J Khan and Rajeev Syal, "'It feels like people want to fight': how communal unrest flared in Leicester," *The Guardian*, 23/9/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/23/how-communal-unrest-flared-leicester-muslim-hindu-tensions> accessed 31/12/2023.

⁶⁶ Colin Drury, "'People are scared': Leicester at sudden crossroads after violence ends 50 years of harmony," *Independent*, 24/9/2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/leicester-riots-muslims-hindus-protests-b2173443.html> accessed 6/11/2023.

⁶⁷ Caroline Lowbridge, James Lynn and Dan Martin, "Large-scale disorder breaks out in Leicester," *BBC News*, 18/9/2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-62943952> accessed 01/01/2024; Faisal Hanif, "Leicester riots: Are Muslims ever allowed to be victims in UK media?" *Middle East Eye*, 13/9/2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/uk-leicester-riots-muslims-victims-media-allowed-are> accessed 1/1/2024.

British media plays a significant role in perpetuating egregious stereotypes. As a damning report by the Muslim Council of Britain's Centre for Media Monitoring found, between 2018 and 2020 seven times as many news articles demonstrated antagonistic bias against Muslims than articles which were found to be supportive.⁶⁸

The police response in the aftermath of Hindu attempts to oppress Muslims in Leicester was similarly equivocal, referring only to the "community" and meeting with "community leaders" to restore calm. But, as Arshad Isakjee summarises, "there is no such thing as a Muslim community. Followers of the faith come from cultures and countries all over the world, live in different parts of the UK and subscribe to a wide spectrum of doctrines. Yet we seem to expect them to all know each other". This is a framing which homogenises, and it is used to place the burden on an alleged community to resolve "their" problem, rather than recognising a societal issue.⁶⁹ As Nahem Yousaf posited in 1996, the "Asian community" is "an incredibly diverse, heterogeneous peoples yoked together under the political aegis of 'Asian' or 'Black' as a result of the 'Othering' of their communities by white British

⁶⁸ Faisal Hanif concludes that it is inaccurate to blanketly label British media as Islamophobic, but "even as Muslims around the world grapple with the same challenges that face others namely economic uncertainty, climate issues and so on, they are most frequently reported on under the theme of 'Terrorism/Extremism'," Faisal Hanif, "British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)," *Centre for Media Monitoring*, November 2021, <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CfMM-Annual-Report-2018-2020-digital.pdf> accessed 4/11/2023.

⁶⁹ Arshad Isakjee, "Why there is no such thing as the Muslim 'community'," *The Conversation*, 6/11/2014, <https://theconversation.com/why-there-is-no-such-thing-as-the-muslim-community-33862> accessed 2/1/2024; Chris Allen, "Leicester's unrest is a problem for the whole city, not just Hindu and Muslim communities," *The Conversation*, 28/9/2022, <https://theconversation.com/leicesters-unrest-is-a-problem-for-the-whole-city-not-just-hindu-and-muslim-communities-191363> accessed 2/1/2024.

institutions. Neither cultural nor national identity is organic but social institutions may operate hegemonically to make it appear so". In the context of British Muslims, he argues that "community and identity politics is fraught with pitfalls and problems, with conflicts and contentions" and notes Hanif Kureishi observing that, "[t]he notion of 'community' is much abused and probably meaningless".⁷⁰

In some ways, the response to events in Leicester recalls reactions in the summer of 2001, when British Asians across the north of England were involved in violent clashes with police after they were threatened by racist groups and the police failed to protect them. Arun Kundnani paints a vivid picture of the background when he writes:

The Fires that burned across Lancashire and Yorkshire through the summer of 2001 signalled the rage of young Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of the second and third generations, deprived of futures, hemmed in on all sides by racism, failed by their own leaders and representatives and unwilling to stand by as, first fascists, and then police officers, invaded their streets.⁷¹

Nevertheless, a report on the civil unrest, led by Ted Cantle and known as the 'Cantle Report', recommended a strategy focussing on "community cohesion" and pushed the blame back onto British Asian communities, eliding deeper social

⁷⁰ Nahem Yousaf, "Hanif Kureishi and 'the brown man's burden'," *Critical Survey* 8:1 (1996): 16, 23. This special issue was devoted to Britain's diverse communities.

⁷¹ Arun Kundnani, "Commentary," *Race & Class*, 43:2 (2001): 105.

problems such as poverty and underemployment as well as marginalisation and racism which had all contributed to the violent response.⁷²

Whether 2001 or 2022, the British media favour a culturalist perspective, whereby culture, race and religion are problematised over systemic and structural social issues in Britain. Ministers have taken a similar view, questioning the loyalties of Muslim minorities, as when then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman told *Sky News* in April 2023 that British Pakistani men “hold cultural values at odds with British values”, comments that were condemned by Pakistan’s foreign office as xenophobic.⁷³ Indeed, Braverman’s invocation of ‘British values’ follows a pattern of rhetoric that has been amplified since at least the July 2005 bombings of public transport in London, with successive Prime Ministers since Tony Blair arguing for a set of values that will supposedly characterise the nation.⁷⁴ The insinuation is that both the culture and religion of non-European immigrants are expected to be

⁷² Home Office (2001b) Community Cohesion (the Cantle Report). HMSO, London.

⁷³ Al Jazeera Staff, “Braverman words on British Pakistani men discriminatory: Pakistan,” *Al Jazeera*, 5/4/2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/5/braverman-words-on-british-pakistani-men-discriminatory-pakistan> accessed 31/12/2023; While Braverman’s rhetoric clearly draws on real cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by British Pakistani Muslim men such as those that occurred in Rotherham between the 1980s and 2020s, the Home Office’s own research found that the majority of ‘grooming gangs’ in the UK were from white backgrounds, contradicting her claims. Jim Waterson, “Braverman’s claim about ethnicity of grooming gangs was false, regulator rules,” *The Guardian*, 28/9/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/28/braverman-ethnicity-child-grooming-gangs-false-mail-on-sunday> accessed 1/1/2024.

⁷⁴ For example, Theresa May argued for the promotion of British values in response to Islamists, who, she claimed “utterly reject British and Western values, including democracy, the rule of law, and equality between citizens, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality.” The Rt Hon Theresa May MP, “A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values,” *Home Office*, 23/3/2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-stronger-britain-built-on-our-values> accessed 1/1/2024.

confined to the private sphere.⁷⁵ In August 2022, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak vowed to crack down on the spread of Islamism in prisons, saying: "Britain is a beacon of freedom, tolerance and diversity. We must never let those who seek to undermine and destroy our way of life to succeed".⁷⁶ These vaguely defined 'values' are frequently invoked in opposition to the actions of terrorists, but they also suggest that Islam is suspect and antithetical to British values; the same arguments are seldom made in response to far-right (white) terrorists and ideology. The assumption of unity or of imagined shared values problematises the supposed values of Muslims as a potential threat to that unity.

Contemporary British writers have continually pointed to how this corresponds to delimiting and retrograde notions of 'Englishness', an Arnoldian yardstick against which the rest of society is judged, effectively denying the multicultural composition of contemporary Britain. Kureishi, writing in 1986,

⁷⁵ "Tony Blair yesterday told radical Muslims that they had a "duty to integrate" into British society and warned them they could not be allowed to override what he described as the country's core values of democracy, tolerance and respect for the law. 'Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain, Britain. Conform to it; or don't come here. We don't want the hate-mongers, whatever their race, religion or creed,' Mr Blair said.", Will Woodward, "Radical Muslims must integrate, says Blair," *The Guardian*, 9/12/2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/dec/09/religion.immigrationandpublicservices> accessed 13/3/2023; "We are all British. We respect democracy and the rule of law. We believe in freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, equal rights regardless of race, sex, sexuality or faith. We believe in respecting different faiths but also expecting those faiths to support the British way of life. These are British values.", David Cameron, "Extremism: PM speech," 20/7/2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech> accessed 13/3/2023.

⁷⁶ George Gylls, "Rishi Sunak says Islamists will face jail isolation," *The Times*, 3/8/2022 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rishi-sunak-says-islamists-will-face-jail-isolation-6zqh7tvwk> accessed 21/1/2024.

identified in the New Right a favouring of T.S. Eliot's idea of English culture: "Derby Day, Henley regatta, Cowes, the Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin-table [etc]".⁷⁷ Salman Rushdie criticised this strand of Thatcherism in *The Satanic Verses* through the character of Salahuddin Chamchawala, whose name is abbreviated to Saladin Chamcha on arrival in England and whose dreams of a "proper London" signal his desire to be accepted as an Englishman, the failure of which gestures towards the impossibility of attaining Englishness for migrants and their loss of cultural identity in the process of assimilation.⁷⁸ Against this limited ideal, Rushdie's novel posited an embrace of the possibilities of diversity: "[m]élange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*".⁷⁹ As Kureishi put it, "today there would have to be numerous additions to the characteristic activities of the British people", including "yoga exercises, going to Indian restaurants, the music of Bob Marley, the novels of Salman Rushdie, Zen Buddhism, the Hare Krishna temple, as well as the films of Sylvester Stallone, therapy, hamburgers, visits to gay bars, the dole office and the taking of drugs".⁸⁰ Kureishi's portrayals of London in the films *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) *Sammy*

⁷⁷ Peter Hitchcock surmises that Thatcher "yearned for the muddled consensus-building of the early 1950s and the mind-numbing conformism of the period when greengrocers, like her father, and their daughters felt at home in the world of Englishness as a posited norm, and the government could be expected to protect 'England's green and pleasant land' of Blake's 'Jerusalem,'" "Culture and anarchy in Thatcher's London: Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," *Hanif Kureishi: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Alice Fischer (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 38.

⁷⁸ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 1998), 35, 37.

⁷⁹ Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 394.

⁸⁰ Hanif Kureishi, "Bradford," *Dreaming and Scheming* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 78.

and *Rosie Get Laid* (1987), and the novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and *The Black Album* (1995) all offer a trenchant critique of Thatcherite 'Britishness' by showcasing an egalitarian vision of heterogeneous British Asians and notions of postcolonial hybridity. But what distinguishes the mythologisation of Englishness, then, from the 'British values' of today is a weaponisation of 'values' in direct response to the perceived threat of Islamism. The implication is that Muslims, radical or not, constitute a threat to the cultural identity of the nation, and this language pervades other instances when Muslims become focal points of public fears in the media, as Stephen Jones avers:

'Muslim-ness' is routinely seen as the most noteworthy part of a Muslim individual's identity, even when that person makes no effort to emphasize it themselves. 'Islam', likewise, is offered as the explanation for all Muslims' actions, especially when those actions are violent or criminal. An abusive husband who is Muslim is described as perpetrating 'honour-based violence', for example, while a white non-Muslim is described simply as 'evil' – if the media write about him at all.⁸¹

In addition, Muslims are statistically among the poorest groups in British society, with 61% in England and Wales living in the lowest 40% of areas as ranked

⁸¹ Stephen H. Jones, *Islam and the Liberal State: National Identity and the Future of Muslim Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2020), 3.

by deprivation.⁸² Cyclical poverty complicates the impact of structural racism; a 2017 study conducted by the government's social mobility watchdog found that 19.8% of Muslims aged 16-74 were in full-time employment, compared with 34.9% of the overall population, and that Muslims face significant barriers in the workplace including discrimination against minority ethnic-sounding names, being targeted for choosing to wear a headscarf, and because of a culture of drinking alcohol at social events in which Muslims were unable to partake.⁸³ In almost every aspect of daily life in Britain, Muslims encounter scare stories in the media, from spurious allegations of a plot to 'Islamicise' schools in Birmingham and the purported introduction of sharia law into UK courts, to bizarre but equally sensationalised reports that Muslims want to ban Christmas.⁸⁴

Set against this context, my primary concern is to identify how social realist British authors who identify as Muslim explore, negotiate and challenge the impact of Islamophobia and navigate a discourse of secularism. Through close readings and

⁸² Aamna Mohdin, "Census says 39% of Muslims live in most deprived areas of England and Wales," *The Guardian*, 30/11/2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/30/census-says-39-of-muslims-live-in-most-deprived-areas-of-england-and-wales> accessed 3/1/2024.

⁸³ Anushka Asthana, "Islamophobia holding back UK Muslims in workplace, study finds," *The Guardian*, 7/9/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/07/islamophobia-holding-back-uk-muslims-in-workplace-study-finds> accessed 3/1/2024.

⁸⁴ For example, Phil Mackie, "'No Trojan Horse extremism links' Birmingham teachers hear," *BBC News*, 10/5/2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-27355014> accessed 3/1/2024. ; John Bingham, "Islamic law is adopted by British legal chiefs," *The Telegraph*, 22/3/2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10716844/Islamic-law-is-adopted-by-British-legal-chiefs.html> accessed 29/2/2024 ; Jessica Elgot, "'We Really Don't Want To Ban Christmas,' Muslims Insist," *The Huffington Post UK*, 17/12/2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/12/17/ban-christmas-muslims_n_4460151.html accessed 3/1/2024.

contextualisation, I trace the ways in which they engage with debates about Muslim identity and belonging, the role of Islam, suspicion and surveillance, and the quotidian effects of Islamophobia on relationships, as explored characterologically from multiple and diverse Muslim perspectives. My focus on fiction by Muslim authors is motivated in part because what they have to say has been neglected and in part by what I see as the potential for these literary texts to challenge the hegemonic representation of Muslims in the media and as promulgated in UK politics. I acknowledge the dangers of a literary critic holding expectations that are based on the cultural identity of an author, not least because it becomes a key issue for some reviewers and critics, as I will discuss and demonstrate when examining the critical reception and marketing of these particular novels.

Being marketed as ‘Muslim’ presents a challenge to writers of fiction who are expected to showcase ‘authenticity’ and to carry a burden of representation. This is something that writers themselves, and their earliest literary critics, have drawn attention to, as when Yousaf points to how Kureishi used the phrase “brown man’s burden” in a reversal of Kipling’s famous poem.⁸⁵ Kureishi describes a thought experiment he would conduct during meetings with publishers and in theatres: “if these white people were of colour, would they ever get through this door? Would they be in this position? In this building at all?”⁸⁶ Race and class privilege keep these sorts

⁸⁵ Nahem Yousaf, “Hanif Kureishi and ‘the Brown Man’s Burden.’” *Critical Survey* 8:1 (1996): 19; Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 6.

⁸⁶ Hanif Kureishi, “Racism has been the grinding backdrop to my life. Is a different future now possible?” *The Guardian*, 26/6/2020,

of questions from being asked of white writers, which works against any hope of meritocracy in the literary landscape. Reviewers, critics, and the publishing industry more widely, typically converge in using an anthropological lens when judging British Muslim novelists. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as Sarah Brouillette argues, “[t]he postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location”.⁸⁷ On the other, as Peter Morey claims, the market “at most allows Muslim-authored texts to offer a critique of Western neoimperialism from within the confines of secular liberalism, while at the same time appreciating ‘explanatory’ narratives about the Other that allow the Other to be better known and controlled”.⁸⁸ This is a debate that I examine in more detail when I discuss the reception of Monica Ali’s fictions and how she makes it the subject of critique in her novel *Love Marriage* (2022). After the success of her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003), which is set in Tower Hamlets and features Bangladeshi characters, Ali shifted to other settings further from her own experience, notably in a speculative novel, *Untold Story* (2011), which imagines the life of Princess Diana if she had staged her death in 1997 and moved to a small American town. The novel was met with complete bafflement by some critics, one of which Ali recalls described it as “a curious

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/26/racism-future-mixed-race-child-london-suburb> accessed 17/3/2024.

⁸⁷ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3-4.

⁸⁸ Peter Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 8.

marriage of author and subject matter”, as if her fiction should only mirror her own experiences to conform to an expected cultural fit-to-self. In an interview she mused: “I think I was really naive in thinking that I could write about whatever I wanted, like a white male writer can”.⁸⁹ As the story of the engagement of Yasmin, a British Asian woman to Joe, a white British man, *Love Marriage* engages metafictionally with delimiting assumptions about ‘authenticity’ and the double standards that critics as well as many others may hold about Muslim families in contrast to white British families. Despite her admiration for what she perceives as an openness between her partner and his mother Harriet, Yasmin is apprehensive about the ways in which Harriet takes a special interest in her mother’s cultural identity, inviting her to cook meals and demonstrate how to wear Asian clothes for Harriet’s friends. These feelings are confirmed by Rania, one of Yasmin’s friends, who concludes, it is “definitely orientalism ... It’s exotification, which is inherently devaluing”.⁹⁰ That Ali points to such assumptions in her fiction is revealing of how Muslim authors are inevitably and necessarily attuned to the ways in which they are seen and read.

The portrayal of Muslims in fiction is compromised by a legacy of Christian and Orientalist polemical narratives that has a long literary history. Since the medieval period in Europe, works including Dante Alighieri’s narrative poem *Divine*

⁸⁹ Jane Graham, “Monica Ali: ‘You have to have a core of self-belief to be a writer’,” *Big Issue*, 10/2/2022, <https://www.bigissue.com/culture/books/monica-ali-you-have-to-have-a-core-of-self-belief-to-be-a-writer/> accessed 6/1/2024.

⁹⁰ Monica Ali, *Love Marriage* (London: Virago Press, 2022), 244.

Comedy (1321) and Voltaire's play *Mahomet* (1736) portrayed the prophet Muhammed in derogatory and offensive ways, and the influence of Orientalist accounts of Islam persist to the present across various media forms.⁹¹ Modern examples are perhaps most evident in television — *24* (2001-2010), *Homeland* (2011-2020), and *The Bodyguard* (2018)—for how they perpetuate and sustain stereotypes and deleterious tropes, casting Islam as the enemy and Muslim characters as terrorists or as oppressed victims of their religious faith and culture. Reviewing *The Bodyguard*, Tasnim Nazeer writes, "[t]here are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, many of whom are pioneering women doctors, lawyers, architects and politicians, but we never see any of them on screen. Instead writers continually play on stereotypes that have the potential to further heighten Islamophobia".⁹² Chris Morris' comedy film *Four Lions* (2010), which features a group of inept Islamic terrorists, stands out as a rare exception that subverted tropes with acerbic humour and pathos, but a mainstream show like the BBC's *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) was derided by one reviewer as "a lazy comedy that reinforces majority (mis)understanding of Pakistanis/Asians/Muslims – three categories all too often conflated in the public imagination".⁹³

⁹¹ For a discussion of Islam as interpreted by European Christian thinkers and authors see: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 60-69.

⁹² Tasnim Nazeer, "Memo to Bodyguard writers: Muslim women are more than victims or terrorists," *The Guardian*, 24/9/2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/24/bodyguard-muslim-islamophobic-attacks-muslim-terrorist-stereotype> accessed 7/1/2024.

⁹³ Rupa Huq, "Citizen Khan? Citizen Cringe, more like. This throwback deserves to be scrapped," *The Guardian*, 11/11/16,

These kinds of images only intensified after 2001 when literature as well as film and televisual representations became a “conduit” for the production of neo-orientalist imagery and exoticism, in particular with the emergence of so called “misery memoirs” that claimed to ‘expose’ the oppression of life under Islam. Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Åsne Seierstad’s *The Bookseller of Kabul* and Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, all published in 2003, are prime examples of this tendency.⁹⁴ For Richard Gray, in novels like *The Kite Runner* and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) by Laila Halaby, “[d]ifference is diminished, crisis is distanced or even suppressed by being accommodated to familiar and often conventional narrative structures”.⁹⁵ Hamid Dabashi goes further in his condemnation of Nafisi and of Ibn Warraq, the self-styled ‘ex-Muslim’ author of *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (1995), by denouncing them as “native informers” whose works reinforce anti-Muslim tropes and have been used to support Western imperialism.⁹⁶ John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), which centres on a Muslim teenager’s bomb plot that is supposedly motivated by religious fundamentalism is a representative example of a ‘9/11’ novel, and Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011), which imagines a public furore when a Muslim-

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/11/citizen-khan-sadiq-khan-instagram-muslims> accessed 24/3/2024.

⁹⁴ *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin eds. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 6.

⁹⁵ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011), 114

⁹⁶ Dabashi discusses Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) at length: “one can now clearly see how very effectively the book cultivated US (and by extension global) public opinion against Iran, after it had already provided a key propaganda tool to the Bush administration during its prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.” Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 69.

American architect is selected to build a memorial at ground zero after the 9/11 attacks, speaks to the ferocity and sensationalism with which Muslim identity was discussed and targeted. Arin Keeble regards the portrayal of a “post-9/11 conflictedness” between trauma and politics as the strength of Waldman’s novel, arguing that through conflictedness Waldman mounts a critique of the Bush administration’s Manichean rhetoric that followed the 9/11 attacks.⁹⁷ It may have suggested a nuanced view of events lacking in other novels of the period, but as Rachel Sykes summarises, literary responses, by white writers in the main, were characterised by a “dismissal of reflection, calm and quiet and an attempt to meet the loud timbre of public tragedy with more noise... and a kind of exceptionalism that dismisses the present’s continuity with the past and equates noise with a narrative of progress”.⁹⁸ British novelists intervened at this juncture, and in different ways. In contrast to Martin Amis, for example, Jeannette Winterson, wrote in the *Guardian* that “to make Muslims into hate figures, or to retreat into the narrow box of Us and Them, will be a move back into barbarism”, and suggested in the moment that, “[h]umans need a narrative. Our best chance is another story - made from the rubble of what has been lost. This time, we have to tell it better”.⁹⁹ The writers I

⁹⁷ Arin Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014), 166.

⁹⁸ Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2018), 68.

⁹⁹ Jeanette Winterson, “We are all frightened. There is no safety without risk. What you risk reveals what you value,” *The Guardian*, 2/10/2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/02/gender.uk1> accessed 6/4/2024.

foreground tell stories that are not limited by a 'singular' event, or by a single 'event', and should be acknowledged for refusing to tie anti-Muslim discourse to September 11, 2001, as if it signalled the beginning of politicised anti-Muslim policies, but situate it in broader historical perspective and the now entrenched problem of Islamophobic racism.

'Folk devils' of that era, Osama bin Laden or Abu Hamza, may no longer present a threat, and the 'misery memoir' has faded but if one criticism can be made about post-9/11 fiction as a sub-genre, it is that it relied heavily on readerly sympathy with the image of the Muslim as terrorist threat, a formulaic framing that Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) played on subversively and that was perhaps the key to that novel's critical success. Novels in this thesis challenge this paradigm. Nadeem Aslam, who was writing *Maps for Lost Lovers* when the 9/11 attacks took place, is emphatic about their impact on the novel, even going so far as to assert that, "[i]n a way, the book is about September 11". But when he elaborates, it is telling: "I asked myself whether in my personal life and as a writer I had been rigorous enough to condemn the small scale September 11s that go on every day. ... Jugnu and Chanda [the novel's slain lovers] are the September 11 of this book".¹⁰⁰ In Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*, published four years

¹⁰⁰ Nadeem Aslam quoted in Marianne Brace, "Nadeem Aslam: A question of honour," *The Independent*, 11/6/2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-a-question-of-honour-731732.html> accessed 21/1/2024.

later, and another of my key texts, Sami's arrest on terrorism charges is even turned into an amusing irony when he is mistaken for a radical Islamist, despite his avowedly secular outlook, and in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* Oz's arrest for terrorism as a result of the government's Prevent strategy is defanged as a misunderstanding, with the author underlining that Muslims can and should conduct research into Muslim heritage should they elect to do so within the academy. In common with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Tariq Mehmood in *Song of Gulzarina* and Nadim Safdar in *Akram's War* both deploy equivocation in order to play on readerly expectations about terrorism and putative terrorists, but in contrast to Hamid they imaginatively explore the broader context of structural racism in Britain, and conflict in Afghanistan, which counters the presentism apparent in many theoretical and fictional interpretations of radicalisation. Mehmood's novel, and, indeed, his oeuvre, charts the changing face of racism from direct violence targeting British Asians in the 1970s and institutional racism in the 1980s, highlighted in the case of the Bradford 12, to more insidious forms of Islamophobia in the 2000s, illustrating for readers how Islamophobic racism has morphed over time. As Tariq Modood observed,

[u]ntil *The Satanic Verses* affair, Asian men were stereotyped as unassertive, overdeferential, and docile, not able to stand up for themselves. Within a few years, the prevalent stereotype of Muslim men (in Britain, the majority are

Asian) included the idea that they were inflexible, always demanding something, fanatical, and aggressive.¹⁰¹

Egregious stereotypes persist despite the popularity of Hanif Kureishi and his irreverent and comedic representation of British Asian identity emphasised in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* via protagonists whose sexual and creative exploration embodies an individualised liberalism that countered a then-prevalent image of socially conservative British Asians. Today, Muslims in the West have a nebulous public presence insofar as they are made highly visible in some contexts and seemingly 'invisible' in others. Nikhil Parmar's play *Invisible* (2023) explores this precise phenomenon satirically through the character of Zayan, an underemployed Muslim actor who struggles to find roles now that the 'Islamic fundamentalist' is no longer in vogue. Left with nameless character roles as doctors, bus drivers, or corner shop owners, Zayan feels the frustration of a growing sense of invisibility, provoking contemplation on the limitations placed on Muslims in the arts and beyond. As one of the first reviewers discerned, "[i]t is disorienting, and infuriating, to be hampered by a culture's — and an industry's — blinkered perception of what a whole group of people is capable of. *Invisible* is a thoughtfully provocative, witheringly knowing response to that noxiousness".¹⁰² This quality of knowingness, however frustrating,

¹⁰¹ Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 14.

¹⁰² Laura Collins-Hughes, "'Invisible' Review: Brown, British and Overlooked," *The New York Times*, 25/6/2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/25/theater/invisible-review.html> accessed 20/11/2023.

is a commonality among and between the authors examined in this thesis, all of whose fiction shows them to be acutely aware and vigilant about shifting perceptions in British society — and how quickly they turn into racism, criminalisation, and surveillance. Parmar's critically successful play captures a paradox that is all too familiar to Muslim writers: there has always been the expectation that to write about Muslim identity is to write about a problem.

This expectation is the focus of Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin's *Framing Muslims* (2011) which evidences how representation of Muslims in the media, politics and across cultural forms is 'framed' by an agenda which limits the terms of debate to a discourse of secularism, security, terrorism, or integration, positing Muslims as a problem to be solved. The authors argue that, in the case of media, delimiting framing narratives "only identify a small range of newsworthy topics [forming] what we would describe as a 'Muslim issues matrix.'" This is a form of "agenda-setting" whereby corporate and state interests converge in the association of supposedly 'Muslim issues' with "radicalism, terrorism, and practices that are seen as a threat to the nation-states that even a globalized media still sees itself as primarily serving".¹⁰³ This shapes market forces and demand for fiction that operates only within these narrow parameters. Morey summarises that:

¹⁰³ Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 63.

certain demands are made of the writers who deal with 'Muslim issues,' and they either accede to or problematize those demands. In other words, framing is always dialogic, and it takes a certain amount of cunning and guile for the writer to be able to circumvent imposed limitations on what they can say and how it will be interpreted.

He adds, tellingly, that, "[c]ritics need to be similarly supple".¹⁰⁴ Critics need to be vigilant, then, to respond to spurious 'framings' without falling into critical commentary that reproduces damaging tropes and eschews more nuanced and aesthetically-focused readings of literature by British Muslim writers.

The authors I have been studying are, to my mind, taking opportunities to mount a critique, indeed a collective critique, through fiction. At its best, literature can provoke, enlighten, challenge, and raise social awareness. It can prompt readers to question the assumptions they hold, to feel empathy, and even to imagine new ways of seeing or thinking, whether they are or are not Muslim. There is evidence of the positive impact of Islam on English literature, of course. Through generational cultural exchange what Amin Malak refers to as a 'muslimisation' of the English language may be taking place. Malak conceives of 'muslimised' English as "an instrument for demystifying and de-alienating Islam and Muslims".¹⁰⁵ An 'Islamicisation' of English is evident in the conscious ways in which Muslim authors

¹⁰⁴ Peter Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 23.

¹⁰⁵ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 8-11.

explore Islamic concepts in literary texts, not least by depicting characters who muse on and intellectualise ideas that may be familiar to Muslim readers but may be less familiar to non-Muslims. One example features in Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* when Muntaha explains the concept of *tawheed* (unity, oneness with God) to non-Muslim Gabor, who then relates it to his interest in art and science, and connects it to the theory of relativity.¹⁰⁶ Writers highlighted in this thesis often insert Islamicate terminology and quotations from the Qur'an and hadiths in ways that welcome Muslim readers and may serve to educate many other readers about cultural beliefs. Critics have a part to play in reshaping the language around Muslim writers to challenge existing paradigms too. For instance, Claire Chambers prefers the term 'writers of Muslim heritage' which she claims subverts "stereotypical representations of 'Muslimness' as a unitary, unchanging identity" and eschews "problematic judgements about whether or not writers are sufficiently religious".¹⁰⁷ Chambers' point is important because although I have labelled the writers whose works I examine 'Muslim' because they share a cultural background, not all are religious or practise the religion. Aboulela, whose work has been praised as "Halal fiction", is a notable exception, and her body of work raises questions about what religious writing may entail in contemporary Britain.¹⁰⁸ However, all of the writers I

¹⁰⁶ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (Penguin Books: London, 2008), 123-4

¹⁰⁷ Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 10.

¹⁰⁸ Sadia Abbas discusses this question in depth in "Religion and the Novel: A Case Study" in *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Fordham University Press, 2014), 72-96; in the same chapter Abbas cites the phrase "halal fiction" in Ferial Ghazoul, "Halal

examine are thoughtful and thought-provoking in depicting what being Muslim in Britain may mean. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, avowedly atheist Nadeem Aslam explores the cultural stigma faced by Muslim communities and his devoutly religious characters suggest convergent interests between culture and religion which cannot, or should not, be dichotomised.¹⁰⁹

Until the 1980s, people of Muslim heritage and background primarily identified in terms of culture or ethnicity, but a series of events, including the Honeyford Affair (1985), politicised religious and cultural identity to the extent that identifying as Muslim became more prevalent.¹¹⁰ Publications such as Kalim Siddiqui's *The Muslim Manifesto: A Strategy for Survival* (1990) addressed feelings of marginalisation and were met with overwhelmingly negative media coverage, cementing popular opinion: "the mediatised form of Muslim identity was one that

Fiction" [Review of *Coloured Lights* and *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela], *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/542/bo4.htm>, accessed by Sadia Abbas April 25, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Nasar Meer has gone so far as to compare the relationship between Islam and Muslim identity to sex and gender identity, "one may be biologically female or male in a narrow sense of the definition, but one may be a woman or man in multiple, overlapping and discontinuous ways." Meer uses the term "quasi-ethnic sociological formation" because "it includes opportunities for self-definition ... it can facilitate the description of oneself as 'Muslim' and take the multiple (overlapping and synthesised) and subjective elements into account independently or intertwined with objective behavioural congruence to [religious practices]," *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 59-63.

¹¹⁰ Ian Jack claimed "[a]s I remember it, the Honeyford affair was the first time the word 'Muslim' become almost as important a personal description as 'Pakistani' or 'Indian' in an argument over the consequences of immigration," "Was the 1980s Bradford headteacher who criticised multiculturalism right?", *The Guardian*, 13/6/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/13/was-1980s-headteacher-who-criticised-multiculturalism-right> accessed 14/1/2024.

from the outset was overtly presented in negative frames and one that was highly politicized".¹¹¹ Following the Rushdie Affair (1989), and the first Gulf War (1991), Muslims in Britain came to be characterised in the press and by some politicians as a kind of 'fifth column', a view that has deepened since with the advent of the 'war on terror', with a sense of belonging to Britain as Britons denied in ways that have resulted in changes in how Islam is practised among some young Muslims.

Observing changes between generations, Humayun Ansari writes:

The attachment of the migrant generation of Muslims to their ethnic and cultural past has been replaced not by feelings of belonging to the British way of life, from which they still feel excluded and alienated, but by Islamic values and practices which they feel are generic, adaptable and relevant to any social environment, including the British. By relinquishing their ethnic identification these young people have tried to counter their definition by the indigenous population as being from somewhere else, while by adopting a Muslim identification they have challenged traditional notions of Britishness. This kind of self-consciousness helps young British Muslims to cope with the ambiguities and contradictions they experience in British society.¹¹²

Ansari's claims may be debated at the grassroots but they are also being supported by some academics who argue that "[w]hat is evolving is not religion but religiosity

¹¹¹ Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 12.

¹¹² Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

– that is, the way in which believers build and live their relationship with religion”.¹¹³ This acculturation has resulted in the emergence of a ‘Muslim youth culture’, which Olivier Roy has posited as a “protest identity” emphasising subcultural identification and neighbourhood belonging.¹¹⁴

Muslim youth culture was the subject of Kureishi’s *The Black Album*, and his short story “My Son the Fanatic” (1994), both of which can be read as literary responses to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism following the Rushdie Affair, and both of which underline the continued relevance of Kureishi in discussions of Muslim identity. Attempting to understand the motivations of self-described fundamentalists, Kureishi has reflected on the history of post-war immigration in Britain and writes that the process of “settling in” took for granted that “‘belonging’ ... would happen eventually”. For those for whom it has not, he suggests, “considerable anger and disillusionment” has followed, compounded by “unemployment, poor housing, discrimination and ill-health”.¹¹⁵

Feelings of unbelonging are surfaced for exploration in Haroun Khan’s *The Study Circle* (2018), which I examine towards the end of the thesis. Khan’s novel focuses on a group of young Muslim men living on a housing estate in south

¹¹³ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 120

¹¹⁴ Olivier Roy describes how in Western Europe “many such youngsters have used Islam as an occasional form of protest identity ... (while they never pray and almost never go to the mosque),” *Globalised Islam*, 145.

¹¹⁵ Kureishi, “The Road Exactly: Introduction to *My Son the Fanatic*,” *Dreaming and Scheming*, 219.

London, a claustrophobic, bleak and hostile environment that is hemmed in by racist police and feels under siege as a result of the threat of violence from English Defence League (EDL) protestors. The protagonists form a 'study circle', a gathering in which to discuss current issues and consolidate their knowledge of Islam. Assumed to be evidence of radicalisation, their meetings are surveilled by MI5, which speaks to the criminalisation of Black British and British Asian youth. By indexing the government's 'Prevent' agenda, Khan's novel suggests how structural bias impacts British Muslims specifically. In contrast to Kureishi's exaggerated dichotomy of liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism in *The Black Album* and his caricature of two generations at odds in "My Son the Fanatic", Khan's novel is thoughtful and quiet. It explores how a group of young men maintain a semblance of friendship in spite of all that threatens them, and its main protagonist, Ishaq, is sympathetic to the different circumstances his parents experienced, sharing a close relationship with them despite differences of experience or belief. This quiet, thought-provoking approach to communities and individuals who are typically portrayed in the media is a deliberate choice on the part of the author to imbue nuance into a debate that too easily gives way to sensationalism.

In 1997, the Runnymede Trust Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All* defined it as "the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims." In 2019, the definition of the All-

Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) differed slightly: “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. By finally recognising Islamophobia as racism, the APPG responded to the rise of racist far-right groups, including the EDL, which are openly and virulently hostile to Islam, exploit hostility towards British citizens who are Muslim, and demonstrate hatred with impunity — in a way that would be condemned, even outlawed, if they were fomenting anti-Black racism.¹¹⁶ As Arun Kundnani has uncovered in his research, the government’s counterterrorism policies are based on models of radicalisation in which “an unfounded assumption” is made whereby “‘Islamist’ ideology is the root cause of terrorism”. He demonstrates how this “enables a displacement of the war on terror’s political antagonisms onto the plane of Muslim culture”, so that “culture talk” stands in for reasoned political analysis.¹¹⁷ Hussein Ali Agrama similarly describes how Islamic religiosity is reduced and essentialised to *fundamentalism*, *political Islam*, or *Islamic resurgence* as a single phenomenon: “the question of why people today would adopt Islamic ways of life presupposes for its plausibility that modern desires, freedoms, and choices are natural. It is by taking them as natural that an increasing (as opposed to a stable, or

¹¹⁶ The Runnymede Trust Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All* (1997) quoted in John L. Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxii–xxiii; The All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, “Islamophobia defined: The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia” (2019), <https://appgbritishmuslims.org/publications> accessed 20/03/2023.

¹¹⁷ Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), 9.

decreasing) religiosity can be seen as a problem for explanation".¹¹⁸ Moreover, Agrama observes a paradox in social theory insofar as the same norms are invoked as absolute truths when theorising Islamic religiosity, as though existing on separate planes as "two different conversations that cannot ever meet".¹¹⁹ Much is made, for instance, of a selective reading of history, a 'return' to tradition, and an ideologised religion, as though specific to Islam and aberrant phenomena. The same dangerous condescension is evident in veiled Islamophobic sentiment prevalent among the liberal mainstream, the issue with which this Introduction began. Even as increasingly robust definitions of Islamophobia would seem to combat the threat of far-right Islamophobes, an anti-Islam bias persists in secular liberal thought.¹²⁰

A critical re-evaluation of political secularism that has emerged over the last thirty years has scrutinised taken-for-granted liberal notions of the difference between religion and the secular. In "Notes on Post-Secular Society", Jürgen Habermas crystallised some emerging reflections about religion in modern society and claimed that the secularisation thesis, the argument that as society modernises religiosity falls away, no longer holds true: "[t]oday, public consciousness in Europe can be described in terms of a 'post-secular society' to the extent that at present it

¹¹⁸ Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

¹¹⁹ Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 16.

¹²⁰ Saeed Khan examines John Rawls' political philosophy and concludes that his construction of liberalism excludes the agency of Muslims and contributes to the institutionalisation of Islamophobia, "Fallacies of Foundational Principles: Rawls's Political Liberalism and Islamophobia," *ReOrient* 3:1 (2017): 50–64.

still has to 'adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment.'"¹²¹ Habermas contemplates how religious and secular epistemologies may be accommodated fairly in the public sphere, and in response to the *Kulturkampf* between multiculturalists and those secularists who are ardently critical of religious doctrines in the public sphere, he urges a process of complementary learning whereby both sides must find an interpretation of the relationship between faith and knowledge on which to agree.¹²² It is a noble ideal, but relies on an essentialisation of religion in order to conceive of the separation of religion and state, or to think of the secular as the absence of religion, notions that have been challenged by a diverse range of scholars, including Talal Asad who theorises 'the secular' as an epistemic category and secularism as a political doctrine.¹²³ As an ideology, political secularism essentialises the categories of religion, 'the secular', and the political. José Casanova more serviceably identifies the nebulous idea of secularism as

a whole range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies that may be consciously held and explicitly elaborated into philosophies of history and normative-ideological state projects, into projects of modernity and cultural

¹²¹ Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 19.

¹²² Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," 29; see also: Spyridon Kaltsas, "Habermas, Taylor, and Connolly on Secularism, Pluralism, and the Post-Secular Public Sphere," *Religions* 10:8 (2019): 460.

¹²³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

programs. Or, alternatively, it may be viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken-for-granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern doxa or as an "unthought."¹²⁴

Casanova's characterisation of secularism as an epistemic knowledge regime informs this thesis, as do other thinkers, including Joan Scott, who view secularism as a discursive operation of power rather than a fixed category of analysis or specific feature of the modern liberal state. Scott follows Foucault to investigate secularism 'genealogically' to "interrogate its meaning as it was articulated and implemented differently in different contexts at different times". Her approach is distinguishable from much of the extant literature on secularism that attempts to pin down a precise definition.¹²⁵ For Casanova, secularism "becomes an ideology the moment it entails a theory of what 'religion' is or does".¹²⁶ As an ideology, secularism is not without religion; rather, it is prescriptive in its conception of what religion is or ought to entail. Tariq Modood outlines the ideology of secularism as a problem for Muslims because "the demand by Muslims not just for toleration and religious freedom but for public recognition is indeed taken to be philosophically very different to the same demand made by Black people, women and gays. It is seen as an attack on the

¹²⁴ José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76:4 (2009): 1051.

¹²⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 4.

¹²⁶ José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1051.

principle of secularism, the view that religion is a feature, perhaps uniquely, of private and not public identity.”¹²⁷

However, Modood also cautions that “secularism pure and simple is not what exists in the world”, and that, in effect, secularism is being developed as an ideology in order to oppose Islam.¹²⁸ This is noticeable in some contexts more than others. In France, for example, state secularism or *Laïcité* is a constitutional principle and is often invoked to support legislation, such as the ban on Islamic headscarves in state schools (*l'affaire du foulard*), and in this sense it becomes a political ideology because it prescribes which aspects of religion are deemed acceptable to secular society. This kind of argument specifically targets religious minorities, namely Muslims. As Talal Asad points out: “[m]any French people, while strongly opposed to any mention of religion in the EU Constitution, have no difficulty in speaking of their Judeo-Christian legacy’ — a pregnant phrase now that ‘Islam’ has become the Stranger Within”.¹²⁹ While secularism operates differently in France, its discursive effects appear in Britain and throughout Europe. Criticism of Muslims is tacitly accepted by many public intellectuals while antisemitism is not.¹³⁰ This has been particularly

¹²⁷ Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 65.

¹²⁸ Modood, *Multiculturalism*, 72.

¹²⁹ Talal Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism,” *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. eds. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 495.

¹³⁰ Talal Asad makes this point explicitly when stating, “There are many prominent intellectuals in France who publicly express opinions Muslims say they find offensive, intellectuals who remain highly respected. Acts and statements offensive to Jews, on the other hand, issue largely from sections of the population that are already far from

noticeable since Israel declared war in Gaza, something to which I will return in the Conclusion of the thesis. As Wendy Brown observes, it is often argued that secularism is culturally neutral, yet secular Western states tacitly identify national or European culture in their defence of 'our' cultural values "through burqa bans, language laws, cultural tests for citizenship (notorious in the Netherlands) and other stipulations for assimilation".¹³¹ A case in point in the British context is the insistence that citizens respect 'British values'.

While it is not the sole focus of this thesis, a discourse of secularism emerges as an important concern that underpins the perception of Islam in Britain and features in these novels. It is evident in the attitudes of characters, including Sami in *The Road from Damascus* who holds a binary view of secularism and religion that has been influenced by his father and is supported by one of Sami's literary heroes, Rashid Iqbal, a thinly veiled caricature of Salman Rushdie. In *Asghar and Zahra*, Zahra's tendency to favour liberalism over Islam, as reflected in her reading habits, renders her dismissive of religion and negatively impacts her relationship with Asghar, suggesting the subconscious effect of a liberal bias. Natasha is equally critical of Islam in *The Kindness of Enemies* when she minimises confusing feelings about her identity, preferring to hide in the "staunchly secular" role of historian.¹³²

respectable: extreme right-wing elements (neo-Nazis) or Muslim youth in the 'sensitive' *banlieus*.", "Trying to Understand French Secularism," 510.

¹³¹ Wendy Brown, "Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality," *Theory & Event* 15:2 (2012): 7.

¹³² Leila Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015), 216.

In this way, Aboulela indicates the ways that secularity impinges on the ability of Muslims to express themselves in British society.

Despite a growing body of critical theory on the post-secular, there remains a dearth of studies that focus on literature in which writers explore this idea. Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2012) stands out as a rare study of how contemporary novelists engage with the post-secular, understood as a critique of secularism as ideology (in the West) or of state policy (in India) as well as organised religion. Ratti features Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, two diasporic writers born in South Asia who have spent the majority of their lives in the West, and "challenge notions of a 'secular' west by venturing into those borderline areas that question received orthodoxies". Ratti argues that, "their diasporic location allows them to challenge the binary oppositions of majority-minority and religious-secular, and the complicities between the two binaries."¹³³ Peter Morey's reading of Leila Aboulela's fiction in the context of post-secular theory is another rare intervention insofar as he issues a critique of post-secularists, including Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who he suggests too simplistically equate the West with desacralisation and Islam with spirituality resulting in a misrepresentation of the history of post-enlightenment secularisation. Morey maintains that "religious" elements in the novel form persist. *Minaret*, he

¹³³ Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination : Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 25.

concludes, has “narrative tropes that have cross-cultural resonances, and which, far from re-emerging as ‘postsecular’, actually never went away”.¹³⁴ In *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (2015), Rehana Ahmed addresses the inadequacies of a liberal secularist assessment of the ‘Rushdie Affair’ via *The Satanic Verses* by reading class as a “structuring absence” in the novel that finds its response in protests from predominantly working-class Muslims in Bradford. By addressing the issues of class overlooked in the novel and responses to the affair, Ahmed unpicks the contradictions of a liberal antiracist position, arguing for example that “[l]iberalism permits, or even requires, Khomeini’s presence in the Britain-based narrative, but disallows that of the Bradford protesters, which would threaten its interests by introducing the issue of class”.¹³⁵ In this vein I consider the post-secular turn as the latest in a series of debates on policy directed against migrants and a way of confronting the limitations of liberal antiracism and multiculturalism in a constructive way. As Ahmed suggests, in these debates Muslims are viewed as a “cipher” because “[j]ust as a critique of multiculturalist practices and policies can function as means of marginalising and stigmatising Muslims, so the supposed cultural excesses of Muslims provide a useful vehicle for criticising

¹³⁴ Peter Morey, “‘Halal fiction’ and the Limits of Postsecularism: Criticism, critique, and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*,” *Journal of Commonwealth literature*, 53: 2 (2018): 310, 312.

¹³⁵ Rehana Ahmed, “Anti-racism, liberalism and class in *The Satanic Verses* and the Rushdie Affair,” *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 72, 75.

multiculturalism".¹³⁶ By focusing on heterogeneous depictions of British Muslims in fiction, I also want to shift the debate from problematising Muslims towards problematising secular liberalism.

Historically, of course, there are precedents to the anti-Muslim rhetoric circulating in Britain and throughout Europe which suggest the discourse of secularism is a common thread. José Casanova's investigation into anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States reveals remarkable parallels. In 1840s America, anti-Catholic animosity fused with anti-immigrant nativism in response to Irish Catholic immigrants, making them a distinguishable minority, with liberals and conservatives alike castigating Catholicism as a "retro-grade, fundamentalist and alien ultramontanist religion". Whether practising Catholics or not, they were considered anti-modern and "embodied representations of popish, barbaric, despotic Roman Catholicism". Today, he argues, 'immigrant', 'Muslim' and 'Islam' are conflated in European discourse in a similar way as anti-Muslim nativism: "throughout Europe immigrants from Muslim countries not only are primarily classified as Muslims [rather than nationality], but they have come to represent 'Islam' with all the baggage which the orientalist discourse of Islam carries in Christian secular Europe and all the associations which 'the war on terror' carries in the modern West".¹³⁷ One might also consider Saba Mahmood's claim that the

¹³⁶ Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2015), 8.

¹³⁷ José Casanova "The Politics of Nativism: Islam in Europe, Catholicism in the United States,"

depiction of Muhammad in cartoons, in both *Jyllands Posten* in 2005 and *Charlie Hebdo* in 2006, 2011, and 2012, echoes the grotesque satirical caricatures of Jews which fomented antisemitism thereby linking ethno-religious identity with worldwide conspiracy, and prevalent attitudes exemplified in events such as the Dreyfus Affair (1894).¹³⁸ In each case, a religious minority is maligned and portrayed as a blight on society. Indeed, Maleiha Malik likens the treatment of Jews in Britain one hundred years ago to how Muslims are positioned today. If Jews in London's East End were stigmatised by links to Bolshevism and anarchism, allegiances for only a minority of the Jewish community, "[i]t was claimed that London was 'seething' with violent aliens, and the British establishment was said to be 'in a state of denial'. East End Jews were said to be 'alienated', not 'integrated', and a 'threat to our security'".¹³⁹ Such comparisons may risk obscuring historical specificities, but they serve to underline what is at stake in the current political climate, and that it has never been isolated to contemporary events.

Philosophy & Social Criticism 2012 38:4-5, 487, 488-9; 'Muslim' has taken precedence as an identity For instance, Nasar Meer argues that the "shift in semantics reflects important internal developments, specifically the fruition of a tangible Muslim-consciousness among Muslim communities themselves." Nasar Meer, *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 56.

¹³⁸ Saba Mahmood, "Moral Injury & Muhammed's Cartoons: Thinking Reparatively with Eve Sedgwick," The Fifth Annual Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Memorial Lecture in Gender and Sexuality Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 5/3/2015 online at <https://www.bu.edu/honoringeve/mahmood/> accessed 25/11/2023.

¹³⁹ Maleiha Malik, "Muslims Are Getting the Same Treatment Jews Had a Century Ago," *The Guardian*, 2/2/2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/02/comment.religion1#comments> accessed 14/3/2023.

Like Malik, in *The Road from Damascus* Yassin-Kassab draws out a comparison to Eastern European Jews in London's East End through his portrayal of Gabor's grandfather, imagining a scene in the early twentieth century at the Brick Lane synagogue in which members of the British Brothers' League proclaim: "[w]e reject the Shylocks and Fagins who abuse our hospitality, our sometimes naïve generosity. The destitute foreigners who plague us. The motley multitude. Our stand is a question of principle, of civilization entrenching itself in the face of barbarism".¹⁴⁰

The message, and its setting, in what is now a predominately Muslim neighbourhood, may provoke readers to reflect historically and comparatively on the plight of Muslims today, as the most recent group to be marginalised and demonised, rather than disaggregate contemporary Islamophobia from historical and ongoing structural racism, xenophobia and classism. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Shamas' rigid stance against Islam is situated in the context of his exile from Pakistan under Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's regime because of views he has expressed in his poetry. Rahim's depiction of Islamic Spain via a trip to Andalusia in *Asghar and Zahra* exposes the suppressed narrative of Islam in Europe and explores how it is set against the mythologisation of a 'Judeo-Christian' European identity. Like Aboulela's portrayal of British support for Imam Shamil in *The Kindness of Enemies*, *Asghar and Zahra* introduces contradictions that unravel dominant narratives of Islam

¹⁴⁰ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 134.

as alien to European and British identity while uncovering important Muslim cultural heritage that may enlighten non-Muslim readers.

Robin Yassin-Kassab, Leila Aboulela, Nadim Safdar, Tariq Mehmood, Nadeem Aslam, Monica Ali, Sameer Rahim and Haroun Khan all published fiction between 2004 and 2022 that is set wholly or partly in contemporary Britain, and also cast back to previous decades to explore the experiences of British Muslims. I begin this thesis by examining Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* for how the novel is representative of British Muslim writers taking on debates about multiculturalism and community. In Chapter 2, Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* is examined in comparative context with Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* for some of the ways in which Islamophobic discourse works to suppress religious Muslim identity and how, through the *bildungsroman* form, both writers, processionally and progressively, challenge a secular liberal epistemology by tracing the acceptance of the importance of faith on the part of their main protagonists. Chapter 3 analyses how the 'marriage plot' is being complicated and extended by British Muslim writers. I focus on practices of reading in Samir Rahim's *Asghar and Zahra* and Monica Ali's *Love Marriage*, for how the works that the protagonists read may be understood as a meta-fictional commentary on romantic idioms and assumptions about 'arranged marriages'. Chapter 4 combines focus on historical racism and contemporary Islamophobia via Tariq Mehmood's *Song of Gulzarina* and

Nadim Safdar's *Akram's War* and examines how both authors explore resistance and resilience as the cumulative effect of a lifetime of division and exclusion for their main protagonists, countering a myopic obsession with the figure of the religiously motivated 'Islamic terrorist' in theories of radicalisation and in popular media in the contemporary era. Haroun Khan's *The Study Circle* is featured in the final chapter because this novel about friendship foregrounds Muslim youth culture, the problem of Islamophobia in the university setting, and the criminalisation of young British Muslim men.

There are pressing challenges posed by Islamophobia today, as this Introduction indicates. In my view, Muslim writers of British fiction are uniquely placed to respond to these concerns with a subtlety and nuance that is largely absent from political debate or media accounts. I have selected writers who demonstrate an awareness of the literary landscape created by established writers, notably Kureishi, who addressed the stigma, discrimination and representational burdens British Muslims faced in previous decades. But, these contemporary novels are often much quieter, and they are certainly more complex than they initially appear. The novels I foreground defy easy readings and suggest what is at stake as a result of an adverse perception of Islam and Muslims in Britain and how that affects non-Muslims too. These intriguing and topical fictions have a relevance that stretches far beyond the experiences of a single, albeit heterogeneous, minority group and together they are building a picture of modern Britain to which we should pay attention.

Chapter 1

“Their religion and background took care of the bitter aftertaste”:

Multiculturalism and Community in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*

In this chapter, I examine the complexities of a particular South Asian diasporic immigrant community in a working-class suburb in the North of England that features in Nadeem Aslam’s 2004 novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Aslam traces the aftermath of the murder of Chanda and Jugnu whose deaths are seen as ‘honour killings’, motivated by alleged shame and humiliation because the couple is ‘living in sin’. The crime and its impending court case shine a spotlight on this community, including its high levels of unemployment and illiteracy that inhibit social mobility. Under the intensifying scrutiny of the pending court case, the enigma of the killings becomes a “bloody Rorschach blot” for the town’s inhabitants.¹ The novel is also a critical and sometimes controversial reflection on Muslim communities in Britain, and Aslam implicates a conservative conception of Islam. Aslam’s prose draws on imagery and iconography that is reminiscent of Sufi poetic forms, acting as a form of theological counterpoint that is internal to Islam. However, among the novels discussed in this thesis, his raises a number of problems because his depiction of conservative Muslims risks becoming flattened by its grounding in secular

¹ Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 137. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

epistemology and undermined by a persistently negative representation of Islam that, at times, gives way to the risk of sensationalism. Reviewers and critics have suggested that Aslam exoticises aspects of his depiction. I engage with this in detail but, in my reading, this is a reductive descriptor that evades the social realism that is a persistent thread across the narrative. I contemplate how Aslam's tendency to tread a fine line between cultural and sociological 'readings' of behaviour reveals an ambiguity that is central to communal life but that when he draws connections between life in the India of the Raj and present-day attitudes in the UK, gesturing towards the complexity of diasporic identities, Aslam conflates Islam with Pakistan, patriarchy, and supposedly 'traditional' family life, while the behaviour of his secular Muslim character, Shamas, is left largely unexplored.

Aslam foregrounds tensions in a community that battles against a racism that is underplayed as an external threat in this novel, curtailing a more balanced and complex understanding of the turn to conservative Islam engendered by life in racist Britain. Against what I read as the novel's bleak denial of a path beyond stasis and circularity for its characters, I look to recent cultural and sociological research that has engaged with Islam as a focal point of identity and a positive assertion of self, to contend that a more optimistic analysis may also be uncovered, against the grain of the text at first sight, with religion a dynamic resource that plays a pivotal role for individuals and communities. An ambivalence lies at the heart of *Maps for Lost Lovers*, then. Tension becomes a central point of reflection and revelation for the

novel's principal protagonists Shamas, brother of slain Jugnu, his pious wife Kaukab, and their three grown-up children Charag, Mah-Jabin, and Ujala.

The debate between a culturalist and a sociological understanding of honour-crime is a divisive one that is played out in this novel. In media accounts, honour killings are portrayed as relating specifically to Islam, infamously in the case of the murder of Banaz Mahmod in 2006 which was widely reported. However, honour-related violence is not specific to Muslim societies and affects all societies, religions, and classes.² Nor has it received approval by Islamic authorities. Honour killing is condemned by Muslim scholars as un-Islamic. It is not in the Qur'an or in the hadith, "nor is it sanctioned by Islamic religion and law".³ Explanations of the phenomenon in Britain have been attributed to a variety of socio-economic factors affecting immigrant populations. Idriss and Abbas assert that:

in certain urban localities there are significant concentrations of Muslim groups, many of which have emerged from rural origins in the sending regions and have maintained to a considerable degree a range of cultural,

² Mohammad Mazher Idriss and Tahir Abbas assert that there is "a common (misconceived) understanding that honour crimes occur mainly against Muslim women (and are mainly perpetrated by Muslim males) living in Muslim communities, and that HRV is expressly supported in Islamic scriptures and the Qur'an; this misconceived import is based upon a neoOrientalist conception that Muslim men are violent, fundamentalist and irrational. However, this misconstrued understanding is supported by the bloodshed witnessed in Pakistan in the name of so-called honour," *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 4.

³ See, for example, John L Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1, 77.

social and religious practices that may be seen to be at odds with the majority society

and that in such circumstances problems of honour-related violence can, they aver, remain undetected.⁴ Other commentators have suggested that honour crime is the consequence of very specific cultural attitudes. In *Crimes of the Community: Honour-based Violence in the UK* (2008), James Brandon and Salam Hafez explore behaviour associated with honour in faith communities and quote Humera Khan, co-founder of An-Nisa Society which is a women's advocacy group in Wembley: "[w]hat fuels honour in Asian and Middle Eastern culture and the frame work [sic] lies within feudalism, tribalism and patriarchal ways of living. Those things do not exist within white secular families".⁵ Khan attributes crimes of 'honour' to whole cultures, despite pointing out that the same crimes would be labelled "crimes of passion" in other cultures and suggests motive is the key difference. She sets up a simplistic dichotomy between a patriarchal Asian culture and a white society supposedly free of such problems when patriarchal ways of living persist in white families, whether religious or secular. As a consequence, she risks figuring white society as a superficially benign comparator. To evidence the prevalence of honour-based violence, Brandon and Hafez cite statistics advanced by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) that 5000 women are victims of honour killings every year

⁴ Idriss and Abbas, *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam*, 20.

⁵ James Brandon and Salam Hafez, *Crimes of the Community: Honour-based Violence in the UK* (Trowbridge: Centre for Social Cohesion: 2008), 38.

worldwide.⁶ As Lila Abu-Lughod contends, while this figure lends credibility to the existence of honour crimes, it also gives the impression that all forms of honour-based violence are “variations on each other”, thereby ignoring dynamic historical and political changes impacting individuals across different societies.⁷ Intercultural studies of honour killing suggest that explanations that rest on cultural differences are inadequate.⁸ Honour killing has been explained as a violent manifestation of *izzat* which is a multi-contextual construct across societal, familial, and interpersonal levels, “honoring one’s existence and relationship with others via behaviors or actions such as harmonizing personal goal/s especially with one’s family and extended family”.⁹ Intercultural theorists Dorjee, Baig and Ting-Toomey assert an understanding of *izzat* as a phenomenon linked to “face needs”, approximately understood as a sense of the reputation of and respect for individuals in a community.¹⁰ They claim that some individuals place a greater importance on how a community is seen, while others will be primarily concerned with how they themselves are seen. If they place *izzat* at the centre of negotiation, commentators

⁶ Nafis Sadik, "State of World Population 2000," United Nations Population Fund, <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/state-world-population-2000>, accessed 30/9/2021.

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Seductions of the 'Honor Crime'," *Differences* 22:1 (2011), 38.

⁸ Tenzin Dorjee, Noorie Baig and Stella Ting-Toomey, "A Social Ecological Perspective on Understanding 'Honor Killing': An Intercultural Moral Dilemma," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 42:1 (2013), 2.

⁹ Dorjee, Baig and Ting-Toomey, "A Social Ecological Perspective on Understanding 'Honor Killing': An Intercultural Moral Dilemma," 7.

¹⁰ Dorjee, Baig and Ting-Toomey, "A Social Ecological Perspective on Understanding 'Honor Killing': An Intercultural Moral Dilemma," 7.

argue that it suggests an inherent violence in immigrant communities, in contrast to majoritarian life in modern, 'post-cultural' Britain.¹¹

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, then, the voicing of different perspectives on the killings that lie at the heart of the novel is explored within a family, when Shamas and Kaukab's children return to the suburban family home to attend the trial. The children have a strained relationship with their parents, particularly with their mother. Ujala has not visited for seven years; despite Kaukab's love for him, she somewhat bewilderedly finds that "everything she did seemed to disgust him – and he left home as soon as he could" (30). Mah-Jabin lives in London and visits her parents once or twice a year, her divorce from an abusive Pakistani man she marries at sixteen having "enraged" her mother (91). The eldest child, Charag, is estranged after revealing to his mother that his white girlfriend is pregnant. These tensions simmer under the surface for all the children. Mah-Jabin feels that she must guard her behaviour around her mother and that there is "so much outside the house that may not be brought into the house" because it will be construed as a challenge to parental authority (93). Kaukab also tries to keep the content of her conversations with the neighbourhood women a secret from her children: "concealing everything regarding the Pakistanis that the children might deem objectionable. She knows Mah-Jabin will ridicule the idea of djinns" (110). In this way, a sense of dissonance is

¹¹ Aisha K. Gill and Avtar Brah, "Interrogating Cultural Narratives about 'honour'- Based Violence," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 21:1 (2014), 73.

produced by emphasising repressed emotions and misconstrued behaviour. This feeling is voiced as regression through Charag who feels that returning to “these Asian streets and lanes of his childhood, is like entering one large labour room, full of the voices of women expressing a spectrum of emotions. It is like being born” (132). As one literary critic, Amina Yaqin, argues, Aslam creates a “cacophony of voices” but “nobody is prepared to listen to one another”.¹² Cutting across generations and behaviours within and outside the family, the threads of ambiguity in the novel are layered. Their cacophony may confound some readers, and they have certainly provoked differences of opinion among literary critics and reviewers that merit unpacking in order for a more complex reading to emerge.

Aslam’s novel’s setting contrasts markedly with many other British South Asian diasporic novels, such as Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), by moving beyond the metropole to a suburb that edges into the English countryside, a space that is imbued with a rose-tinted ‘English’ identity that can be traced back to Romantic poets such as Keats and Wordsworth and to novelists like Thomas Hardy. Aslam’s treatment of rural England unsteadies readers by bending ‘traditional’ similes into images that suggest that this British Asian community is as embedded in the landscape as any other: “[o]n the shore the winds rush from every direction during the winter months to

¹² Amina Yaqin, “Muslims as Multicultural Misfits in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*,” *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing* eds. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin (New York: Routledge, 2012), 113.

twist themselves around the body like a sari" (4). The town is situated above a lake that is shaped like an X, with "shelf-like" streets strung out along a hill lined by abundant cherry trees (3-4). In describing the falling of the first snow in this place, Aslam could just as easily be describing a town in the north of India.¹³ But the impression is fragmented as soon as traditional features of 'Englishness' are introduced into the narrative, including an Iron Age hill fort and a tower dating to Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee at the top of the valley. These are landmarks that jar with the area's natural beauty, physically dominate the landscape, and impose a monolithic sense of its local history which, with frequent references to a "lobster buoy from Maine, USA" used as a doorstep, underline the feeling of being out of place (8).

Aslam emphasises the disorientation of the first settlers: "[b]ecause it was difficult to pronounce the English names, the men who arrived in this town in the 1950s had re-christened everything they saw before them" (28-9). The use of 'Christened' underlines their displacement and ironically calls attention to the historical role of the 'civilising mission' in European conquest and colonisation. Mimicking and reversing colonial appropriation, streets are renamed for those in Bombay, Dhaka, and Calcutta in order to 'map' a sense of belonging for the new inhabitants, but when the town, which is otherwise unnamed, is renamed Dasht-e-

¹³ Cordula Lemke, "Racism in the Diaspora: Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004)," *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts* ed. Lars Eckstein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 173.

Tanhaii (The Wilderness of Solitude) it offers little solace. For Éva Pataki reconfiguring street names suggests how “the presence of immigrants disrupts the image of the idyllic, pure countryside believed to be characterized by intact communities, a sense of community, safety and security, neighborliness, open spaces, privacy and solitude, reaffirming Englishness, cultural security, and timelessness”.¹⁴ For Dave Gunning, the renaming of the town functions as no more than a “cry of despair”.¹⁵ The claiming of space does entail material reterritorialisation in the shape of a mosque, Hindu temple and a shop selling South Asian foods to affirm a sense of belonging in a place otherwise devoid of it. These establishments make the suburb largely self-sufficient or insular which is evident in the lack of contact with white people who are derided by Kaukab as a “diseased, vice-ridden and lecherous race!” (44). The extent to which white people are demonised in this novel is evident when they are invoked to scare children; when young, Ujala is told “he would be handed over to a white person if he didn’t behave, a threat that had reduced his siblings into submission” (72).

Aslam suggests that Dasht-e-Tanhaii is abandoned by the majoritarian society which marks it as an ambivalent space that is not easily subsumed under social and political policy. Yaqin argues that Aslam explores how “‘state multiculturalism’ is a

¹⁴ Éva Pataki, “‘This Dasht-E-Tanhaii Called the Planet Earth’: The Metamorphosis of Space and Identity in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*,” *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 20:2 (2014), 81.

¹⁵ Dave Gunning, *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 84.

meaningless notion for an immigrant working class and a rootless underclass that clings to an unforgiving mode of belonging in an alien environment". She asserts that Aslam's characters "challenge us to think through the construction of identities as they occur within the territorial boundaries of the nation and what happens to those identities when they come into conflict with the values upheld by the metropolitan centre".¹⁶ There are certainly shortcomings to theories of community agency. Homi Bhabha argues, by extrapolating on Partha Chatterjee, that agency is achieved through incommensurable positions: "[t]he agency of the community-concept 'seeps through the interstices of the objectively constructed, contractually regulated structure of civil society', class-relations and national identities".¹⁷ Tariq Modood claims that marginalisation sustains a Muslim group identity and enables its positive assertion against an exclusionary mainstream society.¹⁸ Geoffrey Nash makes the case that Aslam occupies the "individualistic, pro-liberal mainstream" and is therefore unlikely to see the value in a communal identity.¹⁹ However, binaries, like individualism versus group identity, neglect the disorientation and dissonance that is foregrounded in this fiction. The citizens of Dasht-e-Tanhaii do not make identarian claims. The older, and more pious, characters such as Kaukab and Chanda's mother refer to themselves as Pakistanis: "[England] isn't our country"

¹⁶ Amina Yaqin, 'Muslims as Multicultural Misfits in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*', 113.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 230-231.

¹⁸ Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). 39-40.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012), 44.

(79). Another neighbourhood woman “wonders why her children refer to Bangladesh as ‘abroad’ because Bangladesh isn’t abroad, *England* is abroad; Bangladesh is *home*,” suggesting an internalised racism which connects elsewhere with a white racist’s taunt that “[t]his is our country, not yours” (46, 178).

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam focuses on Kaukab, a pious Muslim and the daughter of a conservative cleric, who arrives in England with no schooling beyond the age of eleven and gains little knowledge of England outside of her neighbourhood (32). Kaukab’s misapprehension of English customs and idioms is evident in her mistaken memorisation of English sayings, like “[i]t will be a cold day in Hell when Hell freezes over” (32). Her own logic stands in for the original meaning which she cannot grasp. Aslam suggests that all her behaviour is framed by family customs, even down to her choice of television set, Philips, because it is the brand with which her father is familiar from Pakistan and because “she found it a reassurance and also knew it could be trusted”. Trust in the familiar is infused with a putative sense of security against the hostility of unfamiliar and unwelcoming surroundings (33). This is a feeling that Seyla Benhabib articulates via Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit*, or ‘thrownness’, which claims that as individuals we are born into narratives of gender, family, and collective identity: “[c]odes of established narratives in various cultures define our capacities to tell our individual stories. There are only so many ways in which a cultural code may be varied; beyond them, one may run the risk of becoming an outcast or a convert, a marginal figure or a

deserter of the tribe,” a risk of ostracism exemplified in Aslam’s description of a local prostitute: “had she been Indian or Pakistani, she would have been assaulted and driven out of the area within days of moving in for bringing shame on her people” (16).²⁰ In this context, Aslam portrays a community that relies on a pre-established sense of cultural identity due to the precarity of immigrant life in the way that Avtar Brah defines ‘diaspora space’ as inherently ambivalent:

Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. Here, tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time. What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities.²¹

What is striking about Brah’s claim is the notion that tradition is moulded in diaspora, expressed in the novel when Kaukab transforms from the young woman in Pakistan who awakens her husband Shamas by standing over him and twisting “wet

²⁰ Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 15.

²¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 205.

hair into a yard-long rope, letting beads of water fall onto his face, waking him with her body scented with the dawn bathe, eyes glittering with mischievousness” to a wife who is “ashamed, embarrassed, and distressed” by Shamas’ sexual advances (56). The implication is that this change in her is brought about by life in Britain where she is fearful of the damaging effects of gossip inside the community and where, outside of the community, “there was nothing but humiliation” (65). Kaukab draws on a tradition of modesty in Pakistan to justify the change, despite this being of lesser concern to her younger self. If this suggests that tradition is malleable, as Nira Yuval-Davis argues ‘cultural stuff’ — a plethora of experiences, ideas, traditions, and customs— is a resource that is always used selectively, Aslam suggests that immigrant life in Britain has engendered a turn inwards where aspects of ‘tradition’ take on a greater meaning in the absence of a tangible sense of belonging.²²

In my reading, Aslam’s portrayal of a turn inwards is coupled with direct confrontation of the more contentious issues facing particular communities in Britain, affecting how they are judged, not least in the context of an honour-killing, and embarks on a broad critique of multicultural policy. As Claire Chambers contends, “Aslam’s construction of the migrants’ contributions to their own ghettoization encapsulates one strand of criticism often levelled at the multiculturalism model of immigration”, though she disagrees with charges of self-

²² Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 43.

segregation, viewing them as a form of victim-blaming.²³ Aslam spent eleven years writing *Maps for Lost Lovers*.²⁴ He was working on the novel as a growing backlash emerged in a hostile response that coincided with the publication of the Parekh Report on multi-ethnic Britain in 2000.²⁵ The report's advocacy for an inclusive British identity, in particular its assertion that Britishness has racial connotations, was seized on by the right-wing press, provoking an "extremely hostile reception" culminating in its rejection by Home Secretary Jack Straw.²⁶ That reaction may have set the tone for subsequent inquiries into civil unrest in Northern English towns in 2001, notably the Cantle Report in December 2001, which blamed Muslims failing to integrate as the cause of "disturbances", against the evidence that economic deprivation was a primary factor.²⁷ Such reports placed a new emphasis on allegiance to 'British values' that was concretised following the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks and a derisive backlash against multiculturalism which began to be characterised as "a system of sinister interventions by government, nudging, directing, and manoeuvring laws and cultural practices so as to favour nonindigenous

²³ Claire Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 84.

²⁴ The end of the novel is signed off: "October 1991 – April 2003" suggesting this to be accurate. Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 369; Marianne Brace "Nadeem Aslam: A Question of Honour," *The Independent*, 11/6/2004 at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-a-question-of-honour-731732.html>. accessed 17/9/2021.

²⁵ Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 50.

²⁶ Eugene McLaughlin & Sarah Neal, "Misrepresenting the multicultural nation," *Policy Studies*, 25:3, (2004): 156.

²⁷ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*, 50.

populations.”²⁸ Ziv Orenstein and Itzhak Weismann find these perspectives to be shared by high-profile Muslim secularists, including Salman Rushdie and Maryam Namazie. Secularist scholar Rumi Hasan argues that multiculturalist policies had many unintended negative consequences, including the bolstering of far-right political parties such as the British National Party (BNP) who made spurious claims that faith-based minorities received benefits denied to a (white) majority society.²⁹ A policy of multiculturalism was blamed for creating homogenised communities differentiated by faith, as if the privileged role of ‘community leaders’ had a homogenising effect, imposing a worldview on a community.³⁰ Aslam’s decision to depict a community in the North of England is pertinent to this wider context, specifically cities such as Bradford and Leeds where division is more evident because while in London ethnic difference may be celebrated when aligned with economic success, in the North “difference is seen as a sign of crime, regressive cultural practices or backward-looking communities seeking to isolate themselves from wider society”.³¹

Aslam is clearly aware of these perceptions and some characters look to their past, and Pakistan, to understand the present and guard against it. He writes that Kaukab “extended what she knew of Pakistani women ... to cover all women” and

²⁸ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*, 50.

²⁹ Ziv Orenstein and Itzhak Weismann, “Neither Muslim nor Other: British Secular Muslims,” *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations* 27:4 (2016): 383.

³⁰ Orenstein and Weismann, “Neither Muslim nor Other: British Secular Muslims,” 384.

³¹ Idriss and Abbas, *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam*, 23.

that may be why literary critic Cordula Lemke declares that Kaukab “is unable to imagine an identity not shaped by her memories of Pakistan”.³² Kaukab is cut off and shut down by her own family. Her husband, Shamas, spends almost no time with her, preferring to “spend most of his free weekend hours” at an Urdu bookshop (54). When Jugnu breaks up with a white girl Kaukab disapproves of, he refuses to see his mother. When Kaukab suggests to Charag that his white girlfriend may have got pregnant deliberately it is unclear whether this is intended as a malicious remark or is simply naivety on her part, and she is silenced by Charag who replies: “I can’t listen to any more of this”, compounding a sense of ambiguity (58). Miscommunication abounds in this suburb too (where citizens speak Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, or Gujarati as well as English). The narrator undercuts many of these intricacies, and Aslam steers readers toward an oppositional logic that may be posited between secular reason and religious orthodoxy which is further explored in the novel’s aesthetic.

Aesthetically, Aslam’s prose is richly detailed in its depiction of nature and the imagery with which he describes flora and fauna includes parakeets and escaped peacocks as well as butterflies, tamarind trees and aspidistras, the density of such references often saturating the narrative. This too has provoked critical debate. Sadia Abbas describes the text as “aesthetically laden, even overwrought”.³³ Hephzibah

³² Lemke, “Racism in the Diaspora: Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004),” 182.

³³ Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 185.

Anderson contends it is “[v]ividly impressionistic” but that “its language ultimately becomes a weakness, straying too close to self-indulgence and detracting from a brave and involving analysis of fundamentalism's clash with secularism”.³⁴ Abida Younas goes even further to place Aslam among South Asian diasporic writers who exoticise the postcolonial subaltern.³⁵ However, Rehana Ahmed counters this notion by arguing that the beauty of the landscape is “fractured by the harsh realities of the lives of the inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii. Thus the gaze belongs to the Pakistani immigrant, not to the exoticising outsider”.³⁶ Indeed, Aslam’s imagery is broken by a profound sense of loss, as when Shamas laments that England has only four seasons to Pakistan’s five, and reaches for snow as if his hand is “asking back a season now lost” (5). A sense of melancholy is juxtaposed with starkly British realities when Shamas is told that a pig’s head has been left outside the door of the local mosque, presumably by Islamophobic white neighbours (14). There is more at stake here than beauty against barbarism as the mere effect of contrast. For example, butterflies and peacocks are common visual symbols in Urdu literature and feature in Persian miniatures, as Aslam explained:

³⁴ Hephzibar Anderson, “Lost in the Desert,” *The Guardian*, 19/6/2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/19/features.review2> accessed 11/2/2024.

³⁵ A. Younas, “The Wrongs of the Subaltern's Rights: A Critique on Postcolonial Diasporic Authors,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 9:3 (2017), 133.

³⁶ Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 163-4.

I wanted every chapter of *Maps for Lost Lovers* to be like a Persian miniature. In these miniatures, a small piece of paper – no bigger than a sheet of A4 – holds an immense wealth of beauty, colour and detail. Trees have leaves each perfectly rendered. Flowers are moments old and the tilework of the palaces and mosques is lovingly detailed.³⁷

Aslam's highly detailed and ornate aesthetic privileges art and creativity and, in my reading, is similar to that which Sadia Abbas picks up on when she characterises Aslam's poetic style as Baroque. The novel includes overt references that suggest an alignment with Sufism. These include the story of doomed lovers itself, characteristic of the Sufi poetic tradition, and the dedication of the novel to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a poet whose religious symbolism drew on Sufism. At one point in the novel the narrator interjects: "[e]ven today the Sufis are referred to as 'the opposition party of Islam'" (191). Another critic observes a correlation between the form of the novel and themes in Arabic verse that are closely associated with Sufism, suggesting the influence of the *ghazal* in the character trajectory of Shamas, not least his rejection of Islam in favour of a lustful affair with Suraya, and similarities with the *dastan* in the novel's multiple plot lines.³⁸ I find these observations compelling, but while they point to formal characteristics and iconography, they are uncritical of how Sufi

³⁷ "Nadeem Aslam Interview - Writing Against Terror," last modified -07-23T09:00:39+00:00, <https://www.threemonkeysonline.com/writing-against-terror-nadeem-aslam/> accessed 12/10/2021.

³⁸ Lindsey Moore, "British Muslim Identities and Spectres of Terror in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*," *Postcolonial Text* 5:2 (2009), 8.

aesthetics are used in the modern setting. As Kavita Bhanot adds, by drawing from Sufi *qissas* from the eighteenth century and applying them in a contemporary context Aslam risks contributing to “an endemic Islamophobia, ... a distortion of the political and philosophical foundations of such traditions which fail to take account of power dynamics in the world today”.³⁹

If Islam is a resource for immigrant characters, it is also a resource for Aslam as a writer. He elects to draw on Islamic concepts and imbues them with a liberal sensibility: a love of art, literature, creativity, and the pursuit of knowledge. Aslam’s contrastive themes of light and darkness in the novel are highly suggestive of a significant Islamic concept, that of *nūr* (light), which features in the Qur’an, where it appears as “a movement outwards from darkness into light, and from ignorance into faith”.⁴⁰ In the novel, Kiran, a Sikh whose name means a “ray of light”, becomes an important confidante for Shamas, and, after her Muslim lover is forced to leave by his family, he names his child after her, “it being a name acceptable to both Sikhs and Muslims” (13). In this sense, light suggests a bridge to love, understanding, and togetherness in the novel, more than faith per se, and is shifted away from connotations of division and ignorance. Aslam associates the loss of ‘light’ with lost love; Kaukab arrives in England “bright with optimism” but this changes when she often finds herself alone, “deprived ... of the glowing warmth that people who are

³⁹ Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam, *Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* (Milton Keynes: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 209.

⁴⁰ Oliver Leaman, *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 467.

born of each other give out, the heat and light of an extended family” (31). Aslam loads this binary with multiple associations, then, such as ‘worldly’ or specialist knowledge like that of Jugnu, a lepidopterist whose hands “glow in the dark” from a radium spillage in a clock factory (27). It may be that Aslam is attracted to Sufism because of its parallels with aspects of a traditional left perspective, increasingly harnessed through its commodification in popular culture and support from Western governments as a form of ‘liberal’ Islam.⁴¹

As a character who embodies a more secular liberal perspective than others, Shamas forms a characterological link to Sufism in his love of Ghalib, a Sufi poet who wrote during the Mughal era and who Claire Chambers believes shares similarities with Aslam’s literary aims in the sense that he “creatively reinterpreted the stock images of Urdu poetry to make veiled but acerbic points about the turbulent times in which he lived”.⁴² For Shamas, literature is associated with freedom of movement and thought, and he names his local bookshop after a rowboat he owns as a boy, the *Safeena*, meaning both “boat” and “notebook” in Urdu (136). As a poet and Communist Party member, poetry is a primary means of expression for Shamas, before he is virtually exiled by the oppressive Zia-ul-Haq

⁴¹ For instance, US think-tank the Rand Corporation claimed Sufis as the West’s “‘natural allies’ in the war against radical Islam. While recognizing that Sufism was largely a ‘traditional’ phenomenon that sometimes made room for radical and militant tendencies, Rand argued that the majority of Sufis fell “‘on the moderate side of the divide’ and that some even favored ‘modern’ Islam,” Farzana Sheikh, “Will Sufi Islam Save Pakistan?” in *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, eds. Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crewe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 175.

⁴² Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, 87.

regime. This is suggested in the love poems he sends to Kaukab before their wedding, the verses of which are sewn onto her wedding dress, which she later burns during a period of separation (142).⁴³ The destruction of Shamas' poetry and his frustrated inability to write poems in a stifling environment when in England stands in contrast to Kaukab's reading material which consists of the Qur'an and *Veil*, an Islamic Pakistani magazine. Aslam would seem to play on the idea of literature versus religious fundamentalism, but without taking a clear side (301). Rather, Aslam articulates a critical perspective on religion and 'self-segregation' through Shamas' background. In contrast to Kaukab, Shamas has a negative experience of life in Pakistan. He is disillusioned by the Soviet Union but feels beholden to the values of communism and thinks that "one of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century is that the Soviet Union disgraced itself, that we danced on Communism's grave" (156). This commitment to socialism informs Shamas' decision to take on the role of Director of the Community Relations Council once he is settled in the UK, a role connected to Britain's multicultural policy which is placed under scrutiny too. Shamas acts as a mediator when the neighbourhood is "unable to negotiate the white world on its own" and in this way Aslam establishes him as a compassionate character (15). Shamas addresses the social problems that the community faces: poverty and ostracism, illiteracy in English, lack of sexual health awareness, and

⁴³ Aslam's tendency to emphasise the importance of literature and art in the novel is considered by Ahmed to be a "fetishisation of creativity", Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*, 161.

exposure to what, in Britain, have become rare diseases, such as Tuberculosis due to poor nutrition and over-crowded living conditions (161-2). Shamas' position is both necessitated and undermined by the fact that his community is divided over religion and cultural values. Like his brother Jugnu, he feels scant affiliation with religion due to their father's childhood experience. Born a Hindu, as a child Deepak is injured by the shockwave of a bomb dropped by the British RAF in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919.⁴⁴ He loses his memory as a consequence and wanders alone until he is found at the shrine of a Muslim saint, given the name Chakor, and raised as a Muslim (53). Partition separates Chakor from his family in the name of religion, leading Shamas to understand that life can be little more than "darkness and separation" (75). Following Partition, letters between India and Pakistan are posted via a third country because "[d]irect correspondence is often destroyed out of pettiness" and Aslam creates a parallel with the indirect communication in the novel's neighbourhood, in which rumour travels through a third party such as a taxi driver (75, 121). These petty acts that develop through longstanding grudges suggest entrenched, unchanging attitudes. Dave Gunning contends that the novel questions the possibility of individual change and suggests

⁴⁴ Aslam's novel is notably absent from Rakhshanda Jalil, *Jallianwala Bagh: Literary Responses in Prose & Poetry* (India: Thornbird/Niyogi Books, 2019). Jalil's work examines reflections on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in literature and Aslam's allusion to the event calls to attention its impact on identity in the Punjabi diaspora.

that social change “cannot helpfully be imposed from without, but must develop within it, through a process of struggle and negotiation”.⁴⁵

There are many vignettes in the novel suggesting how change imposed from the outside is ineffectual and superficial. Aslam describes a spot down the river by the ruins of an abbey where Sikhs ceremonially cast the ashes of their dead into the water: “when the practice began a decade or so ago, the inhabitants of the nearby all-white suburb had been outraged, but the bishop had settled the matter by saying he was delighted the site was being put to a spiritual use, rather than the open-air dog lavatory he was sorry to say those who were now complaining had turned it into” (18). It is notable that a bishop takes authority in this scenario when, as Modood argues, the establishment’s recognition of religion through the Church of England is welcomed by Muslims and other religious minorities because it “holds out the prospect of extending state-religion connections”, and is appreciated by religious minorities in part because the “Church of England takes its mission to serve the country quite seriously, including the goal of incorporating new minority faith communities into its vision for the country”.⁴⁶ However, it also suggests that a top-down imposition of religious rights masks intolerance and prejudice.⁴⁷ More

⁴⁵ Gunning, *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*, 92.

⁴⁶ Tariq Modood, “Multiculturalizing Secularism,” *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 207.

⁴⁷ Talal Asad argues that rather than focussing attention on representation for Muslims, “the focus should be on what it takes to live particular ways of life continuously, co-operatively, and unselfconsciously.” See: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 178.

precisely, one might ask how the traditions and practices associated with an identity grouping can be respected without giving way to homogenous characterisation. That question notwithstanding, the persistently negative portrayal of Islam in the novel exaggerates the extent to which it forms a barrier for its characters—and contention between its critics. Among them, for example, Geoffrey Nash asserts that the portrayal of Islam in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is crudely one-sided, and that the accumulation of religious injunctions and their consequences coalesce in a polemic which could be seen as a “meretriciously jejune performance”.⁴⁸

I would add that the uncertainty over the killing of Chanda and Jugnu, who are ‘missing’ at the start of the novel, casts a keen sense of external judgement over this community because although Aslam has claimed that each incident in the novel is based on real events, the frequency in which these incidents occur risks sensationalism.⁴⁹ In a 2017 *Guardian* article, Aslam writes: “[m]any things in my books come from real life; but a novelist has to be careful in transporting a real event into the landscape of a novel. It is patient work, like moving a lake from one place to another with a teaspoon”.⁵⁰ The subtlety implied by this comparison is not always evident in the novel. In one passage, Kaukab repeats the gossip of the day to

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012), 42.

⁴⁹ Aslam quoted in “Nadeem Aslam: A Question of Honour,” *The Independent*, 11/6/2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-a-question-of-honour-731732.html> accessed 17/9/2021.

⁵⁰ Nadeem Aslam, “Nadeem Aslam: ‘I take delight that my initials in Urdu look like a pen by an inkwell’,” *The Guardian*, 8/4/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/08/my-writing-day-nadeem-aslam-books> accessed 6/1/2022.

Shamas, telling him of a letter she has received from a Bengali mother whose son has been “beaten to death in a racial attack by the whites” – and that “in the letter she says that she was totally devastated to hear that her old neighbours’ daughter Mah-Jabin has cut short her lovely long hair” (160). The juxtaposition suggests insularity or deflection from the impact of such horrific violence, while in the same thread Kaukab tells him about women in the neighbourhood who are protesting a magazine which offers sexual medical advice, and a boy who has been disciplined at school for telling white pupils that they will be skinned alive in Hell for eating pork. Figured as snippets of gossip, none of these scenarios are explored further, and thereby risk a disingenuous attack on an already maligned community through moralistic critique, even on the part of the broader Muslim diaspora in Britain. In an interview Aslam fervently distinguishes himself from Martin Amis’ Islamophobic views, saying: “[w]hen I criticise Islam, it isn’t in that tenor”, but that nuance is not readily apparent in his writing.⁵¹ That may be one reason why Amina Yaqin characterises Aslam’s prose style as typical of a British left which criticises Islamic conservatism for a lack of progressive principles by “flattening the complexity of faith-based identities”.⁵²

Racism in the novel, though prevalent, is marginalised by the main plot to the extent that some critics, including Cordula Lemke, feel that “the white population

⁵¹ Aslam quoted in Maya Jaggi, “Nadeem Aslam: a life in writing,” *The Guardian*, 26/1/2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/jan/26/nadeem-aslam-life-in-writing> accessed 7/1/2022.

⁵² Yaqin, “Muslims as Multicultural Misfits in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*,” 114.

does not pose a tangible threat to the Pakistani community".⁵³ This under-reads the insidious character of cultural racism and Islamophobia which continually undermines the stability of the characters' lives. There are myriad racist acts perpetrated by white people in *Maps for Lost Lovers*: when Kaukab dials a wrong number, she is told by a stranger to "[g]et off the phone and go back to your country" and two white men shout "*Sieg Heil!*" loudly and repeatedly as they walk by a group of British Asian women and children (174). Shocking attacks are sometimes referred to euphemistically, as when Kiran describes the mosque as busy with its own "troubles", which turns out to be a blood-soaked pig's head left outside the door (14). Rehana Ahmed raises racism as a feature of the novel, but finds its representation, including repeated references to a lack of contact with white people and Ujala's invective against Islam at the family dinner table, to be contrived. Ahmed argues that the novel is occasionally "suggestive of the exoticisation of the cultural Other, a process that relays the alien through recognisable paradigms, rendering it ripe for eventual conversion to 'our' sameness".⁵⁴ While Aslam's use of language may convey a sense of insularity and miscommunication among this fictitious community, it also seems to have had a similar effect on some readers and critics who focus on intercultural tensions within a British South Asian community rather than the racism it withstands from without, a factor which is amplified by the lack of white characters. Stella is the exception and instrumentalised to illustrate

⁵³ Lemke, "Racism in the Diaspora: Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004)," 175.

⁵⁴ Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*, 175.

Kaukab's insecurities around white people, expressed in shock at a short skirt or anxiety over how Stella will judge her, even when simply tying a knot in Stella's presence, "she had suddenly gone numb, wondering if there was a *Western* way of tying a knot – more sophisticated, *better*. Perhaps the way she tied knots was an *ignorant* way of tying a knot?" (318). Stella's relationship with Charag also serves to highlight an imposed lack of contact with women in adolescence, but in both examples Stella's perspective is left unvoiced.

Despite exploring generational differences in attitudes to Muslim identity and to racism in Britain, the rationale for such different views and behaviours is left largely unexplored, though Kaukab admits to Shamas: "[O]ur time here was only meant to be temporary. But things didn't turn out the way we thought they would. Decades have passed and we are still here" (145). After migrants from former British colonies were called to help rebuild Britain after the Second World War, migration was primarily economic.⁵⁵ Immigrants were threatened by racist practices which affected housing and education, as when Asian children were subjected to racist initiatives, such as 'bussing' to schools in areas outside of where they lived to keep

⁵⁵ Zig Layton-Henry summarises, "New Commonwealth immigrants came to Britain in search of work and a better standard of living. The expansion of the British economy in the 1950s and 1960s created a substantial shortage of labour, particularly in the relatively stagnant sectors of the economy; for example, textiles, metal manufacture, and transport where low pay, long hours, and shift work made the jobs unattractive to native workers. These industries were unable to compete for the short supply of native labor with expanding sectors," "Great Britain," *European Immigration Policy: A Comparative Study*, ed. Tomas Hammar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 97.

some schools white.⁵⁶ Institutional racism following an assimilationist policy might account for Aslam's depiction of Kaukab's revulsion to 'Western' modes of behaviour. On learning that Jugnu drinks wine with his white girlfriend, Kaukab thinks: "[w]hat else have you learnt from her and her people" and "what else do you plan to pass on to my children?" (40). But, as depicted by Aslam, her reaction also suggests a reading of her behaviour as superstitious and ignorant.

In a shifting narrative that moves through the neighbourhood, Aslam explores the complicity of the women in perpetuating patriarchal values, particularly when they focus entirely on their sons' choice of career and education to the detriment of daughters. Kaukab dreams of her sons graduating from university: "first the elder, Charag, and then a few years later the younger, Ujala, and she planned to send the graduation-ceremony photographs to the local newspaper, standing proudly next to her gowned boy in her Benaresi *shalwar-kameez*" (71). On the other hand, daughters' futures are limited to aspirations of marriage and status by association. Kaukab declares that she wants Charag to become a doctor "so people would say Mah-Jabin is a doctor's sister" (329). Aslam underplays the prevalence of patriarchy in Western society generally and if we are to read patriarchy as perpetuated by pious women as a feminist critique, it should be considered in contention with the construction of a distinction between the public and private that is gendered beyond the confines of this specific community. A socially-constructed binary that fixes women in the home

⁵⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, 25.

sets them in opposition to citizenship and rights that are associated with a more fluid 'becoming'.⁵⁷ Irene Gedalof writes:

Community identities are not just something that happen to women, and neither the 'community' nor the 'women' in question should be seen as fixed, pre-given identities that then confront each other. Rather, women are produced as women of a particular kind, as they help to produce those collective identities through the discursive representations of 'woman' with which women must negotiate, and through the embodied practices in which women engage.⁵⁸

Aslam does not disentangle or refuse the binary logic that sees the home as fixed. A trope of female captivity under Islam persists whereby characters must accept their fate or rebel against their faith. This is underscored by the threat of violence if daughters do not adhere to Islamic mores. In one instance, not having consummated their marriage, the bridegroom of one girl is instructed by her mother to "[r]ape her tonight" (88). Aslam invokes a monstrous reading of older women in this community when he describes how their daughters are relieved when marriage saves them from the abuse of the "dangerous lunatics" who are their mothers (118). Ruvani Ranasinha goes so far as to argue that the mothers in this novel "are at times

⁵⁷ Irene Gedalof, "Taking (a) Place: Female Embodiment and the Re-grounding of Community," *Uprootings/Regroundings/Questions of Home and Migration* ed. Sara Ahmed (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 96.

⁵⁸ Gedalof, "Taking (a) Place: Female Embodiment and the Re-grounding of Community," 97.

(unlike the fathers) pathologized as monstrous”.⁵⁹ Again, Aslam’s depictions provoke debate and Kamila Shamsie’s view of Kaukab is that “she could, in the hands of a lesser novelist, have become a monster. But in Aslam’s hands she is transformed into a woman entirely human, entirely heartbreaking”.⁶⁰ Shamsie acknowledges the tender aspects of Kaukab’s portrayal as a character who appears pained by her inability to reconcile her faith with her love for her children when she despairs of their actions. Lindsey Moore agrees that Aslam’s treatment of Kaukab’s character is to some extent sympathetic but suggests that she is a “vehicle for the most intractable ideas about identity”.⁶¹ Her character becomes overloaded as a focal point for criticism of Islam, and even sympathy for Kaukab is a double-edged sword in the novel, because it is seen to enable some dangerously ignorant reactions, and Ujala mockingly describes her as “a poor immigrant woman in a hostile white environment who deserved everyone’s compassion” (72). An overriding feeling on reading the novel is that Kaukab is shown to be a mere victim of Islam because it is depicted as denying her personal freedom. For example, Ranasinha argues that Aslam’s portrayal “shifts somewhat uneasily between suggesting that members of this specific community invoke laws in the name of Islam as a *pretext* for asserting

⁵⁹ Ruvani Ranasinha, "Racialized Masculinities and Postcolonial Critique in Contemporary British Asian Male-Authored Texts," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45:3 (2009), 305.

⁶⁰ Kamila Shamsie, "Review: Maps for Lost Lovers by Nadeem Aslam," *The Guardian*, 26/6/2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jun/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview17> accessed 9/2/2021.

⁶¹ Lindsey Moore, "British Muslim Identities and Spectres of Terror in Nadeem Aslam's Maps for Lost Lovers," *Postcolonial Texts* 5:2 (2009), 9.

patriarchy, *as well as simultaneously* locating the injustices that arise in the story as endemic to Islam".⁶² The hesitancy of the narrative never completely denies this. By way of explanation that she could not prevent Mah-Jabin from having an arranged marriage, Kaukab tells her: "I did not have the freedom to give you that freedom" (115). Incensed, her daughter differentiates herself from the traditions of her parents' generation by cutting her long hair, after eighteen years of growth, to the consternation of her mother (92).⁶³ Aslam largely denies the possibility of change within the narrow parameters of the Islamic identity he describes in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, attributing to Islam a stasis that is a familiar characteristic of orientalist representations where faith is a barrier that denies personhood, and being Muslim is not shaped by negotiation between oneself and others, even though, as Heidi Mirza among others argues, like class, ethnicity, and gender, religion has an intersectional and convergent logic for the narrativisation of self.⁶⁴ Mirza's study of Muslim women suggested that a sense of selfhood is bound by 'Muslimness' through hegemonic discourses of Islamophobia and the social construct of the 'Muslim woman in the West', identified in embodied practices such as wearing or choosing

⁶² Ranasinha, "Racialized Masculinities and Postcolonial Critique in Contemporary British Asian Male-Authored Texts," 305.

⁶³ Rehana Ahmed claims that the cutting of hair suggests a stereotype of female oppression under Islam. Such a reading may be indicative of the extent to which Aslam treads a line close to Orientalist readings of Islam. Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*, 171.

⁶⁴ Heidi Mirza, "'A Second Skin': Embodied Intersectionality, Transnationalism and Narratives of Identity and Belonging among Muslim Women in Britain," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 36 (2013), 6.

not to wear a hijab. Mirza argues, and her findings suggest, that Muslim women's embodied practices should be understood not simply as performed ethnic identity but also as expressions and signs of a more reflexive female agency. When women described Islam as a 'second skin', for example, it embodied a sense of belonging and was a focal point for their definition of self against Islamophobia.⁶⁵ Similarly, Claire Dwyer found that some young Muslim girls were able to challenge their parent's prohibitions by drawing upon religious authority, with one young girl citing the Qur'an to support her ambitions for further education.⁶⁶

A recurrent thread in the novel is love and loss; it is central to almost all of the characters. But while Childs and Green argue that "the novel presents multiple narrative strands, striating the narrative like map lines, of individuals separated from those they love", I find that this mixing of context and scenario weaves a confusing and sometimes contradictory line.⁶⁷ Despite revealing the complex layers of Kaukab's character, for example, Aslam undermines a balanced reading of diasporic faith-based identity by incorporating characters who are victimised, the interconnecting theme a shared belief in a hard-line reading of Islam. When a Pakistani woman, Suraya, travels to the town to meet potential suitors for a temporary marriage after she is drunkenly divorced by her husband in Pakistan,

⁶⁵ Mirza, "'A Second Skin': Embodied Intersectionality, Transnationalism and Narratives of Identity and Belonging among Muslim Women in Britain," 6, 7, 11.

⁶⁶ Claire Dwyer, "Negotiating Diasporic Identities: Young British South Asian Muslim Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* 23:4 (2000), 483.

⁶⁷ Peter Childs and James Reid Green, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 108.

Aslam's prose shifts into a notably flat and dry register. Islam, readers are told, permits her to remarry her husband if she first marries another, a feature of the culture that is narrated derisively: "[l]imitless is Allah's kindness toward his creation" (150). Despite Suraya's apprehensions and internal questioning of this practice, she resolves to follow the demands of her husband, and Islamic law "as all good Muslims must" (150). It is a testy scenario for literary critics. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that Aslam "succumbs to a pedagogic compulsion" regarding honour crime and Islam, and Amina Yaqin finds that this particularly problematic because of Aslam's positionality as a Pakistani "representative spokesperson", along with other fiction writers such as Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie who the Western media hold in high esteem.⁶⁸ This should be weighed against the fact that Aslam's novel is clearly aimed at readers who are unfamiliar with Islamic laws and customs. It is also neglective of a point made by Nahem Yousaf regarding Hanif Kureishi's work when he claimed that Black and Asian writers are sometimes "straitjacketed into a formulaic series of expectations", and that they carry the burden of representing 'positive images', resulting in a sense of containment.⁶⁹ In describing Aslam as a 'representative' Pakistani, Yaqin risks essentialism when Aslam is one of many writing from 'within' a culture he understands, and not all people portray it in the same way. Nevertheless, Aslam claims "I lived in that community and my family still does", asserting an 'insider knowledge' on which his defence of the novel has

⁶⁸ Yaqin, "Muslims as Multicultural Misfits in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*," 103.

⁶⁹ Yousaf, "Hanif Kureishi and 'the Brown Man's Burden'," 18-19.

rested.⁷⁰ His comment that literature is “a *public act*” that contributes to debate appears to inform his didacticism in this novel and reaffirms a connection to contemporary multicultural debates.⁷¹ Maryam Mirza argues Aslam’s framing of the “misogynistic behaviour of the diasporic community is depicted as being almost solely rooted in an orthodox Islam which, having been imported from Pakistan” became “further distilled” by ghettoisation.⁷² This is difficult to refute, in my view, and perhaps the notable aspect of Aslam’s, at times, didactic style is a tendency to equate misogynistic practices with Pakistanis. For example, Shamas’ disdain over the fact that Islam allows a man to have four wives is linked to Pakistan which he claims is “not just a wife-beating country, it’s a wife-murdering one” (226). ‘Soundbites’ inserted in the narrative connect this fear with an apparently factual reality that “in one Pakistani province alone, a woman is murdered every thirty-eight hours solely because her virtue is in doubt” (136). These apprehensions are confirmed in the novel by scenes that Aslam sets in Pakistan, as when Suraya flouts convention by confronting her neighbours who rape a local girl, and they spread a rumour that they have raped Suraya: “[a]s it turned out it was as bad as if they had raped her. What mattered was not what you yourself knew to have actually happened, but what other people thought had happened” (158). This anecdote as related suggests a

⁷⁰ Aslam quoted in Jaggi, “Nadeem Aslam: a life in writing,”

⁷¹ Nadeem Aslam, “Where to Begin,” *Granta*, 29/9/2010, <https://granta.com/where-to-begin/> accessed 7/1/2022.

⁷² Maryam Mirza, “Ambiguous Pakistani-Muslim Masculinities in the Diaspora: A Study of Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*,” *South Asian Diaspora* 9:2 (2017), 194.

continuity in the policing of behaviours in Britain that also risks misleading some readers by pushing them toward an essentialist view because it connects Suraya's experiences in Pakistan with the attitudes of the community in Dasht-e-Tanhaii, when it is only tangentially intersected with Pakistan—and attitudes in the country are made to seem monolithic.

Even in the opening chapter Aslam offers a critical reflection on the Pakistani diaspora: “[r]oaming the planet looking for solace, they’ve settled in small towns that made them feel smaller still, and in cities that have tall buildings and even taller loneliness” (9). This parochialises the Pakistani diaspora, and Aslam describes Pakistan’s history as a “book full of sad stories” which its inhabitants take with them (9). Sadia Abbas’ reading of the novel, in which she situates it within the context of the Cold War, appears to confirm the equation of Pakistan with conservative Islam. For Abbas, the novel is, in part, a response to what she refers to as ‘imperial theology’: “the nexus of American, varieties of third world nationalist or postcolonial praetorian, and Saudi Arabian anticommunism, and the cultivation by these convergent groups and agents of iconoclastic and antiaesthetic brands of Islam”.⁷³ Abbas’ reading aligns a conservative form of Islam practised in Pakistan with that of the pious characters in this novel’s community, which Nash also does when he disparages Aslam, contending that the violence between Kaukab and Mah-Jabin exhibits the bitterness “of at least some among the westernized diasporic elite who

⁷³ Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 150.

take the opportunity of the safety of their position in the West to castigate a hated strand of society in Pakistan".⁷⁴ The result is a reductive take on Islam and simultaneously on Pakistani diasporic identity in contradistinction to the more developed probing of Shamas' secular perspective through Aslam's imagining of his childhood and that of his father.

Despite the oppositions that are staged through Shamas and Kaukab as I have argued, Aslam's novel does not attribute redemptive qualities to a secular outlook, and this is articulated by its bleak ending and Charag's comment that he is glad Islam forbade alcohol "because otherwise I am sure both my mother and my father would be alcoholic" suggesting that without the faith, their difficulties would merely manifest in other ways (330). Shamas is shown to be just as myopic as pious characters, and his blinkered political and artistic idealism cause him to neglect his own family, even Charag who shares an artistic sensibility: "Shamas had never encouraged him to be a painter" and "disapproved when he *did* become a painter" (319). For Shamas, Suraya is an aspect of this idealism in his imagination, and this is evidenced by his desire to tell her about poetry rather than learn more about her: "[h]e'll tell her how much he regrets never having continued with his poetry ... go back and see if he can do something for the betterment [of Pakistan]" (154). Shamas projects an ideal of himself as poet and socialist through his interactions with Suraya and thinks that to meet her is "to meet oneself" (155). In this way Aslam explores

⁷⁴ Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity*, 43.

Shamas' character as one who is blinded by an ideal in perhaps the same way that the religious characters attribute events to the divine, but that comparison relies on a negative understanding of religion as indoctrination. As a father, Shamas is hardly progressive, and Mirza argues: "Shamas' modern, 'Westernized' identity in the text entails a very traditional conception of fathering and fatherhood" with little emotional involvement and passive deferral to Kaukab.⁷⁵ Indeed, when this parental attitude is challenged by Suraya on the point that he allowed a teenaged Mah-Jabin to move to Pakistan and marry he meekly replies: "[i]t's complicated ... She wanted to go ..." (229). Although this weak response may elicit a questioning of Shamas' character among readers, the effect is lessened through contrast with the conflation of Islam with corporal punishment expressed through Kaukab's view that "[p]arents are supposed to hit children", and Shamas' pious elder brother who beat his son "almost unconscious for flying a kite" (58, 84). A similar contrast is found between the sensitivity of Shamas toward his lover Suraya and her Pakistani husband who encourages her to marry in England for reasons that delineate her as his property: "I'd feel humiliated if you married someone here, because I don't want to see another man touch my wife, the woman I love" (150). In effect, both Shamas and Suraya are duplicitous in their affair, but instead of drawing readers further into contemplation of Suraya's helplessness, the novel leans toward a reading wherein she is treacherous for drawing Shamas into marriage as a form of captivity against his youthful

⁷⁵ Mirza, "Ambiguous Pakistani-Muslim Masculinities in the Diaspora: A Study of Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*," 202.

passions. Kavita Bhanot goes so far as to assert that the novel's perspective is that of a male gaze which brings readers around to a sympathetic reading of Shamas, thereby reinforcing a patriarchal view.⁷⁶ Incensed by the fact that Kaukab has been making their infant son Ujala fast during Ramadan, he beats her and leaves her alone with the children. In the heat of violence, Shamas feels "[h]e was he but less and less", suggesting that he is reacting impulsively to the irrationality of Kaukab's behaviour, and to her faith, with Aslam framing the incident as a moment of madness (142). Shamas' sensitivity is often invoked to justify a visceral reaction, as when he is pained by the lack of a physical relationship with Kaukab as if that leads by default to his affair with Suraya and he is portrayed as sympathetic to her situation despite using her for his sexual gratification, while Suraya is helpless in her despair: "I walk around missing my son, my husband, mourning my mother, begging forgiveness from Allah for committing sin with you" by which Aslam suggests Suraya is yet another victim of her faith (224). Aslam's portrayal in this regard is unbalanced, not least because Shamas' position and reputation in the neighbourhood is secure against the precarious reputations of Suraya and Kaukab: a local boy says that "[h]e and his brother are the coolest adults I know" (86). One woman refers to him as "the good Shamas brother-ji", pleased that he has chosen to remain in the neighbourhood because "he is not the kind of man who believes you

⁷⁶ Kavita Bhanot, "Love, Sex, and Desire Vs Islam in British Muslim Literature," *Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing*, eds. Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 209.

see through your window what you deserve" (46). In this way, the portrayal of Shamas facilitates a reductive take on religion and religious characters, and while the novel scrutinises the gendered roles of female characters, Shamas' gendered role as a parent and husband is figured as largely benign.

Aslam suggests that the motives of the killers in the novel are entrenched in masculinity and ownership. Men in the community complain to Chanda's brothers in the assumption that they are "allowing" their sister to live with Jugnu without being married (342). Barra and Chotta are depicted as gatekeepers and protectors of family honour, which burdens them with the indignity of being seen as weak for not taking action against their sister. While they deny her murder publicly, they privately boast to friends and relatives in Pakistan that, "it was we who made the choice to be murderers. We are men but she reduced us to eunuch bystanders by not paying attention to our wishes" (342). Aslam uses the Urdu word for brother-in-law, *sala*, also a term of abuse when used to approximate to "'[y]ou can't stop me from trying my manhood on one of your women!'" -- and highlights patriarchal attitudes in language (346). Aslam claims that in scrutinising the community in the novel he was "trying to understand what maleness is", and his portrayal of the brothers' diminished status in the community connects with studies of masculinity among young Muslim men.⁷⁷ Louise Archer argues that a discourse that situates Muslim men as riotous, terrorists and book burners also posits them as the 'enemy within',

⁷⁷ Aslam quoted in Jaggi, "Nadeem Aslam: a life in writing,"

narrowly limiting the terms in which they are represented or speak for themselves, yet rendering them “hypervisible” albeit within narrowly defined parameters.⁷⁸

Comparable with Aslam’s portrayal of the brothers, Archer’s study of Muslim schoolboys in Bradford suggests some of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity plays a role in response to racism. The boys the researchers spoke to mapped their local geography by use of terms such as ‘safe’ and ‘friendly’, while leafy, affluent ‘white’ areas were deemed ‘unsafe’ and ‘racist’ by their estimation. Hegemonic masculinity appeared to inform the boys’ actions in defiance of racism, in some cases leading them to inflict violence rather than tolerating racist epithets, which Archer connects with broader discourses of ‘fighting back’ as a response to racism.⁷⁹

Drawing upon this research, the contextual background for Chotta and Barra’s crime may be understood as situated in multiple discursive arrangements that place Muslim men on an uneven footing and that are linked to negotiations of space and identity, further evidenced in Deborah Phillips’ study of urban citizenship in Bradford. She found that when newly immigrated Christian East-Europeans entered “into a home-space appropriated and marked as British Asian Muslim, some inhabitants sought to draw boundaries between themselves and newcomers through

⁷⁸ Louise Archer, “‘Race, ‘Face’ and Masculinity: The Identities and Local Geographies of Muslim Boys,” *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities* eds. Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 74.

⁷⁹ Archer, “‘Race, ‘Face’ and Masculinity: The Identities and Local Geographies of Muslim Boys,” 77, 79.

an embodied defence of urban citizenship”.⁸⁰ For young men, this sometimes manifested in displays of hegemonic masculinity. Phillips’ work draws attention to the dynamics of communal life in a place where men and women reported feeling safe.⁸¹ However, in the novel, when the brothers are tried in court the judge claims that “their religion and background took care of the bitter aftertaste” of the crime, solidifying it as endemic to a specific culture (278). The verdict is derided as racist by the perpetrators in the court room, but theirs is the only criticism, and as Ahmed notes, they are misogynistic and homophobic which serves to undermine or deny a legitimate critique of the judge’s verdict.⁸² The sentencing serves as an indictment of multiculturalism because the law is shown to perpetuate stasis and circularity by protecting ‘cultural difference’ but Aslam’s social realist style is similarly undermined by his curtailment of alternative perspectives.

The grounding of Aslam’s perspective within a liberal framework arguably leads to a judgemental propensity in his writing toward pious characters in the novel, despite their otherwise thoughtful development. The privileging of sexual liberty and creativity over religion, made manifest what Asad refers to as “the secular”, prefigures political secularism and is described as a “variety of concepts,

⁸⁰ Deborah Phillips, “Claiming Spaces: British Muslim Negotiations of Urban Citizenship in an Era of New Migration,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40:1 (2015): 71.

⁸¹ One respondent reported: “I can feel comfortable in my [Muslim] dress, my headscarf ... we’re all like a one big family.” Phillips, “Claiming Spaces: British Muslim Negotiations of Urban Citizenship in an Era of New Migration,” 67.

⁸² Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*, 169.

practices, and sensibilities” that have come together over time.⁸³ As Judith Butler contends, within a liberal framework, ideals such as sexual freedom and artistic expression often rely on a temporal argument: the “link between freedom and temporal progress is often what is being indexed when pundits and public policy representatives refer to concepts like modernity or, indeed, secularism”.⁸⁴

Highlighting cases of new immigrants and sexual minorities in France and the Netherlands, she avers that in social policy: “[t]he presumption is that culture is a uniform and binding groundwork of norms, and not an open field of contestation, temporally dynamic; this groundwork only functions if it is uniform or integrated, and that desideratum is required, even forcibly, for something called modernity to take hold”.⁸⁵ Such a rigid understanding of culture as a set of established norms has historically contributed to harmful teleological colonial narratives and Anne McClintock theorises an ‘anachronistic space’ as a colonial trope which denies the agency of colonised men and women through a temporal distinction whereby

[g]eographical difference across *space* is figured as a historical difference across *time* ... The stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from

⁸³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2016), 104.

⁸⁵ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, 108.

Europe and thus equally valid, but as *temporally* different and thus as irrevocably superannuated by history.⁸⁶

Historically, one might contemplate how an established framework of 'norms' was invoked in the British Raj authorities' abolition of the Hindu practice of *Sati* or widow sacrifice, denying the agency of the women in question, leading Gayatri Spivak to view its ban as an act of "white men saving brown women from brown men".⁸⁷

Temporality takes on a geographic dimension in Kaukab's revulsion towards the 'West' as associated not only with decadence, but also with technological advancement and psychological theories, so that the younger generation wears 'Western' clothing to signal a sense of development from 'regressive' parents, and the children's movement away to cities such as London effectively gives the sense of Dasht-e-Tanhaii as separated by time and space. Ahmed speculates: "the abstraction or despatialisation of the neighbourhood in *Maps for Lost Lovers* works to detach it from contemporary time, or, put differently, to turn space into time – so that Dasht-e-Tanhaii could become identifiable with an earlier place 'in the historical queue'".⁸⁸ It appears, then, that relegating Dasht-e-Tanhaii to something other than 'secular time' works to discredit religion as a dynamic force, echoing Ranasinha's conclusion

⁸⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 40.

⁸⁷ Rosalind C. Morris and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 71.

⁸⁸ Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*, 175-6.

that for Aslam it seems “that religious identity cannot be subsumed under categories of gender and ethnicity or nation”.⁸⁹

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam does create a dense narrative by looking deeper than oft-sensationalised media accounts that have reported on the phenomenon of ‘honour’ crime, artfully examining his characters’ motives, bringing in a historical context that contemplates the impact of colonialism and racism on an immigrant community in Britain. Importantly, his novel raises questions and food for socio-political thought on the issue of ghettoised Muslim communities in Britain, probing a contentious issue that few authors have substantially engaged. However, in this novel Aslam too readily imputes blame on religious conservatism by delimiting attention to the suburban setting, suppressing voices, and minimising the effects of racism. The critical views toward Islam and cultural attitudes in Pakistan that are voiced by Shamas, Charag, Mah-Jabin and Ujala are redolent of a liberal outlook that the author may share, which constrains the novel and hinders Aslam’s ability to see perspectively by looking beyond binaries, whether that is Sufism and conservative Islam or secular liberalism and fundamentalism. The result of these contrastive, unmoving perspectives is revealed as an almost inevitable stasis that leans on orientalist accounts of a static Islam and makes it distinct from other aspects of identity, and which risks undermining confidence in his readers’ perceptions of

⁸⁹ Ranasinha, “Racialized Masculinities and Postcolonial Critique in Contemporary British Asian Male-Authored Texts,” 306.

Muslim communities. In so doing, he delimits how Muslim immigrants integrate into British society, and neglects the ways in which Muslim communities in Britain draw on Islam and Muslimness as a dynamic resource.

Aslam's novel showcases just one example of how contemporary authors are building complexity into narratives that defy easy or comfortable readings. Reading this novel now, at the remove of two decades since its publication, it is clear that many of the issues at its heart persist in public debate. A case in point is the furore surrounding 'grooming gangs' in northern towns that are reminiscent of the novel's setting, with criticism persistently levelled at Pakistani men, singling them out as if culturally predisposed to this particular sexual crime despite the varied ethnicity of perpetrators and the invalidity of such claims. By choosing to explore tensions through complex Muslim characters that belie pernicious stereotypes, Aslam succeeds in shifting criticism of Muslim communities away from Islamophobic rhetoric because he offers a probing critique of communal life and clerical abuse. Where other critics have viewed the novel as an anti-Islam invective, my critical position is that Aslam suggests how external racism impinges on his characters' sense of self, with cultural identity, including religiosity, acting as a limited defence; Islam becomes the lens through which characters view Britain. I am critical of the assertion among some literary critics that Aslam uses exoticism to appeal to white readers. Rather, he reveals a strong attachment to the subcontinent among his (many) immigrant characters. His rich aesthetic also conjures imagery of Pakistan in

particular and underlines the importance of place in direct relationship to feelings of belonging and it works to counter the reductive depiction of immigrants to Britain, in media portrayals as somehow inevitably 'other' and 'alien', as if places other than Britain can be ignored or erased because they do not figure. With a narrative that casts back to the British Raj, in *Maps for Lost Lovers* Aslam gestures to the importance of a slow and reflective reading and re-reading and raises uncomfortable questions about the future of multicultural Britain.

Chapter 2

Negotiating the Secular and Sacred in *bildungsromane*: Sufism and Spirituality in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road From Damascus* (2008) and Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015)

The Road from Damascus and *The Kindness of Enemies* are self-reflexive responses to Islamophobia. The trajectory of each novel follows the form of the *bildungsroman* insofar as the main protagonists – Sami Traifi in Yassin-Kassab's novel and Natasha Wilson in Aboulela's—undertake and undergo an epistemic step-change in their thinking about Islam. Thirty-one-year-old Sami is British-born to Syrian parents, Mustafa, an ardent secularist who is deceased, and Nur. He is married to Muntaha, an immigrant from Iraq, but their marriage is in turmoil, as are his doctoral studies. When Sami travels to Syria, he is confronted by a difficult family history of which he has been unaware and a version of Pan-Arabism that contradicts the 'secularist' worldview he has inherited from his father. He seeks refuge in drugs and alcohol until arrest for drug possession is the trigger to get his life back on track and reconnect with Muntaha. This entails a radical rethinking of his beliefs and culminates in a "trembling, contingent faith".¹

¹ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 348. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

Born in Khartoum to a Russian atheist mother and Sudanese Muslim father and immigrating to Britain in 1990 at the age of fourteen, Natasha Hussein feels out of place in Scotland and hides her Muslim identity, taking the name of Wilson. A university lecturer in History, she finds herself intrigued by one of her students, Osama Raja (Oz), who shares her fascination with Islamic history. A descendent of Imam Shamil, the nineteenth-century warrior and leader of a Caucasus rebellion against Imperial Russia, Oz embarks on a research project that will encompass *jihad*, it is taken as evidence of radicalism by the authorities, and he is arrested and detained. Their lives and stories are intertwined in *The Kindness of Enemies* for how Muslims in the West have been positioned throughout history whether in Orientalist myths or by the Prevent agenda, both of which flatten nuanced and varied interpretations of Islamic concepts. Natasha is all too aware of deleterious stereotypes, but they have impacted her deeply and to the extent that she holds negative views about Muslims. Her struggles are dramatised allegorically in the form of a book within a book that is interspliced throughout the novel: the story of Imam Shamil told through the perspective of Princess Anna of Georgia. Like Sami, it is only through reevaluating her relationship with her parents that Natasha comes to accept herself as a Muslim and through a new friendship she forms with Oz's

mother Malak she discovers Sufism: “[p]erhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual”.²

In my reading, Sufism figures as a form of belonging that transcends national or transnational identities, connects the protagonists to others, and breaks down a putative binary understanding of the secular versus the religious. As one reviewer of Yassin-Kassab’s novel notes, “[t]here have been very few fictional representations of the spiritual aspect of Islam”, and she points to Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* (2005) as another rare example.³ A literary critic, Billy Gray, goes further, arguing that Aboulela’s depiction of practising Muslims “necessarily entails the charting of a new literary space”, because there are few examples in English language fiction.⁴ Two prominent British novels that do engage with religious identity, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), delimit it to a fundamentalist Islam that stands in opposition to liberal ‘freedom’, which in Kureishi particularly is equated to sexual and hedonistic as well as artistic expression. As Peter Morey writes of *The Black Album*, “[d]espite a few somewhat tepid attempts to imagine the attractions of a religious outlook, the novel in the end makes secularism the key

² Leila Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015), 314. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

³ Susie Thomas, “Review of Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus*,” *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 7:1 (2009). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2009/thomas.html>. Accessed on 18/8/2023.

⁴ Billy Gray, “From the Secular to the Sacred: The Influence of Sufism on the Work of Leila Aboulela,” *Narratives Crossing Borders: The Dynamics of Cultural Interaction*, ed. Herbert Jonsson (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2021), 146.

guarantor of individual liberty against the Riaz group's censorious self-righteousness". Morey celebrates the deftness of Kureishi's prose but fears that his approach puts him in the company of writers who would assert liberal 'universalism' as a defence against Islamic terrorism in the wake of 9/11, as well as New Atheists like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens for whom religion is primarily superstition.⁵ It is revealing that reviewers of *The Road from Damascus* compare Yassin-Kassab to Kureishi and claim that "at times, Sami resembles a Kureishi hero in his search for hedonistic escapes in the city".⁶ Another observes that Sami's "sense of having a double identity recalls Hanif Kureishi", and that he "has something in common with Karim" in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) "and even more with Shahid", the protagonist of *The Black Album*.⁷ Sami's gradual abandonment of hedonism and secularism in favour of religion, then, entails a reversal of the trajectory of a Kureishi hero while simultaneously illustrating Kureishi's influence on more recent British novelists.

In *The Road from Damascus*, Yassin-Kassab unpicks the constructed binary of literature as 'freedom' versus religion as dogma that emerged in the wake of 'The Rushdie Affair' that ensued when *The Satanic Verses* was published in 1988, while in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela challenges Islamophobic discourse that has

⁵ Peter Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 79, 82-3.

⁶ Aamer Hussein, "The Road from Damascus, by Robin Yassin-Kassab," *Independent*, 20/6/2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-road-from-damascus-by-robin-yassin-kassab-850691.html> accessed 30/9/2023.

⁷ Susie Thomas, "Review of Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road From Damascus*".

delimited Islamic concepts in the 'Western imagination' since the 'war on terror'.

That these phrases need to be placed in scare quotes exemplifies what a struggle it is to rescue Islam from the negative discourse in which it has been cast. Aboulela's critique of an 'authentic' Islam drills down into its theoretical flaws, and Yassin-Kassab's use of Sufi sources suggests an alternative. Both novelists explore a practice of Islam that rarely features in popular representation and that cuts against the monolithic version of Islam that features so heavily in media and critical accounts. That each protagonist is initially influenced by this version makes these novels particularly resonant of the difficulties of being Muslim in Britain and how recourse to how Islam is practised in other nations is an important part of their heritage that helps them to allay pernicious anti-Muslim feeling.

The Road from Damascus opens with Sami visiting family in order to "reconnect with his roots" in the city of his ancestors. He believes that here he may "remember who he was" and find a coherent argument for his PhD studies on Arabic poetry (1). At stake is his failing marriage to Muntaha, "his place in the world" as an academic, and his estrangement from his mother with whom he hopes to reconcile (2). Damascus unsettles his preconceptions which are couched in stereotypical terms, not least when he thinks he is observing in anthropological terms a "determinedly Muslim population, hairy and hijabbed" (3). Sami discovers that he has an uncle Faris, imprisoned for twenty years after being accused of being a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist political party. The ruling

secularist Ba'ath regime persecuted Brotherhood members, notably in the 1982 Hama massacre when an uprising of the Brotherhood was brutally quashed, resulting in a death toll of between 5,000 and 10,000 people, predominantly civilians.⁸ Hama was a polarising event for Syrians, illustrating for some the brutality of the Ba'ath regime, and for others the necessary extremes needed to tackle Islamists. As such, it has taken on a “symbolic and mythological significance” which continues to haunt perceptions of the Brotherhood in the present.⁹ It is a history that Yassin-Kassab reconfigures in his fiction for how events are mythologised via storytelling because Mustafa's support of the regime's crackdown influences Sami's interpretation that it “rightly” stopped “fanaticism” at Hama. Entering the home of his maternal aunt Fadya in Damascus, though, Sami's eyes struggle to adjust to the light; that he sees only “in black and white, with patches of blindness”, emphasises his blinkered view of the world, which becomes a recurring motif of the novel. Faced with Faris, now “the skeleton in the backroom”, and the strong implication from his relatives that Sami's parents know who informed on Faris, Sami's world is rocked. The revelation seems “too much information of the wrong sort”, a counter-narrative that he is not yet prepared to contemplate, and which prompts his departure from

⁸ Middle East Watch (part of Human Rights Watch) claimed that most credible estimates range from 5,000 to 10,000 deaths. Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 20.

⁹ Dara Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” *Middle East Journal* 70:2 (2016): 212.

Damascus. But he returns to what he has heard, suggesting that it may be the catalyst for a broader reconsideration of his views (3, 4, 5, 9).

Sami disdains religious belief as “backwardness”, and after his trip muses on what his avowedly secularist father would have made of the rise of religiosity in Syria. Sami is as judgemental as Mustafa and consequently believes that his mother “betrayed” his father’s secularism by choosing to wear the hijab, and that his mother’s side of the family are “broken Islamists”. Sami is equally and openly critical of his wife Muntaha’s decision to wear the hijab. The beliefs Sami purports to hold, and to have inherited about Muslims on the one hand and of a secular Arab nationalism on the other, are challenged in the novel by global events, including the first Gulf War (1990-1991). Muntaha is a casualty of this war. Her mother is beaten to death and her father Marwan tortured and imprisoned by the Iraqi authorities. When Sami first meets her by chance at the British Museum, he is taken by her Iraqi accent, her appearance, and by the way in which she carries herself, which all declare her to be “a proper Arab” and which promises to validate his own cultivated sense of Arabness. If Muntaha is less religious at the beginning of the novel, her sense of herself as a British citizen develops in line with a burgeoning faith, challenging Sami’s assumption that she is “easy to read in poetic terms” (18, 15). Muntaha becomes an important contrastive voice to Sami’s and she too points readers toward the limits of his thinking.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 is also the context against which Natasha Hussein is read by her classmates in Scotland when she immigrates at the age of fourteen, but it is the British government's current counter-terrorism programme that becomes the focus of *The Kindness of Enemies* as soon as Oz is detained and questioned as a terror suspect after downloading radical Islamist material for his student project (4). Natasha strikes up a friendship with Oz and his mother Malak after she is invited into their home because of her interest in Imam Shamil and his *jihad* as a Sufi Caucasian resistance leader. Natasha assures herself that her interest in Islamic history is academic and secular, rather than personal and religious, when she tells Oz that, "[f]rom a purely secular perspective [Shamil] was one of the most successful rebels of the colonial age", but when she is invited to talk about herself as a guest in Malak's home, Natasha reflects on the ways in which she has concealed her Muslim identity in order to fit in (13). Aboulela captures the conflicted sense of belonging that immigrants can sometimes experience, especially when Natasha compares them to chameleons, "not only shifting their colours at will, but able to focus on two opposing goals at the same time". It a difficult feeling and one shared by Oz, who abbreviates his name because the name Osama has been linked with terrorism (6-7). That Muslims are positioned in Britain as a problem and a threat is expressed as a burden:

[I]t was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7, not enough to walk against the wall, to raise a glass of champagne, to eat in the light of

Ramadan, and never step into a mosque or say the shahada or touch the Qur'an. All this was not enough, though most people were too polite to say it. All these actions somehow fell short of the complete irrevocable dissolution that was required (6).

But, unlike Natasha, Malak does not try to hide her Muslim identity or react to how others may perceive her. Like Natasha, Malak has a mixed heritage — born in Baghdad, her ancestry is Russian and Persian—but she embraces a Muslim identity. She impresses Natasha by how easily she lives with her neighbours in the Scottish countryside, which makes Natasha consider the basis of her own discomfort and her self-consciousness, feeling “the need to justify” her presence in Britain as an African (15). Malak is inspired by her ancestor Imam Shamil’s teachings, and the practice of Sufism proves a source of strength for her in the aftermath of her son’s arrest, but Aboulela emphasises throughout how Malak’s faith inspires Natasha as their friendship develops. As Saleh Chaoui argues in a reading of *The Kindness of Enemies*, Sufism is embodied in Aboulela’s characters “as a catalyst orienting the present challenges [they] face as subjects living in a secular society”.¹⁰ Through her articulation of a practice and philosophy of Sufism, Malak figures as a guide, and a “guru” for Natasha who begins to keep a notebook to record what Malak tells her: “Sufism is based on the belief that the seeker needs a guide. Even Muhammad, on

¹⁰ Saleh Chaoui, “Ensoulng Agential Praxis in A Secular World: A Sufi Spiritual Turn in Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 65:2 (2023), 280.

his miraculous night's ascent through the seven heavens needed Gabriel as his guide" (107). In ways that are comparable with Muntaha's role in Sami's personal development towards faith and hope, Malak guides Natasha on the transformative journey she undertakes in order to conjoin her longing to belong with her faith.

The *bildungsroman* form is the integral driver for this change in both novels. Joseph Slaughter has observed that there is an avid readership of what he terms the postcolonial *bildungsroman* of the Global South among the literary centres of the North, identifying "an insatiable appetite for the stories of Third Worlders coming-of-age".¹¹ Peter Morey suggests that Muslim novels receive critical praise when reviewers from outside the culture are assured that the fictions offer direct insights into 'Muslim life'.¹² If, as Slaughter argues, the 'traditional' *bildungsroman* (for which read Western) "normalizes the idealist vision of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the dominant transition narrative of development and modernization" as white and underpinned by the institutions of the modern nation state, the postcolonial or diasporic *bildungsroman* contends with this dominant framework and suggests the reflexivity of the form.¹³ That postcolonial *bildungsromane* typically feature fragments of a protagonist's life "serves to highlight the interrupted, erratic and fractured development of the postcolonial Bildungsroman protagonist", a symbolic denial of the archetypal developmental trajectory and successful assimilation into the status

¹¹ Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 38.

¹² Peter Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 7.

¹³ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, 94.

quo.¹⁴ The stories of Natasha and Sami subvert a typical coming-of-age narrative, and the return to childhood in both novels stages a critical reflection on the coping strategies that many Muslims are forced to create for themselves in a multicultural Britain that still sidelines Islam. For example, Maria Helena Lima has noted that the postcolonial *bildungsroman* often begins with a death rather than the birth of the protagonist.¹⁵ For Lima, death, absence, grief and loss suggest the impossibility of closure associated with the European *bildungsroman*. The deaths of parents feature in both *The Kindness of Strangers* and at the beginning of *The Road from Damascus* and underline a transitory rootlessness that is a component of the migrant experience, and a feeling that persists inter-generationally for Sami as a child of migrants, but these deaths also catalyse a journey toward self-discovery, one that also works beyond the narrow frame of an individual protagonist.¹⁶ This is because of how British Muslims continue to be ‘framed’ in mainstream discourse and stereotyped according to a limited number of the terms in which they are debated, spoken for, and situated within a narrow agenda. As Morey and Yaqin assert, this framing tamps down engagement with the diversity of Muslim life and cultural expression.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ericka A Hoagland, “The Postcolonial Bildungsroman,” *A History of the Bildungsroman*, Sarah Graham ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 226.

¹⁵ Maria Helena Lima, “Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid and the Bildungsroman,” *Genre* 26.4 (1993), 441.

¹⁶ C. E. Rashid makes this point in a different context when asserting that *The Road from Damascus* has a transformative social effect within a climate of Islamophobia, “British Islam and the novel of transformation: Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48:1 (2012), 95.

¹⁷ Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

Claire Chambers may be accurate when she claims that “British-resident authors of Muslim heritage share certain preoccupations (relating to gender, class, the war on terror, Muslim Spain, the Rushdie Affair and cosmopolitanism, among other issues)”.¹⁸ However, those preoccupations are also defined by a publishing industry that selects and markets texts according to narrowly defined parameters, a process that critics are complicit in when fixing in place a taxonomy. Some British Muslim writers open up and resist this, including Yassin-Kassab who has voiced his opposition. While his novel engages a number of issues, including 9/11, the politicisation of the hijab, and the surveillance of Muslims, he asserts that “*The Road from Damascus* is about men and women, about a marriage, as much as it's about religion”.¹⁹ Comparably, Aboulela has stated that she is “writing back to that Anglocentric tradition which is also Christian: I am putting Islam in the English novel”.²⁰ If, as Morey claims, “[how Muslims] write will always be shaped and contained by the requirements of the frame”, then both authors work against the grain of that frame.²¹ The self-reflexive awareness of the *bildungsroman* genre, its market value, teleology, and connection to the modern nation state suggest these

¹⁸ Claire Chambers, “‘Sexy Identity-Assertion’: Choosing Between Sacred and Secular Identities in Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*,” *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin eds. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 119.

¹⁹ Robin Yassin-Kassab, “Islam in the writing process,” *Religion & Literature* 43:1 (2011): 143.

²⁰ C. E. Rashid, “Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative: An Interview with Leila Aboulela,” *Interventions* 14:4 (2012): 619.

²¹ Morey, *Islamophobia and the Novel*, 9.

writers should be understood as undertaking transformative work in brave novels that push against stereotype and a secular neo-liberal society.

Sami and Natasha battle with Islamophobia by first trying to distance themselves from profoundly negative associations circulating around Muslims in Britain. At school, Sami thinks that “all origins except his had something going for them” (*The Road from Damascus*, 60). Islam and ‘Muslimness’ are made into the constituent Other against which Sami constructs an alternative identity in an effort to belong; to do so, he identifies Muslims along ethnic lines as Pakistanis not Syrians, and the nefarious stereotypes with which he too describes British Muslims suggest he also internalises the discourse of Islamophobia:

In Britain Muslims meant Pakis, which meant crumbling mills and corner shops. Which meant anoraks and miserable accents and curry houses. Dismal northern towns where day never dawned. They had a proletarian role in the economy, and a bourgeois conservatism. Neither sexy nor strong. Badly dressed and poorly educated. Islam’s cobwebs in their eyelashes, and its mould on their tongues (61).

Homogenising and distancing rather than recognising Islam as a diverse religion crossing nations and ethnicities, Natasha elaborates on the self-hatred she believes is perceptible in her students:

Many of the young Muslims I taught throughout the years couldn’t wait to bury their dark, badly dressed immigrant parents who never understood

what was happening around them or even took an interest, who walked down high streets as if they were still in a village, who obsessed about halal meat and arranged marriages and were so impractical. (*The Kindness of Enemies*, 137)

Natasha cannot know the thoughts and feelings of her students, though, making this description a projection of her negativity for the ways she has been made to feel as an immigrant. It is against this difficult emotional backdrop that both novelists imagine a renewed engagement with faith in their personal relationships that will contradict negatively spun images and received ideas of Islam in the West to which Sami adheres in his crude simplification of the religion into which he is born. Yassin-Kassab includes a wry and telling summary that, “teenagers want the world to fit together better than it does. Their childhood assumptions of jigsaw accuracy in the world’s interconnections have given way to anxiety. They realise there are pieces missing, that the edges are jagged” (83). The same metaphor is explored by Aboulela when Natasha describes the breakdown of her parents’ marriage and how she focuses on a jigsaw of a scene in *Bambi* (1942), a children’s film that resonates with loss and grief, and how the process echoes her feelings: “I knew which pieces were missing and I worked around these absences” (137). The need to fit in and adjust to loss or hostility coalesces in the trope of longing to belong in both novels, and the idea of a ‘missing piece’ is the absence which gives root to irrational self-hatred in Natasha and Sami and spirituality in Muntaha and Malak.

Mourning his father, Sami revisits material objects that Mustafa left behind: a copy of the book his father wrote entitled *The Secular Arab Consciousness*, an old whiskey bottle and photographs of the two of them together. As symbols of his father, these “empirically verifiable” physical objects take on a stronger resonance over time than his own “vapourish” memories (49). The effect is comparable to what Salman Rushdie describes as a ‘broken mirror’, a metaphor he used when writing about his childhood in Bombay:

[I]t was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.²²

It is in this sense that Mustafa’s legacy has a formative influence on Sami: through loss, his memories of his father gain potency and Yassin-Kassab gives symbolic meaning to the fragmentary elements of Mustafa’s beliefs as well as the objects he leaves behind. If for Rushdie, in this instance, memory is tied to a particular time and place of 1950s Bombay, for Sami it is more diffuse, encompassing not only Syria but also pan-Arabism because the father’s intellectual position influences the son’s PhD studies in Arabic poetry.²³ As an adolescent, Sami conjures with his father’s identity,

²² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 12.

²³ Tasnim Qutait takes a different view when arguing that the quest for belonging in *The Road from Damascus* is focussed on creative adaptation and performance. “‘Qabbani versus

inventing a fictive one for himself and embellishing it: “[h]e often sported a keffiyeh” when “[a] member of his class in Syria would never wear one” (13). When he savours the poetry of a Syrian nationalist, Nizar Qabanni, Yassin-Kassab inserts a sardonic narratorial commentary: “eroticism, secularism and defiance all contributed to the sexiness of Sami’s Arabism” (14). Self-consciously close narration, then, suggests sceptical scrutiny of Sami’s choices, where aesthetic ‘sexiness’ is privileged over belief, and ideology is reduced to symbols which are transplanted to a new context in Britain where the symbols lose their original meaning.

If in *The Road to Damascus*, Sami connects with his father’s heritage via the idea of a ‘transplanted’ nationalism, in *The Kindness of Enemies* Natasha sees academia and academic work as escapism. Against Sami’s expressive performance of an adopted identity, Natasha’s interest in history imbues her with a sense of freedom:

History could be milked for this cause or that. We observed it always with hindsight, projecting onto it our modern convictions and anxieties. ... I could lose myself in it and forget to visit my mother. I could memorise the dates of battles and the details of treaties so that I could blot out my father ... The taunt ‘swot’ was the only one that never bothered me (41).

Qur’an’: Arabism and the Umma in Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*,” *Open Cultural Studies*, 2, (2018): 77.

The benign taunt of ‘swot’ is happily contrasted with Islamophobic taunts that Natasha tries to guard against. The academic discipline she chooses also privileges evidence over belief to an extent that deflects attention away from cultural heritage. During one research paper presentation, a student asks Natasha whether she is Muslim, a question she finds “irrelevant, even silly” and she responds with laughter (5). But her research into Shamil demands that she engage with his Sufism and for that she is much better equipped than any non-Muslim scholar. The interwoven historical narrative of Imam Shamil that is narrated in the novel reveals that despite the differing contexts of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century and contemporary Britain, religious identity is contested in both, and Aboulela situates similarly Shamil’s *Jihad* in Imperial Russia and Islamophobia in Britain. Some readers may try to differentiate the historical narrative, believing it separate from the main plot and one reviewer goes so far as to assert that, “Aboulela leaves Natasha behind to create a fiction about the subject of her work”.²⁴ Other reviewers are drawn in by the “almost euphoric — language swept up in a ministry of dreamstate, imagination”.²⁵ Seduced by language and narrative, one draws the unlikely conclusion that in some respects “the 19th century was more civilised than our own time”, and thereby

²⁴ Rebecca Carroll, “Review: A Muslim Woman Struggles with Identity in the Novel ‘The Kindness of Enemies’ by Leila Aboulela,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3/1/2016, <https://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-leila-aboulela-20160103-story.html> accessed 28/4/2024.

²⁵ Carroll, “Review: A Muslim Woman Struggles with Identity in the Novel ‘The Kindness of Enemies’ by Leila Aboulela”.

assesses that the modern narrative is “ill-yoked” to this plot.²⁶ Such readings buy into the romanticism behind Natasha’s approach to history without acknowledging how the author ensures that Natasha yokes historical study to aspects of her personal life, making them a feature of her research.²⁷ Natasha’s idealism is clearly indicated as a form of escape, and her tendency to “reach out to the past” is a frame of reference for the present when circumstances are unsettling (216). Natasha’s romanticisation of the Caucasus refracts Islam away from any putative association with modern terrorism and allows her to explore religious identity without the stigma of suspicion. While some critics may dismiss the historical as an elaborate allegory of psychic exploration, its inclusion in the novel provokes readers to reflect on the perception of Islam in the West beyond its limited framing of the present and Aboulela’s portrayal of Natasha suggests that, like Sami’s, her sense of identity inevitably feels insecure and that is why she seeks historical ballast. At the university, Natasha gloats about her publications and when a colleague’s envy “gleamed through her mascara”, she allows, “[i]t gave me more satisfaction than anything she could have said” (100). When she feels undermined, or suffers from impostor syndrome, she clicks through her staff profile on the web as confirmation

²⁶ Allan Massie, “Book Review: The Kindness Of Enemies by Leila Aboulela,” *The Scotsman*, 15/8/2015, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/book-review-kindness-enemies-leila-aboulela-1497489> accessed 7/5/2021.

²⁷ Tasnim Qutait’s analysis of Sami compares with my reading of Natasha when she writes, “Sami finds in the ancient past a static and satisfying contrast to his own confused, hyphenated identity as a Syrian raised in Britain”, “‘Qabbani versus Qur’an’: Arabism and the Umma in Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*,” 77.

of self (220). Natasha's sense of self remains fragile though and she admits to herself that, "[m]y intellect could rebel and I was well-read on the historical roots and taboos against miscegenation (the word itself hardly ever used now), but revulsion and self-loathing still slithered through my body in minute doses" (40). Natasha's self-worth is linked inextricably into how others may perceive her, and when placed in a state of vulnerability and subject to suspicion following Oz's arrest, she recognises an internalised racism, underlining a trauma that remains unresolved.

The fragility of Natasha's sense of belonging in Britain is magnified when the suspicion around Oz shifts to her. When her flat is burgled, Natasha calls the police immediately, but their line of questioning seems to cast suspicion on her and she feels that racism factors into their judgement: "my skin flared in their presence, it became more prominent than what I was saying". The experience undermines her dignity and undoes all her efforts to 'fit in' (102). When her line manager asks why she did not identify Oz as vulnerable to radicalisation, in the light of his arrest for possessing material on Chechen Jihadists linked to Al-Qaeda, she feels that the burden of blame is placed on her (142). As part of Contest, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy which emerged after 9/11, staff in education institutions are required to report students or employees considered at risk, known as the Prevent duty. It has contributed to the construction of Muslims as a "suspect

community” within Britain and is placed under scrutiny in this novel.²⁸ The association of Muslims with the risk of domestic terrorism is closely linked to UK foreign policy and to wars to which Britain contributes in Muslim countries, and for Natasha the situation resonates with her research on Imam Shamil in the nineteenth century.²⁹ Natasha teases out how terms like *jihad* have been used and understood very differently, a point of nuance which the reporting process at her university does not accommodate. In this way, Aboulela suggests how Natasha’s role in surveillance as an education practitioner and the way in which she is placed under suspicion herself is indicative of the ways that counter-terrorism strategy impacts negatively on all Muslims in Britain. Effectively made homeless through the damage caused during the burglary of her home, Natasha also loses access to her laptop and phone, both of which are retained as evidence in relation to Oz’s arrest, furthering a sense of her exilic status, and she thinks nostalgically of her mother, who she describes as her “first home” (102). The burglary also prompts her to reach out to her stepfather Tony whose calls she has been ignoring, but when he informs her that her biological father in Sudan is seriously ill Natasha is dismissive of his suggestion that she visit, highlighting further ambivalence over her sense of ‘home’ or belonging.

²⁸ See also: Imran Awan, “‘I Am a Muslim Not an Extremist’: How the Prevent Strategy Has Constructed a ‘Suspect’ Community,” *Politics & Policy*. 40:6, (2013), 1158–1185.

²⁹ Stacey Gutkowski argues that risk and security are culturally constructed and that Britain’s imperial legacy has defined its sense of risk in relation to religiosity and religious nationalism, “Secularism and the Politics of Risk: Britain’s Prevent Agenda, 2005–2009,” *International Relations* 25:3 (2011): 349.

Tensions that play out as feelings of belonging and unbelonging are made manifest too in the hybrid figures that feature in different ways in both novels. In *The Road from Damascus*, Sami dreams of his late father as a centaur, the form in which he also appears to Sami during a night of intoxication and infidelity (9-10, 166). In *The Kindness of Enemies*, at a fancy dress party she attends as a child, Natasha “kicked and screamed at a child with the head of a wolf and the body of a seven-year-old-boy”, and later the sight of a centaur in a library book causes her to vomit (39-40). Neither novelist overplays the anxiety created in their characters by hybrid figures, but both edge toward a critique of the notion of hybridity as propounded by Homi Bhabha, that ‘liminal space’, or the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications”, facilitates “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”.³⁰ Natasha recognises her “liminal self” in hybrid figures and describes herself as a “failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves” (40). She cannot reconcile the different sides of her heritage as facilitatively hybrid, not least because of the attitudes of her parents: “[m]y African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight” (40). Like Sami, who feels that he should choose between loyalty to his father or to his mother, Natasha feels that migrants of mixed heritages are expected to conform to one identity or another and muses bitterly: “[p]erhaps we half and halves should

³⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

make a choice, one nationality instead of the other, one language instead of the other. We should nourish one identity and starve the other so that it would atrophy and drop off. Then we could relax and become like everyone else" (104). In this way, Aboulela gestures to the role that nationalist and colonial discourses play in suppressing the identities of minorities. She explores this idea through allegory in the historical narrative when Georgian Princess Anna, whose children will grow up as subjects of Imperial Russia, wants them "to know who they were, to not lose themselves completely just because the reality around them insisted otherwise". It is a narrative imperative that underlines Natasha's fear of 'losing herself' and her desire for a stable identity (292).

The persistence with which the hybrid figures in the protagonists' imaginations is suggestive of the nature of myth. Since it is never argued rationally into existence to begin with, a mythological narrative proves difficult to dislodge and, for Yassin-Kassab, 'secular' mythology complicates the alleged rationality of secularism over religious thought. Sami's assumption that religion and Pan-Arab secular nationalism are distinct and dichotomous is reliant on what his father teaches him about Arabic mythology and the poetry of Nizar Qabbani, and the stories from the Qur'an that his mother Nur tells him: Sami "learnt early on to separate these two narratives". But, it becomes clear that this is a separation that is coerced by Sami's father, who silences Nur in her attempts to teach Sami. When Nur has visitors who are practising Muslims, Mustafa slams doors and blasts Egyptian

dance music (53, 58). In my reading, the form which Nur's silencing takes mimics the Ba'athist regime which violently silenced oppositional voices in Syria, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and Yassin-Kassab disrupts binaries too via a juxtaposition of two foundational texts: the Qur'an and the Epic of Gilgamesh, a poem of ancient Mesopotamia; Sami and his father bond over the poem, and Nur tells Sami of "the adventures of God's messengers. Of Khidr the Green Man. The tales of the Rightly Guided Caliphs" (53). Placing the texts in conversation provokes an intertextual reading in the way that Claire Chambers maintains that juxtapositions of the secular and sacred suggest how this novel "explores a 'third space' ...in which the interplay between religion and secularism is apparent".³¹ Paradoxically, then, even as Yassin-Kassab seems critical of Bhabha's notion of hybridity in terms of identity, in *The Road from Damascus* intertextuality opens up an 'interstitial' reading that bridges a putative dichotomy between of the secular and the sacred. Bhabha's articulation of a 'third space' as a hybrid space of enunciation teleology:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys [the] mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing,

³¹ Chambers, "'Sexy identity assertion' Choosing Between Sacred and Secular Identities in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*," 122.

unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive by the national tradition of the People.³²

By drawing attention to supernatural mythological creatures, Yassin-Kassab points to the seemingly absurd distinction made by Mustafa, who “tolerated ghouls (an Arabic word), plus sprites, leprechauns, dryads and goblins. Also, dwarves, elves and hobbits [but] drew the line at jinn, because these were mentioned in the Qur’an” (54). In this way, and with inflected irony, Yassin-Kassab expertly destabilises any clear distinction between the secular and sacred.

If in *The Road from Damascus* Sami’s beliefs are revealed to be based on myths, his ‘fall’ towards disillusionment is conditioned by events that put those big ideas into question. As the narrator surmises, “[h]e was brought up that way, which was not necessarily a bad thing. It was fine until he stopped believing” (87). Indeed, when Tasnim Qutait reads the novel it is as primarily the story of Sami’s de-conversion from secular pan-Arabism, with the Gulf War the turning point that “drives his turn towards a quest for religious belonging”.³³ The war certainly shatters the perception of Arabism as aligned with humanist progress in the way Qutait describes: “Iraq had been the most developed Arab country. After the war it was in the Stone Age again, worse than the Stone Age, the Depleted Uranium Age ... For Iraqis, for all Arabs, history started to run backwards in 1991” (90). Ammar and

³² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37.

³³ Qutait, “‘Qabbani versus Qur’an’”, 79.

Muntaha, who lose their mother in Iraq and whose father Marwan, “secular and romantic”, believes himself to be “a model citizen of the new Iraq” but is imprisoned and tortured, are disillusioned (71). Ammar adopts a militant-styled Islamist persona and Muntaha indulges in the anaesthesia of nights out with Sami, before becoming more devout. Sami finds no comfortable alternative and because the different directions he takes through his life “turned out to be dead ends,” he resents Muntaha for “finding her own” (92). It is amid this uncertainty that Sami heads to Syria, to “reconnect with his roots”, an endeavour that in practice unsettles him still further (38).

While Sami’s ‘return’ to Syria dispels his illusions, Natasha’s return to Sudan after a twenty-year absence destabilises her further. Natasha takes a flight to Khartoum where she learns upon arrival that her father has already died, denying her the possibility of reconciliation. She stays with her mother’s friend Grusha and her son Yasha, Natasha’s childhood boyfriend, who is now obese and whose changed appearance emphasises the passage of time. Aboulela explores how Natasha’s memories of Sudan, crystallised at a time of intense emotion during the breakdown of her parents’ marriage, are at odds with present reality. When Natasha wanders the streets of Khartoum, the city strikes her as “incongruous”, and she gets lost (249). She feels disoriented by the changes she perceives since living there, as though “stuck in a time warp” (281). These feelings can be read as moments of ‘unhoming’, drawing on Bhabha’s theorisation of ‘unhomeliness’. Bhabha describes

the 'unhomely moment' as that which "relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence"; Natasha's personal discomfort is also an acknowledgement of feelings of displacement and her own positionality. Moments such as these that "[creep] up on you stealthily as your own shadow" are instances in Aboulela's text, as when she revisits her stepfather Tony's former home and finds it abandoned and dilapidated which stirs in her a "yearning" for "an identifiable place where I could belong".³⁴ Natasha's imaginative exploration of history can be read as a process of 'making home' and a reaction to uncomfortable feelings. Aboulela gestures to the idea of return and suggests that a possible homecoming for migrants and the children of migrants involves layers of displacement and othering, like that which Natasha experiences in Britain, even if, as Stuart Hall argues, "[d]iaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference". Hall allows that the desire to "return to the beginning" may be potent but that it "can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery".³⁵ The narrative voice in *The Road from Damascus* would seem to share this perspective, describing roots as "shallow, and mythical; we all come from everywhere at once, and we are floating creatures" (38). The transformation that the

³⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 289.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 269.

protagonists of both novels undergo, then, is prefaced by an imperfect identification of belonging in place, and in the subverting of the *bildungsroman* form it speaks to the denial of a linear or teleological narrative of progress towards resolution.

Instead, the plotlines in these texts are reminiscent of spiritual journeys that may be understood within the tradition of Sufism. During a meeting with his academic supervisor, Sami is advised not to focus too much on “big ideas” but to pay attention to details, suggesting a quietist, subtle approach that is a characteristic of Sufi philosophy (153). After putting his studies on hold indefinitely, Sami heads to a bar where he becomes heavily intoxicated before following a group of revellers to a gathering where he absent-mindedly has sex with a woman he does not know. On waking the next day, Sami is walking home when he collides with a policeman in the street who arrests him for cocaine possession. He has been seeking solace in recreational drugs. In a cell at the police station, he decides to stop running from his problems, and feels as though he may be “on the verge of something. The lifting of a veil” (181). Yassin-Kassab’s use of ‘veil’ alludes to the Sufi concept of *kashf* or unveiling, as explored in the work of Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī.³⁶ In this context, the veil connotes a personal divine revelation, in which to lift it is to become aware of an inner dimension and the disclosure of divine mysteries. It features prominently in Aboulela’s novel too, as when Natasha learns from Malak

³⁶ Rashid, “British Islam and the novel of transformation: Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*,” 97.

that “Sufism delves into the hidden truth behind the disguise” (107). While both authors articulate Sufi concepts, they also suggest how they may translate into ‘secular’ contexts and for non-Muslims. Yassin-Kassab compares the lifting of the veil to apocalypse, or revelation in Christianity (181). For Natasha, hidden meanings constitute “the kind of knowledge that couldn’t be found in books”, expressed in words or codified (107). In both novels, revelation suggests acknowledgement of deeper meanings beyond symbolic representation and a ‘sacred’ discourse that may illuminate some of the shortcomings of secular humanism.

The changes that Sami makes include quitting tobacco, alcohol, and meat, as well as choosing to fast and wash “in the Muslim style” (255-256). If Sami’s gradual embrace of what he comes to call “self-applied Sufism” appears redolent of ‘self-help’ techniques and practices, it suggests how ‘sacred’ discourses are enmeshed with the secular and commodified in capitalist society. Asha Sen contends that, “when the ‘sacred’ enters the realm of public discourse, it reinforces a secular status quo that focuses on the health, wealth, and wellbeing of the individual over the community”.³⁷ However, it is a condition of modern life that Sami comes to accept, whereas when younger, he views different strands of belief as rigid positions that cancel each other out—observing reductively that “[b]elief X cancels belief Y. Leaving zero belief” — he intuits that secularism has collapsed under a new

³⁷ Asha Sen, *Postcolonial Yearning: Reshaping Spiritual and Secular Discourses in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

“marketplace of religion”, and that a variety of ‘New Age’ beliefs, “consumer cults” and “body cults” form the ‘religion’ of modern society (57, 245). Yassin-Kassab gestures effectively to why and how a society can be considered post-secular and suggests that unbelief, or even atheism, always entails forms of belief. Sufism appears to provide a moral philosophy for Sami that can counter the capitalist and consumerist excesses of the West, with Sufism’s rejection of materialism providing a balance. Sami’s turn to Islam is an affirmation of his desire to reconnect with Muntaha and a recognition of feelings about faith that he has suppressed. It is a return of sorts too; as a child Sami feels “something attractive about the ritual movements Nur made ... a halo of peace and slowness surrounded her” and he comes to understand that his long courtship of Muntaha is “inherently religious” and that it involves “heightening pleasure by putting it off” thereby placing a value on delayed gratification that is a feature of Islamic belief, exemplified by fasting during Ramadan. It is suggested that Sami unconsciously maintains these values (90, 58).

Critique of materialism is a significant feature of both novels too. Natasha is disdainful of how her students fetishise “their Uggs and Hunter wellies; their leather jackets and mobile accessories” and discerns that the market has had “them by the throat; they might be in debt, they were surely struggling, but they needed what generations before them had easily done without” (71). If the market encourages sameness and limits individual expression, in Sudan she finds that the ostensibly

close-knit family unit is also characterised by social conventions. Early in the novel, Natasha is scathing about the Sudanese state which she blames for the failure of Natasha's father to get steady work, which leads to the collapse of his marriage, and opines, "his was another brilliant mind burnt out by a dysfunctional post-colonial state" (73). Only back in Sudan does she begin to recognise that every society has its challenges, and she contends with this too, as when Yasha claims, toxically, that Oz needs to "man up" and that in the 'Arab world' he would be beaten for his behaviour, and Natasha retorts that Oz's cultural expectations are based on being born in Britain (286). If Aboulela's writing suggests a cultural relativism in which issues related to Britain may belong "wholeheartedly there", as a practising Muslim, she elects not to engage directly with criticism of Islam or Islamic states. This has divided critics. Geoffrey Nash argues that, for Aboulela, Sudan is a place "to be left" and he compares this to how British born writer Caryl Phillips treats the Caribbean in his fiction (287).³⁸ For Sadia Abbas however, it is a strategic move whereby Aboulela opens up a dichotomy between the East and a West of loneliness despite sexual liberty.³⁹ Wail S. Hassan argues similarly and underlines that in her previous novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), Aboulela was "less concerned with reversing, rewriting, or answering back to colonial discourse than with attempting

³⁸ Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012), 46.

³⁹ Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 88.

an epistemological break with it".⁴⁰ As Billy Gray summarises, criticism of Aboulela's fiction is "predicated on a secularist, supposedly 'progressive' ethos where the perception of 'submission' in any shape or form is viewed as synonymous with subjugation and even oppression". He suggests that, "[i]f approached from the perspective of Sufi philosophy, however, Aboulela's belief that within the sphere of spirituality, submission and individual agency are by no means incompatible, acquires greater legitimacy and contextualisation".⁴¹ If in her previous work Aboulela narrows the canvas to the extent that disparate ideologies and beliefs can seem to fit together harmoniously in the English novel, in *The Kindness of Enemies* she displaces political identities in favour of a deterritorialised sense of belonging through Sufism. Indeed, it is only when her political citizenship becomes useful to Natasha in order to defend her rights to her father's estate that she claims a Muslim identity, an arbitrary marker as Yasha tells Natasha: "[y]ou have a right, a human right, to be a bad Muslim, a lapsed Muslim, a secular Muslim, whatever" (281). While she is required to literally prove in court that she is a Muslim in order to claim her father's inheritance, her desire to belong develops in the bonds she forms with Grusha, Yasha and Mekki, with whom she is "relaxed without the need to prove, explain or distinguish [herself]" (310).

⁴⁰ Wail S. Hassan, "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 41:2 (2008): 299.

⁴¹ Gray, "From the Secular to the Sacred: The Influence of Sufism on the Work of Leila Aboulela," 161.

If both authors initially destabilise notions of the sacred and secular as distinct, they go much further by levelling a critique of identity politics, and the *bildungsroman* form allows for processive and progressive engagement with ideas along the journey both protagonists take towards a more spiritual sense of belonging. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, this is established through multiple encounters between characters, like Muntaha's brother Ammar and her colleague Gabor Vronk. Ammar is assertive about his identity which he embellishes in creative ways, drawing influences from hip-hop culture as much as from Islamic fundamentalism, and he is described by one critic as "a wonderful portrait of a would-be radical".⁴² In one encounter that turns into a confrontation between brother and sister, Ammar attempts to convey his authority when he tells Muntaha to stay with Sami, "your Muslim man", and when in support of the Palestinian cause he alleges that all Jews share the same perspective on the conflict with Israel. Muntaha responds with a subtlety which undercuts his tone and his essentialism, reminding her 'little brother' that "[p]eople are individuals, not shapes to fit your categories". When Ammar refers to Shia Muslims as "traitors", she retorts that their mother was Shii and that he should be ashamed of himself (226-227, 229, 230.) That Ammar becomes tearful at

⁴² Aamer Hussein, "The Road From Damascus, by Robin Yassin-Kassab," *The Independent*, 20/6/2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-road-from-damascus-by-robin-yassin-kassab-850691.html> accessed 15/9/2023; Claire Chambers has described the way in which Ammar's combination of the secular and sacred through hip hop and Islamism is paralleled by the endorsement of religious movements such as the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation by groups like the Wu Tang Clan. , Chambers, "'Sexy Identity-Assertion' Choosing Between Sacred and Secular Identities in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*", 126.

this juncture underlines the vulnerability of a young man who is appropriating assertions and scanning for views when they do not always reflect what is personally important to him. In deconstructing Ammar's character with economy in this way, Yassin-Kassab speculates on the appeal of identity politics for young Muslims and counters a debilitating search for authenticity with the quiet clarity that a more assured Muntaha gains from Sufism.

Towards the end of *The Road from Damascus*, Yassin-Kassab puts under scrutiny a constructed and largely accepted binary that pits literature aligned with a notion of 'freedom' of thought and expression against a view of religion read as dogma, the binary that characterised liberal responses to the Rushdie Affair, when Sami attends a debate featuring Rashid Iqbal, who is depicted as a caricature of Rushdie. Iqbal tells the crowd that "[l]iterature is impure, as blended and mixed and polluted, as transgressively tainted, as a curry, a spiced Bombay curry", a line that evokes Rushdie's idea of 'chutnification' in *Midnight's Children* (1981) against which Iqbal posits religion as tyrannical and aligns Islam with harmful practices such as FGM (300, 303-304). Sami, who owns copies of Iqbal's books, is now sceptical of his views, which are also countered by Iqbal's opponent in the debate who notes the "spicy mix that was Islamic Spain" and the "masala of medieval Baghdad" to highlight Iqbal's oversimplified polemic and to underscore the diversity of the Islamic world against its monolithic representation in the West (300). When Sami relates the event to Muntaha she asks why a distinction between literature and

religion is necessary, emphasising that, like fiction, Islamic scripture is open to interpretation. Throughout the novel, Muntaha emphasises the importance of reading and making judgements rather than following prescription. Sami has revered uncritically the academic study his father published, and his bookshelves are filled with “texts about Sufi texts” and “theories about theory” while Muntaha privileges Sufi sources in their original forms. She gifts Gabor a copy of Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi’s *The Shape of Light* so that he may make his own interpretations (240). She challenges Ammar on his limited reading of history too, advocating that he read more books “and make your mind up” (230). Quotations from the Qur’an and from Sufi texts that Yassin-Kassab intersperses in the novel mimic this demand, allowing readers space and opportunity to form their own judgements rather than relying solely on secondary reading or on how Islam is filtered for a non-Muslim audience. In this context, in particular, Yassin-Kassab has explained that he envisaged a novel that could respond to Orientalist myths and convey “the complexity of Muslims, Islam, and the Muslim world” and that it might also show how many different forms of Islam there are, “even within the same individual”.⁴³

Through the characters of Muntaha and Malak respectively, Yassin-Kassab and Aboulela structure an engagement with Sufism for readers of their novels that not only challenges Sami and Natasha’s initial views but also identifies a practice of faith that resonates for the novel ways in which young Muslims in Britain are

⁴³ Yassin-Kassab, “Islam in the writing process,” 146.

practising Islam. Muntaha's Sufism is imagined as a way for her to bridge her heritage and her life in Britain. Her childhood in Baghdad is "like a storybook village", with neighbours looking out for her and bringing food to her family home, but in London people avoid eye contact, so that she both misses and craves a Muslim community and begins wearing the hijab as a mark of pride and communal identification (92, 230-231). For Muntaha, belief is always an "expression of wonder", and she articulates her faith as an embodied practice rather than unquestioned belief (93-94). If new patterns of globalisation uproot and deterritorialise Muslims and engender a new form of acculturation, resettlement also provokes reassessment of what Islam means, and for the current generation, as Olivier Roy claims, "the making of Muslim minorities is carried out through a process of deculturation, in which none of the previous cultural markers is retained".⁴⁴ It is a deculturation that is explored by Yassin-Kassab through the character of Muntaha who privileges personal meaning when her father Marwan dies and keeps his "cutlery that gleamed something of the past" and drawings he has saved that she and Ammar made as young children, whereas Ammar chooses to remember via Islamic pamphlets and his father's prayer mat, both of which are symbolic of his religious identity (234). There is little in the way of materiality or custom that links Muntaha's practice of religion to a specific culture and while Islam has historically been linked to many cultures, theologically it is not identified with a specific or singular culture.

⁴⁴ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 108.

Decoupling religion from culture potentially enables agency because faith can be practised without adherence to a set of cultural norms. Muntaha muses on this: “[a]ccompanying a stranger, leapfrogging over conventional greetings to intimacy, in Iraq it would seem very untraditional, very ‘modern’. But the distinction is a false one. Nobody anywhere lives in smooth connection to the past. Only the shape of tradition remains” (86). Muntaha may value the traces, but she values more the space she has found in which to practise her religion in a way that is personally meaningful, such that she comes to recognise herself as a ‘British Muslim’.

This recognition is strikingly similar to Natasha’s at the heart of Aboulela’s novel, that “[n]o situation at any given time is entirely new; the constraints and conversations are different, the fears are different, but still today is a ripple of former times, a version of what has been passed down” (177). Malak’s Sufism connects her back into a heritage that includes the subject of her research, Imam Shamil; she even attends *zikrs* that are performed by the same Sufi *tariqat* that Shamil followed, and the word *zikr* itself denotes recital and remembrance (216).⁴⁵ But the current political situation for Muslims brings new challenges, for Sufis too. As Natasha elaborates in internal monologue, “[i]n modern times as Political Islam embraced transnationalism and activism, the Sufis were perceived to be not only passive and traditional, but often, also, reactionary and neo-cons” (208). At least part of this

⁴⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “dhikr (n.),” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4585254288> accessed 29/4/2024.

perspective is the result of interventions made by Western governments and in the case of the Prevent programme, the government made assumptions about religion as part of its strategy. The primary and most deleterious assumption is that Muslim religiosity equates to an inclination toward radicalism, the holding of extremist views, and, in terms of policy, the government privileged what it designated moderate theologies, such as Sufism, over Salafism.⁴⁶ Aboulela raises a perceived distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims not only to underscore how terms like *jihad* have become weaponised, but to also point to the consequences for ordinary Muslims. She explores this through characters and groups, as when the Muslim student society at Oz's university claims to "hate the Sufis" and objects to Malak's occupation as an actress (208). Like Muntaha, Malak turns away from these politicised debates, with her faith a source of resilience. She tells Natasha "[i]f I didn't have my faith, I would go mad" (215). Rather than rationalising her position as a political choice, Malak is guided towards her faith by her feelings in ways that come to resonate with Natasha, whose scepticism towards the *zikr* she attends with Malak in London is contrasted with the "powerful, heady" feeling that haunts her afterwards (314). As she begins to acknowledge these feelings more openly, Natasha realises that Malak is indeed a consummate teacher, and this completes an

⁴⁶ Stacey Gutkowski, "Secularism and the Politics of Risk: Britain's Prevent Agenda, 2005–2009," *International relations* 25:3 (2011): 355.

epistemological shift in Natasha's thinking that allows her to embrace spiritualism in a way that does not contradict her rationalism, but complements it.

Both novels end similarly in the Scottish countryside. In both scenes, there is a note of gentle irony in introducing aspects of Islam and Arabic culture into rural places. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Malak prays on a Persian carpet at Dunnottar Castle whilst thinking that she may be the first person ever to praise Allah there. In *The Road from Damascus*, Muntaha brings Arab culinary ingredients to make a meal, symbolising the importance she places on food as cultural heritage and belonging (346-47). In both cases, there is a reappraisal of how one may belong as a Muslim in an adopted space, or new homeplace, as much as there is a claiming of space for Islamic cultures. Dunnottar Castle's history as Mary Queen of Scots' residence links it indelibly to the struggle for an independent Scotland and the contested history of English and Scottish relations: successive monarchies have claimed this space as a site of spiritual importance— just as Malak does when she chooses to pray there (311). For Sami's surveillance-sceptic university colleague Tom, the countryside represents a clean slate, "[n]o ancestors up here, no past". This is an unattractive proposition for Muntaha, who declares, "there aren't so many of us in this country, better for us to stick together" (345-346). Muntaha's self-definition as a 'British Muslim' figures as a politically and socially more cohesive cultural entity than 'Arab'. But more pertinently, adoption of this descriptor relates to her need to belong

collectively rather than live in isolation.⁴⁷ Sami claims for himself “a doctrine of radical unknowing, and the beginning of acceptance” and his journey to Scotland reconnects him to Muntaha because it is where they married (347). When he finally declares his “trembling, contingent faith” it is to suggest that he is now open to different religious perspectives, and that his ‘partial’ faith further destabilises the dichotomy of secular and sacred (348). For Natasha, an acceptance of the spiritual entails the beginning of a journey with Malak as her guide for what “could never be written down in history”, and similarly points to the limitations of secular thought (311).

The Road from Damascus and *The Kindness of Enemies* are brave novels that problematise secular liberal thought to an extent that has rarely been seen in postcolonial British fiction. Together they represent a literary component of a growing body of writing and scholarship that is critically rethinking secularism and the role of religion in contemporary UK society. By deploying the *bildungsroman* form in intriguing ways both authors privilege religious epistemology to encourage and challenge readers to reflect on the values of religious identity in its myriad different forms: as a way of belonging, as a way of connecting to the past and to one’s heritage, as a critique of secular values and as an acceptance of faith as a form of agency in its own right. Through the tentative ‘partial’ faith that the characters

⁴⁷ For discussion of this idea in a different context, see Caroline Nagel, “Constructing Difference and Sameness: The Politics of Assimilation in London’s Arab Communities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25:2 (2002): 273–74.

come to embrace, both novelists underline that the paths their protagonists take are just possible options among many, and that religiosity does not necessarily entail the denial of allegedly secular values. In an increasingly politicised climate for British Muslims, debates often become polarised, and, as these novelists suggest, relationships can be deeply impacted by Islamophobia, but the transformation that Sami and Natasha undergo offers a counterpoint and points to new ways of practising faith that some Muslims are successfully adapting in a difficult and often hostile context in contemporary Britain.

However, spirituality is not a panacea, and questions remain for readers to contemplate after the conclusion of both novels. Through Oz and Ammar, both authors hint at generational change as the attitudes of these younger characters stands in contrast to Sami and Natasha. How might these characters fare in adulthood with the pressures of more intense forms of Islamophobia? How would public expressions of religiosity be perceived in the contemporary context? Readers may reflect on the difficult adolescence of Oz and Ammar to draw conclusions about the challenges facing young Muslims today, one that relates to a broader spectrum of discrimination beyond the present moment, and in this way both novels suggest a complexity which challenges the taxonomy of 'Muslim issues' that publishers and critics have attempted to fix in place.

Chapter 3

Reading and Storytelling in Sameer Rahim's *Asghar and Zahra* (2019) and

Monica Ali's *Love Marriage* (2022)

It is striking how prominently reading features in Sameer Rahim's novel *Asghar and Zahra* (2019). Reading has generative effects on his characters, nineteen-year-old Asghar Dhalani and twenty-one-year-old Zahra Amir. They seem to be always reading something: novels, Islamic texts, text messages, Facebook, emails, and newspapers. How and what they read across these media is reflective of their subjectivities, the desires, feelings, and tastes that coalesce as their perceptions of one another. What they select and how they interpret what they read affects their attitudes towards one another and the novel performs a reflective re-reading of each character as Rahim builds their complexity and conjures with lazy stereotypes to challenge his readers' putative perceptions of young Muslims in Britain. While *Maps for Lost Lovers* featured a Muslim couple many years into their marriage, *Asghar and Zahra* examines the beginning of a marriage between two young Muslims who are similarly subject to the scrutiny of the local community. Rahim engages with negative media stereotypes of radicalised young Muslims and communal insularity but disarms these issues with comedy and reveals a self-reflective tendency in the main protagonists as a response to Islamophobia. The novel tracks the nascent relationship of a couple seemingly at odds; each perplexed by the other's outlook,

they seem mismatched. Zahra, a Cambridge-educated investment bank employee, may bear some resemblance to Mah-Jabin in *Maps for Lost Lovers* insofar as she rebels against the 'traditional' perspectives of her parents, in contradistinction to Asghar.

Storytelling also plays a significant role in Monica Ali's *Love Marriage* (2022) which shares thematic concerns with *Asghar and Zahra*, and the family marriage plot. Ali's Yasmin Ghorami reappraises her relationships with her partner Joe, her parents Anisah and Shaokat, her brother Arif, and her faith. She is a doctor at St Barnabas hospital in London where her white partner Joe Sangster also practises and she is increasingly concerned about the expectations of her soon-to-be mother-in-law Harriet Sangster and how Harriet relates to her parents as British Muslims. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that Yasmin's views are shaped, and distorted, by her parents' storytelling, and Ali seems to set traps of representation which may evoke the biases and prejudices among some of her readership. Yasmin too makes assumptions which find confirmation in the opinions of her friends, and she is duped by the secrets and lies that abound in her own family, and in her relationship with Joe. Ali's is a tale with universal reach, but it is the underlaying fixity of public discourse in which Muslim cultural identity is read and judged negatively that stands out. The impact of a national discourse on the way that stories are told, details added or omitted, and subjects broached or avoided, cannot simply be attributed to rampant stereotypes. Rather, as I investigate in this chapter, it is a discourse bolstered by Home Office reports that are critical of Muslim communities,

and renewed calls for 'British values' among government ministers that have contributed to exclusionary understandings of 'Englishness' and delimited Muslim representation in other cultural forms. These debates filter into quotidian interactions that are imagined by both Ali and Rahim and which also put genre expectations under scrutiny.

There is a light and seemingly unassuming quality to *Asghar and Zahra* and *Love Marriage* which masks their depth in my view. Melissa Katsoulis describes Ali's novel as an "epic but easy to read book", listing the plethora of topics with which the novel engages: "Islamophobia, the specific rights of British hijab-wearing Muslims, babies, literary prizes, psychotherapy, lesbians, chutney, charity shops, sex, bodies, shame".¹ Parallels can be drawn with the weighty issues, including contested Islamic history and the radicalisation of Muslim youth, that Rahim takes on in *Asghar and Zahra*. Effectively, both novels transcend a clichéd, formulaic, and easy-to-read style often associated with young adult fiction or 'chick lit' from which Ali and Rahim have arguably drawn when centring a frustrated marriage plot. Stephanie Harzewski reflects on how so-called 'chick lit' draws stylistically from Jane Austen and Edith Wharton's works, maintaining a comedic tone with light irony, and frequently involving a marriage plot and suggests that "chick lit serves as an

¹ Melissa Katsoulis, "Love Marriage by Monica Ali review — it's *Brick Lane* updated (but with more sex)," *The Times*, 21/1/2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/love-marriage-by-monica-ali-review-xtjxfpkn>, accessed 23/3/2022.

accessible portal into contemporary gender politics and questions of cultural value”.² Indeed, in an interview where she notes Austen as an influence, Ali asserts, “the expectations, customs, rituals, and family dynamics surrounding marriage are still a good way of exploring our society”.³ I would extend that idea to how a domestic setting still reflects the everyday dynamics of power exemplified in the second-wave feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’, which sociologist Cynthia Enloe describes as “an astounding revelation: that power was deeply at work where it was least apparent”. This involves locating political causality in the mundane, so that the locus of power is in “kitchens, bedrooms, and secretarial pools ... pubs, brothels, squash courts, and factory lunch rooms—and village wells and refugee camp latrines”.⁴ A revelatory understanding of power in political consensus was already evident in the novels of Austen and George Eliot and the ‘domestic’ setting holds an enduring appeal for writers. One need not look far to find examples of how Muslim identity is contested and affected in this sphere, from workplace norms to social activities that may make Muslim men and women uncomfortable, such as socialising in the pub, as well as continual media attention on manners of dress, including headscarves.⁵ *Love*

² Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 4, 5.

³ Monica Ali quoted in C. S. Bhagya, “From *Brick Lane* to *Love Marriage*: An Interview with Monica Ali,” *Wasafiri*, 37:1 (2022): 35-6.

⁴ Cynthia Enloe, “The Mundane Matters,” *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011): 447-48.

⁵ See for example the report ‘Defining Islamophobia’ which outlines numerous examples of how daily life in Britain is impacted for Muslims, including discrimination when applying for accommodation or insurance in a Muslim name, Tabetha Bhatti, *Defining Islamophobia: A Contemporary Understanding of How Expressions of Muslimness are Targeted* (London: Muslim Council of Britain, 2021), mcb.org.uk/islamophobia, accessed 27/4/2024.

Marriage and *Asghar and Zahra* sit within a cluster of novels that engage with relationships among young millennials, including novels by Leila Aboulela, most specifically *The Translator* (1999), and Kasim Ali's *Good Intentions* (2022) where a young British Muslim couple meet at university. One reviewer of *Good Intentions* observed: "[t]he general impression is that, with solid jobs and homes out of reach, these earnest millennials have vastly over-invested in relationships, and that carries its own poignancy".⁶ The intensity, and overloading, of relationships in such fictional representations becomes the focal point for challenging hegemonic thinking. Lucinda Newns draws upon structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov's conceptualisation of genre as a 'horizon of expectations' when assessing how readerly expectations can be manipulated, even changed: "[r]omantic narrative forms are particularly fertile ground for challenging dominant ideas about Muslim women, as stories of love and courtship have been central arenas within which the gender norms of any given society are represented and challenged".⁷ It is a point on which reviewers of *Love Marriage* would seem to agree, with Madeleine Feeny representative: "Ali subverts the traditional marriage plot to illustrate the pitfalls of taking people, including oneself, at face value".⁸ She is not alone in doing so.

⁶ "Breakout beginners — a round-up of the best debut fiction," *Financial Times*, 27/2/2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/bf9f5ad1-aa72-4f11-ab79-c303d9d9e4c9> accessed 21/3/2022.

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.), 18; Lucinda Newns, "Renegotiating Romantic Genres: Textual Resistance and Muslim Chick Lit," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 53:2 (June 2018): 287.

⁸ Madeleine Feeny, "Monica Ali is back to her satirical best," *Prospect*, 27/1/2022, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/monica-ali-is-back-to-her-satirical-best>, accessed 21/3/2022.

Rahim's characterisation of Asghar in particular plays on prejudicial stereotypes of communal insularity and naivety. As the novel opens, Asghar sits on a swing in the garden in his wedding clothes while waiting for his parents and sister who are "taking ages" to get ready.⁹ Rahim suggests that the solitary activity of texting on his mobile phone is an echo of his younger self playing on a Game Boy. It transpires that in preparation for his wedding night Asghar has been given a pamphlet entitled *The Making of an Islamic Marriage*, the "tatty red" booklet having been the subject of rumour at Sunday madrasa, such that it "had gained an aura of erotic secrecy – like a sharia-compliant *Kama Sutra*, which would be solemnly revealed only on the eve of marriage".¹⁰ The guidance in the booklet is vague but has the effect of undermining Asghar's wedding night, as he becomes focussed on saying the required prayers (23). In the opening chapter, Rahim is already constructing the act of reading as an integral aspect of Asghar's character. Asghar is a pious Muslim; each Sunday he attends madrasa, listening attentively to the maulana's Quranic stories and, at home, he listens to family stories of "old Zanzibar days" (3). Zahra's parents think of him as a "sad sack who was always bullied at madressa" and fear that his is a "rough Zanzibarian family". Her father barely even sees Asghar as "a grown-up" (8, 10). Whilst Zahra is defensive of her choice to marry

⁹ For Sophie Ratcliffe this "smacks of child's play," *Asghar and Zahra* by Sameer Rahim, review: the unmaking of an Islamic marriage," *The Telegraph*, 3/7/2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/asghar-zahra-sameer-rahim-review-unmaking-islamic-marriage/> accessed 9/12/2021.

¹⁰ Sameer Rahim, *Asghar and Zahra* (London: JM Originals, 2019), 2. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

Asghar, privately she labels him a “community boy”. A recent graduate of Cambridge where she has studied Economics, she is seen as “the most beautiful and charismatic girl in the community” and described as having a “fading – but not yet extinguished – religious observance” (3, 99). In this way potential tensions begin to appear, especially because Asghar’s view of Zahra is idealised and based mostly on childhood infatuation. He is also reflective about the transformation brought about in him by his engagement: “[a]sking for Zahra’s hand had been the boldest move of his life. When the risk came off, it changed the way the world looked at him, and the way he looked at the world” (1, 3-4). Boys who have bullied him now offer up congratulations.

The characters’ initial impressions are based on what is superficially known, in the way that political philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests, “our feeling for reality depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of a public realm”, when she argues that intimate life is transformed by the act of storytelling and “in artistic transposition of individual experiences.” Arendt contends that, “[e]ach time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before”.¹¹ However, the act of storytelling also carries an intrinsic problem, Arendt contends: “[t]he moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50-1.

into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us".¹² Zahra and Asghar get entangled in this kind of way and reach for stereotype when working out who the other may be. As markers of character or identity, they seem banal but, as the novel progresses, easy descriptors become stumbling blocks for how each character 'reads' the other. This was noticed in passing by some reviewers. Catherine Taylor claims that Asghar and Zahra "know next to nothing about each other, in part due to Asghar's immature idealisation and Zahra's self-denial".¹³ Azadeh Moaveni, avers that "a narrowness of personality appears to be part of Asghar's essential Asghariness".¹⁴ But this is a superficial reading which occludes the factors at play in Rahim's shaping of Asghar and Zahra's outlooks.

Like Zahra, Yasmin in *Love Marriage* reaches for stories in magazines, comparing her own life favourably, but her perceptions are informed largely through stories which have been impressed upon her, chief among which is the story of her parents' 'love marriage', in contradistinction to the more ubiquitous 'arranged marriage' that remains common in South Asia. The story calls up tropes of romance,

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

¹³ Catherine Taylor, "Sameer Rahim's Asghar and Zahra: a sparkling comedy of Muslim manners," *New Statesman*, 7/6/2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2012/06/sameer-rahim-s-asghar-and-zahra-sparkling-comedy-muslim-manners> accessed 1/5/2024.

¹⁴ Azadeh Moaveni, "Loyalty Vs Passion," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5/7/2019, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/loyalty-vs-passion/> accessed 7/12/2021.

with the “well-to-do Calcutta girl” marrying the “poor but clever village boy” which fires the imagination of Yasmin who reads “all sorts of novels” avidly which suggests her susceptibility to this narrative.¹⁵ Yasmin knows the story so well that she does not recall being told it; rather, it is “as if she had always known. As though she had been born with the knowledge. Still, she thirsted for more” (27, 100). So embedded is this family story that she never questions why her parents are reluctant to elaborate on the details; this only serves to add to their story’s mystique. This form of storytelling has a potency that is easily lost in other forms such as news media, because, as Walter Benjamin argued, principally “the psychological context is not forced on the reader. He is left the freedom to interpret the situation as he understands it, and the story thus acquires a breadth that information lacks”.¹⁶ Benjamin’s citation of Herodotus’ telling of the story of Psammenitus, a tale which has provoked multiple interpretations, makes his point that when a story is not cut by perspective or analysis it may be at its most potent. Benjamin argues that Herodotus’ version of the story is void of analysis, and thereby takes on an aura of curiosity that has lasted for thousands of years.¹⁷ The universal power of storytelling is explored by Ali via a complex array of secrets and lies, evinced, for example, in her exploration of Joe’s struggles to acknowledge his secret sex addiction and his determination to gloss over negative emotions and stick to a positive story (186-7).

¹⁵ Monica Ali, *Love Marriage* (London: Virago, 2022), 27, 121. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2019), 54.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays*, 55.

Through therapy, an addict may gain greater understanding of their addiction by telling their life as a story and effectively gaining control over it. Joe's addiction is a productive analogy when put in tension with the desire for normalcy that occupies Yasmin because societies construct the individual addict as a problem to be solved and returned to normal. Ali, however, challenges this framing via Joe's interactions with his psychiatrist, who says, tellingly: "[s]ometimes our actions spring from motives we obscure from ourselves" (110).¹⁸ The novel suggests in different ways unconscious motives and the need to be accepted.

Yasmin derives a self-narrative and her sense of identity from her parents' love marriage, which forms the basis for how she characterises her family and, in turn, makes her anxious about them meeting Joe's mother.¹⁹ Harriet is a second-wave feminist writer who has written in opposition to "'faux female empowerment': the girls-gone-wild trope of hard drinking and waxed-and-plucked sexuality" (3). An infamous photo of Harriet, nude and staring defiantly at the camera, which conjures

¹⁸ Ali draws from the work of psychologist Gabor Maté, while other psychologists such as Bruce Alexander have argued that addiction is a societal problem rather than an individual one: "today's rising tide of addiction to drug use and a thousand other habits is the consequence of people, rich and poor alike, being torn from the close ties to family, culture, and traditional spirituality that constituted the normal fabric of life in pre-modern times. ... People adapt to this dislocation by concocting the best substitutes that they can for a sustaining social, cultural, and spiritual wholeness, and addiction provides this substitute for more and more of us.", Bruce K. Alexander, *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.), 3.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall argues that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past", "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 260.

up the feminist celebrity Germaine Greer, as most reviewers noted, seems to promise readers a thrilling clash of cultures narrative, especially when in the Ghorami household “sex was never mentioned” (1) But this is likely the case in most British households, whether they identify as religious or not and, as Joan Scott summarises, ostensibly self-determining white western individuals on the one hand and Muslims as agents of repression on the other, is a false binary, an “unnatural” contrast to what is deemed “natural” so that “liberated” women are expected to conform to established norms too.²⁰ On the point of sex these two novels converge, when Zahra describes the “sexual chaos” at her school where white girls are “gunning to lose their virginity” and she feels “angry at herself for being so ashamed” of what she perceives as her careful and more sexually guarded Muslim upbringing, a belief supported not by what her parents have told her but by the “blanket atmosphere” she feels at home that seems to imply to her that “she would remain pure until she made a respectable marriage” (*Asghar and Zahra*, 175). The underlying sense is that negative external judgements filter into both characters’ self-perceptions.

In light of her parents’ forthcoming meeting with feminist academic Harriet, Yasmin cannot help but view Shaokat as an outsider might, reducing him in the process: she “kept glancing at Baba, seeing him as Harriet would see him tomorrow, the Indian doctor in his brown too-loose suit and too-wide tie” (*Love Marriage*, 8). She is equally anxious about Anisah’s penchant for flamboyant outfits that she tracks

²⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 163.

down in charity shops, “her heart sinking at the prospect of introducing an eccentrically clad Anisah to the perpetually elegant Harriet” (14). Yasmin judges everyone and suggesting that her mother should dress like a “normal person” reflects the pressures of a normatively white society (229). But, underlying this reading is a more serious concern on the part of the author about how Muslims are positioned on the basis of appearance. This is true of Rahim’s fiction too. Zahra is apprehensive in the belief that her mother’s practice of rubbing oils on her daughter for her wedding night is “textbook orientalism ... the kind of thing *they* think we would do” (*Asghar and Zahra*, 5).²¹ Zahra assumes the practice is superficial because her married cousins have never mentioned it, suggesting that the question of authenticity occupies Zahra as well as the weariness about exoticisation of Muslims. On the other hand, Yasmin deliberately exploits orientalist tropes herself when assuming that her mother dressing in a ‘traditional’ manner will impress Harriet: “*Authentic enough to give her an orgasm. A sari would be the best choice, without a doubt*” (*Love Marriage*, 14). Exoticisation is inescapable and when Harriet invites Anisah to the salon she attends with her socialite friends it is because they would “love to hear about your faith”, a remark that trivialises as a form of virtue signalling, and uses Anisah to test which “impeccable liberals” among Harriet’s friends “turn out to be Islamophobes” (27, 39). Yasmin thinks that her mother is

²¹ For a discussion of how the ‘Orient’ has been contained and represented through the work of writers, see Edward Said, “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental” *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 49-73.

being studied “like an exhibit in a human zoo, like some anthropological specimen” (123).

Yasmin’s friend Rania underlines for her that Harriet’s behaviour is “definitely orientalism. It’s patronising and reductive...It’s exotification, which is inherently devaluing, potentially misogynist and shaves uncomfortably close to racism” (244). Ali stages many pointed critiques in this novel and the discussion between Yasmin and Rania takes place in a restaurant called ‘Orient’ in Shoreditch which serves ‘Balkan fusion’, recalling the fetishisation of authenticity for white consumers that Ali explored in *Brick Lane* (2003), as when Nazneen spots figures of Hindu gods in the windows of restaurants, despite the area being home to a primarily Bengali Muslim population: “‘Hindus?’ said Nazneen when the trend first started. ‘Here?’ Chanu patted his stomach. ‘Not Hindus. Marketing. Biggest god of all.’ The white people liked to see the gods. ‘For authenticity,’ said Chanu”.²² A more reflective reading is provoked in *Love Marriage* when Yasmin insinuates that Rania is a contrarian at heart and would be “part of the anti-hijab movement” if she lived in Iran (395). British Muslim novelists are continually springing the traps of representation for their readers to consider.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Wasafiri* on the libraries and literatures of Islam, Rehana Ahmed and Nadia Atia write: “[t]hough reading is a solitary act, each reader knows that a library book has passed through the hands and

²² Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), 446.

minds of multiple, unknown kindred spirits. Reading a library book therefore is always a communal experience, one that connects us with those who have borrowed the book before us, and those who will read it after we return it”.²³ They uncover the importance of literature in Islam, drawing on the work of a theologian, Johannes Pedersen, who asserts that, “[i]n scarcely any other culture has the literary life played such a role as in Islam. Learning (‘ilm), by which is meant the whole world of the intellect, engaged the interest of Muslims more than anything else during the golden age of Islam and for a good while thereafter”.²⁴ It is notable in Rahim’s novel, then, that the reading of Islamic texts takes place only in the private spaces of the home or the mosque when the relationship between Islam and literature has been transfigured into an adversarial understanding. In most media accounts, Islam is identified not with the transmission of books but with their destruction, as in images of protesters burning *The Satanic Verses*. Some Muslim responses to depictions of the Prophet Muhammed in *Charlie Hebdo* (in 2006 and 2012) and *Jyllands-Posten* (in 2005), were spun to create the impression that all Muslims, or Muslims in general, are intolerant of free speech, as claimed in the publications’ defence.

In *Love Marriage*, Ali has Yasmin evince a binary view of the secular and sacred that is arguably emphasised by these wider debates and evocative of a secularisation thesis which has until recently largely remained unproblematised.²⁵

²³ Rehana Ahmed & Nadia Atia, “Libraries and Literatures of Islam,” *Wasafiri*, 36:4 (2021), 1.

²⁴ Johannes Pedersen, *The Arabic Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 37.

²⁵ Charles Taylor criticises a widely held belief that as society modernizes religious belief and practice fall away, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007)

When she is young, religion and science are conveyed through stories told by her mother and father respectively, often about “worlds invisible to the eye”, but she comes to privilege science, especially when she views “bacteria, cytoplasm, vacuoles and chloroplasts” under the microscope her father buys her as a present and relegates religious stories to the past. When she is reminded by her mother of “how much you loved to listen”, this finds a parallel in Rahim’s novel where Zahra’s characterisation of religion is “a genre she felt she had outgrown – like teenage romance or fantasy fiction” (*Love Marriage*, 80, 79; *Asghar and Zahra*, 99). Zahra turns to humanist texts, with Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) one example, the theological roots of which are “deep and dark”.²⁶ In a characteristic passage, Smith writes:

The love and admiration which we naturally conceive for those whose character and conduct we approve of, necessarily dispose us to desire to become ourselves the objects of the like agreeable sentiments, and to be as amiable and as admirable as those whom we love and admire the most.²⁷

The indignance that Zahra feels when conversing with some friends is described as a lingering sense of her religious upbringing: “moral boundaries that had defined her from childhood had proved surprisingly durable” (*Asghar and Zahra*, 165). But,

²⁶ Duncan Kelly, “Time for Sympathy: Some Thoughts on the 250th Anniversary of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,” *New Political Economy*, 14:4 (2009): 538.

²⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 168.

Zahra also ‘secularises’ her sense of morality, pointing out, for example, that her position against sex before marriage is “not a Muslim thing” (166). After experiencing sexual assault by a former partner, Krish, Zahra escapes into Smith: “she found all she had written down were fierce slogans about exploitation and laissez-faire economics. She kept telling herself that nothing bad had happened” (175). The absence or diminishment of religion and its cultural and familial role in both Zahra and Yasmin’s lives provokes introspection and reappraisal. Despite Yasmin’s interest in medicine, it is suggested that she feels contained by the demands of rigorous study, preferring to read fiction, albeit with a “guilty conscience” in part because of her father’s disdain for anyone privileging stories over facts, and Ali explores the power his storytelling has over his daughter (*Love Marriage*, 121).²⁸

Shaokat is a general practitioner who lives a quiet life. His stories about life in India emphasise hardships, the deaths of his parents at a young age and how he “learned to write letters in the dirt” (75). In contrast, he regards his life in Britain as a happy one, describing their home in Tatton Hill as “our little piece of heaven on earth” (13). Sara Ahmed has argued that immigrants in Britain are subject to what she calls “happiness duty”.²⁹ The legacy is found in citizenship tests and Home

²⁸ Shaokat tells Yasmin that her creative writing is no different to lies. Monica Ali, *Love Marriage* (London: Virago, 2022), 103.

²⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 124-5.

Office guides for migrants which conjure an image of Britain as happily diverse, in turn propagating a 'duty' toward finding happiness in the UK:

[I]ntegration remains a national ideal, a way of imagining national happiness.

Migrants as would-be citizens are thus increasingly bound by the happiness duty not to speak about racism in the present, not to speak of the unhappiness of colonial histories, or of attachments that cannot be reconciled into the colorful diversity of the multicultural nation. The happiness duty for migrants means telling *a certain story* about your arrival as good, or the good of your arrival.³⁰ (emphasis added)

Shaokat's aversion to confrontation evokes the expectations and attitudes that confronted first-generation migrant doctors when 'difference' was stigmatised in the workplace.³¹ He sets himself apart by his choice to live in a white neighbourhood, viewing communal living as "a mistake that foreigners made" and happily describing himself as a "secular Muslim" (22, 42). It is later revealed that he secretly feels ashamed of mixing with other Bengalis and Muslims due to the circumstances of his marriage, but Yasmin, unaware of this, can only read his actions at face value (482). His impact is emphasised in the constant refrain, "don't get excited, Mini"

³⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 158.

³¹ Julian Simpson argues that doctors were confronted by racism as well as 'heterophobia' or fear of difference: "South Asian migrant doctors could find themselves at a disadvantage because of racism but equally as a result of attitudes toward accent, gender, class, alcohol consumption, nationality, religion and other factors," *Migrant Architects of the NHS: South Asian Doctors and the Reinvention of British General Practice (1940s-1980s)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 91-178.

which Yasmin recalls in numerous instances, invoking his passivity in times when she is angry (9). The effect is made manifest early in the novel, when Yasmin responds to a colleague's racist remarks about a patient "lamely" (51). This mirrors Shaokat's trivialisation of the "so called prejudice" that his son Arif claims is the reason he has not found a job (75). It is clear that his coping methods of diversion and study become hers, as when they practise case study challenges from the *New England Journal of Medicine* which Shaokat reads aloud for his daughter. When her father imparts his diagnosis, Yasmin feels "a childlike comfort, as though her father had looked beneath the bed and assured her there were no monsters lurking below" (10). Their conversations are usually benign and always depoliticised but this also operates as a mask for tensions that do exist within the family, as in any family, but, as Claire Allfree observes of Ali's novel, "these characters, who consider themselves Muslim, only publicly reckon with their faith and ethnicity when a white liberal demands it of them".³² Indeed, it is only after meeting Harriet that tensions in the family unravel.

Ali interrogates Yasmin's relationship with her father by having Arif confront her with his view that she is an "appeaser", who has gone along with her father's desire for her to become a doctor (156). Yasmin is so swayed by Shaokat into taking his side that she does not recognise that his behaviour towards Arif is abusive,

³² Claire Allfree, "Love Marriage by Monica Ali review: from Brick Lane to Coronation Street," *The Telegraph*, 21/1/2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/love-marriage-monica-ali-review-brick-lane-coronation-street/>, accessed 22/3/2022

merely seeing it as “tension, these scenes, the ever-present threat of something she couldn’t name but that filled her with dread (153). Despite revealing their close sibling relationship in heart-to-heart discussions, Ali suggests that Yasmin is dissuaded from defending Arif or seeing his point of view due to his new interest in studying Islamophobia and what appears to her to be sympathy with Islamist causes. Yasmin identifies artifice in his display of piety: “[d]id Arif realise you had to do more than wear your religion like a badge, wear it – literally in his case – on your sleeve” (156). Yet, she is shown to be genuinely concerned about the power this particular ideology may have over him: “[s]he was scared for him. Arif had put on a mask, but what if he started to believe it was his true face?” (84). Their father asks him to stop attending the mosque he frequents and through these interactions, Ali traces the contours of ‘acceptable’ behaviour in the Ghorami household, suggesting the politicisation of religious affiliations within Muslim families after 9/11.³³ As Basia Spalek and Douglas Weeks describe, “topics of radicalization, terrorism, and counterterrorism are no longer the sole purview of government. Communities are not only embroiled in the debate; they passively monitor the individuals around them and the events that affect their community”.³⁴ Madeline-Sophie Abbas points to

³³ As Mahmood Mamdani argues, at the outset of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ Muslims rather than civilians from terrorists influenced ‘culture talk’ around Islam and the West, politicising religious experience, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism,” *American Anthropologist* 104:3 (2002): 766–775.

³⁴ Basia Spalek & Douglas Weeks, “Community-Based Counterterrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40:12 (2017), 987.

a number of governmental initiatives that focus on combatting radicalisation within the family unit, including Families Against Stress and Trauma (FAST), and Educate Against Hate, and draws from Judith Butler's definition of subjection to argue that parental involvement in counter-radicalisation has altered perceptual frameworks "so that the beard triggers fears of loved ones 'turning to extremists' because parents are 'conditioned' to equate visibly Muslim bodies with extremist bodies".³⁵ Effectively, the meaning of a beard has shifted from the religious to the political, for some, and Rahim imagines how Asghar's body is 'read' as a point of contention between the secular and religious in *Asghar and Zahra* too.

Rahim depicts the ways Asghar is 'read' by others. At school he is told by his teacher Mr Powell that he must present an explanation of Islam to his class because he is "compelled" by the syllabus to "cover" 'other' faiths (65). He meets his only childhood friend, a Jewish boy named Danny, through their shared duty of having to explain their respective faiths in class. Asghar's childhood is remarkably solitary, and it is his reading that shapes his understanding, as when he reflects that he "had never met anyone Jewish" before Danny and that his knowledge of Judaism has only been shaped by "the stories he had heard in Scripture classes" (66). Later, Danny's sister Sarah writes to Asghar for the sole purpose of finding out about Islam for her homework but he overreads her letter as a sign of romantic interest when she writes

³⁵ Madeline-Sophie Abbas "'I grew a beard and my dad flipped out!' Co-option of British Muslim parents in countering 'extremism' within their families in Bradford and Leeds," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45:9 (2019), 1459, 1466.

that she would “love” for him to help her (71). If Asghar is seen as “immature”, this is figured primarily through his lack of knowledge of popular culture in comparison to what he knows about Islamic culture. For example, when Zahra mentions her love of the classic crime writer Dorothy L. Sayers, he asks “[i]s she a jazz singer?” (198). Zahra is equally unfamiliar with Islamic history, and tries to make up by “quickly glancing at Wikipedia on her phone” (32). It is telling that her ignorance is not picked up by reviewers as meriting discussion, nor is Mr. Powell though he is clearly set up to embody the conservative Englishness of men like his namesake Conservative politician Enoch Powell, whose ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968 conveyed profoundly racist sentiment in supposedly ‘reasonable’ terms as if widely shared sentiment, as discussed in Chapter 4.³⁶ He takes Asghar to the bathroom to shave his beard, telling him, “[s]ince your father has no interest in hygiene, I suppose it’s up to me” (142). He is ignorant of the importance of the beard to Asghar’s cultural identity and inserts himself into the family when he has no right to do so. The beard is perceived by Asghar’s father as signifying that Asghar is “baligh”, that he has gone through puberty and is fully responsible under Islamic law to be a “proper Muslim” (118). That the school building Asghar attends is comprised of two Victorian houses belonging to Mr Powell underscores his

³⁶ Though condemned as disingenuous by his detractors, Enoch Powell’s rhetoric followed a line of seemingly coherent, if distorted, logic, with some white audiences “mesmerised by the crisp beauty of his logic,” Hugo Young, “The influence of Powell,” *The Sunday Times* 14 September 1967 quoted in Kevin Hickson, “Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ Speech: Fifty Years On,” *Political Quarterly* 89: 3 (September 2018): 81.

paternalistic Victorian attitude, and his trivialisation of “this religion of yours” serves to silence a credible, rational perspective on religion in education (149).

While Rahim explores Asghar’s engagement with and then eventual disavowal of an Islamist group, Arif’s brief interest in religion marks the limits of an assertive Muslim identity in Ali’s depiction, foreclosing and privatising religious identity in a way that is reminiscent of her portrayal of Karim in *Brick Lane*. As Rehana Ahmed has argued in her reading of *Brick Lane*, “while the stereotyping image of the ‘Islamic fundamentalist’ is disturbed, in the process the young male British Muslim is deconstructed to the extent that he becomes delinked from any coherent social and political narrative”.³⁷ In effect, as with Karim, Ali risks trivialising some of the issues she raises through the character of Arif, not least unemployment among young Muslim men. There is little to persuade readers that claims of prejudice against him are not contrived, especially when Ali has him indulge in the belief that he has been blacklisted. Ali has Arif cite statistics as the reason for his failure to find work, “you’re 74 per cent more likely to make a successful application if you have a white-sounding name”, and in a research paper he includes the line “CENSORED BY THE SECURITY SERVICES” despite this being untrue (73, 85). Ali risks undermining the gravity of the issues his character could raise for all readers and when these issues fall away after he moves in with his

³⁷ Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 135.

partner, he finds work. His rebelliousness, characterised by a tendency to “defin[e] himself in opposition”, is one possible response to exclusion and microaggressions (86, 151).³⁸

Through each member of the Ghorami family, Ali explores the effects of an insidious discourse on race and religion that can shape the attitudes of individual Muslims, the stories they tell, and the secrets they hold, and responds metafictionally to the way that she has been positioned by her critics. Outspoken feminist Germaine Greer went so far as to question Ali’s authenticity as the writer of *Brick Lane*, describing Ali as “a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name” who “has forgotten her Bengali, which she would not have done if she had wanted to remember it. When it comes to writing a novel, however, she becomes the pledge of our multi-ethnicity”.³⁹ Greer took Ali to task for attempting to portray an authentic ‘account’ of being Muslim in Brick Lane, London, and failing and Salman Rushdie called her intervention “philistine, sanctimonious, and disgraceful, but it is not unexpected”.⁴⁰ Ali’s work has continually come under fire from critics who expect

³⁸ Izram Chaudry’s study of British Muslim students in higher education concludes that several factors contribute to their “hyper-visibility and exclusion.” His participants were all subject to microaggressions as defined in the study, “‘I felt like I was being watched’: The hypervisibility of Muslim students in higher education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53:3 (2021): 257-269.

³⁹ Germaine Greer, “Reality Bites,” *The Guardian*, 24/7/2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books>, accessed 22/3/2022.

⁴⁰ Rushdie’s feud with Greer dates back to her refusal to sign a petition in support of him during *The Satanic Verses* Affair, when she described him as “a megalomaniac, an Englishman with dark skin.” Salman Rushdie and Germaine Greer quoted in “‘You sanctimonious philistine’ - Rushdie v Greer, the sequel,” *The Guardian*, 29/7/2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jul/29/topstories3.books> accessed 13/7/2024.

'authenticity', criticism that would not be levelled at white writers. This has been the case even when a novel reflects nothing of her experience, such as *Untold Story* (2011), which imaginatively explores an alternative history in which Princess Diana arranges her own disappearance and moves to America. Ali claims that one critic described *Untold Story* as "a curious marriage of author and subject matter", as if this was not her appropriate subject matter.⁴¹ Ali summarised the problem when she asserted that authenticity "seems to be a requirement of writers of colour. As if you're trying to deny or evade your ethnicity if you don't 'stay in your lane'. As if you are not credited with imagination, or intellect or creativity. As if your primary duty is to perform brownness on (and off) the page".⁴²

These writerly expectations figure self-consciously in *Love Marriage* when, during a gala dinner at the Savoy hotel, Harriet suggests to a Black novelist that he should write "something a little closer to home", and Yasmin is too timid to challenge her (122). Paradoxically, another writer character in the novel feels he is disadvantaged as a "White. Male. Heterosexual. Absolutely no chance" (123). Graham Huggan defines exoticism as "a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its

⁴¹ Monica Ali quoted in Maya Wolfe-Robinson, "Monica Ali says reaction to previous novel caused 10 years of depression," *The Guardian*, 7/2/2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/feb/07/monica-ali-says-reaction-to-previous-novel-caused-10-years-of-depression>, accessed 21/3/2022.

⁴² Monica Ali quoted in Bhagya, "From *Brick Lane* to *Love Marriage*: An Interview with Monica Ali", 36.

immanent mystery".⁴³ Sarah Brouillette asserts that authors of postcolonial fictions are marketed as the text:

[P]art of the aggressive marketing of certain titles, necessary in order for book divisions to remain competitive within transnational media firms, entails an emphasis on the connections between the book in question and its biographical author. The author's name and attached personae have become key focal points for the marketing of literary texts, such that one could argue that the current industry brands literature more by authorship than by other aspects of or ways of approaching a given work's meaning.⁴⁴

Rahim is clearly cognisant of these debates too, of the literary marketplace in which his novel will sit, and a largely secular liberal reading public prone to see Muslims as cultural others but try to universalise the texts in normatively white terms.

Predictably, his work has been read in this vein. For example, Alice O'Keeffe claims "at its core this is a book not about being British Muslim, but about the universally deep and difficult business of making a marriage work".⁴⁵ Sophie Ratcliffe finds similarities with Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and suggests that "Austen and

⁴³ Graham Huggan. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 13.

⁴⁴ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 65-6.

⁴⁵ Alice O'Keeffe, "Asghar and Zahra by Sameer Rahim Review – a Tender, Clear-Eyed Portrait," 28/6/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/28/asghar-and-zahra-sameer-rahim-review> accessed 7/12/2021.

Joyce flicker just beneath the surface. The ghost of *Middlemarch* is here too".⁴⁶

Praising qualities which connect British Muslim writers with authors of the white Western canon is not untypical, as if it were the yardstick against which all literature should be measured. The burden of representation has been challenged by various Black British and British Asian writers and critics beginning with Kobena Mercer and Nahem Yousaf in the 1990s, and Dave Gunning summarises that the way Black British and British Asian literature is consumed has been saturated with expectations of authenticity such that the "'implied author,' created within the text, frequently struggles to be heard over an imputed authorial persona, brought into being by a reductive notion of multiculturalism that imagines homogeneous ethnic communities and positions literary authors as their spokespeople".⁴⁷ This reductive multiculturalism is described by Amartya Sen as 'plural monoculturalism' and it has gained traction "despite the tyrannical implications of putting persons into rigid boxes of given 'communities.'"⁴⁸

This is precisely how Yasmin and Anisah are positioned by Harriet and her white friends in *Love Marriage*. Harriet has the temerity to tell Anisah that she has

⁴⁶ Sophie Ratcliffe, "Asghar and Zahra by Sameer Rahim, review: the unmaking of an Islamic marriage," 3/7/2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/asghar-zahra-sameer-rahim-review-unmaking-islamic-marriage/> accessed 27/1/2022.

⁴⁷ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 81-92; Nahem Yousaf, 'Hanif Kureishi and 'the brown man's burden', *Critical Survey*, 8:1, *Diverse communities* (1996), 14-25; Dave Gunning, "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Empathy in the Realist Novel and Its Alternatives," *Contemporary Literature* 53:4 (2012): 787.

⁴⁸ Amartya Sen, *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London, Penguin: 2006), 158.

been “isolated” by Shaokat’s decision to live in Tatton Hill and that she is “not thriving without community” (142). Harriet’s friends ask Yasmin how her “community” voted during the Brexit referendum, as if British Asians constitute a monolithic group and that she can speak for a group (352). Ali is unequivocal: “[h]e was asking her as a brown person. An expert. An undeniable authority on issues of race. Alan and Sophie were looking at her, wanting their views legitimated: by the representative of brown-skinned people, of immigrants, of outsiders” (352). This is just one of many examples of the self-referential style that is redolent of the criticism that Ali mounts through her fiction and it resonates with the controversy around *Brick Lane*. In *Asghar and Zahra*, Rahim responds to frame and delimit Muslims with witticism, incorporating the language of government papers in his prose, but his irony is still misunderstood by one reviewer who writes that in *Asghar and Zahra* “it is the underlying issues, the often ‘parallel selves’ of modern Muslims that are most sensitively and ... effectively portrayed”.⁴⁹

The idea of ‘parallel selves’ as it is expressed in the novel draws from the notion of ‘parallel lives’, an expression that Ted Cantle used in his Home Office-commissioned report in 2001, loading the phrase to suggest that Muslim communities were segregated from mainstream (that is to say, white) society and functioned in parallel by choice:

⁴⁹ Taylor, “Sameer Rahim’s *Asghar and Zahra*: a sparkling comedy of Muslim manners”.

Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges.⁵⁰

Cantle's conclusions obfuscate racism and Islamophobia because, given the low socio-economic status of many Muslims and the effects of racism that impinges from outside, what Cantle suggested amounts to blaming the victims. Nor do the report's claims stand up to evidence based on social-political research.⁵¹ Contrary to Cantle's claims, Stephen Jones writes, "Muslim minorities in the UK have moved out from inner-city areas as they have socially integrated and become more affluent. The effect of age momentum has meant, however, that this has not always been large enough to reduce residential concentration".⁵² This is a point on which Rahim is also critical, fusing the expression 'parallel lives' with "selves" ironically when Asghar feels alienated when Islam is not perceived by other boys as a way of life but seems to

⁵⁰ Ted Cantle, *Community Cohesion: Report of the Independent Review Team – The 'Cantle Report'* (London: Home Office, 2001),

<https://tedcantle.co.uk/pdf/communitycohesion%20cantlereport.pdf> accessed 27/4/2024.

⁵¹ Lucinda Platt found that "Muslims shared with other minorities in increased chances of cross-group friendships and social 'mixing'. This extended to social mixing within the private and potentially exclusive environment of the home. ... These findings, even if not contrary to expectations, fly in the face of common claims that Muslims are different, exclusive or isolationist," "Exploring social spaces of Muslims," *Muslims in Britain : Making Social and Political Space*, Waqar Ahmad, and, Ziauddin Sardar, eds. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 79-80.

⁵² Stephen H. Jones, *Islam and the Liberal State: National Identity and the Future of Muslim Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 26.

figure more simply as a set of rote practices: “[f]or the mosque boys, Islam was a set of rituals to be rushed through without leaving any deeper impression. No one teased out the meaning of faith or fundamentally questioned the values of the society in which they lived. Their parallel selves never crossed” (135). This narratorial comment also points to the privatisation of religious practice as engendered by secularism. While the other boys ‘privatise’ their practise of Islam, Asghar is more publicly Muslim. Zahra teasingly questions whether he is becoming a “fundo” (49). As Wendy Brown argues, too often in a discourse of secularism any public practice of religion risks being perceived as zealotry:

Taking shape as a norm and regulatory ideal of secularism, religion subjectivized, personalized and privatized renders public and collective expressions of piety - from religious dress to fasting to praying in public - not as merely violating the tenets of secularism but as signs of religious zealotry ... the tacit universalization and generalization of Christianity tendered by this model of secularism casts religion that is insufficiently privatized as religion improperly tamed - excessive, possibly dangerous and certainly pre-modern insofar as secular containment is a sign of the modern.⁵³

Rahim confronts this tendency, in my reading, in his depiction of Tariq and the Islamist group he purports to lead.

⁵³ Wendy Brown, "Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality," *Theory & Event* 15:2 (2012), 5.

Rahim's characterisation is redolent of recent attempts to satirise and make light of stereotyped images of young Muslims as terror suspects, shown to best effect in Chris Morris' film *Four Lions* (2010) which follows four terrorist jihadis in an inept attempt to become suicide bombers. The film was well received among British Muslims and protest negligible despite a highly politicised and sensitive topic being made comedic.⁵⁴ Rahim's impatience with trite stereotypes may also be understood via the 'staged marginality' that Graham Huggan defines as "the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience".⁵⁵ Staged marginality often has a subversive function, and in *Asghar and Zahra* Rahim subverts the sobering gravity of 'home-grown' terrorism through absurd humour. For example, when Asghar attends Tariq's meeting, its clandestine nature is a point of humour, because the house it is held in has a holographic Allah sticker on the door making it conspicuous but Asghar is instructed to knock three times (130). The relatively austere silence in the meeting in which everyone is already sitting on the floor is broken by Tariq telling the group that "[c]hairs are an unnatural innovation" (131). Far removed from plotting terror, they discuss their experiences of Islamophobia, with each speaker given the floor to tell their 'story', after which Asghar is hugged by other men who are tearful. This is the group's appeal to Asghar who is lonely and

⁵⁴ See for example, Abdul-Azim Ahmed, "Faith in Comedy: Representations of Muslim Identity in British Comedy," *South Asian Popular Culture* 11:1 (2013): 91-96.

⁵⁵ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, 163.

lacking in male companionship. Tariq tells Asghar to read the group's pamphlet entitled *Western Sexual Revolution: A New Slavery* but Asghar dismisses it as "pretty stupid" (154, 215). Again, reading is a catalyst for his thinking and eventual disagreement with the group, but by including this self-supporting group of Muslim men, Rahim points up the importance of companionship because the racial climate in Britain has engendered a need for support groups for men who feel alienated and victimised.

Rahim makes a number of subversive references to aesthetic 'Englishness' to suggest how its continuing romanticism impacts on his characters. Asghar and Zahra's wedding takes place at a mosque which was once the home of "a minor Georgian earl". It is set in "a pleasant spread of fields and farm cottages" and "in the distance sheep grazed bucolically next to a private tennis court. Inside the grounds...a square of faded brown grass where the earl had once played croquet" (15). Rahim suggests that essentialist ideas of Englishness are embedded in an aesthetic, so that the presence of a mosque appears jarring to Zahra who is "struck by its strange hybrid nature", but can only comment, "God, English people are weird" when she notices stuffed foxes' heads along the back wall of their hotel's reception, despite the fact that the hotel caters for Muslims by serving halal English breakfasts (20). Into a marriage plot, Rahim threads a debate that has underpinned the construction of mosques across Britain. As Tom Villis and Mireille Hebing suggest, a mosque is "not only a physical site for the location of an Islamic

community but also an important space for rehearsing and voicing questions of culture and identity".⁵⁶ Their enquiry into debates over a new mosque in Cambridge engaged with questions of 'Englishness' because planners were told they must be "aware of Cambridge's international and cultural status as an English country town" as if a mosque represents something "un-English".⁵⁷ Rahim turns this question on its head when his protagonists visit Granada for their honeymoon, the city having been under Muslim rule until claimed by Catholic conquest in the late fifteenth century. Here Asghar discovers that "every church was built on a destroyed mosque" and that all Muslims in Spain were converted or expelled (32). The mosque that Asghar and Zahra attend is the first built in Spain since 1492, "in the teeth of opposition from the Church and conservative Spaniards", echoing opposition to mosque-building in Britain now (35). Visiting a former mosque that is now a cathedral, in Cordoba, the couple finds that church authorities do not allow Muslim worship at the site, and a protest staged by Muslims is quickly dispersed by Spanish police, with one politician going so far as to describe it as "cultural terrorism", illustrating the double standards being applied (49).

Reading plays a key role here too when the history of Granada becomes a highly dramatised scene of contestation over different narratives. Asghar reads

⁵⁶ Tom Villis and Mireille Hebing, "Islam and Englishness: Issues of Culture and Identity in the Debates over Mosque Building in Cambridge," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 20:4 (2014), 416.

⁵⁷ Villis & Hebing, "Islam and Englishness: Issues of Culture and Identity in the Debates over Mosque Building in Cambridge," 423.

aloud from an Islamic history book that he borrows from “the new mosque’s library”. Authored by “one Dr R.S. Hassan, PhD,” it claims that Granada fell because “people like Ibn Rushd were too Westoxified”. Zahra reads from a Christian pamphlet (31, 42). The conflicting claims of both texts highlight the reciprocal histories that Edward Said highlighted: “nations *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism”.⁵⁸ Islam in Spain has been explored by a number of other British writers, including Tariq Ali and Salman Rushdie, and in a discussion of fictional depictions, Muneeza Shamsie argues:

[T]he excavation of Andalusia’s symbiotic past by these writers asserts a dream—a dream in which the possibilities of a future that is mirrored by the past moves beyond the politics of prejudice and confrontation to celebrate a melting pot of culture in mainstream European life, as well as in the Muslim world and South Asia.⁵⁹

Rahim’s novel sits within a literary tradition, then, that writes back to a historical and cultural amnesia that is perpetuated, in part, by the myth wherein the

⁵⁸ Edward Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), xiii.

⁵⁹ Tariq Ali explored Islamic Spain in his novel *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1992), the first of a quintet of novels about encounters between Christian and Islamic cultures in Europe. Rushdie’s novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) draws on historical events in Granada as part of its plot; Muneeza Shamsie, “Restoring the narration South Asian Anglophone literature and Al-Andalus,” *Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion, Representations*, Claire Chambers & Caroline Herbert eds. (London: Routledge, 2014), 69.

foundations of European culture are claimed to be solely Roman and Greek which continues to suppress the impact of Islam on Europe's identity.

Rahim also imagines how popular culture subtly stifles engagement with Islamic art forms, and by extension diminishes meaningful interaction between Asghar and Zahra. At Cambridge University, Zahra watches a film about the British cellist Jacqueline du Pré at her college cinema club, listens to Elgar's Cello Concerto, and later at the National Gallery, with Asghar, reveals her knowledge of *impasto*, a layered effect in painting. "Van Gogh basically invented the technique", she tells him, "though you can see it in Rembrandt as well" (193, 202). Meanwhile, when Asghar tries to engage her on Islamic art, she provides only vague replies about Persian miniatures that she has seen on the internet, without a hint of knowledge, and when he tells her about the pictures of Imam Hussein that he saw in Iran and copied for his GCSE in Art, he is met with silence (201). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that taste in cultural products has a classifying effect on both the product and the consumer: "[a]rt and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not", he asserts, "to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences".⁶⁰ This classifying effect is evident in Zahra's new habits of consumption. She chooses to spend her free time reading "at the newish Starbucks – packed with other middle-class people escaping the high street", suggesting that she

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), xxx.

prefers this milieu rather than mixing with working-class people in town (159). Such is the perceived rift between the people she associates with at Cambridge and her family and local community, that she defines Muslims against English by essentialising Englishness as whiteness. This informs some of her interactions with Asghar: “[t]rust me” she tells him, “English people don’t know anything” about wine (204). Zahra does not want to inform the waiter that he has given her the wrong drink either because she does not wish to bother him, and says “I suppose I’m quite English like that” (205). This behaviour too is depicted as a byproduct of her reading. During a low-point in the relationship, when the couple is spending less time together, Zahra starts visiting her local library where she finds “a stack of golden-age detective novels” and spends her time in cafés “sipping hot chocolate and reading Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers” (159). Her reading suggests escapism, but the content of these novels fits a paradigm of cosy middle- and upper-class English sophistication. As Christopher Yiannitsaros distils: “[a]s one of England’s most popular literary exports, Christie’s fictional works have become synonymous with ideas of what it might mean to be ‘English,’ while the author herself has been imaginatively transfigured into a battalion of English national identity”.⁶¹ A quintessential Englishness is the dominant trait of Sayers’ principal protagonist Lord Peter Wimsey, a gentleman detective, and Sayers’ Harriet Vane (later Lady Peter

⁶¹ Yiannitsaros suggests that this framing has fitted her into an emblematic idea of Englishness which includes afternoon tea, village life, etiquette, and the countryside Christopher Yiannitsaros, “Tea and Scandal at Four-Thirty’: Fantasies of Englishness and Agatha Christie’s Fiction of the 1930s and 1940s,” *Clues* 35:2 (2017): 78.

Wimsey) is “a confident, modern, and successful woman, but her value system, respect for the past, and gentlemanly virtues also allow her to be part of the conservative myth of Englishness. She is also an ideal candidate to restore the detective to his masculine self”.⁶² It is not too far a stretch that Zahra may imagine herself as a ‘female gentleman’ when traditional gender roles have been transposed and she goes out to work each day while Asghar studies mainly at home.

Moreover, Zahra’s trips to the library include her abrupt judgement of a group of Muslims at a stall she passes on her way home; that she sees them as “a bunch of fanatics” is based, implicitly, on their outward appearance, including beards and the *niqab*, which implies that Zahra is just as susceptible to a negative media discourse that characterises practising Muslims as fanatical (160). The correlative relationship between Englishness and Islamophobia underpins this novel and is explored elsewhere in the work of Jo Carruthers, who traces the threads of an English aesthetic that converges on simplicity:

The mutually constructive qualities of land and character mean that in mythologies of Englishness, the English are as simple as their ‘green and pleasant’ land. The mythology of simplicity persists in influential writing as it communicates the transparency of a countryside that reveals truth to its

⁶² Renáta Zsámba, "The Female Gentleman and the Myth of Englishness in the Detective Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham," *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 26:1 (2020): 20.

redeemed readers, and renders the English a simple, yet discerning, self-controlled elect.⁶³

Islam is figured as its antithesis, as an “externalized and elaborate religion in opposition to English simplicity’s guarantee of interiorization, honesty, rationality and control”.⁶⁴ She concludes, “Muslims are not just sometimes treated as texts to be read, but they are conceived of as surfaces, as pure practice, not rational beings”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Carruthers too readily attributes the reading of Muslims to an aesthetic, when exclusionary rhetoric on Britishness is so prevalent in official discourse. Prime Minister David Cameron and his successor Theresa May both foregrounded so-called ‘British values’ in speeches that were specific to the issue of Islamic terrorism.⁶⁶ And in a speech Tony Blair made in 2006, he defined British values as “the rule of law, tolerance, equal treatment for all, respect for this country and its shared heritage”, even though these could easily be ascribed to universally-held values.⁶⁷ Even the government’s Prevent programme, in its definition of extremism, states: “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and

⁶³ Jo Carruthers, *England’s Secular Scripture: Islamophobia and the Protestant Aesthetic* (Bloomsbury: London, 2011), 94.

⁶⁴ Carruthers, *England’s Secular Scripture: Islamophobia and the Protestant Aesthetic*, 96-97.

⁶⁵ Carruthers, *England’s Secular Scripture: Islamophobia and the Protestant Aesthetic*, 99.

⁶⁶ “PM’s Speech at Munich Security Conference,” Official Site of the British Prime Minister’s Office, 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>

⁶⁷ Speech by Tony Blair, “The duty to integrate: shared British values,” 8/12/2006, www.politics.co.uk/news/2006/12/8/blair-warns-of-duty-to-integrate accessed 27/4/2024.

tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". Such a definition relies on a carefully selective reading of British history.⁶⁸ Rahim's novel suggests that the association of this political rhetoric with an aesthetic is exclusionary because Britishness is too nebulous to be the basis for unity, and national identity is always defined as the exclusion of an 'Other'. Even as Asghar feels a sense of pride in being English, while chatting to a Polish girl who is impressed that he is from England, he laments: "[m]aybe he would only ever truly feel English if he lived abroad – in Europe or America – where they would be impressed by his accent" (267). It is a poignant point.

If reading both affirms and may transform attitudes, Rahim's novel explores alternative practices of reading, against a hegemony that values 'critical' reading. Literary critic Michael Warner describes the contrived nature of academic critical reading against the typically 'uncritical' practices of his students. Warner's students, much like Asghar and Zahra, read in a variety of ways that he thinks they "aren't supposed to". For example, "[t]hey stock themselves with material for showing off, or for performing class membership. They shop around among taste-publics, venturing into social worlds of fandom and geekdom. ... They thrill at the exotic and take assurance at the familiar. ... They look for representations that will remediate

⁶⁸ "Revised Prevent duty guidance: for England and Wales," <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance/revised-prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales> accessed 19/5/2022.

stigma by giving them ‘positive self-images.’”⁶⁹ As an academic tutor, he feels it is his responsibility to ensure that his students do not, among other things, read “like fundamentalists”.⁷⁰ Warner’s brief enquiry into critical reading demonstrates how apparently ‘uncritical’ reading practices may be misread in the context of an institutionally hegemonic critical practice of how to read. Suggesting that the recognition of other frameworks of reading poses a challenge in itself, he notes, “it might be easy to miss the nuances by which reading practices are embedded within and organized by ethical projects for cultivating one kind of person or another”.⁷¹ Warner does not suggest how alternative reading practices might be made manifest, but, by drawing upon the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood, indexes a possible framework for religious reading practice. Mahmood’s concern was not textual, but her study of the Islamic women’s pietist movement in Egypt affords insight into the reading of the Qur’an as an ethical practice which shapes and affirms a specific sense of piety. Through reading the Qur’an, specifically verses on modesty (al-haya), the women in her study affirmed its value in their lives; if the practice of shy modesty initially felt hypocritical to some of the women, they developed those feelings

⁶⁹ Warner opens an important discussion about reading that some other literary critics have engaged with in other contexts, see for example Jenni Ramone, *Postcolonial Literatures in the Local Literary Marketplace: Located Reading* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, Jane Gallop ed. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 13.

⁷⁰ Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” 15.

⁷¹ Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” 19.

through embodied practice.⁷² Mahmood writes: “instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them”.⁷³ The women in Mahmood’s study may practise religiosity in the face of Egypt’s secularist regime in a way that is not easily applicable to other Islamic contexts, but her point resonates with Rahim’s epigraphic reference to Muhammad Iqbal in *Ashgar and Zahra*. Iqbal contends that “[i]t is the mysterious touch of the ideal that animates and sustains the real, and through it alone we can discover and affirm the ideal”.⁷⁴ Identifying the practice of Islam as an ideal that sustains the real may offer a way to understand Islamic reading practices that cannot easily be subsumed into a secular framework. Rahim’s contrastive approaches to literary texts in *Asghar and Zahra* strikes a marked difference between the practice of reading the Qur’an and that of reading popular novels. Seated in the mosque after his mother’s death, Asghar reads the Qur’an and is determined to finish reading injunctions that would normally scare him. He finds “the Quran’s moral imperatives invigorating; and the rounding merciful phrases that melted divine justice – his mother’s favourites – filled his heart with love for

⁷² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 156.

⁷³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 157.

⁷⁴ Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), 56

her" (276). For Asghar, reading the Qur'an creates emotional attachment to his mother, connecting his faith to his love for his parents.

When Zahra initiates a break in her relationship with Asghar, she reaches for a copy of the Qur'an that is in Arabic and finds the "mere sound of the words was more of a balm than their literal meaning" (228). When reading in English, Zahra is prone to be critical of Quranic verses, which she characterises reductively as "sermons on hellfire and damnation", but the act of reading aloud frees her from a learned testiness (228). In this sense, Rahim has Zahra rediscover the Qur'an through the orality that is fundamental to Quranic verse, as understood by Muslims and scholars.⁷⁵ The Qur'an's "social existence is essentially oral" and careful readers assert that "it is essential to understand that the Qur'an is not meant to be a book to study but a text to recite".⁷⁶ Such a reading emphasises the importance of repetition and recitation and has implications for this novel because of other rituals in Zahra's childhood and a sense of communal belonging; finding satisfaction in pouring tea for women at the mosque leads her to reflect on how Asghar's mother may have felt unsure of "how to speak to a young woman with whom she shared a religion and a community, but not an education or outlook" (285). She feels her own inadequacy in

⁷⁵ For example, Angelika Neuwirth illustrates how the concise form of verse that features in the Qur'an reflects an ancient Arabic linguistic pattern called *saj'* which "not only facilitates the act of memorising but constitutes the backbone of qur'anic recitation (tartil, tajwid), the essential format of self-manifestation for the Muslim scripture." See: Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, linguistic and literary features," *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed. Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 98.

⁷⁶ Neuwirth, "Structural, linguistic and literary features," 103.

this regard, not least feeling unable to properly convey her condolences to Asghar's sister, Fatima, because English phrases of condolence "seem emptily inadequate" (286). The loss of Arabic affects her emotionally and communally. The resulting sense for Zahra is regret that she has abandoned an aspect of herself: "[t]he cost had been a break with her past, her parents and her community". It leaves her feeling "like a fraud" (290). Zahra's reflections result in an attempt to reconcile with Asghar as her character's trajectory moves towards not seeing communal belonging and the individual freedom to pursue a career as mutually exclusive: "[S]he agonised over whether she had taken the right path – but perhaps she needed to change her metaphor" (291). In choosing to marry Asghar, a community boy, Zahra has attempted to bridge this perceived binary, but the novel suggests it to be a false dichotomy because she may yet reconcile her faith with her lifestyle.

Sameer Rahim and Monica Ali suggest the complex and often contradictory narratives according to which ordinary Muslims are positioned and sometimes pinioned. They expose the vigilance it requires on a quotidian level to have to engage with those narratives, and how doing so creates tensions within families. While Ali explores how a Muslim family is scrutinised by white liberals, she problematises the white family and satirises it, subverting the scrutiny typically directed at Muslims. In doing so, Ali portrays Yasmin as too busy in her vocation as a doctor to pick away introspectively at how she is positioned, yet she comes up against the expectations of others regardless. At the same time, her view of her family is limited, and she often

takes others at face value. Gradually, she becomes more in tune with her feelings when they are scrutinised by others. Her elderly patients, who are effectively outside of society due to their hospitalisation, and are facing terminal illness, are notably candid in their views, seeing beyond pretence and societal expectation. When she forms a clandestine relationship with a colleague, Pepperdine, he enables her to recognise her latent desires and she realises that she is not in love with Joe, and that their happy relationship is a narrative she has wanted to believe for her parents. If Yasmin initially sees Pepperdine as an amorphous figure, and is confused by him, he is very clear about what he wants, and despite her efforts to understand him he does not conform to her expectations. In this way, Ali's novel demonstrates how people are led by expectations and that the way in which they read others will affect personal relationships. Rahim goes further, exploring how popular culture works insidiously to construct identities as polarities, drawing readers' attention to delimiting assumptions about British Muslims.

Both novelists push the boundaries of the marriage plot to interrogate lazy assumptions about others made habitually in daily life. They defy readers to reconsider any opinions they may form about each character and as the plots develop each character learns more about their partner, family, and others, adding layers of depth and complexity. Both authors illustrate that there is far more at stake when being read at face value as a Muslim in Britain. At the conclusion of both novels the couples are no longer together, but they begin writing to each other. Joe and Yasmin

exchange letters, opening up about their current lives in ways that they did not at the beginning of *Love Marriage*, and Asghar receives a positive text message from Zahra about meeting up that gives him hope at the end of Rahim's novel. These British Muslim writers demonstrate how reading impacts perception, and move towards an understanding of writing as a way to counter the misreadings of others. Writing letters and text messages is a process of exchange and an interaction of ideas rather than passive acceptance, and these are among the processes that underscore novel writing as a way to 'write back' against false and insidious narratives.

Chapter 4

Hope and Despair for British Muslims in Tariq Mehmood's *Song of*

Gulzarina (2016) and Nadim Safar's *Akram's War* (2016)

In recent years the 'War on Terror' has seen a revival in Britain as the Conservative government sought to embed its Prevent strategy within society. In 2013 an anonymous letter sent to Birmingham City Council suggested that a plot was being organised to spread an Islamist ethos and sideline non-Muslim staff in Birmingham's schools, in what became known as the 'Trojan Horse' affair. The letter was widely considered to be fake, but was seized on by the press, as well as the government, who used the affair to suggest a link between extremist ideology and terrorism while promoting David Cameron's doctrine of 'muscular liberalism', a form of liberalism that emphasised 'British values'. Elizabeth Poole argues that the case presented government with "an opportunity to further manage minority communities and restrict civil rights in the professed interests of preventing terrorism".¹ More recent developments include the threatened publication by the Home Office of a purported 'blacklist' of Muslim organisations, further associating Islam with a threat to security.² Luca Mavelli describes the 'securitisation' of Islam as the construction of

¹ Elizabeth Poole, "Constructing 'British Values' within a Radicalisation Narrative," *Journalism Studies*, 19:3 (2018), 377.

² Miqdaad Versi, "The McCarthyite blacklist of Muslim groups Gove wants published should never see the light of day," *The Guardian*, 29/12/2022,

Islam as a threat which authorises 'exceptional' measures. He asserts that "securitisation is instrumental for the reproduction of secular forms of subjectivity based on the privatisation of religion and for disciplining and 'producing' 'good Muslims' compliant with the secular order".³ The state is increasingly involved in matters of religion for social control. To take a broader historical view, these actions follow a pattern of institutional and cultural racism that has been a feature of life for post-war Black British and British Asian citizens, and this chapter examines two novels that engage with this wider perspective to critique it. Resistance and resilience are important features of the fiction which considers the shift from racially motivated violence of skinhead gangs in the 1960s and 1970s to implicit and open hostility towards British Muslims in the form of Islamophobia that is instituted by figures across the political spectrum now. Both authors implicate the role of Britain and its NATO allies during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) and the War in Afghanistan (2001-2021), imagining the conflicting emotions that their protagonists feel in response, and how these global events impact British Muslims more generally. The despair that many Muslim characters experience is the cumulative effect of a lifetime of division and exclusion that shapes their sense of belonging and unbelonging in Britain.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/29/mccarthyite-blacklist-muslim-groups-gove-prevent-review> accessed 2/2/2023.

³ Luca Mavelli, "Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject," *Millennium*, 41:2 (2013), 179.

Nadim Safdar's *Akram's War* pivots on a chance meeting between Akram Khan, a former British army sergeant, and Grace, a sex worker, in the early hours of the morning in Akram's hometown of Cradley Heath. Grace is introduced in a short prologue as the widow of Adrian Hartley, a soldier missing in action in Afghanistan, whose young daughter Britney is in the care of social services. A switch to first-person narrative in Chapter One signals immediately that Akram will be the chief protagonist as he introduces his mission in a soliloquy: "I am Akram Khan, formerly Sergeant Khan of the Queen's Own Yeomanry, and in a short number of hours, at a place not far from here, loaded and enabled, I will submit".⁴ It is a resolute statement that reflects his careful preparatory act of shaving, saying prayers, and considering himself someone who has "rejected the vanity of the infidel" (7). After meeting Grace, apparently by chance en route to his target, and visiting her home, the narrative unfolds in the form of a lengthy monologue addressed to her as she sleeps. Akram tells of an adolescence coloured by the threat of racist violence in his hometown, a culture of bullying at school, and an overbearing father at home. He eventually escapes by joining the army with Adrian Hartley, a white friend. During military training Akram is met with racial discrimination from a drill sergeant who singles him out, but undeterred he completes the training and is sent to Afghanistan. While on patrol Adrian is killed by an Afghan man, and Akram wounded in the leg, which results in his discharge from service. Back home again, Akram marries a Pakistani

⁴ Nadim Safdar, *Akram's War* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 5. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

woman to whom he has been betrothed as a child, but the marriage is unconsummated, and his wife humiliates him for being a “cripple”. The novel culminates in Akram’s suicide bombing which takes place at a war memorial on Armistice Day circa 2004.

In *Song of Gulzarina*, Tariq Mehmood imagines the life of another individual, Saleem Khan, born in Pakistan and who emigrates to Britain in 1965, and traces his life to 2006. Living in Bradford, London and Manchester, he is confronted by a hostile environment of racist bigotry and discrimination towards South Asian immigrants. It impacts his sense of identity, the people he loves, the places he frequents, and his workplace relationships. His relationship with Carol, a white woman, is strained by Carol’s family members who are racist and refuse contact. During a trip to Pakistan, in which they pose as a married couple, the differences in their expectations of the relationship and the pressures imposed by others become increasing pressures, creating a rift and causing Carol to leave Saleem and return to Britain. While in Pakistan, Saleem’s familial ties and business interests take him to Afghanistan, where he is swept unwillingly into a convoy of *mujahideen* who raid a Soviet camp during the Soviet-Afghan War. He witnesses the Ojri Camp disaster, as well as the death of his cousin, and rescues Gulzarina, a rape victim of the war whose son and daughter-in-law are later killed in a NATO strike, and he cares for her to honour his cousin’s wishes. Saleem then marries Yasmin, with whom he has a relationship before emigrating to England, and returns to England with her, but their

marriage is an unhappy one, ending with Yasmin's suicide. Reconnecting with Carol only much later in life, Saleem discovers that she is terminally ill and after a brief period in which their feelings for each other are reignited, she dies, leaving Saleem devastated. The novel opens in the wake of all this, in the present of 2006, with Saleem living in Manchester and estranged from Aisha, his daughter with Yasmin. Alone and despairing, he prepares an explosive device, discarding any evidence that might link the suicide bombing to the friend who provided the bomb.⁵ His intended target is Prime Minister Tony Blair who is due to give a speech at a Labour Party conference, a historical event which took place in September 2006, where "a huge security complex was fenced in at GMEX", the place to which Saleem is heading in the novel's finale.⁶

Notably, both novels commence in a present-day setting in which Muslim protagonists prepare to act as suicide bombers.⁷ With little contextual information, readers are presented with imagery that will initially appear to be reminiscent of terrorist attacks on 9/11 and 7/7, thereby conjuring loaded expectations. Mehmood

⁵ Tariq Mehmood, *Song of Gulzarina* (Québec City City: Daraja Press, 2016), 3, 7. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text.

⁶ "Labour Conference 2006," *Manchester Evening News*, 17/9/2006, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/labour-conference-2006-988152> accessed 21/1/2023.

⁷ With a Muslim name and references to Allah and prayers in the narrative, readers may assume Akram to be a devout Muslim. Saleem is described as having told Christian evangelicals who knock on his door that he is a "Muslim who has left his God" suggesting that he identifies as a secular Muslim, and there is a passage at the start of the novel in which his young daughter reads the Qur'an: Safdar, *Akram's War*, 5-7; Mehmood, *Song of Gulzarina*, 4, 7.

offers the briefest suggestion of how powerfully the media has rendered images of “mobile phones, primed for the explosions,” leaving their effect to the imagination of readers, while Safdar tantalises with “[n]ot a drop of blood. ... Not a drop, not yet”, directing readerly expectation to violence (*Song of Gulzarina*, 11; *Akram’s War*, 11.). Safdar’s novel was marketed by Atlantic Books with the tagline “a novel of one young Muslim’s journey to radicalization”.⁸ Reviewers have likewise been swift to characterise its subject as radicalisation, with one describing it as “a ‘super-timely’ novel about the radicalisation of a British Muslim”, despite Safdar’s insistence that the novel is “about love; it’s not about suicide bombers”.⁹ Another reviewer describes Akram tautologically as both an “extremist” and a “devout Muslim” and what he tells Grace as “the long story of his radicalisation”, which amounts to a limited and reductive reading and suggests his character arc corresponds only to the process of becoming a terrorist.¹⁰ Still another reviewer goes so far as to suggest that Akram embraces “an extreme form of Islam” that “provides a sense of moral superiority, but also serves to further isolate him”, putting the blame for Akram’s

⁸ Atlantic Books, “Akram’s War: a novel of one young Muslim’s journey to radicalization,” 5/5/2016, <https://atlantic-books.co.uk/book/akrams-war/> accessed 21/11/2022.

⁹ “Meet the new faces of fiction for 2016; A genre-breaking war story, a widow uncovering the secret life of her dead husband, the comic fortunes of a young woman trying to find a dream job... just a few of the subjects chosen by our pick of 2016’s debut novelists,” *The Observer*, 10/1/2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/10/new-faces-of-fiction-2016-debut-authors-harry-parker-nadim-safdar-janet-ellis> accessed 21/11/2022.

¹⁰ Matthew Adams, “Book review: an extremist is turned by a chance encounter in *Akram’s War*,” *The National*, 10/5/2016, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts/book-review-an-extremist-is-turned-by-a-chance-encounter-in-akrams-war-1.193019> accessed 21/11/2022.

sense of alienation on his faith.¹¹ In some ways, Safdar does little to dissuade readers from jumping to rash conclusions and seems hesitant to say anything substantive in interviews, opting to allow the book to “speak for itself”, in spite of its narrow categorisation by his publisher and among reviewers who undermine his sustained engagement with broader issues and subjects raised in this layered novel.¹²

In my reading, Safdar plays on the characterisation of Muslim terrorists in popular culture; his is a more self-consciously critical gaze than reviewers have apprehended. They may have fallen into the trap set out at the beginning of the novel when Safdar depicts Akram as an ostensibly devout Muslim preparing to commit an as yet unknown but apparently lethal act. The language is heavily loaded with terms such as “martyr” and “infidel” and Akram’s whispering the short prayer “*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*” suggests his faith. There is also a brief description of Akram meeting with “a group of brothers” who excitedly imagine the “voluptuous houris” that await them in their martyrdom. These clichéd images of so-called ‘Islamic terrorists’ suggest that Akram may be a terrorist like any other (7, 9). But other indications counter this impression expressly. Safdar alludes to Akram’s sleeping wife, “still a virgin”, and to a “bad knee” which quickly suggest that a

¹¹ Cameron Woodhead, “Akram's War review: Nadim Safdar's unconvincing look at the birth of a terrorist,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/6/2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/akrams-war-review-nadim-safdars-unconvincing-look-at-the-birth-of-a-terrorist-20160603-gpbac9.html> accessed 27/4/2024.

¹² “Meet the new faces of fiction for 2016,” *The Guardian*, 10/1/2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/10/new-faces-of-fiction-2016-debut-authors-harry-parker-nadim-safdar-janet-ellis> accessed 21/11/2022.

religious motive may be a thin veneer for sustained resentment (6,7). In short, Safdar points immediately to the unreliability of Akram's narration. The impression of his unreliability is intensified by the convoluted framing narrative in which Safdar has Akram address a sleeping Grace which forecloses any response or objection to what he may tell her because Grace's voice is effectively silenced for much of the novel. Akram's story — as told — puts into question the idea of 'Muslim radicalisation' as it has been understood in academic literature and depicted in popular media, and indeed, in much popular fiction by white writers.

The image of young devout Muslim men intent on destruction of 'the West' has been overcoded by a proliferation of media images, fictional representations, government statements, and policies, including the Prevent programme. Moral panics regarding radical Islam in Britain, such as those exploiting 'folk devils' like the disgraced cleric Abu Hamza, and incensed political rhetoric about the so-called 'War on Terror' have contributed to a characterisation of terrorism as the direct product of a violent tendency within Islam. Discussion of the causes of terrorism was curtailed in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks by a dominant consensus among neoconservative commentators who favoured a culturalist perspective whereby a fanaticism was parsed as supposedly inherent to Islam and cited as the cause of terrorist action. This is a position taken up by some academics and it found particular traction in the writing of Walter Laqueur who claimed that religious commandment was the cause of terrorism, citing *jihad* and *shariah* as specific

examples. It was supported by Orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose work subsequently influenced Samuel P. Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis, to suggest that Muslim terrorists were motivated by fanatical resentment of modernity.

Another critic, Arun Kundnani, is as critical as I am of the definition of radicalisation that emerged in these publications. Across multiple case studies he analyses, he discerns that the term "tends to merge a number of meanings – disaffection, youth alienation, radical dissent, religious fundamentalism, propensity to violence – which ought to be kept analytically distinct".¹³ The collapsing of distinctions leads him to question the intellectual rigour of studies such as Marc Sageman's which is dismissive of economic and political circumstances and focusses instead on the embedding of theological radicalism across a 'bunch of guys'. Kundnani fails to find convincing evidence of a causal link between theology and violence because Sageman's findings, in common with other studies he examines, fail to distinguish between radical beliefs and violent methods. The upshot is that "the question of violence can only be answered by assuming certain ideologies are inherently violent."¹⁴ It is a point that Christian theologian William T. Cavanagh refutes vehemently in *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009) where the central claim is that "religion-and-violence arguments serve a particular need for their consumers in the West" and are part of a broader aim to paint 'religion', construed in essential

¹³ Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014), 62.

¹⁴ Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, 65.

terms, as irrational, by privileging secular forms of power.¹⁵ Talal Asad's genealogical investigations also appear to confirm this hypothesis. In his study of Christianity and Islam, Asad points out that twentieth-century anthropologists characterised religion as having an essence separate from politics or other aspects of life, which "invites us to define religion (like any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon". It may be a "happy accident", he writes, "that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life".¹⁶

It suits political authorities, then, to define religion as entirely separate from politics—because it delegitimises religious claims to power—and the predominant 'establishment' view of Islamic radicalisation should be understood as a distinct part of this development. Brian Goldstone also argues that violence figures prominently in a process of 'religion-making', "both as that which might at any time erupt among certain forms of religious life and as that which the secular state inflicts in order to forestall such threats and to better facilitate its various modes of subjectivation and accumulation. One is transgressive, inhumane, gratuitous; the other, necessary and

¹⁵ William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 28.

salvific, administered on behalf of universal humanity".¹⁷ A case in point was the reaction of some Muslims, as reported, to the publication of cartoons of Muhammed in *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, prompting a particular argument in its defence: an alleged moral impasse which Saba Mahmood describes: "if we do not defend secular values and lifestyles, it is argued, "they" (often Islamic extremists), will take over our liberal freedoms and institutions. In this formulation, the choice is clear: either one is against secular values or for them".¹⁸ Events, beliefs and political suasion can all be manipulated by foregrounding a constructed 'secular' and 'religious' dichotomy.

In Britain, theoretical propositions on theological links to terrorism fly in the face of the findings contained in a classified MI5 research document on terrorism that found that "far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practise their faith regularly", and that many individuals declared terrorists actually lacked religious literacy. The research findings stressed that no specific demographic could be linked to terrorist activity.¹⁹ The disparity between government rhetoric – and policy – and the evidence supplied by its own security service suggests the political motivations at stake. Stacey Gutkowski argues that British government officials are under the influence of a British secular *habitus*,

¹⁷ Brian Goldstone, "Secularism, 'Religious Violence,' and the Liberal Imaginary," *Secularism and Religion-Making*, eds. Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 116.

¹⁸ Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 64.

¹⁹ "MI5 report challenges views on terrorism in Britain," *The Guardian*, 20/8/2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1> accessed 17/10/2022.

employing Pierre Bourdieu's term for "a set of shared, explicit, and implicit sentiments" by the readership of the same newspapers and viewers of television and radio programmes that deploy the same 'experts' as well as the same policy makers in the same conversations, all of which contribute to a unity of thought and comprehension.²⁰ The shared secular background of officials has inhibited their ability—or openness—to understand religiosity or the experiences of British Muslims. Gutkowski's study suggests that the government risks myopic thinking, and the promulgation of false or misleading information, which in a climate of heightened Islamophobia has potentially disastrous consequences. Evidence can be seen in the popularity of supposedly 'insider' or 'native informant' texts by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Ibn Warraq and provocatively titled works like *Why I am Not a Muslim* (1995), *What the Koran Really Says* (2002), and *The Islam in Islamic Terrorism* (2017). Hamid Dabashi has written scathingly that such self-styled 'ex-Muslims' have helped to create a Muslim enemy in the minds of whites who then "dehumanize and subjugate by assuming a superior civilizing mission".²¹ He may not be far from the truth.

Similar inclinations can be found in literary fiction. Among the proliferation of terrorist-themed novels that appeared in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, high profile novelists joined the fray, notably John Updike in *Terrorist* (2006),

²⁰ Stacey Gutkowski, "The British Secular habitus and the War on Terror," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27:1 (2012): 87-103.

²¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 86.

a novel about an American Muslim teenager who plots a bombing in New York City. As Anna Hartnell notes, the novel alludes to Ahmad's seemingly inevitably violent Islamism through the invocation of a Quranic saying: 'idolatry is worse than carnage' which "seemingly provides a scriptural basis for the suggestion that Islam is irremediably haunted by violence".²² But beyond the Orientalist tendency to align the behaviour of individual Muslims with Islam's holy text, the quotation is a mistranslation. The translated phrase is either Updike's own or, perhaps, that of N. J. Dawood whose translation of the Qur'an appeared in 1956. Ziauddin Sardar points out that the word translated as "idolatry" is actually "fitna" which means persecution or oppression.²³ Dawood's translation, on the other hand, conveys an impression that the Qur'an will put up with carnage but not idolatry when in the Qur'an persecution and oppression constitute "a crime greater than murder".²⁴ Updike's blunder follows a long line of Orientalist misrepresentations of Islam since medieval Christendom. It is illustrative of the dominance of a religion-violence narrative in popular culture, as well as in media-constructed 'understandings' of Islamic concepts. Faisal Devji suggests "*jihad* itself can be seen as an offspring of the

²² Anna Hartnell, "Writing Islam in Post-9/11 America: John Updike's Terrorist," *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, eds. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey, and Amina Yaqin (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 140.

²³ Ziauddin Sardar, "Islam's sacred text lost in translation," *Financial Review*, 13/8/2004, <https://www.afr.com/politics/islams-sacred-text-lost-in-translation-20040813-jlsuw> accessed 18/10/2022.

²⁴ Sardar, "Islam's sacred text lost in translation".

media, composed as it is almost completely of pre-existing media themes, images and stereotypes".²⁵

Novels written by Muslims have been more nuanced in exploring radicalisation. This is notably the case in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) which played on contemporary fearmongering in a plot about a Pakistani man who increasingly feels that American foreign policy towards Pakistan in particular and Muslims more broadly is hostile. Much of the tension in the novel is staged through the ambiguity of Changez' motives for deciding to tell his story to an unnamed American in Lahore. In Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), Oz is arrested and interrogated under suspicion of terrorist activity. While his culpability remains in question, it is suggested that his interest in Islamic history and heritage as a descendant of Caucasian resistance leader Imam Shamil is misread by the authorities as a sign of fanaticism. Aboulela highlights the invasive surveillance of British Muslims when protagonist Natasha, a university lecturer, is required to monitor and report on Oz's behaviour as a student vulnerable to radicalisation as part of the Prevent programme. Sami's brief arrest and interrogation on suspicion of terrorism is an ironic twist in *The Road from Damascus* (2008), given his hitherto critical stance towards religion, and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) is an in-depth fictional portrayal of radicalisation. She imagines

²⁵ Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Oxford: C. Hurst and Company Limited, 2005), 88.

how Parvaiz is groomed for Islamic State militancy in a friendly and almost homoerotic manner by Farooq, who exploits Parvaiz with tales of his late father's alleged heroism, while taunting him that his older sister is infantilising him. Parvaiz's eventual horror at the atrocities committed within the Islamic State caliphate underlines that his motives for joining were not based on religious conviction. That this pathology is central to Updike's *Terrorist* and subverted in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reflects the focus on the motives and causes of terrorism that fascinate some, particularly non-Muslim, readers. But there are pitfalls to this perspective. One reason, Talal Asad contends, that religious motive is attributed to Islamic discourse is because a terrorist "typically uses a religious vocabulary—thus the highly ritualized proclamation is taken to correspond to his real motives". This, then, risks being read as the sole motivation when "[t]he motive and the action to which it leads are together regarded by most Western commentators as perverse because the agents have chosen death. But death here is an effect not a motive".²⁶ In effect, a focus on pathology muddies the water as much as it promises probing analysis.

Both *Akram's War* and *Song of Gulzarina* trace the progress of very different protagonists from youth to the adult decision to undertake violent acts, and I read Mehmood and Safdar as writers who, cognisant of the demand for a pathological understanding of terrorism, resist its simplistic linear narrative of cause and effect.

²⁶ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 42.

Taking a long historical view of the protagonists' lives counters the presentism and historical amnesia that infuse accounts of terrorism in the twenty-first century.

Mehmood is emphatic on this point, claiming that "selective memory" lays the blame for right-wing terrorism on lone wolves, such as Norwegian mass-murderer Anders Breivik, and Thomas Mair, the right-wing fascist who killed British MP Jo Cox. He makes clear that his concern is context rather than individual psychology, asserting that the "roots of [Saleem's] action are born of on-going suffering, one that goes back in time". He emphasises that, "[a]n outrage cannot be understood in the flames of its brutality, but in its historical context".²⁷ Key to that context is the overt and institutional racism faced by Pakistani Muslims in Britain, prevalent since the 1960s and 1970s.

It is a context familiar to both authors who grew up during the era. Nadim Safdar was born in the Black Country to Pakistani parents. While he attributes only general lived experience, he may have drawn more specifically on aspects of his own life in his development of the character Akram, who shares his background, as well as his memories of attitudes then prevalent in Rowley Regis, the novel's setting.²⁸

Tariq Mehmood's life has clearly influenced his fiction. He was born in Pakistan in

²⁷ Mehmood quoted in Changiz M. Varzi, "Fighting warplanes with words." 3/7/2017, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-british-pakistani-novelist-tariq-mehmood-fighting-warplanes-with-words> accessed 13/7/2024.

²⁸ "We all have lived experience: have loved, fought, wounded others and scarred ourselves." Nadim Safdar quoted in Valeria Melchiorretto, "Birkbeck's Published Alumni Series: Nadim Safdar," *Birkbeck Research Blog*, <http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/research/2016/06/27/birkbecks-published-alumni-series-nadim-safdar/> accessed 31/1/2023

1956 and grew up in Bradford. During his childhood, Mehmood recalls “being encircled by white children in the playground at school to which I was bussed, who held hands and moved around me, chanting racist nursery rhymes”.²⁹ It was indicative of the more persistent abuse that he fought against in self-defence groups. In 1981 he was imprisoned on charges of terrorism as one of a group of young Asian men referred to as the ‘Bradford 12’. Prior to his arrest, racist attacks from skinhead groups had been on the rise, with lack of police action in response highlighted by incidents such as the New Cross fire in January 1981, in which a birthday party was firebombed by racists killing 13 young Black people, with evidence of arson dismissed by the police investigation.³⁰ Believing that not enough was done to protect communities from racist attacks, Mehmood prepared for self-defence with the United Black Youth League (UBYL). In a statement, Mehmood said: “[o]n the morning of Saturday 11th July 1981 I went into the town centre, I met many people whom I had known for a long time and almost all were talking about skinheads invading Bradford. It is my belief that when a people are attacked it is their right to act in self defence”.³¹ Part of this avowed self-defence amounted to the manufacture of a small number of Molotov cocktails to be used in case of an attack. The news

²⁹ Tariq Mehmood, “Former Bradford 12 defendant to make a film about landmark case,” *Telegraph and Argus*, 19/11/2021, <https://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/19728210.former-bradford-12-defendant-make-film-landmark-case/> accessed 2/2/2023.

³⁰ Anandi Ramamurthy, “Bradford 12 – Self Defence is No Offence,” *Black Star: Britain’s Asian Youth Movements* (Pluto Press, 2013), 121.

³¹ Tariq Mehmood quoted in Ramamurthy, “Bradford 12 – Self Defence is No Offence,” 127.

media, often swift to label young Black and Asian men as violent in clashes with skinheads and the police, sensationalised the story with headlines of a “Black Gang” with a “Bomb Factory”.³² Mehmood and eleven others were acquitted in June 1982 when it was found that they had acted in self-defence, but that charges of terrorism were brought to trial suggests the government’s agenda. *Swamp 81*, a ten day stop-and-search operation targeting a thousand young Black people, showed that the Thatcher government was determined to criminalise protest. For Anandi Ramamurthy, the case was a summary example of “the state’s attempt to use a trial to deter protest”.³³

While in prison and expecting to spend most of his life behind bars, Mehmood wrote *Hand on the Sun* (1983), a novel about racism and the challenges second-generation immigrants in the North of England faced amid industrial decline. His second novel, *While There is Light* (2003), is loosely based on the Bradford 12. He is also a filmmaker, directing *Injustice* (2001) which focuses on the struggle for justice of families whose loved ones have died in police custody, and he has written a novel for children, *You’re Not Proper* (2013), which follows two fourteen-year-old Muslim girls living in a context of Islamophobia in a town where white men are enlisting to fight in Afghanistan. *Song of Gulzarina*, then, represents a return to issues and ideas that pervade all his works and, in part, to the setting of his first novel,

³² *The Standard* and *Sheffield Star* quoted in Ramamurthy, “Bradford 12 – Self Defence is No Offence,” 125.

³³ Ramamurthy, “Bradford 12 – Self Defence is No Offence,” 126.

which has continued resonance with more recent events. After having been on trial for terrorism and having spent time in prison, Mehmood is acutely aware of the state's coercion to deter protest and the media's in the criminalisation of British Asian youths. At a time when British Muslims are positioned at the forefront of societal concern over radicalisation, terrorism and crime, a return to longer histories of Black and Asian resistance suggest the many ways in which Islam and Muslim cultural identity have been targeted.

In 1960s Britain, immigrant communities were under attack. This was as true for the West Midlands of Safdar's novel as it was in the cities of Bradford and Manchester in Mehmood's. Conservatives in Smethwick held a successful election campaign featuring racist sloganeering aimed at discouraging Black and Asian people from settling in the area, prompting the American activist Malcolm X to visit the town in 1965 when touring Britain.³⁴ Enoch Powell, Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South West and a native of nearby Stechford, delivered his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech on 20th April 1968 in Birmingham. Nationally, protests in Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958 were already indicative of the shape of things to come before anti-immigrant animosity was consolidated by far-right

³⁴ A meeting between Smethwick MP Peter Griffiths and Malcolm X had been arranged by the BBC but Griffiths withdrew on short notice. Joe Street highlights the success of the Smethwick election as a precipitating event in the racial atmosphere that peaked with Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech. The hostile response from Smethwick's mayor towards Malcolm X was indicative of racist attitudes that prevailed in the West Midlands. Joe Street, "Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s," *Journal of Black Studies*, 38:6 (2008), 932–950.

groups, some of which were brought together as a coalition forming the National Front (NF) on 7th February 1967.³⁵ This is the context for Mehmood's depiction of Saleem's arrival in Britain in 1965. Held in high esteem as a high school teacher in Pakistan, Saleem is aspirational and envisions life in Britain as a prospective life-changing opportunity, but he is told emphatically by his agent on arrival: "[h]ere you are nothing. *Nothing*. No Teacher Saab. No Khan Saab. Nothing. Just a Paki. A wog. OK?" (12-13).³⁶

Such a grim warning presented as absolute fact is compounded by the racial discrimination Saleem experiences working in a mill where white workers earn more during the day than Pakistanis on the night shift, and where facilities are segregated so that only white employees can use the toilets inside the building, while Asian workers are expected to use outhouses and suffer poor sanitary conditions. Saleem writes to their employer Mr. Anderson to request upgraded facilities and is humiliated; he is struck by his boss with a heavy cardboard pipe. Mr. Anderson, it

³⁵ As A. Sivanandan describes, in the 1960s race was an institutionalized political issue: "at both local and national levels 'race' became an area of contestation for power. It was the basis on which local issues of schooling and housing and jobs were being, if not fought, side-tracked. It was an issue on which elections were won and lost. It was an issue which betrayed the trade unions' claims to represent the whole of the working class, and so betrayed the class. It had entered the arena of politics". Fascist groups had an incentive therefore to coordinate for political gain, putting up candidates for Greater London council elections., *Catching History on the Wing: Race, Culture and Globalisation*. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 106-8.

³⁶ For many post-war migrants from India and Pakistan, migration to Britain was primarily economic and voluntary, and, in the case of the British textile and car industries, jobs were promoted through advertising to attract a migrant workforce. See Muhammad Anwar, *Between Cultures: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Young Asians* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 3.

transpires, is the regional organiser of The National Front. Comparably, Safdar illustrates the impact that groups like the National Front had on the daily lives of Pakistanis when Akram's family is subjected to violence meted out by gangs of 'skinheads', or 'Paki-bashers', white mobs who intimidate or attack with racist motivation. His fearful parents bolt the door and send him upstairs, but Akram watches as white men set fire to an old sofa in front of their house. This childhood incident marks Akram who suddenly loathes "being brown, a Paki" (*Akram's War*: 48). Years later, he tells Grace as she sleeps, "[we] don't fit in ... Never will". That he no longer desires to "fit" is due to a learned sense of profound indifference (49). The attack he witnesses as a child also calls attention to the role that religion, or more specifically, prayer, has in Akram's life. His father's response is to run down the street shouting "Allahu Akbar!" while Akram sits in fear reciting *Bismillah*, one of several instances in which he turns to prayer in a time of stress or anxiety, a ritual that he describes dismissively as superstition (7, 48). Prayer tempers feelings of humiliation, a coping mechanism which inspires resilience, moral fortitude and reverence, as when Akram and his friend Mustafa witness the death of a cat and Akram insists they say, "[t]he foreign prayer my dad says", rather than the Lord's Prayer which Mustafa learned at school, a preference and identification with Islam over the Christianity that is associated with the white people who attack them (40).

Saleem and Akram experience similar feelings of self-loathing, with Saleem "despising" himself and sometimes crying alone (*Song of Gulzarina*: 26). But, Saleem

disputes conditions at the mill, and Mehmood maps the racial discrimination Saleem challenges to important and still sometimes, hidden histories of resistance among Pakistani workers in the UK. Saleem is referred to as Masterji and *Sardarji* by his peers in the factory because of his command of English and attempts to improve conditions, especially after he convinces all the Asian workers to join the union and their pay and conditions improve as a direct result.³⁷ Saleem joins a hitherto all-white union at the suggestion of Carol, Mr. Anderson's daughter, who, as the novel progresses, becomes the love of his life. Mehmood, then, suggests that readers reflect on the increased unionisation among Asian workers in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to joining national trade unions, South Asian workers formed associations such as the Indian Workers Association (IWA) established in 1956 in South Staffordshire. IWAs were primarily welfare and social organisations but later groups such as the Pakistani Progressive Party (PPP) and Pakistani Worker's Union (PWU) were more politically active, formed in response to racism and the lack of police action taken against it.³⁸ There were numerous strikes where Indian and Pakistani workers were at the forefront of change as organisers. Large factories such as Woolf's in Southall attracted immigrant labourers due to the long working hours

³⁷ "For the vast majority of immigrants from India and Pakistan, their inability to speak or write the English language posed a difficult problem in their daily life in dealing with the British bureaucratic machine. For those who could, they felt duty-bound to help their fellow villagers in the tasks of letter writing and form-filling, endemic in British life." Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black working class in Britain* (London: Verso, 2017), 219.

³⁸ Stephen Ashe, Satnam Virdee, & Laurence Brown, "Striking back against racist violence in the East End of London, 1968–1970," *Race & Class*, 58:1 (2016): 50.

and poor conditions that many white workers would not accept; by 1965, 90 per cent of unskilled labourers at Woolf's were Punjabi Sikh. Ron Ramdin asserts that confrontations between Asian workers and their employers at Woolf's and Courtaulds in Preston, another large factory, were significant, forming a pattern of action repeated elsewhere.³⁹ In 1972, Pakistani workers at Crepe Sizes in Nottingham went on strike over working conditions, initially without the support of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), which was later forced to act through the solidarity of activists.⁴⁰ In the same year, 500 Asian workers at Mansfield Hosiery Mills in Loughborough went on strike against denial of promotion and for higher wages; other major strikes included those at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester in 1974, and at Grunwick in 1978.⁴¹ The strike in Mehmood's novel is a composite of some of these which had a lasting impact for British Asians. Marc Collinson claims, for example, that the strikes at Mansfield Mills demonstrated the significance of South Asian workers in the city, and that it was an "important moment in the developing consciousness of the migrant community".⁴² It is a sentiment shared in the novel. Becoming a union member improves Saleem's self-esteem so that he feels

³⁹ Ramdin, *The Making of the Black working class in Britain*, 225; Mike Hill, "Race row sent hundreds on strike in Preston," *Lancashire Post*, 14/3/2020, <https://www.lep.co.uk/heritage-and-retro/retro/race-row-sent-hundreds-strike-preston-2450302> accessed 26/1/2023.

⁴⁰ Wilf Sullivan, "Black Workers and Trade Unions 1945 – 2000," <http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narrativedisplay.php?type=raceandtradeunion> accessed 26/1/2023.

⁴¹ Ramdin, *The Making of the Black working class in Britain*, 225.

⁴² Marc Collinson, "The Loughborough 'Mansfield Hosiery' Strike, 1972: Deindustrialization, Post-war Migration, and Press Interpretation," *Midland History*, 47:1 (2022), 82.

“proud of being a worker” and harnesses the sense of possibility in the political change that trade union movements could bring about (28). It also consolidates his atheism when in pub debates he learns the Marxist interpretation of religion as false consciousness, that “God only served to justify suffering” (27). However, this feeling of unity among British Asians is broken by past grievances and current affairs at home and abroad. As the story of a migrant, *Song of Gulzarina* underlines the impact of events in the Indian subcontinent on life in Britain for Asians for the ways in which they affect Saleem peripherally and sometimes directly.

Nor does Mehmood confine his narrative to the experience of Muslims.

Saleem’s childhood friend Mangal Singh flees their village along with all other Sikhs due to the threat of violence and persecution in the wake of Partition in 1947.⁴³ As Yasmin Khan describes, the approach of Independence Day signalled frantic alarm at the prospect of an unknown border in the Punjab, not least for Sikhs, a community of six million out of an all-India population of four hundred million, who feared they had “lost their influence on the colonial state and felt the interests of their community were being sacrificed on the altar of a broader constitutional settlement”.⁴⁴ Channelling the anxieties of that time, a fraught sense of hopelessness is captured in *Song of Gulzarina* when Mangal Singh’s father, Chacha Hari Singh, is

⁴³ Despite fomenting for Partition, the Sikh leadership was caught unprepared for the prospect of Pakistan and the Partition of the Punjab, formerly the state of the Sikh Empire and where a significant population of Sikhs lived, subsequently targeted as a threat to stability in newly formed Pakistan, Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (Yale University Press, 2017), 184.

⁴⁴ Khan, *The Great Partition*, 109.

inclusive of Saleem when he tells his son: “blood will be spilt. It will be our blood” (22). Saleem is taken by surprise when he meets Mangal Singh again at the mill in Bradford. It is an emotional reunion, and Mehmood uses Mangal’s presence to highlight some of the many circumstances in which South Asians migrated to Britain. Saleem is brought back to the events of their childhood but rather than discussing them with Mangal Singh, his thoughts linger on “waves of stubborn memories” (23). An aspect of his personality that becomes a recurrent thread in the novel is a tendency to keep emotions to himself, a coping strategy comparable to Akram’s prayers, but with volatile consequences.

Despite the impression of Britain as a possible haven for Indian and Pakistani migrants alike, the advent of the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971 brings division at the mill in *Song of Gulzarina*: “Bengali workers from East Pakistan started collecting money to send to the Mukhti Bahini fighters ... and the West Pakistanis condemned the Bengalis for being traitors” (28). Nationally, the implications went deeper than Mehmood’s brief portrayal suggests. Many Pakistani political organisations had East Pakistani (now Bangladeshi) leaders due to their earlier arrival, resulting in splitting and disaffection in the membership. Party loyalties were also impacted as Labour took a pro-independence stance while Conservatives viewed the war as Pakistan’s ‘internal dispute’, with West Pakistanis supporting Conservatives. Jed Fazarkarley argues that the 1971 war “penetrated British elite consciousness”, and while not fully appreciative of the impact of the conflict on

British Asian communities, white elites were nonetheless sensitive to the distinctive interests of East Pakistanis and their organisations, many of whom had religious demands.⁴⁵ It is a view that counters the suggestion that the British government was largely dismissive of religious claims prior to the Rushdie affair.⁴⁶ On a broader level, the war can be seen as a contributory factor in the increasing unviability of a political 'Blackness' for British Asians because it evidenced the need for recognition of the specifics of cultural, religious, and ethnic groups.⁴⁷ Beyond these political ramifications, the war is yet another level of discord in Saleem's life because many of his family members are in the Pakistani army posted to fight in East Pakistan, while Mangal Singh is supportive of Bangladesh (28). The closure of the mill shortly thereafter is characteristic of the decline of manufacturing and a movement towards service industries that began in the 1970s, hitting British Asian workers hard because in the restructuring, "textiles and engineering were particularly vulnerable, the very

⁴⁵ Jed Fazakarley, "Multiculturalism's categories and transnational ties: the Bangladeshi campaign for independence in Britain, 1971," *Immigrants & Minorities*, 34:1 (2016), 56, 57, 62.

⁴⁶ It challenges the view proffered by Philip Lewis when he writes, "most discussions of the South Asian presence in Britain paid only the most perfunctory attention to the religious dimension of the settler's lives, and still less to the extent to which Islam might provide them with a vehicle for the expression and mobilisation of their collective interests." Philip Lewis, "Being Muslim and Being British: The Dynamics of Islamic Reconstruction in Bradford," *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Experience in Britain* ed. Roger Ballard (London: Hurst & Company, 1994), 58.

⁴⁷ As a political signifier, 'Black' has been used to identify communities who "experience structural and institutional discrimination because of their skin colour; namely peoples of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian origin." Uvanney Maylor, "What is the meaning of 'black'? Researching 'black' respondents," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32:2 (2009): 369-387. Tariq Modood, among others, has critiqued the hegemony of 'black' as a political term for non-white, "Political Blackness and British Asians," *Sociology* 28:4 (1994): 859-76.

sectors which attracted migrant labour in the 1950s and 1960s.”⁴⁸ Work becomes scarce for Saleem and he signs on the dole, occasionally taking odd jobs (34).

The same backdrop of economic change is explored in *Akram's War* when Akram walks the streets of present-day Cradley Heath, passing pubs that have closed down and “large walled yards where the factories stood” in a town once notable for its metallurgical industry (14, 28). Here too British Muslims are disproportionately impacted by economic deprivation in the way that a 2017 government report on social mobility for young Muslims concluded: “Muslims experience the greatest economic disadvantages of any group in UK society. They are more likely than non-Muslims to experience neighbourhood deprivation, housing, educational and health disadvantage, and unemployment.”⁴⁹ According to the 2022 census, 39% of British Muslims live in the most deprived areas of England and Wales, with campaigners describing “cycles of poverty” that affect second and third generation British Muslims.⁵⁰ Cyclical poverty may result from an ‘Islamic penalty’ for young Muslims in the labour force; Sophie Bowlby and Sally Lloyd-Evan claim that “ideas held by employers about employability skills, stereotypes of the role of work in Muslim families and a distrust of people who express visible

⁴⁸ Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 23.

⁴⁹ Social Mobility Commission, “Social mobility challenges faced by young Muslims,” 07/09/2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-challenges-faced-by-young-muslims> accessed 5/12/2022.

⁵⁰ “Census says 39% of Muslims live in most deprived areas of England and Wales,” *The Guardian*, 30/11/2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/30/census-says-39-of-muslims-live-in-most-deprived-areas-of-england-and-wales> accessed 5/12/2022.

religious difference are being translated into a discourse which identifies Muslim employees as ‘unskilled’ and ‘problematic.’”⁵¹ To make matters worse, some Muslim communities are scapegoated and side-lined by the spurious charge of ‘self-segregation’, and commentators blame poor economic conditions for homegrown ‘terrorism’ as in the Cantle Report.⁵² Given that readers are led to suspect that Akram is planning an attack, living in a deprived area may read like one tell-tale sign among others that Akram will turn to violence, especially in the context of an adolescence marked by threats from skinhead gangs, his interaction with a paedophile at the age of seven, and witnessing his friend Dax beaten to death by bullies at school which, taken together, constitute a traumatic and significant reason to hold a grudge, and would appear to ‘fit’ a paradigm of radicalisation. But even as Safdar draws out myriad social problems in his fiction, he counters easy readerly assumptions with Akram’s dynamic and resilient character, setting it against the notion that he is victimised.

⁵¹ Sophie Bowlby and Sally Lloyd-Evan, “‘You seem very westernised to me’: Place, Identity and Othering of Muslim workers in the UK Labour Market,” Hopkins, Peter, and Gale, Richard, eds. *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 52.

⁵² Ted Cantle, “Self-segregation is still divisive,” *The Guardian*, 21/1/2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/jan/21/islamandbritain.comment> accessed 06/12/2022; a report from the youth justice board of the UK government identifies socioeconomic deprivation as a theory of radicalization and quotes the Institute of Community Cohesion which claimed that deprivation was a cause for grievance and “fertile terrain for radical mobilisation”, in contrast to which the report finds deprivation to play, at best “some facilitative role” rather than a causative one: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, “Preventing religious radicalisation and violent extremism,” 16/11/2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-religious-radicalisation-and-violent-extremism> accessed 6/12/2022.

Akram is never a direct victim and has the opportunity to work in the family business, a grocery shop. As a child he encounters an unknown man named Bobby, is enticed by toffee and the promise of money and lured to a nearby park, but it is his white friend, Adrian Hartley, who is attacked. Akram tells Adrian that he can earn a pound if he accompanies him and Adrian is raped by Bobby out of sight of Akram, who has only an inkling of what may be happening to his friend. He is still “smarting” from the memory as he relates it to Grace (35). If as a child Akram feels “despair” he now feels “in need of that despair”, as if the act of storytelling builds emotions of which he would otherwise be devoid. Akram expects Grace “at least to stir” but she remains asleep. His desire for touch, then, may be read as a desperate need for connection, rather than erotic fantasy, just as ‘hope’ is connected with touch at the beginning of the novel when Akram’s “hopeful” hands attempt to touch his wife (5, 35-36). Akram’s guilt at keeping the pound coin from Adrian reveals a compassionate character, and he evinces empathy in his friendships with outsiders, including Craig Male and Dax Cogger. Akram is careful to avoid bullies by retreating at lunchtime, alone “as usual to a stony step at the side of the school” (50, 62). He is also wary of associating with bullied children, particularly Craig, known as ‘Maley’, who is described as having “bad genes”, spots on his face and a sparse head of hair, physical differences that mark him out for bullies, but Akram strikes up a rapport when Maley’s mother dies (50). Maley’s plans to escape his life with an alcoholic father resonate with Akram’s rebellion against his family’s wish for him to marry a young woman from Pakistan he has never met.

Tropes of alienation and unbelonging feature in Safdar and Mehmood's novels. A sense of othering even creeps into the interactions Akram has with friends, as when Maley angrily denies the existence of heaven and condemns the practice of halal butchery, telling Akram "I'm glad I wasn't born you" (52, 54). Akram's response is to hold his tongue, as though looking beyond white prejudices; it is an epiphany and the source of much of his resilience in his early years, the sense that the attitudes of his peers are superficial and merely inherited from parents. He tells Adrian, "[w]e're all a little bit like our fathers" (114). But nothing negates societal divisions in these British novels. Saleem appears keen to present his migration positively to friends and family in Pakistan by painting images of an idealised England in letters as "really, really green", and omitting his experiences of racism (*Song of Gulzarina*: 15, 29). Returning to Pakistan to attend his mother's funeral, friends and relatives make him feel different and his former lover Yasmin asks, "[h]as your blood turned so white you have no feelings for me?" and "[d]o white men not cry at the passing of their mother?" (30-32). Their relationship marks the changes in his experience but the love story at the heart of Mehmood's novel is with Carol to whom he is reintroduced by Mangal Singh in London. Interracial relationships, still less marriages, could be viewed with scepticism and hostility by both communities.⁵³ This is a feature of Safdar's novel too when Akram is told by his

⁵³ Anna Maguire shows that parental attitudes towards mixed-race relationships were sometimes antagonistic, citing in one example a 1968 television documentary entitled '*Mixed Marriages: Would You Let Your Daughter Marry One?*' in which one white mother says of her daughter: "I have several times said to her not to get too involved with coloured people".

mother that the family will “never accept a *gori*” (*Akram’s War*: 95). Like Saleem, Akram faces pressure to maintain kinship networks and transnational links. In his love for Carol, Saleem overlooks all other concerns as they begin living and working together in London. If their relationship is volatile, it is in major part because Saleem does not appear emotionally invested: he is unwilling to disclose details of his life in Pakistan to Carol and does not entertain the idea of having children; for her part, Carol is unwilling to let Saleem see a family she describes as a “bunch of racists” (*Song of Gulzarina*: 41, 50-51).⁵⁴ Carol tells him, “[y]ou left your world, but I know you can’t really” (38). Mehmood makes clear that Saleem is still guided by the prospect of returning to Pakistan, as he ponders: “[h]ow could she fit into that life?” (42).

When Muhammad Anwar describes the ‘myth of return’ it is to suggest that immigrants were resistant to active participation in British life because they planned on a temporary stay, and forming a long term relationship with a white woman might seem reckless in that context.⁵⁵ However, factors in Pakistan count too in this novel, such as the reaction friends and family may have to Carol, since Saleem is

Anna Maguire, “‘You wouldn’t want your daughter marrying one’: parental intervention into mixed-race relationships in post-war Britain,” *Historical Research*, 92:256 (2019): 432–444.

⁵⁴ Carol’s summation turns out to be mostly accurate, as her father refuses to even talk to Saleem while her mother is more supportive.

⁵⁵ In Muhammad Anwar’s groundbreaking 1979 study of Pakistani immigrants in Britain, he noted: “Pakistanis in our study were preoccupied with their future plans, investments, status and children’s future in Pakistan and not Britain ... The obligations which migrants were supposed to fulfil and the regular contacts they kept with relatives in Pakistan through letters, messages and visits were a reminder of what their relatives expected of them. There was no discontinuity of relationships with Pakistanis beyond Rochdale. Consequently the myth of going back to Pakistan helped Pakistanis to maintain ethnic boundaries,” *Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 95.

already transgressing social norms by living with her. Saleem even goes so far as to pretend that he and Carol are married to avoid friends and relatives believing he has broken convention, but their efforts to be together are thwarted when life in Pakistan exposes their 'differences'. Despite Carol's openness to change and how assiduously she tries to 'fit', she is unfamiliar with social mores and finds Saleem unnecessarily cold. In turn, Saleem becomes disillusioned by the changes he perceives in Carol and himself (57). Saleem and Carol drift apart; in spite of their love, and she eventually feels there is nothing to do but return to England.

Mehmood complicates this British novel by setting a core section in Pakistan, where Saleem finds work at his cousin Habib's goods forwarding agency, and encounters a group of *mujahideen* at an event which underlines American support for their *jihad* in the Soviet-Afghan War.⁵⁶ American foreign policy support is made explicit when a Pir (Sufi guide) tells a group of *mujahideen* fighters, including Saleem, that President Ronald Reagan has sent a message in praise of their cause, in which he describes them as "the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers" and ends with: "[m]ay God bless you in your Jihad against the foreign invaders" (78). While

⁵⁶ The most infamous *mujahid*, Osama Bin Laden, found support from both the Saudi Arabian government as well as the United States, for whom the war, as John Esposito writes, was a "good jihad", when he points out that: "Ironically, although the United States had been threatened by Iran's revolutionary Islam and the violence and terrorism committed by jihad groups in Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere, our government was able to cheer and support Afghanistan's holy warriors, providing considerable funding as well as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) advisers. Everyone was in agreement. For Osama bin Laden, as for Saudi Arabia and indeed Muslims worldwide, the Afghan jihad to repel foreigners from Islamic territory was eminently in accord with Islamic doctrine." John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10-11.

the message is fictionalised in Mehmood's account, the Reagan administration described *mujahideen* as "freedom fighters" and he met with a group of their representatives in the Oval Office in June, 1986.⁵⁷ Support is understood in the context of a proxy war between the United States and Soviet Union as part of the Cold War, but it will undoubtedly strike some readers unfamiliar with the history as hypocritical that the US openly provided funds for this *jiḥād*, not only for the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but also in contention with 'war on terror' rhetoric that delimits so-called *jiḥādīs* to enemies, a contradiction sustained in *Akram's War* through Akram fighting in the War in Afghanistan, an irony that some readers may find particularly jarring. Mehmood's depiction emphasises the complicity of NATO and its damaging impact on innocent civilians in the Ojhri camp disaster, with more than a hundred dead and thousands injured when a munitions depot exploded, creating a chain reaction of large explosions.⁵⁸ Officially the result of an accident, the cause remains the subject of rumour and the novel highlights speculation when a newsreader lays blame on the Indian Intelligence Agency Research and Development Wing, with assistance from Khad agents from Afghanistan, and it is rejected by Brigadier General Ashraf who claims that the Americans "know who did this" (97). With duplicitous US support for *mujahideen*,

⁵⁷ "Photo Op. President Reagan Meeting with Freedom Fighters from Afghanistan (Mujahideen) Oval Office," <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/video/photo-op-president-reagan-meeting-freedom-fighters-afghanistan-mujahideen-oval>, accessed 11/10/2022.

⁵⁸ Shaikh Aziz, "The Ojhri Camp disaster — Who's to blame?" *Dawn*, 7/02/2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1237794>, accessed 11/10/2022.

Mehmood emphasises complicated and corrupt international connections that belie a naïve reading of the conflict between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. In my reading, the figure of Gulzarina comes to embody the destruction of many more innocents and she remains a source of despair for Saleem. For Akram too, war provokes critical reflection on British policy and Safdar imagines the confusing sense of camaraderie between enemies connected by a common faith; even after his friend Adrian is killed by an Afghan man, one of the Taliban fighters reminds Akram of himself (170). He is “struck with the idea that he could have been me. I could have been him. ... each of us amounted to nothing more than where we were fated to be born” (170). In turn, the Afghan soldier feels that Akram is a ‘brother’ and spares his life. Rather than suggesting that Akram feels part of a broader Muslim community (*ummah*), the affinity Akram feels is filtered through his experience as an immigrant, acutely aware of how ‘Others’ are positioned in imperialist discourse, as in the reductive shorthand of ‘Terry’ for Taliban which is suggested as comparable to the deleterious epithet ‘Paki’.

Saleem is not seen to fast for Ramadan, pray or worship, and he does not believe in God. He is nonetheless targeted for his ‘perceived Muslimness’ and Mehmood explores how Muslimness has been constructed when Saleem watches the attacks on the World Trade Centre on television with his friend George Turner and suddenly notices “everyone’s eyes turned” towards him in the Manchester pub when it is announced that suspected “Islamic terrorists” are behind the attack (156).

George and Saleem leave separately, and when Saleem visits George later, George slams his door against him and insults his erstwhile friend: “[w]hen are you lot going to bomb us then, eh?” (156). White neighbours stop talking to him, and a gang shouts “Muslim Terrorists – Off Our Streets!” echoing skinheads in the 1970s (156). The rising profile of far-right groups like the British National Party (BNP) and a resurgence of the National Front, was the aggravating factor in the ‘riots’ in communities across Northern England during the summer of 2001.⁵⁹ Mehmood conveys how that felt through Saleem in ways that fiction can approach when other written sources do not. The resurgence of more overt forms of racism in the wake of 9/11 reopens old wounds for Saleem.

Mehmood also explores how this impacts a new generation through the character of Saleem’s daughter Aisha. Their relationship is severely strained because Saleem has become an absent father, and she blames him for her mother Yasmin’s suicide. Aisha is wayward as a young adult and taunts her father by suggesting that she is a prostitute (113). She reacts against her family identity and becomes involved with a racist white man who attacks two Muslim men; when Aisha steps in to defend them John beats her and pushes bacon into her mouth to force his racism down her throat (115). The attack figures in the fiction for how the far-right’s anti-Muslim agenda was ‘mainstreamed’ in the columns of journalists such as Melanie Phillips

⁵⁹ Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, “Flying the Flag for England? Citizenship, Religion and Cultural Identity among British Pakistani Muslims,” *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure* Tahir Abbas ed. (London: Zed Books, 2005), 209

and Katie Hopkins, leading Conservative peer Baroness Sayeeda Warsi to declare that anti-Muslim sentiment had “passed the dinner table test” and was now deemed socially acceptable.⁶⁰ It is implied that the hate crime that John commits politicises Aisha; she attends an anti-war protest in Rusholme, and when she appears at Saleem’s door she is wearing a *niqab* and informs him: “I found myself in God and in my prophet” (117).

Aisha’s turn to faith is couched as a form of protest to anti-Muslim racism.⁶¹ It may also be read as a form of defence, and rebellion, each time Aisha reminds Saleem of the hurt she believes he caused her mother. Mehmood avoids a reconciliation between Saleem and his adult daughter and while he succumbs to a plot twist in which it transpires that Aisha is living with Carol, unaware that she is the woman for whom her father had left her mother, this serves to form the addendum to Saleem and Carol’s relationship in the form of a brief and affective happiness that cannot last beyond the months left to terminally-ill Carol. The extent to which his devastating grief is a trigger for Saleem’s decision to mount a bombing,

⁶⁰ The BNP manifesto of 2005 “spoke of the threats Islam posed ‘to our democracy, traditions and freedoms’, and pledged to crack down on the ‘creeping Islamification and dhimmitude of Britain’”, discussion of mainstreaming and Sayeeda Warsi quoted in Matthew Feldman and Paul Stocker “Far-right Islamophobia: From ideology to ‘mainstreamed’ hate crimes,” *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, Irene Zempi, Imran Awan eds. (London: Routledge, 2021), 353-358.

⁶¹ Following the negative media representation of Muslims, some Britons felt compelled to publicly identify as Muslim and New Labour parliamentary candidate Farmida Bi established a group called ‘Progressive British Muslims’ in 2005, claiming that “it was imperative that people who were comfortable with their combined identities as Britons and Muslims should participate in political debate.” Nahid A. Kabir, *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics and the Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 144.

as are the deaths of Gulzarina's son and daughter-in-law in a NATO attack, is left uncertain, but how Saleem and Aisha intersect in the final third of the novel is suggestive of the complexities that Mehmood raises and refuses to resolve for readers. The novel's shock ending provokes readers to consider whether Aisha is any more of a religious terrorist than her father, if indeed she is planning an attack. It demands that readers contemplate the conditions that enable Aisha to undertake this final, desperate act at a young age and suggests a cycle in which the subsequent generation takes on the burdens of discrimination in the forms of nefarious Islamophobia and racism that their parents have faced.

Saleem's failure to apprehend that Aisha's burgeoning faith is a response to discrimination evinces tensions of belonging that compound her alienation and echo Saleem's struggle with a hyphenated identity in Pakistan and Britain. Saleem wants her sense of identity to be aligned to his past, his memories, and his village in Pakistan which she has no real connection to, but Aisha rejects her father's lifestyle telling him he "failed in everything", blaming lack of faith for his humiliation of her mother (117). Though the narrative limits her character to brief interactions with Saleem, readers have Saleem's life experience to reflect on in their reading of Aisha. The sources of strength that had nourished Saleem earlier in life, including camaraderie among compatriots and connection to family, are bereft in Aisha's. Furthermore, the loss of her mother undermines Aisha's wellbeing and is aggravated by Saleem's virtual silence over her death. When Aisha questions him about Yasmin,

Saleem gives vague, terse answers. His inability or unwillingness to articulate his complicated relationship with Yasmin suggests a problem of cultural translation for second generation immigrants, due to different social mores in Britain and Pakistan; he bluntly suggests that England is to blame for their lost love (121). He explains to Aisha that he “never believed” in the caste differences that distinguish him as a high-caste Jat and Yasmin as a low-caste massalan, but Aisha is unconvinced (125). Saleem’s reluctance to share more details suggests his conflicted feelings about the cultural values he grew up with in Pakistan, of which Aisha reads him as flatly representative. Despite these tensions, Aisha may feel sympathetic to her father because of their shared experiences of racism which appear to account for some of Saleem’s views. In one of the novel’s final scenes Saleem witnesses a group of young white men harass Aisha and her friends; one man rips her robe and nobody comes to her defence (168). Mehmood’s understated prose suggests that these incidents of violence are casualised, in contrast with the threat of spectacular violence that Saleem’s plans seem to imply, but the gravity of their consequences is made clear through Aisha’s suggestive message in the novel’s finale.

Black humour subverts the archetypal terrorist plot that Saleem seems to dream up while in the Manchester pub, The Grand Central, pondering on killing Tony Blair after watching a political protest against his visit taking place just across the street, as The Doors’ “Riders on the Storm” plays on the jukebox: “[t]here’s a killer on the road, his brain is squirmy like a toad. If you give this man a ride, sweet

memory will die" (176). Gallows humour is compounded by the many comedic turns that occur when Saleem sets out to kill Blair, including a policeman who stops to talk as he pushes a shopping trolley containing explosives: "[y]ou'll kill yourself lugging this thing around, mate" (176). Saleem never makes it to his target, and returns home where Aisha appears to have been and gone, taking the trolley with her, leaving a note which says, "[l]et me sing to this wind, the song it understands". While the note plays on the symbolism of Gulzarina's lament for her dead son and anger at the violence of Western powers, it is implied that Aisha may carry out the attack in her father's stead (182).

Aisha's message suggests that she is taking up the baton for her father, transforming the novel into a cautionary tale about the perils of ignoring the plight of British Muslims today. Will Saleem act to save Aisha before an attack can occur? Certainly, an assassination attempt did not take place in Manchester at the Labour Party Conference in September 2006, a fact that most readers will bring to their reading of the novel. The equivocation matches that of the final moments of *Akram's War* where at the war memorial with Grace and her daughter in attendance, a phone timed to trigger the explosives slips out of Akram's grip (232). Readers are left to question what may happen and may cast their minds back to earlier scenes that suggest doubt about Akram's intentions. In one instance, when picking up the rucksack carrying explosives, Akram meets an old man who tells him "[g]o back. Return to her warm bed and think on it", a moment of surreal dreamlike quality that

suggests Akram's conscience at work (109). The final lines also offer hope: "[t]here is love. Love enough for us all" (233). Regardless of the projected outcome in each case, readers are left to interrogate their own assumptions. If a focus on pathology is a feature of post-9/11 fiction in the finite, closed ending of Updike's *Terrorist*, and subverted in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, then Safdar and Mehmood's novels go further by displacing pathology altogether in favour of long and critical meditations on the lives of the protagonists. Bleak as they initially appear, the final acts are situated in the context of division and discrimination that has characterised the long trajectory of the life stories and how resilient and hopeful Saleem and Akram are when faced with hatred and harrowing circumstances. Their stories reflect recent political history for British Muslims, whose resilience through activism in trade unions and political organisations, whether fighting racism under the banner of a political blackness or campaigning for issues on their own terms, is continually adapting to a changing political landscape. Novels which push Muslim protagonists to the edge of their rational limits are rare. They explore the logical extremes of pressures faced by many ordinary British Muslims and they humanise would-be perpetrator protagonists to show that above all they are the victims of violence, both state-sponsored and Islamophobic.

Chapter 5

“Distorted mirrors of who they are, what they might be”: Friendship in

Haroun Khan’s *The Study Circle* (2018)

In an essay that accompanied the publication of his novel *The Study Circle*, Haroun Khan writes: “[w]hen the community and society you know is in flux, if not crisis, ideas and the political are a currency, an everyday unit of exchange. You regularly spot how external events seem to overwhelm any individual life”.⁶² Khan’s novel is a story of the political in everyday life. Set in contemporary Britain, it explores the close-knit friendship of three young adult British Muslims, Ishaq, Marwane, and Shams, who live on a council estate in South London. The plot centres on the friends’ relationship at a time of heightened unease. A planned EDL march near the estate threatens violent confrontation, and Ishaq is wary that he and his friends are under surveillance, a fear that is confirmed when he learns that his behaviour at university has been deemed suspicious and reported as part of the government’s Prevent programme. When the friends are picked up by the police under trumped-up charges, Shams is interrogated by an MI5 officer seeking information about their meetings. Across Europe, politicians give vitriolic speeches denouncing Muslims as a problem to be solved and propose hostile legislation that targets them. When these

⁶² Haroun Khan, “My Political Novel,” Dead Ink Books, 17/8/2017, <https://deadinkbooks.com/my-political-novel-by-haroun-khan/> accessed 16/2/2024.

events occur, the friends are already facing uncertain futures: difficulty finding employment, conflict at home, and living precarious lives on a council estate that is fraught with danger. Regular meetings of an Islamic ‘study circle’ held in a flat on the estate appear to be a haven, but there is widespread political disagreement in the group as to the role of Islam in their lives, and a rift forms between the three friends as events take them in different directions. They come to a head when Shams betrays Ishaq.

Khan focuses readers’ attention on deleterious representations of Muslims in the media and toxic political rhetoric that judges and contains them. As Khan writes of his characters: “[d]espite a toughened and inured outside shell, they are quite sensitive to representations of themselves as a body, in the press and media”.⁶³ In fiction, he points to numerous ways in which Muslim communities are problematised by politicians and tabloid journalists, including charges of “ghettoising themselves” and fomenting conspiracy in the form of “Trojan hoaxes”, a reference to the ‘Trojan Horse Affair’ in which a letter sent to Birmingham City Council spuriously alleged a plot to ‘Islamicise’ local schools.⁶⁴ Khan’s protagonists are confronted with images of Muslims that are almost uniformly negative, like that of a woman pictured next to a story about FGM in the *Daily Mail*, a culturalist

⁶³ Khan, “My Political Novel”.

⁶⁴ Haroun Khan, *The Study Circle* (Liverpool: Dead Ink, 2018), 7-8, 55. Subsequent references will be included in parentheses in the main text. John Holmwood and Therese O’Toole, *Countering Extremism in British Schools?: The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2017), 2-3.

stigmatisation of a practice erroneously associated with Islam despite its clear condemnation by the Muslim Council of Britain.⁶⁵ At one point in the novel Khan's protagonist Ishaq observes that not just the media but "so much of the outside world" seem to be "hysterical" in their accusations levelled at Muslims, "from the serious, like benefit cheats and grooming gangs, to the surreal, like articles stating that Muslims are trying to implement Sharia law and ban Christmas" (46).⁶⁶ These examples are far from atypical, as a 2021 study on British media articles about Muslims and Islam between 2018 and 2019 across 34 media organisations found that the majority have a negative slant.⁶⁷ When a protestor at the student union of the university Ishaq attends holds a placard that reads "HALAL MEAT TODAY, SHARIA LAW TOMORROW", Khan indicates that these articles, however sensationalist, are read at face value by some among the reading public (65). Pejorative representations are foregrounded in a dominant narrative that conflates Islam with terrorism and Muslims with 'extremists', and is reinforced whenever a single incident is spun in the media as a cultural norm, as in the aftermath of the

⁶⁵ Alexandra Topping, "Muslim Council of Britain says female genital mutilation is 'un-Islamic'," *The Guardian*, 23/6/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/23/female-genital-mutilation-muslim-council-britain-unislamic-condemn> accessed 27/4/2024.

⁶⁶ The examples in Khan's fiction are similar to articles. The claim that Muslims are trying to ban Christmas is a myth perpetuated by the *Daily Mail* and Melanie Phillips. For further reading see: Kevin Arscott, "Winterval: the unpalatable making of a modern myth," *The Guardian*, 8/11/2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/nov/08/winterval-modern-myth-christmas>, accessed 14/10/2023.

⁶⁷ Furvah Shah, "Coverage of Muslims and Islam in UK media is mostly negative, study finds," *Independent*, 15/12/2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-media-muslims-islam-islamophobia-b1976742.html> accessed 14/10/2023.

murder of Lee Rigby in South London on 22nd May 2013.⁶⁸ The Prevent agenda, initiated in 2015, impacts Muslims in Britain whose actions are scrutinised as a 'suspect community' and whose quotidian lives are put under surveillance.⁶⁹ Hate crimes committed against Muslims are insufficiently recognised despite the *Equality Act of 2010* including religious faith among protected characteristics, and current laws do little to prosecute Islamophobia effectively, as legislative protections against hate speech are primarily found in the Part 3A of the *Public Order Act 1986* and *Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006*, which require proof of a defendant's intent, unlike the laws for racist hate crime under the *Public Order Act 1986* in which no proof of intent is required for an act to be criminal. As such, many overtly Islamophobic acts go unpunished.⁷⁰ Within a context in which Islamophobia often goes unchecked, insinuations can hold sway and impact the ways in which Muslims perceive each

⁶⁸ Imran Awan & Mohammed Rahman are clear: "Our research suggests that following Woolwich, the print newspaper coverage of Muslim communities in the immediate aftermath provided a lens by which the terms 'Islam' and 'Muslims' were used alongside "terrorism" in an overtly negative manner. Sadly, we believe this is a trend within the British press that has often negatively termed Muslims as 'fanatics', 'extremists' and indeed 'terrorists'," "Portrayal of Muslims Following the Murders of Lee Rigby in Woolwich and Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham: A Content Analysis of UK Newspapers," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36:1 (2016): 28.

⁶⁹ Mary J. Hickman, Lyn Thomas, Henri C. Nickels & Sara Silvestri, "Social cohesion and the notion of 'suspect communities': A study of the experiences and impacts of being 'suspect' for Irish communities and Muslim communities in Britain," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5:1 (2012): 89-106.

⁷⁰ "Increase in Islamophobic hate crimes show why we need effective new laws," *MEND (Muslim Engagement & Development)*, 22/2/2019, <https://www.mend.org.uk/increase-islamophobic-hate-crimes-show-need-effective-new-laws/> accessed 14/10/2023.

other, creating suspicion and heightening vigilance, and in Khan's novel external representation affects the most basic of relationships: friendship.

This chapter focuses on how friendships sustained from childhood into young adulthood are impacted by events over which Ishaq, Marwane, and Shams have no control. In common with male friendships in other contexts, the young men in Khan's novel are influenced by popular culture, notions of hegemonic masculinity, generational differences, and by the criminalisation of working-class youth, all images and expectations that shape their interactions. But what underpins these circumstances for British Muslims is a climate of suspicion and fear engendered by state surveillance, the use of Muslims as a political 'football', and the media's tendency to align the actions of any Muslim with all Muslims. Whether at university or home on the estate, Khan's characters have to be hypervigilant. Their study circle as an extension of shared faith suggests a form of cultural capital in the absence of other institutional structures, evincing a dynamic resilience to challenging circumstances, but the breakdown of friendship between Ishaq and Shams is the lingering effect of the novel and a tension left unresolved for readers. I suggest that their relationship is a microcosm of the issues British Muslim men are forced to confront, including their increasing politicisation, a consequence that Khan connects more broadly to the collapse of working-class solidarity.

The Study Circle is one example among a plethora of fictions about friendship by British Muslim novelists that have been published in recent years. Among this

burgeoning sub-genre is Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019), in which she imagines a road trip taken by three Muslim women, Salma, Moni, and Iman, through the Scottish Highlands to pay homage to Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman convert to Islam to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. Salma El-Wardany's *These Impossible Things* (2022) is a coming-of-age novel about Jenna, Malak and Kees, who navigate the demands of family, faith and relationships, and in Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2023), Maryam and Zahra grow up in Pakistan during the dictatorship of President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and meet again in Britain where their friendship is tested. These novels of female friendship exemplify a burgeoning trend in fiction that chafes against a simplistic binary of 'good' and 'bad' archetypes and pursues friendship in increasingly complex ways. Male friendship, on the other hand, is rarely the subject of fiction by British Muslim writers. As the novels in this thesis suggest, male protagonists are typically lone figures with few close friends: Sami in *The Road from Damascus*, Shamas in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Oz in *The Kindness of Enemies*, and Saleem in *Song of Gulzarina*. Their portrayal suggests that Islamophobia contributes to a sense of alienation in Britain and can also be a significant barrier to friendship. Sami's aversion to negative stereotyping of Pakistanis, for example, discourages him from associating with Muslims at school due to fear of being the target of cultural racism against Pakistani Muslims, and Saleem's isolation in Britain is underscored when George, one of his few close friends, avoids him following the 9/11 attacks. Haroun Khan's *The Study Circle*, then, is intriguing in its depiction of male friendship specifically.

Despite its ubiquity in everyday life, friendship remains an overlooked and understudied phenomenon in the contemporary period. In part, this may stem from an increasingly pessimistic view of the importance of friendship. As Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl have observed, thinkers and writers “from de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century through Durkheim, Lasch, Riesman and Putnam to Bauman and Castells in the early twenty-first century” tend to see friendship as “increasingly transient and superficial”, hypothesising that people are neglecting social responsibilities as these ties seem to fade.⁷¹ Such views are echoed in critiques of social media use, when friendship risks becoming a tickbox or ‘like’, as merely agreeing to be in contact and where acquaintanceships of proximity and fluidity in the workplace and at school dominate.⁷² These arguments hinge on the idea of friendship as a tight bond is at risk and even becoming outmoded if friendship is forged online. One study concludes that “‘digitalization’ of our lives should not replace the value of promoting and keeping offline friendships”, while another counters that social media helps teenagers feel more connected to their friends’ daily

⁷¹ Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 190.

⁷² A 2019 study found that 55% of respondents believed that social media use had made their friendships “more superficial”, and that socialising online made people less likely to interact in “real life”, Rob Knight, “Social media is getting in the way of real-life friendships, new study claims,” *The Independent*, 1/2/2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/extras/lifestyle/social-media-superficial-friends-fake-book-a8758246.html> accessed 25/2/2024.

lives.⁷³ This makes the close-knit ‘offline’ relationship of the young men in *The Study Circle* a feature of significance.

Friendship has been sidelined as a model for theorisation in the development of liberal thought. Ivy Schweitzer contends that the liberal individualism that developed in the nineteenth century consigned friendship to a feminised, private sphere, evidenced through its omission in the works of thinkers such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud: “modern secular philosophy, especially liberal thought, emphasized individual selfhood and autonomy, relegating friendship and ethics to the private realm as issues of obligation rather than choice and leaving the public sphere to the dictates of self-interest and market economics”. Schweitzer avers that it is only since the 1970s and 1980s, and among poststructuralist critics, that friendship became an ethical model; the long running success of 1990s television shows *Friends* and *Seinfeld* bear out its revival in popular culture.⁷⁴

For Kamila Shamsie, whose novel *Best of Friends* imagines the friendship between two women who grow up in politically turbulent 1980s Karachi before moving to London as adults, friendship and contemporary politics are inseparable: “[c]hildren might be able to some extent to cocoon themselves within a friendship

⁷³ Maria Luisa Lima, Sibila Marques, Gabriel Muiños, and Cristina Camilo, “All You Need Is Facebook Friends? Associations between Online and Face-to-Face Friendships and Health,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 (2017), 68; Amanda Lenhart, “Teens, Technology and Friendships,” Pew Research Center, 6/8/2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/08/06/teens-technology-and-friendships/> accessed 30/3/2024.

⁷⁴ Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 10-11, 12.

but part of being adults is being in the world. And what your world looks like is very much a product of politics".⁷⁵ Similarly, Sarah Cole claims that it is a mistake to view friendship as a private, voluntary relationship between individuals, and that "[l]ike any complex social relationship, friendship has its own conventions and institutional affinities ... [and] is shot through with social meaning". How that meaning changed in the work of modernist writers with the advent of the First World War is central to Cole's study, and she argues that the war produced "highly visible reconfigurations of male community", with friendship "infrastructure – practices, conventions, a language, a history".⁷⁶ The specificity of male relationships is the focus of Eve Sedgwick's study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) because, she points out, there is "an asymmetry in our present society between, on the one hand, the relatively continuous relation of female homosocial and homosexual bonds, and, on the other hand, the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds".⁷⁷ For Leela Gandhi the politics of friendship is a useful model to examine anti-imperialism beyond frameworks like 'citizenship' which are complicated by divergent national and supranational interests, and she follows Derrida in viewing the trope of

⁷⁵ "Kamila Shamsie on Best of Friends," *Bloomsbury*, 26/9/2022, <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/discover/articles/interviews/in-conversation-with-kamila-shamsie/> accessed 1/4/24.

⁷⁶ Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4, 7.

⁷⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4-5.

friendship as “the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging”.⁷⁸

Friendship has been the focus of diverse literary analyses including of Shakespeare, eighteenth-century novels, and nineteenth-century American fiction.⁷⁹ In the contemporary US context, friendship in fiction has received sustained attention over the last twenty years. Sharon Monteith suggests that “characters and episodes may function as coded aggregates of contemporary problems” and that “models of friendship can form the basis of a utopian premise as a first stage in imagining new communities and lifestyles”. She reveals how white writers who ostensibly advocate for interracial ‘sisterhood’ undermine or silence Black characters, and make them auxiliary, to white characters.⁸⁰ But, her focus is women. Michael Kalisch foregrounds male friendship and politics in American contemporary fiction as a “relationship of freely chosen association ideally modelling equality, and prefiguring a broader politics concerned with questions of community and citizenship”. He notes how a lack of friendship is associated with loss of community and “a wider critique of liberal individualism”, ideas that resonate in Khan’s novel for how Islam

⁷⁸ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

⁷⁹ Tom MacFaul, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Bryan Mangano, *Fictions of Friendship in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁸⁰ Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 40, 39.

becomes a central unifying aspect of friendship.⁸¹ However, there is a dearth of critical attention on how friendship figures in contemporary British writing.

Friendship requires imagination and empathy, and fiction can capture a sense of friendship in perspectival ways that other forms of writing may not. As Gregory Jusdanis argues, unlike other relationships, friendship is not bound by legal, religious, or economic ties, so that friends “make up their own rules”.⁸² Michael Neve contends that “male friendship must partake of the rhythms, the exits and entrances, the highs and lows, of life”, but Kalisch argues that it has “often been read suspiciously, in literature and in life, as a cover story of the sublimation or displacement of one kind or another, rather than a relationship in its own right”.⁸³ If Kalisch situates suspicion in relation to speculation about homosexuality in previous decades, I would extend beyond sexuality to how Islamophobia in the public sphere puts under suspicion friendships between young Muslim men in the private sphere.

Theories of friendship and of its analogic relationship with civic politics suggest that it has a utility and is shaped by circumstance. In *The Politics of Friendship* (1994), Jacques Derrida examines the writing of Aristotle and Cicero to draw out how friendship was valued in antiquity:

⁸¹ Michael Kalisch, *The Politics of Male Friendship in Contemporary American Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 19, 5.

⁸² Gregory Jusdanis, *A Tremendous Thing: Friendship from the Iliad to the Internet* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 6.

⁸³ Michael Neve, “Male Friends,” *The Dialectics of Friendship*, Roy Porter, and Sylvana Tomaselli eds. (Milton Keynes: Taylor & Francis p, 2021), 62; Kalisch, *The Politics of Male Friendship in Contemporary American Fiction*, 2.

[Friendship] gives rise to a project, the anticipation, the perspective, the providence of a hope that illuminates in advance the future (*praelucet*), thereby transporting the name's renown beyond death. A narcissistic projection of the ideal image, of its own ideal image (*exemplar*), already inscribes the legend ... Friendship provides numerous advantages, notes Cicero, but none is comparable to this unequalled hope, to this ecstasy towards a future which will go beyond death.⁸⁴

Derrida muses on a narcissistic impulse towards the friend as "our ideal image" that gives "absolute hope" for a future in which we are eulogised, suggesting that friendship had a particular utility in relation to reputation.⁸⁵ Derrida suggests the binary 'logic' on which friendship hinges:

once the enemy had disappeared, the friend would disappear at once. He would vanish in the same stroke, actually/effectively and virtually, in his very possibility. The possibility, the meaning and the phenomenon of friendship would never appear unless the figure of the enemy had already called them up in advance, had indeed put to them the question or the objection of the friend, a wounding question, a question of wound. No friend without the possible wound.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005), 3, 4.

⁸⁵ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 4, 5.

⁸⁶ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 153.

This would suggest that friendships arise or develop due to circumstances in which an enemy exists, whether in a person or group intending harm or an attack on reputation in times of uncertainty or when faced with adversity, and is pertinent in the context of Khan's novel when Shams, the youngest of the friends, finds friendship with Ishaq because Ishaq looks out for him and protects him from the threat of drug dealers.

In some ways, Khan's novel of university-age friendship recalls Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995) and shares some interesting parallels. Set in London in 1989, Shahid, a working-class student, is at college when Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is published and is conflicted over the Islamic fundamentalism espoused by some of his friends and the liberalism represented by Deedee Osgood, a tutor with whom he has an affair. When Shahid meets Riaz, a fellow student, he tells him that seeing Rushdie on television attacking racism made him feel "terrifyingly sensitive" and paranoid.⁸⁷ As Dave Gunning observes, Shahid bonds with Riaz and Chad because of "the psychological damage racism has caused him", finding a sense of belonging within an Islamic fundamentalist framework as a reaction.⁸⁸ In his belief that the turn to fundamentalism has its origins in racism, Kureishi can only view it as an aberration. Reflecting on his youth in the 1960s, he recalls struggling to reconcile the rise of a new radical politics with the turn to the Nation of Islam and

⁸⁷ Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 9-10.

⁸⁸ Dave Gunning, *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* (Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2010), 70.

then mainstream Islam taken by Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. For Kureishi, Islam proffered a bleak substitute for a broader solidarity denied, as he summarised with hindsight:

I saw the taking up of Islam as an aberration, a desperate fantasy of a world-wide black brotherhood; it was a symptom of extreme alienation. It was also an inability to seek a wider political view or cooperation with other oppressed groups – or with the working class as a whole – since alliance with white groups was necessarily out of the question.⁸⁹

Kureishi was perplexed too by the rise of fundamentalist Islam among young British Asian men during the Rushdie Affair but wanted to understand the motivations of men turning to what he saw as “a form of belief that denied them the pleasures of the society in which they lived”. After meeting with a self-described fundamentalist he concludes that feelings of exclusion make it tempting to exclude others, and that, “[b]y opposing that which continually changes around us, by denying those things we might want, we keep ourselves together”.⁹⁰ Kureishi neglects to consider the economic position of the men and his characterisation of Islam and liberalism as incommensurable, binary positions risks essentialising both. Wendy O’Shea-Meddour argues that in *The Black Album* he “fails to protect” characters from “essentialist readings” but “reminds us that secular liberalism could just as

⁸⁹ Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), 31.

⁹⁰ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*, 215, 218.

convincingly be described as having a fundamentalist core".⁹¹ The appeal of Islam is explained as a response to racism and is ultimately rejected by Shahid. Indeed, the novel's conclusion forecloses multiple *Islamic* ways of being in the world and infers that Islamic fundamentalism is rigid certainty, on which friendship among his Muslim characters is dependent.⁹²

Other aspects of male friendship explored in *The Black Album* prefigure *The Study Circle*. If viewing Islam as solely a response to racism is reductive, it can nevertheless be said that racism is a significant motivating factor for Khan's characters to congregate in a safe space. At the first such meeting, Ishaq feels that their shared faith seems to elide any differences: "he saw all of that diversity and unity [of Islam] around him. Black, brown, and white. Brothers in Islam. ... This brotherhood of man across all races and strata nourished Ishaq" (5). A similar sentiment is expressed in *The Black Album* when Shahid is visiting a mosque:

Men of so many types and nationalities – Tunisians, Indians, Algerians, Scots, French – gathered there, chatting in the entrance, where they removed their shoes and then retired to wash, that it would have been difficult, without prior knowledge, to tell which country the mosque was in. Here race and class barriers had been suspended.⁹³

⁹¹ Wendy O'Shea-Meddour, "Deconstructing Fundamentalisms in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*," *Fundamentalism and Literature*, Catherine Pessoa-Miquel and Klaus Stierstorfer eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 86, 91-2.

⁹² Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 274.

⁹³ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 132.

While Shahid remains doubtful of the value of religion in the modern world, dismissing Islam's "old and useful stories" because life is "more subtle and inexplicable", Khan gestures beyond worship and storytelling to a less tangible aspect of brotherhood when Ishaq feels "great comfort from the feeling of communality washing over the group, their familiarity eliciting an undercurrent of ease, comfort, and even frivolity, that contrasted with the hefty burden of the subject matter" (4).⁹⁴ Equally significant is the small talk between "beloved friends" after the meeting that is devalued in Kureishi's fiction.⁹⁵ The physical and emotional warmth of the meeting, contrasted with the cold night and bleak imagery of the estate, suggests comfort and even safety against the threat of attack on the estate, where "groups of young men were especially intimidating" (12). Safety in numbers is redolent of self-defence groups that formed in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the threat of the National Front, but such groups were often criminalised, as with the Bradford 12, an older generation of which Khan's character Ayub is somewhat representative. Ayub's caution to Ishaq to "stay out and let the authorities deal with it" in response to news of a planned EDL march highlights a cautious attitude engendered later by state surveillance, a feature that has

⁹⁴ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 133.

⁹⁵ One strand of criticism levelled at Kureishi's work is a privileging of individual rights over community or group rights, evidenced by his characterization of religious culture as a source of division and oppression, Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2015), 109, 110; Bart Moore-Gilbert, "From 'the politics of recognition' to 'the policing of recognition'," *Culture Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin eds (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 189-90.

significantly changed the circumstances of British Muslims since Kureishi was writing in the 1990s (10).

Khan traces the contours of changing times, imagining how friendship changes as young working-class men grow older. In adolescence, friendship is based on imagination and exploration whilst playing physical games such as skateboard warriors and tag (107). Violence in play is tempered by solidarity among boys; if someone punched or tripped Shams, "Ishaq would make a note and get the kid back in the next round" (108). If Ishaq is brotherly towards Shams, it is because he is aware of the dangers posed on the estate, including drug dealers. After dismissing one dealer, he tells Shams it is a question of "right and wrong", his desire to protect Shams is the basis of their particular friendship (25). Readers learn that while the boys are playing outside, their white school friends are on PlayStation in their homes, inoculated from the dangers of the estate (109). At ten years of age, the British Asian boys witness the suicide of a wealthy white woman who travels to the estate to jump from a tower block. Shams is incensed that someone with privilege and opportunity elects to "inflict their misery on the estate". The disparity between rich and poor, and her thoughtlessness about the impact outrages Shams and cements a desire to escape that can be read as emerging class consciousness (32-33). Leaving the estate on excursions via the London Underground appears to offer "a vast landscape of possibility and adventure" that is contrasted with the "constricted horizons of the council estate" (14). When the boys jump the turnstiles Ishaq would

rather ask passengers for unused passes and not endanger his father's livelihood as a bus driver employed by Transport for London (31). Khan makes clear that each of the boy's outlooks is informed by their parents' experiences, a common topic of their conversations on the tube, and a point of connection as the children of immigrants (14). In Mohammed Qasim's study of a group of British-born Muslim men in Bradford aged 25-33 known as 'The Boys', he describes their solidarity:

There was a particular and outstanding solidarity between The Boys which transcended blood kinship and all other barriers. Where such a close bond existed, The Boys would refer to each other as bhai [brother]. They would even talk of each other's parents as if they were their own, reinforcing their alliance to one another. The Boys replicated solidarity often in ways similar to the parental generation who formed their own tight-knit communities.⁹⁶

Most South Asian communities in Britain were formed through 'chain migration' whereby 'pioneer' migrants would find work before sponsoring family members and assisting them, a process that continued to the 1960s.⁹⁷ Industrial decline reducing demand for migrant workers, as well as hostile legislation such as the *Immigration Act* of 1971, may have contributed to the decline of this practice. It is a context explored in *The Study Circle* when Ishaq's parents tell him how they hosted

⁹⁶ Mohammed Qasim, *Young, Muslim and Criminal: Experiences, Identities and Pathways into Crime* (Bristol University Press, 2018), 43.

⁹⁷ Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 17.

the Shaikhs in their flat, and of their friends' desire to reciprocate by offering their daughter in marriage to Ishaq. This foregrounds the value placed on sustaining kinship as well as the intimacy of friendship as a result of the hardships of migration (158). Ishaq's father tells him, "[w]e have so few friends from the old days in Pakistan. We must keep our ties" (187). Ishaq's refusal of the offer of marriage on the grounds that the "culture of British Muslims had changed", then, marks a hardening border between generations and a shift in attitudes among young British Muslims (162).

Though parental attitudes have a significant positive influence, they also place a burden of expectation on the young men, particularly on education. For Shams this is felt most keenly when Ishaq and Marwane meet the requirements for university and he does not: "it was obvious they had gained good grades ... *their parents' smiles* and their unspoken confidence told it all" (emphasis added) (101).⁹⁸ Shams is accused by his father of doing "nothing" with the hard work his generation performed: "[y]ou could have worked harder, got better grades like your friends. Like your sister" (252). As presented the parents seem to be largely oblivious to the realities of life on the estate for their children. Ishaq's father does not "mix" with the British Asian community and has a limited social life drinking with colleagues at the bus depot, while Shams' father stays at home all day watching the television (189-

⁹⁸ Michela Franceschelli underlines that education is foremost in priorities for their children in *Identity and Upbringing in South Asian Muslim Families: Insights from Young People and Their Parents in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 203.

190). For his part, Ishaq opts to keep his parents and sister in the dark about the problems he faces: “what was the point. A plague of anxiety when there was nothing they could do but fret” (197). The effect is dissonance, with neither generation fully appreciating the circumstances of the other. On occasion, this also extends into the friendship group. Ishaq and Marwane are reticent to talk about university to Shams and as students have no experience of how hard it is to find work. They belittle Shams’ protestations that his lack of success is due to discrimination, suggesting he change his name to one that sounds white (101). Shams’ experience in the novel is undergirded in life by evidence from the social mobility commission which reported in 2017 that only 19.8% of Muslims between the ages of 16 and 74 were in full-time employment, compared with 34.9% of the overall population. Among reasons cited was the racist fact that Muslim and minority-ethnic sounding names on applications reduce the likelihood that applicants will be offered an interview.⁹⁹ Shams avoids telling his friends about his role in a sales pyramid scheme, and when he gets into trouble turns to Mujahid instead. This is one of the many ways that Khan explores how childhood friends come to perceive each other differently and take divergent paths.

Khan makes clear that whether seeking work or attending university, these young men face an uncertain future. Ishaq and Marwane attend university while

⁹⁹ Anushka Asthana, “Islamophobia holding back UK Muslims in workplace, study finds,” *The Guardian*, 7/9/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/07/islamophobia-holding-back-uk-muslims-in-workplace-study-finds> accessed 27/4/2024.

living at home with their parents.¹⁰⁰ Ishaq stays home due to the cost of living, commencing his studies as tuition fees are raised and working in the summer so that he can “just about make ends meet” (49). How comfortable Muslim students feel on a university campus is undermined if societies and leisure activities foreground a drinking culture, and privilege a secular lifestyle and non-religiosity.¹⁰¹ The reputation universities have and protect as ‘liberal’ institutions can make them complacent about incidents of racism, treating them as isolated incidents rather than structural problems.¹⁰² Khan explores the university experience through Ishaq, describing his initial impression of university as a “massive shock” (58). Ishaq struggles to make new friends; he follows his interests and joins political organisations but finds other students act as if “the world was just an exotic backdrop to their own self-realisation (58). He enjoys sports and makes it onto the

¹⁰⁰ Studying at home is common among Muslim students nationally, at 76.9%–81.3% when non-UK students are excluded—compared with 40.2% of all students, Alison Scott-Baumann, Mathew Guest, Shuruq Naguib, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, and Aisha Phoenix, *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 17.

¹⁰¹ Tariq Modood argues that Higher Education leaders “do not understand the importance that religion has for some individuals and groups, in terms of a sense of the spiritual and/or in the structure of their family and social lives, and as a source of ethical orientation and/or community membership, or solidarity with groups in other parts of the world. Such religious people are ‘foreign’ or strangers to many in higher education’s leadership – at best a problem to be managed, not people to be sympathetically and empathically understood and accommodated.” Tariq Modood and Craig Calhoun, “Religion in Britain: Challenges for Higher Education,” 1/6/2015, <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/religion-britain-challenges-higher-education> accessed 14/10/2023.

¹⁰² Sara Ahmed’s discussion of the language of diversity highlights the paradoxes of institutional language. She writes: “the transformation of the collective into an individual (a collective without individuals) might allow individual actors to refuse responsibility for collective forms of racism,” *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 46.

football team, but the camaraderie is alienating because it is based on lewd humour, nude photos, and “compulsory nights-out drinking”. This is a barrier to friendship for Ishaq (59). If cultural ‘others’ of various backgrounds and heritages are sometimes made to feel sidelined, the effect is intensified for British Muslims since the passing of the *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015*, which places a ‘Prevent Duty’ on higher education institutions to monitor if students are drawn into terrorism and has a knock-on effect: “[i]ncreased surveillance appears to have made it more difficult to mobilise collectively for British Muslims”.¹⁰³ This climate of suspicion persists if Muslim students are put under heightened scrutiny and inhibits debate.¹⁰⁴ Muslim students must self-censor as a result, which restricts academic engagement and leads to marginalisation.¹⁰⁵ Khan puts these concerns at the centre of his narrative, especially when Ishaq is informed by a professor that he is under suspicion because he is “quiet and isolated” and one of few observant Muslim students (54). Ishaq’s response is “quiet compliance” with the implication that even saying nothing may be deemed suspicious in the climate of fear engendered by Prevent (55). The contrast between the university students Ishaq encounters who have “support networks and role models of friends and family, the fuel-of-ambition

¹⁰³ Hélène Balazard & Timothy Peace, “Confronting Islamophobia and its consequences in East London in a context of increased surveillance and stigmatisation,” *Ethnicities*, 23:1, (2023): 104.

¹⁰⁴ Tahir Abbas, Imran Awan & Jonathan Marsden, “Pushed to the edge: the consequences of the ‘Prevent Duty’ in de-radicalising pre-crime thought among British Muslim university students,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* (2021), 12-13.

¹⁰⁵ Abbas, Awan & Marsden, “Pushed to the edge: the consequences of the ‘Prevent Duty’ in de-radicalising pre-crime thought among British Muslim university students,” 13.

and career-hopes” while his friends on the estate have none, suggests bitter injustice, but also serves to underline an increasing solidarity in his friendships on the estate (60).

Khan sets the young men’s encounter with a ‘deculturised’ practice of Islam against these tensions of intergenerational conflict and surveillance, couching it as both a form of rebellion and a reflection of emerging consciousness. It is a practice that spreads through word of mouth across the estate, sometimes through “a recommendation from a friend”, with friendship portrayed as a way to circulate ideas (41). Khan suggests that Ishaq’s love for his parents is one reason that Islam is important to him; he shares their love of Muslim poets, “Ghalib, Faiz, Iqbal and others”, and knows his parents are “genuinely nice people”. But some aspects of his culture and faith jar; he considers the holy man in India to whom they send money a scammer and puts an end to their donations, concerned that faith is also “superstition and insouciance” (44, 42, 41). Ishaq’s move towards a ‘deculturised’ practice can be read as a rejection of the cultural ‘baggage’ of his parents’ generation and pursuance of a more “textual way” that reaches across “language, race and nation” welcoming Muslims of all heritages and backgrounds (43).¹⁰⁶ The

¹⁰⁶ In his research on identity construction among young British-born Bangladeshis from East London, Aminul Hoque goes so far as to assert that Islam now provides a “safety net” against an increasingly irrelevant and alien Bangladeshi culture for some young people, and a sense of belonging in the face of systemic racism and poverty, “The Construction of a Multifaceted British Islamic Identity Third-Generation of British-Born Bangladeshis from East London,” *Political Muslims: Understanding Youth Resistance in a Global Context*, Tahir Abbas and Hamid Sadek eds. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 118, 278.

'deculturised' turn has been described as an "elastic orthodoxy" and "a skill" that young British Bengalis "developed for perpetually recontextualising their revivalist Islam as new circumstances arise".¹⁰⁷ Rejecting both family and mosque, in spirit at least, means that few institutional structures remain, but in my reading the study circle is a community hub and space for the potential accumulation of social capital, understood as "the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition".¹⁰⁸ Although Pierre Bourdieu viewed social capital in the context of privileged elites, the concept has been extended in various and intriguing ways, by James S. Coleman, for example, who defines it as:

the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organisation and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person. These resources differ for different persons and can constitute an important advantage for children and adolescents in the development of their human capital.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, "Elastic Orthodoxy: The Tactics of Young Muslim Identity in the East End of London," *Everyday Lived Islam in Europe*, Nathal M. Dessing, Nadia Jeldtoft and Linda Woodhead eds. (Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 82.

¹⁰⁸ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2005), 119.

¹⁰⁹ James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (London: Belknap, 1994), 300.

Adhering to the tenets of Islam, the study circle embodies a way of being but also a process of becoming.¹¹⁰ For Ishaq, Islam offers “the certainties of ritual that inculcated healthy habits of discipline while also focusing on the brotherhood of mankind, and conditioning of the heart” (43). These are important to set against the lucrative allure of drug dealing and criminality in the absence of other forms of work. In this sense, the study circle fulfils a civic role; the police “rarely came into the estate proper”, and youth services have long been abandoned (11, 12). Ishaq’s practice is so disciplined that the mere smell of marijuana and alcohol seem like “boundaries violated” (36). Despite some generational rifts, Ayub, who leads the address, is older and intent on passing on his knowledge of Islam, as well as his life experiences, to the younger men, thereby emphasising the importance of memory and history in the group’s collective identity.

The sense of history that plays out in the novel coalesces in a postcolonial consciousness largely as a result of Ishaq’s study of historical injustices and the erasure of colonial history in the public imagination. At school Ishaq focuses on Shakespeare, the First World War poets, the Elizabethans and Victorians, but feels disconnected as if “it had to have been made up”, because it conveys an

¹¹⁰ Sociological research appears to confirm this reading of the role of religion as explored in Khan’s fiction. For example, Claire Dwyer, Bindi Shah and Gurchathen Sanghera’s study of British Pakistani Muslim men found that “Religion provided these young men with a source of strength to overcome class-based and gender stereotypes, and resist the influence of youth peer cultures, as well as the social capital which encouraged them to study and be successful.” Claire Dwyer, Bindi Shah & Gurchathen Sanghera, “‘From cricket lover to terror suspect’ – challenging representations of young British Muslim men,” *Gender, Place & Culture*, 15:2 (2008), 130.

unblemished past and a national mythology that filters into everyday life (60). The friends recall playing British Bulldog as children, its appellation synonymous with Winston Churchill and an ideal of staunch and unremitting British character in the days of Empire. It is curious that this name survives, along with a rhyme the boys chant when playing: “there’s a German in the grass with a bullet up his arse, pull it out, pull it out, pull it out” (108). For Paul Gilroy, the mythologisation of British culture “reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture – operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life – was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable”.¹¹¹ It is a way to set aside uncomfortable questions and shame about the British Empire.¹¹² In play the connotations are rendered innocuous and boys bond over the game, but Khan imagines other ways that colonial history is weaponised when a white racist, Charlie, sports a jacket with World War II RAF patches and a First World War army badge, symbols of nationalism exploited by the EDL. Colonial history and its racist repercussions are meted out on Ishaq’s family too, when despite holding a degree in mechanical engineering, his father can only secure a job driving a bus. In turn, part of what constitutes the men’s friendship in the study circle is an acknowledgement of how colonialism informs their lives now. When Marwane reads Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), he highlights the colonial

¹¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2006), 97.

¹¹² Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 98.

source of Mr. Darcy's wealth, telling Shams and Ishaq that, "[t]he elephant in the room is that Mr Darcy, or whoever would definitely be a slave-owner" (109).

Marwane's reading echoes Edward Said's of *Mansfield Park* (1814) where the estate is funded by Sir Thomas' slave plantations in Antigua. Said points to the 'dead silence' when Fanny Price brings up the subject and asserts:

In order more accurately to read works like *Mansfield Park*, we have to see them in the main as resisting or avoiding that other setting, which their formal inclusiveness, historical honesty, and prophetic suggestiveness cannot completely hide. In time there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central to a new understanding of what Europe was.¹¹³

English novels are being studied and understood in that context now, but in *The Study Circle* even Ishaq wonders if Marwane's thinking is "madness" or a joke (110).

Khan also explores historical events that are important to his characters, imagining friendships forged in contexts unique to the experience of British Muslims, of which the war in Bosnia is a case in point. Ayub and his friend, a white convert named Adam, recall their experience of fighting as British *mujahideen*, together with fighters from around the world in support of besieged Bosniaks. Adam's gentle nature—he is described as having a "poet's soul"—and Ayub's piety

¹¹³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 45.

underline their humanitarianism (115). In Britain today the war in Bosnia risks being forgotten; Bosnia and Croatia are holiday destinations for a younger generation surprised to learn that Muslims were defended in a European war, a scenario that jars with 'War on Terror' rhetoric espoused by governments since 9/11. As Jennifer Mustapha writes, "[t]he Mujahid, by virtue of his place in the post-9/11 war on terror security narrative has been recast as terrorist", and in some cases been deprived of citizenship and rendered stateless.¹¹⁴ Ayub is clear that for him the war "destroyed the illusion ... that Europe could be trusted" (121). That Bosnian Muslims were victims of ethnic cleansing is a cautionary tale about the perils of being complacent in Britain. Khan's portrayal of Ayub and Adam, their friendship and trust, offers an important counter-narrative. Ayub shows Adam a newspaper article in which a delegate to the EU conference requests that European Muslims agree to change the text of the Qur'an to align with European values: "I cannot see why reasoned and moderate Muslims will not sign it. If they do not they must have something to hide" (116). Dissenting Muslims are always read as extremists, occluding the complexities of such choices and the politicisation of persecution that Gilroy identifies as "an additional catastrophe: the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects".¹¹⁵ Memorialisation is so

¹¹⁴ Jennifer Mustapha, "The Mujahideen in Bosnia: the foreign fighter as cosmopolitan citizen and/or terrorist," *Citizenship Studies*, 17:6-7 (2013), 750.

¹¹⁵ Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 98.

often a form of forgetting that Ayub and Adam resist by pointedly choosing to remember, “[e]ven if it’s painful” (118).

The men who attend the study circle may agree on some aspects of Islam and politics, but they do not accord with the way that some other people on the estate practise Islam, and an important tension pivots on how characters view each other, and how they are viewed by outsiders in turn. Against monolithic constructions of Islam in media accounts, Khan imagines the heterogeneity of Islam as represented in different ways by young Muslims, like Abdul-Majid who campaigns for the restoration of the caliphate, and Zulfi who works in the city and is critical of what he perceives as the “ghettoised mindsets” of some Muslims (71, 81). Each character justifies their perspective in different ways, illustrating how different strands of ‘Muslimness’ manifest. As Thijl Sunier writes:

Since there is no single field that qualifies as purely religious, there is no practice that must a priori be singled out. In my view, the production of religiousness and the making of religious ‘selves’ among young people reside on the nexus between performance and aesthetics, politics, and popular culture. ... [Y]oung Muslims do not just construct their own Islam out of nothing; they relate to Islam as a discursive tradition and they relate to other

Muslims in a variety of ways. Religious engagement is a process of community-building.¹¹⁶

Community building is a feature of contemporary fiction by British Muslims, and emphasised in characters such as Ammar in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008), who infuses aspects of hip hop culture with Islam by pursuing his interest in the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters, Black nationalist movements heavily featured in American hip hop and in the lyrics of artists such as Nas and the Wu-Tang Clan.¹¹⁷ Yassin-Kassab bases some of his characters on the hip hop *niqab* posse he encountered in East London: "[t]hey have an assertive identity, bringing together different cultural aspects from East and West that they grew up with, in a way that makes sense to them".¹¹⁸ In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Karim's shift to wearing shalwar kameez suggests the importance of clothing in identity assertion after a personal struggle that is made clear in the text when Karim describes his childhood:

When I was a little kid ... If you wanted to be cool you had to be something else – a bit white, a bit black, a bit something. Even when it all took off, bhangra and all that, it was Punjabi, Pakistani, giving it all the attitude. It

¹¹⁶ Thijs Sunier, "Styles of Religious Practice: Muslim Youth Cultures in Europe," *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*, Haideh Moghissi and Halleh Ghorashi eds. (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 129, 132.

¹¹⁷ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 215-6.

¹¹⁸ Robin Yassin-Kassab quoted in Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 206.

weren't us, was it? If you wanted to be cool, you couldn't just be yourself.

Bangladeshi. Know what I'm saying?¹¹⁹

Against perceived negative associations, an Islamic identity appears 'cool'. Islam is increasingly appealing to young people partly as a result of the influence of hip hop and grime subcultures. For some African-Caribbean converts to Islam in South-East London, "Islam has a 'street cred'" —and Jonathan Githens-Mazer claims that Brixton has been a hotspot of radicalisation and counter-radicalisation as far back as 1993—and Islamic vocabulary and symbols matter for how contemporary political issues are discussed.¹²⁰ In Khan's novel, Mujahid is of Jamaican heritage, and converts to Islam while in prison because he found "true brotherhood" and defended Muslim friends in prison fights in a camaraderie based on self-defence (25). Mujahid's prison experience influences his reading of Islamism as an oppositional ideology, and one that can be used to justify his criminal activity. He tells Shams: "[t]he centre of our struggle, our Jihad, is money, bro. You can't do anything without money. If that means taking from and exploiting the enemies of Islam, then so be it" (23).¹²¹

Mujahid's view is dependent on an idealised Islamic past set against a destructive

¹¹⁹ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2003), 263.

¹²⁰ Jonathan Githens-Mazer, "Why Woolwich Matters: The South London Angle," *RUSI*, 31/5/2013, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-woolwich-matters-south-london-angle> accessed 20/06/2023 accessed 16/2/2024.

¹²¹ According to Githens-Mazer some prison converts gain "a clear structure - a set of rules and practises [sic.] that make leaving the temptations of street life behind a more achievable proposition", while for others, "Islam is alleged to provide a justification for robbing and committing acts of physical violence and theft against other non-Muslim gangs and non-Muslims in general," "Why Woolwich Matters: The South London Angle."

West, and Ishaq is conscious that he “would always go on and on about Islam’s golden history and how everything was perfect in those halcyon days, snatching random names from history as evidence” (241). Mujahid’s idealisation of Islamic history emphasises pride in his identity as a Muslim who stands assertively against the persecution. Parveen Akhtar has described how some Muslims feel a sense of ‘symbolic exclusion’ because conflicts in Chechnya, Palestine, and Bosnia, among many other countries, render “a genuine sense of persecution: that the enemies of Islam will victimise Muslims whatever they do, and that it is therefore important to rally around Islam”.¹²² Kate Zebiri’s study of Muslim converts found that “disillusionment with Western society” was commonly cited as a contributing factor to conversion, but Khan’s novel suggests that converting inspires Mujahid to be more imaginative and optimistic.¹²³ Ishaq and Mujahid’s divergent views contribute to the breakdown of their childhood friendship, but Khan’s perspectival narrative draws out the rationale for their thinking and beliefs through their interactions with Shams, who becomes involved in dealing illicit goods on behalf of Mujahid.

Written in the third person but incorporating the perspectives of Shams and Ishaq, *The Study Circle* is reflexive. Khan’s extensive use of internal monologue enables a deep exploration of characters’ thoughts and feelings with the effect that, as readers, one might become ‘friends’ with the characters in Khan’s novel, insofar as

¹²² Parveen Akhtar, “‘(Re)turn to Religion’ and Radical Islam,” *Muslims in Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, Tahir Abbas ed. (London: Zed Books, 2005), 168.

¹²³ Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 53.

following these internal monologues can give the sense of an intimate conversation. But, as with the conversations they have with each other, monologues elide certain details as they emphasise others. Ishaq and Marwane's opinion of Mujahid is based on rumour, for example, because Mujahid keeps his personal life private: "[i]n Islam, a man's privacy is serious business" (22). The result is that little is known about him, and when it is rumoured that Mujahid has returned to a life of crime this time it is textured "with a tincture of Islamic-based defiance against the establishment" (26). Khan offers glimpses beyond his characters' assumptions, as when Ishaq hears a voice calling "Michael" from Mujahid's flat (174). As young men without children Shams and Ishaq do not automatically appreciate the demands that fatherhood places on Mujahid and do not interpret his need for privacy or protectiveness in this light, nor do they imagine that a man who goes by his birth name to loved ones may act differently at home. Regardless of Mujahid's intentions, he exploits friendship for personal gain, telling Shams "I'm really relying on you ... you were alright with me way back so I want you to be the one" (29-30). It is a technique of manipulation that echoes Shams' experience in a sales team, when his boss takes him out with a few other high earners and tells them they are the "chosen few" (18). Mujahid gains Shams' trust because he is young and impressionable, revealing how easily young men desperate for work can be coerced onto a criminal path, and that relationships of trust are the basis of any business or employment, legitimate or not. That is key to how Khan suggests readers understand these relationships too. When Shams tells Marwane and Ishaq that he is working for Mujahid, Ishaq assumes that he is dealing

drugs despite lack of evidence, buying into the criminalisation of Black and Asian youth in the media and by authorities, a faulty if not deleterious image which they are then forced to confront first-hand when arrested by the police (102). Rumours can take hold easily among friends in any circumstances but, intensified by fears of conviction and surveillance, they harden boundaries between former friends in this novel.

The arrest of Ishaq, Marwane and Shams highlights an antagonistic relationship between the police and young Asian men who are flatly interpreted as suspicious by the mere fact of their gathering. Ishaq and Marwane are playfully mocking Shams' new hat before Marwane grabs it and runs down the street with Shams giving chase until they all stop for breath, laughing. They are behaving like young people, children, but are stopped by police who question why they are running and tell them that, as Asian and Black men, they match the description of a group involved in a fight, in spite of Marwane pointing out that none of them are Black (126). The policemen search them under the power to "stop and search", extended with the passing of Section 60 of the *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994* and Sections 44-47 of the *Terrorism Act 2000*, and widely believed to target people of Black and ethnic minority backgrounds disproportionately. The Independent Office for Police Conduct reported in 2022 that Black people were seven times more likely to be searched than white people in the year ending March 2021, and that people of Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds were two-and-a-half times

more likely to be stopped and searched, whilst raising the case of a Black boy who had been stopped more than 60 times between the ages of 14 and 16.¹²⁴ In Khan's novel, being stopped is a "rite of manhood", with the police described as "London's largest gang", suggesting an abuse of power that intimidates rather than prevents crime (130). Ishaq's criticism of the police is undergirded by his knowledge of the heavy sentences given to British Asian men in the aftermath of the Bradford riots, and the shooting of Charles De Menezes, a Brazilian man killed on the London Underground after wrongly being identified as a fugitive London bomber in 2005. He situates their arrest in the wider context of structural racism so that readers are encouraged to reflect on what underscores the need for community organisation. Ishaq's knowledge of his rights as a citizen are contrasted with police ignorance and abuse when he tells them "[t]his isn't pick and mix" as they try to charge him under Section 44 despite initially relying on Section 60 (137). He has gathered his knowledge in support groups and from leaflets shared in the study circle to guide young Muslims how to respond to unjust criminalisation.

At the police station, Ishaq and Marwane are processed and released while, unbeknownst to them, Shams undergoes an interrogation by an MI5 officer because suspicion about his activities and his friendships are read as signs of radicalism. Khan's depiction of the interrogation shares parallels with another scene in which he

¹²⁴ Andre Rhoden-Paul, "Stop and search: Ethnic minorities unfairly targeted by police – watchdog," *BBC News*, 20/4/2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61167875> accessed 16/2/2024.

imagines a meeting between Ayub and Simon, another security service officer, provoking a contrastive reading between the context of surveillance of Ayub and surveillance of Shams. Both officers establish familiarity by false friendship and pleasantries. Theodore tells Shams “[d]on’t worry, I just want to get to know you. Nothing sinister”, while Simon tells Ayub “it would be good to have a chat” (141, 225). The effort to come across as neutral and friendly may be read as a byproduct of the British government’s claim that Prevent is non-partisan, undermined in the literature which associates terrorist threats with Islam, identifies scripture as a source, and spins and literalises Islamic texts as evidence of radicalisation.¹²⁵ In official discourse, young Muslims are pathologised as psychologically ‘vulnerable’ to radicalisation, a tenuous justification for pre-emptive surveillance and racial profiling.¹²⁶ This shapes Theodore’s line of questioning when accusing Shams of spending time with “extremist” groups that picket dead soldiers in a way that he asserts is reprehensible to “normal British people”, basing his words on an imagined consensus aligned with putative ‘shared values’ (142-143). The ‘friendship’ Theodore attempts to strike up does not broaden his understanding of Shams but has the opposite effect of making Shams defensive. In my reading, Theodore’s security

¹²⁵ Vicki Coppock, Surinder Guru and Tony Stanley, “On becoming ‘radicalised’: Pre-emptive surveillance and intervention to save the young Muslim in the UK,” *Governing Youth Politics in the Age of Surveillance*, Maria Grasso and Judith Bessant eds. (London: Routledge, 2018), 110.

¹²⁶ HM Government, Prevent strategy. London: The Stationery Office, 2011; HM Government, Channel: Vulnerability Assessment Framework. London: The Stationery Office, 2012.

agenda thwarts empathy, so much so that he only read Shams as malignant and cannot comprehend his fear. But their misunderstanding is far from equal. For Shams and Ayub, their futures are at stake. Simon embodies white privilege, manipulating Ayub by playing with sugar cubes whenever Ayub is speaking, until Ayub realises that attempts to argue are futile:

He wished to tell the man in front of him that they were the children of partition, colonialism, immigration, racism, and terrorism. That every part of them was formed in an act of violence whether physical or verbal, over generations. That they lived in constant convulsions of which glib Little Englanders like Simon, with their parochial view of humanity, had absolutely no comprehension (225-226, 231).

The burden that British Asian men carry as dramatised in these episodes is not understood by authority figures. Simon's gifting to Ayub of Jeremy Paxman's book *The English* (2007) is symbolic of the imbalance of power: while Ayub must understand Simon's perspective in order to be vigilant, Simon does not need to care about Ayub's feelings or experiences — and Simon sees all Ayub's other friends as conspiratorial. The quotidian nature of their interaction — in a café conversing as “old friends” — serves to underline that what can appear as a friendship from the outside can mask a gulf of difference (224).

The interrogation of Shams is the catalyst for the breakdown of trust and friendship that dominates the second half of *The Study Circle*. After admitting to

Mujahid that he has been questioned by MI5, and to displace Mujahid's suspicion that he is an informant, Shams lies that Ishaq reported him, a decision he immediately regrets (180). Fearing that he and his family are endangered because of Ishaq, Mujahid slashes Ishaq's arm with a blade during a confrontation. Mujahid tells Shams "[a]ggression respects only aggression. ... I wasn't always this way. You put up a front, pretend you're tough, pretend it doesn't hurt, pretend you're not fussed, then all of a sudden it's all good" (180). Aggression is couched as the defence of reputation and family, and comparable to Ishaq's sense of life on the estate that "[i]f you were soft on small incursions, your block could get altogether too hospitable a reputation around the estate and be infested by druggies, and other undesirables squatting" (34-35). But Ishaq reads Mujahid as "playing-up to an imposed identity" (216). British Muslim men are sensationalised and demonised in numerous ways – as angry and dangerous men, book-burners, rioters and advocates of terrorism, 'hypervisible' within these narrow parameters but 'invisible' outside of these parameters.¹²⁷ Even when they talk alone, Ishaq is unable to breach the barriers that Mujahid puts up and when Mujahid cries Ishaq cannot comfort him because he is certain that Mujahid would see empathy as "weakness or subterfuge" (93). The upshot is a stunted connection even when Marwane invokes Mujahid's past to

¹²⁷ Louise Archer, "Race, 'Face' and Masculinity: The Identities and Local Geographies of Muslim Boys," *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale eds (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 75.

remind him of their past friendship: “you used to come to the halaqah. Why you acting like this?” (218).

The nostalgia for childhood friendships with which Khan imbues the novel is a choice to remember childhood as a simpler and happier time when faced with the complexity and confusion of the present. Throughout the novel, Ishaq encounters different white characters with whom he shares a childhood friendship, such as Pauline, now “an ersatz facsimile of the ferocious woman his childhood knew”, and Frankie, a drug addict whose deterioration is the result of a hard life on the estate (169). Though a close friendship no longer seems possible, Ishaq feels an affinity with Frankie and with a young woman, Rice, because they are working class: “[h]e felt. Something. That these two were of his tribe” (37). At university Ishaq understands “working class types like him who wanted to get on”, while middle-class students live “separate human realities” (59-61). Khan explores how disenfranchisement fractures working-class solidarity. Charlie, a member of the EDL who Ishaq also remembers as a child, moves away as part of the ‘white flight’ that takes some families beyond the neighbourhood, and lacks a subcultural outlet for the anger he feels. While Khan stops short of a sympathetic portrayal, he suggests that Charlie’s racism scapegoats a loss of identity on the estate. Khan suggests that divisions among the working class, and the racist attitudes of some, are the effects of social processes such as gentrification and increased economic inequality. Groups like the EDL exploit misguided anger, but they are also emblematic of a narrowing

of the terms of debate and promulgate an image of working-class white people that is analogous to British Muslims and Black Britons.

Organisation and protest are increasingly politicised and policed. Ishaq cannot escape how Muslims are represented and Khan claims that his characters are “sensitive to representations of themselves as a body” and “inhabit all of this complexity”.¹²⁸ He contends with dominant representations in ways that can only be achieved in fiction, personalising multiple ways in which media reactions to atrocities involving a tiny number of Muslim perpetrators result in all Muslims being targeted and “mosque telephones ping[ing] with death threats” (277). After the murder of Lee Rigby in South London on 22nd May 2013, Harun Khan, of the Muslim Council of Britain, said “we were conscious ... that the suspects had used Islamic words, and these would be used to demonise Muslims”, as he condemned the killing.¹²⁹ Fiyaz Mughal, of Tell MAMA, a site where Islamophobic attacks can be reported, said that in the six weeks after Rigby’s murder there were 162 cases, “from hijab and niqab pulling, to graffiti on mosques and cars. One man entered a mosque armed with knives. Mosques have been attacked with petrol bombs”.¹³⁰ A 2022 study conducted by MEND revealed that 42% of mosques had been attacked since 2019 in

¹²⁸ Haroun Khan, “My Political Novel,” Dead Ink Books, 17/8/2017, <https://deadinkbooks.com/my-political-novel-by-haroun-khan/> accessed 28/4/2024.

¹²⁹ Harun Khan quoted in Shelina Janmohamed, “Woolwich attack: ‘Muslims are free of guilt. We had to condemn this killing’,” *The Guardian*, 26/05/2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/26/muslim-community-responds-woolwich-killing> accessed 16/2/2024.

¹³⁰ Fiyaz Mughal quoted in Janmohamed, “Woolwich attack: ‘Muslims are free of guilt. We had to condemn this killing’”.

racially motivated incidents.¹³¹ In a novel that encompasses this context, characters like Ishaq are pushed to think about how to improve conditions and mirror their parents' hope that education results in social mobility and a better life. The burden of responsibility that Ishaq bears often comes at the expense of fun and light-heartedness and contributes to the breakdown of some friendships in the novel. Ishaq recalls talking to Abdul-Majid about *Star Wars* and how they watch *The Wrath of Khan* (1982) together, but divergent views of Islam stymie the connection (72). A woman on the estate named tells Ishaq that a childhood friend Lucy "asks about you every time I go up" to visit— but there is no further mention of Lucy (170). The dearth of references to romantic relationships may lead readers to wonder whether a male friendship circle inhibits potential relationships, or friendships with women, but it may also undergird the many issues that young British Asian men face before they are in a position to be able to support homes and families: surveillance, suspicion, criminalisation, police harassment, as well as reduced chances in the labour market.

Mujahid's violence and Shams' lie mark a turning point for Ishaq. He begins to question whether his friendships and the study circle may be futile. He tells Shams, "I've got a chance to do something more with my life. Something small that can take our people forward" and hopes to pursue an academic career in which he

¹³¹ "UK's first-ever survey details attacks on mosques, Islamic bodies," *Al Jazeera*, 8/7/2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/7/8/uks-first-ever-survey-details-attacks-on-mosques-islamic-bodies> accessed 16/2/2024.

will focus on Muslims in Britain (263-64). It is an ambition that is not available to Shams, even as a dream. The friends are at odds because events have taken them on divergent paths so that they become “[d]istorted mirrors” to each other (299). In a final epiphany Ishaq realises he has taken “the world’s problems on his shoulders” to help his friends, but that in the process he has lost sight of the meanings he derives from close friendship (301). What is experienced as an impasse for Ishaq and Shams is symbolic of an uncertain political future for British Muslims, a tension left hanging in the novel’s tragic conclusion. Caught in the crowds of the EDL protest and kettled by the police, Ishaq spots Shams, and after a struggle Shams stabs Ishaq in what appears to be an accident. Wounded, Ishaq is killed by a policeman. The exact circumstances of his death are left unclear, but in the Epilogue, Shams is in prison, his jailing, it is suggested, the result of his attendance at the protest which the MI5 officer instructed him not to join. He tells Marwane that the police covered up Ishaq’s murder by pinning it on someone else, but circumstances remain unclear and uncertain just as Shams and Marwane’s friendship is. Readers are left to wonder how what has happened impacts Ishaq’s family, the study circle and the estate. After following him through the novel, Khan leaves readers with the death of Ishaq. Before he is murdered, Ishaq resolves to study for a PhD and to “try to help resurrect the youth centre project. It would be something that he could get Shams involved in, too” (287-288). But in the Epilogue Shams’ claim that “Muslim bros” are helping him survive in prison and that “you do need to be part of a group in here to survive” undermines the empowerment Ishaq envisions, a poignancy broken only by the

adhan being called at the prison, “the sonorous sound of the promise, the call of awareness, the call to good” (316, 319). If friendship in this novel is a microcosm of the many and complex issues that British Muslim men are forced to confront, the death of Ishaq and imprisonment of Shams point to the limits of individual agency in the face of structural injustices, but in spite of division and hostility, friendship and faith may still offer the only hope and possibility for redemption.

Conclusion

During a discussion about the future of dissent in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) Rob Nixon asks, “[h]ow will writers, photographers, video artists, podcasters, and bloggers navigate the possibilities—and possible perils—opened up by a new media culture characterized both by extensive, instant connectivity and by impatient, distractive staccato rhythms?” His concern is the less visible, long standing ‘slow violence’ perpetrated by transnational corporations through long-term processes such as deforestation and mineral extraction, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive”.¹ I would extend Nixon’s critical intervention into environmentalism to think about the insidious and slow violence of Islamophobia, a discourse that draws on spectacular and singular events and images, like 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, while its long term effects on ordinary Muslims are largely ignored.

Nixon’s question suggests how rapidly representational forms are changing as a result of new digital media; the immediacy and prevalence of short-form ways of communicating on the internet brings new challenges as well as opportunities. Organisations like Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) and Tell MAMA

¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 276, 2.

(Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) are turning to social media for their campaigns in an effort to reach a wider audience and educate the general public about Islamophobia. Conversely, reliance on short-form media has led to widespread disinformation. A case in point is the aftermath of Hamas' attack on Israel on 7th October 2023, when unconfirmed reports emerged stating that Hamas militants had decapitated and burned 40 babies. Without any verification, claims about "40 murdered babies" went 'viral' and were repeated by celebrities and politicians on the social media site X, where they received 44 million impressions or views, 300,000 likes, and more than 100,000 reposts.² As Jasmin Zine points out, regardless of where conspiracies and scare stories originate or their lack of veracity, they eventually come to be regarded by many of the people who read them "as social facts" and in times of war they are mobilised precisely because "the ability to authorize wholesale violence relies on circulating dehumanizing tropes".³ Zine calls attention to scare stories that promulgate the notion of folk devils, paving the way for politicians to describe Palestinians as "bloodthirsty monsters" and "human animals".⁴ The impact

² This claim was made by Marc Owen Jones, Associate Professor of Middle East studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar and quoted in: Kat Tenbarger and Melissa Chan, "Unverified reports of '40 babies beheaded' in Israel-Hamas war inflame social media," *NBC News*, 12/10/2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/unverified-allegations-beheaded-babies-israel-hamas-war-inflame-social-media-rcna119902> accessed 13/4/2024.

³ For a detailed analysis of online Islamophobia see also: Irene Zempi and Imran Awan, *Islamophobia: Lived Experiences of Online and Offline Victimisation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2016)

⁴ Jasmin Zine, "How Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism are manufactured through disinformation," *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-islamophobia-and-anti-palestinian-racism-are-manufactured-through-disinformation-216119> accessed 13/4/2024; Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu described Hamas as "bloodthirsty monsters". Paul Rogers, "Israel's assault on Gaza provides breeding ground for Hamas,"

of such rhetoric has been felt in Britain, where anti-Muslim hate crimes more than tripled between October 2023 and February 2024 and included death threats to worshippers at a mosque, as well as violent assaults and abuse.⁵

Already 7th October is being invoked in official language and rhetoric that connect it to the 'war on terror' in the way that other dates, 9/11 and 7/7, became egregious shorthand. In Britain, the attacks are referenced when attempts are made to condemn protests against genocide in Israel and to stifle public debate. When Suella Braverman criticised pro-Palestine demonstrators, she described them as "Islamists" and stated "[t]o my mind there is only one way to describe those marches: they are hate marches".⁶ The constructed spectacle of the violent Muslim is being mobilised and exploited through such dangerous rhetoric, and a high wave of Islamophobia has risen in political discourse in the months since the attacks. In February 2024, the Conservative candidate in the London mayoral election, Susan Hall, was accused of Islamophobia by the Labour Party, pointing to evidence uncovered by the campaign group Hope Not Hate which included her endorsements

openDemocracy, 18/10/2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/hamas-israel-palestine-war-breeding-ground-new-recruits-paul-rogers/> accessed 13/4/2024; Israel's Defence Minister Yoav Gallant described Palestinians living in Gaza as "human animals". The New Arab Staff London, "Israel defence minister Yoav Gallant calls Palestinians in Gaza "human animals", orders total siege," *The New Arab*, 10/10/2023, <https://www.newarab.com/video/israel-defence-minister-calls-palestinians-gaza-human-animals> accessed 13/4/2024.

⁵ Sara Monetta, "Anti-Muslim cases surge in UK since Hamas attacks, charity finds," *BBC News*, 22/2/2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-68374372> accessed 13/4/2024.

⁶⁶ Suella Braverman quoted in Rajeev Syal, Dan Sabbagh and Kiran Stacey, "Suella Braverman calls pro-Palestine demos 'hate marches'," *The Guardian*, 30/10/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/30/uk-ministers-cobra-meeting-terrorism-threat-israel-hamas-conflict-suella-braverman> accessed 20/4/2024.

of tweets. One with an image of Enoch Powell featured the words: “[i]t’s never too late to get London back”, and another by far-right influencer Katie Hopkins described Sadiq Khan as “mayor of Londonistan”.⁷ As Pankaj Mishra observed when Brexiteers won, it suggested that Powellism had won too: “English nationalism turns sadistically against those Powell stigmatised as hostile aliens”. Mishra points to the slow but steady “hardening of Powellite verities into bien pensant opinion”.⁸ The targeting of Muslims has not been limited to insidious rhetoric and smear attempts. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, unveiled a new definition of extremism in March 2024, claiming that the Muslim Association of Britain, Cage and MEND all “give rise to concern for their Islamist orientation and views” and promising they would be held to account.⁹ Despite expressing concerns about the implications of the new definition, the Labour Party also adopted a policy of not engaging with MEND.¹⁰ In a statement published on its website, MEND responded:

⁷ Ben Quinn, “Labour demands Tory London mayor candidate apologise for ‘Islamophobia’,” *The Guardian*, 27/2/2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/27/labour-demands-tory-london-mayor-candidate-susan-hall-apologise-for-islamophobia> accessed 16/4/24; Gregory Davis, “Susan Hall: Conservative candidate for London Mayor’s social media exposed,” *Hope Not Hate*, 15/9/2023, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2023/09/15/susan-hall-conservative-candidate-for-london-mayors-social-media-exposed/> accessed 16/4/2024.

⁸ Pankaj Mishra, “Time’s Up,” *The Guardian*, 7/12/2019, 11. (7-11)

⁹ Paul Seddon & Dominic Casciani, “Michael Gove names groups as he unveils extremism definition,” BBC News, 14/3/2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68564577> accessed 14/4/2024.

¹⁰ Charles Hymas, “Labour cuts ties with organisation named as Islamist by Gove,” *The Telegraph*, 1/4/2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/04/01/labour-cuts-ties-with-muslim-organisation-named-as-islamist/> accessed 14/4/2024.

The new definition is a blatant attack on civil liberties and free speech. It is a highly politicised and undemocratic polemic aimed at trying to exclude and ostracise peaceful and law-abiding Muslim organisations that have been critical of the government from having a voice. Labelling groups that are critical of Government policy as ‘extremist’ is a lazy and convenient way of avoiding dialogue. It is a tactic more suited to stifling dissent in authoritarian repressive regimes than used to silence those exposing UK Government complicity in the Gaza genocide. Extremism policies undermine basic freedoms and lend the state arbitrary power to sanction any dissenting citizen.¹¹

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was also targeted by the government when the Ministry of Defence decided to end its twelve-year relationship with the organisation. Zara Mohammed, the MCB’s Secretary General, expressed bafflement at the decision, describing it as “barking [mad]”, and suggesting that the MCB was an easy target for scapegoating: “I think we are a very suitable political punchbag and that’s what we’re seeing right now. The Muslim Council of Britain is always being targeted. I think there’s this ongoing theme of demonising Muslims”. She shared her personal experience too when adding that since the 7th October attack she

¹¹ “PRESS RELEASE: Politicising dissent – MEND calls for rejection of Gove’s new extremist definition,” Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), 14/3/2024, <https://www.mend.org.uk/mend-calls-for-rejection-of-goves-new-extremist-definition/> accessed 14/4/2024.

is continually asked to prove that she is not an extremist.¹² If the government decides what constitutes extremism on these grounds, it creates and risks more division.

Worryingly, these developments seem to signal a return to the Manichean rhetoric of the 'war on terror', when President George W. Bush stressed "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists".¹³ Whether these are merely some examples of hardline Conservative Party attitudes or part of a broader trend in government policy remains to be seen at the time of writing.

The Labour Party has alienated many Muslim members and potential voters with its stance on the war in Gaza. When Party leader Sir Keir Starmer was asked in an LBC radio interview whether he thought it was appropriate for Israel to cut off power and water to Palestinians in Gaza, he replied, "I think that Israel does have that right".¹⁴ Despite clarifying that he meant Israel has the right to self-defence, his response angered many Britons and, for some, this was compounded by his Party's refusal to call for a ceasefire, leading to resignations, including that of the Muslim

¹² Zara Mohammed quoted in Daniel Boffey, "'We're a political punchbag': Muslim Council chief baffled by MoD move to cut ties," *The Guardian*, 14/3/2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/14/zara-mohammed-muslim-council-chief-baffled-mod-move-cut-ties> accessed 14/4/2024.

¹³ President George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," United States Capitol, Washington D.C., 20/9/2001, The White house Archives online at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> accessed 14/4/2024.

¹⁴ Asher McShane, "Israel 'has the right' to withhold power and water from Gaza, says Sir Keir Starmer," *LBC*, 11/10/2023, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/sir-keir-starmer-hamas-terrorism-israel-defend-itself/> accessed 6/5/2024.

MP for Bradford East, Imran Hussain.¹⁵ Labour lost the support of Muslims who made the decision to end their Party membership then.¹⁶ British Muslims have historically been more likely to vote for Labour in general elections and some 'safe' Labour seats are held by Muslim MPs, but it is now unclear which Party is adequately equipped to represent the interests of Muslims, or to tackle the problem of Islamophobia in the UK. The risk is that Muslims are made politically homeless and lose Parliamentary representation, or worse still that the 'Muslim vote' becomes associated only with support for Palestinians, rather than the many other issues that concern them as Britons, contributing to the narrowing and 'framing' agenda being constructed by some pundits in the media and by some politicians. This issue was brought to the fore with George Galloway's victory in the 2024 Rochdale by-election. Tellingly, after his swearing-in ceremony as an MP, Galloway told a press conference that the next election "will be about Muslims". He was unequivocal in stating his belief that Rishi Sunak had "identified Muslims and Gaza as the proximate centre of that wedge issue that he intends to use as perhaps his only hope of re-election".¹⁷ If

¹⁵ Alasdair Soussi, "Labour's refusal to call for Gaza ceasefire derails UK opposition party," *Al Jazeera*, 8/11/2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/8/labour-leaders-refusal-to-call-for-gaza-ceasefire-derails-opposition-party> accessed 15/4/2024.

¹⁶ Samira Shackle, "In a London borough home to many Muslims, Labour loses appeal over Gaza," *Al Jazeera*, 15/2/2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/15/in-a-london-borough-home-to-many-muslims-labour-loses-appeal-over-gaza> accessed 15/4/2024.

¹⁷ Amy Gibbons, "Next election will be about Muslims, says Galloway," *The Telegraph*, 4/3/2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/03/04/george-galloway-election-muslims-rishi-sunak-rochdale/> accessed 20/4/2024.

this view holds any legitimacy at all, it suggests a cynical view of Muslims as a homogenous voting bloc whose interests can be manipulated by Party politics.

How contemporary British novelists have approached the “clash of civilisations” narrative and the framing of Muslims as violent has been traced throughout this thesis and, collectively, the selected authors and texts suggest a deliberate movement away from what Haroun Khan describes as the “entrapping external gaze” that is brought to the fore in responses to singular events (‘honour killings’, terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims) and through pervasive negative stereotypes of violent Islamists or oppressed Muslim women that do little more than project “an outsider’s anxieties and their own pathologies”.¹⁸ When events that are spun as “singular” are depicted in the novels I foreground, they are always made peripheral because these writers privilege the inner lives of protagonists and ensure that events are focalised through their relationships. In *The Road from Damascus*, when Sami watches the attacks on the World Trade Centre unfold on the television, with Muntaha at her father’s house, his initial feeling is “an intestinal rush of excitement, something like worthiness and justification”, and he speculates on this as an emotional response to military expansion and foreign intervention perpetrated across the world by the United States to “[u]ndermine popular governments and prop up hated dictatorships. Put the bullets in the guns which kill Palestinians.

¹⁸ Haroun Khan, “My Political Novel,” Dead Ink Books, 17/8/2017, <https://deadinkbooks.com/my-political-novel-by-haroun-khan/> accessed 9/5/2024.

Export their films to everywhere, in every one of which they're the heroes".¹⁹ But, this scene is also an important moment in which Sami reconnects with his wife after a period of separation, with even this event which supercharged Islamophobia configured as the backdrop to their relationship. In *Song of Gulzarina*, Tariq Mehmood has Saleem sitting in a pub with his friend George when the attacks occur on September 11, 2001. George changes immediately as a result. His suspicion of Saleem and refusal to associate with him afterwards is sadly indicative of how the post-9/11 hysteria impacted lives and of the increasing public subscription to Islamophobia. In Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* when Natasha thinks of Saddam Hussain's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, it is not the event on which she reflects but her shame at being taunted at school in Scotland for simply having a Muslim name. In *The Study Circle*, terrorist attacks feature for how they blight the London community at the centre of the novel. It is targeted in the aftermath: "[w]hen a Muslim, however distant, carried out an atrocity, mosque telephones pinged with death threats".²⁰ A mosque in the neighbourhood, a visible and hospitable place that is open to non-Muslims, has to be protected and obscured by protective railings, and Ishaq worries how to explain to his mother that sensationalist newspaper articles are vilifying Muslims. In this way and many others, these novelists bring forward the often-overlooked perspectives of myriad British Muslims, probe how events are felt by

¹⁹ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 316.

²⁰ Haroun Khan, *The Study Circle* (Liverpool: Dead Ink Books, 2018), 277.

ordinary Muslims, and afford ways for diverse readers to reflect on this and other ways in which all British Muslims are positioned egregiously as ‘other’.

In an age of post-truth, fake news, and political upheaval, British Muslim writers have been moving away from the irreverent, bold, comedic approach popularised by Hanif Kureishi. The extent to which this has been by choice or by necessity is a point of contention raised in this thesis. Certainly, marketing demands play a part. Bradford born novelist M. Y. Alam included a biographical statement in his novel *Kilo* (2002) that is an attempt at biting humour: “[h]e is ... considering growing a neat but thick Magnum PI-style moustache. As yet, however, he is not thinking about growing a beard and blowing himself up in a busy shopping mall although he might just do that in order to boost the sales of this book”.²¹ Alam’s novel focuses on the drug trade in Bradford, challenges stereotypes of Islam and religious practice, and fictionalises Bradford’s Mirpuri community, but his later novel *Red Laal* (2012) overtly reflects on post-9/11 Islamophobia and terrorism, because by that time “Tommy Taliban and Betty Burkha had taken centre stage”. In some ways, his later novel mirrors Tariq Mehmood’s writing in *Song of Gulzarina*.²² In

²¹ M. Y. Alam, *Kilo* (Glasshoughton, Yorkshire: Route, 2002), np.

²² As Claire Chambers observes, “[in *Kilo*, Alam] only examines religious practice in so far as it relates to communitarian behaviour such as the ‘abstinence, inner reflection and devotion’ associated with Ramadan. ... However, in *Red Laal* (2012), his only fully post-9/11 novel, readers witness Alam’s developing interest in what has happened ‘since Tommy Taliban and Betty Burkha had taken centre stage’, namely the twenty-first-century rise in Islamophobia and apprehensions about terrorism”. Claire Chambers, “‘Burmington? Nottinggaon? Biradforrd?’: British Asian Noir Depictions of Bradford,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Volume 56:3 (2020), 265; M. Y. Alam, *Red Laal* (Pontefract: Route, 2012), p. 28.

novels that pre-date 9/11, 'militant Islamists' and 'Islamic terrorists' are often depicted as ridiculous, fumbling characters, as are the character of Millat in *White Teeth* (2000) and Shahid's friends in *The Black Album* (1995). In a reading that brings together *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *White Teeth*, and Kureishi's 'My Son the Fanatic' (1994), Helga Ramsey-Kurtz argues:

[T]he deadly seriousness with which Tavleen, Millat, and Ali pronounce their readiness to die for their causes, if taken entirely seriously by Rushdie, Smith, and Kureishi, would dramatically constrict the narratives' scope to a single trajectory and thereby yield a rather stereotyped interpretation of the characters' aggression. The authors escape this limitation by implicitly insisting on the importance of *not* being earnest, which their characters fail to understand.

Ramsey-Kurtz suggests that they all posit humour as a powerful "antidote to dogma".²³ In fiction after 9/11, however, Muslim writers have been less concerned with undermining stereotype and more focussed on adding complexity to the portrayal. When Mehmood uses humour in the final third of *Song of Gulzarina* he draws attention to an effect similar to self-fulfilling prophecy provoked by negative stereotypes because Saleem is so embittered by his circumstances that he makes self-referential jokes based on popular perceptions of Muslims as terrorists. He tells one

²³ Helga Ramsey-Kurtz, "Humouring the terrorists or the terrorised? Militant Muslims in Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and Hanif Kureishi," *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein eds. (New York: BRILL, 2005), 85.

woman on his way to the Labour Party Conference, “I am a suicide bomber, madam”, and recounts for a police officer that he is “nearly done” with a trolley containing explosives.²⁴ Mehmood’s depiction points to the limits of satire that only serves to reinforce archetypal framing narratives. How humour figures in British Muslim fiction is changing as writers enact a slow, sustained engagement with such difficult issues as terrorism and fundamentalism imaginatively, emotionally and politically.

In my view, the move is towards more thoughtful, introspective fiction. When Sukhdev Sandhu reviewed Guy Gunaratne’s novel *Mister, Mister* (2023), for example, he observed in passing that, “[h]istorically, British Asian writing has been preoccupied with finding one’s voice, making a noise, becoming politically audible”. He described Gunaratne’s novel as very different for how it “gestures towards a new aesthetic imperative. Ellipses, tactical disappearance, strength in muteness”.²⁵ Separately and together, the complexity of debates circulating around Muslims in Britain today is at the centre of the meditative prose that characterises the novels in this thesis, prose that is thought-provoking and often quiet. The term quietism is sometimes applied to religious mysticism, such as Sufism, to convey the importance of inner reflection, and it is exemplified in Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies* through the character of Malak who rejects political forms of Islam in favour of

²⁴ Mehmood, *Song of Gulzarina*, 172, 176.

²⁵ Sukhdev Sandhu, “Mister, Mister by Guy Gunaratne review – a terror suspect’s story,” *The Guardian*, 24/5/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/may/24/mister-mister-by-guy-gunaratne-review-a-terror-suspects-story> accessed 30/3/2024.

Sufism and guides Natasha towards a reappraisal of her Islamic faith. Some critics have criticised Aboulela's 'quietism' as a means of deflecting political questions.²⁶ However, a quiet mode in literature affords writers and readers the opportunity to explore spirituality and lived faith beyond the noise of contemporary debates. In her study *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (2017) Rachel Sykes discerns "a slow, contemplative prose style" in contemporary fiction that "denies the teleological drive to conclusion by largely eschewing narrative event" and finds that "one idea is common to all discussions of quiet fiction: if society is noisy, then quiet becomes a much rarer commodity".²⁷ The quiet novel, then, may begin to be understood as a reaction to and in contrast with the noise that can predominate in other kinds of fictions. Sykes makes this case when arguing that the '9/11 novel' in particular "embodies an aesthetic of anxiety and noise" and that novels by John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Jonathan Safran Foer, among other examples, just create "yet more noise". Quiet novels exude more measured reflection because they often "evade residual expectations that fiction must represent topical event in order to speak of and to the present".²⁸

²⁶ Eva Hunter criticises Aboulela's "quietist 'solution'" in *Minaret*, arguing "perhaps to forestall Islamophobic responses from readers who perceive her religion as linked to violence, she advocates for her female characters of faith an Islamic form of quietism, their withdrawal dovetailing with patriarchal views of the virtuous conduct required of women." Eva Hunter, "The Muslim 'Who Has Faith' in Leila Aboulela's Novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2009)," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 25:1 (2013): 97–98.

²⁷ Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 17, 16.

²⁸ Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel*, 58, 68, 69.

While I am hesitant to suggest that any of the novels in this thesis are entirely 'quiet', they bear many of the qualities that typify the quiet novel as Sykes describes it. At times, these qualities and characteristics appear through the effect of contrast. Towards the beginning of *The Road from Damascus*, for example, Sami is researching his PhD thesis, recording the bustle of shisha cafés and vendors on Edgware Road in London, then procrastinating in Morocco and Paris where the noise emanating from his surroundings mirrors his chaotic and frenetic state of mind: "he smoked, he drank, he avoided things".²⁹ By the end of the novel, though, having rekindled his relationship with Muntaha, Sami is in the Scottish countryside where he finds he "no longer experienced body-claustrophobia, but something like its opposite, a sense of openness and space".³⁰ Creating space and taking the time for contemplation allows Sami to reflect and reevaluate his relationship with Muntaha, his feelings about his parents, and his views on religion. Similarly, *The Kindness of Enemies* moves from the busy streets of Khartoum in a tumultuous Sudan to a tranquil scene at Dunnottar castle in Scotland at the novel's end, with Natasha's research emphasising the spiritual life of Imam Shamil in contradistinction to the heavily politicised context of Islam in contemporary Britain. Nadeem Aslam explores silence in multiple and different ways in a quiet enclave in a Northern English town in *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

²⁹ Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus*, 36.

³⁰ Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus*, 347.

In one passage, the neighbourhood is personified and described entirely in terms of sound:

this neighbourhood that is noisy: it manages to make a crunching sound when it eats a banana and its birds bicker like inter-racial couples. Speaking up is a necessity because the neighbourhood is deaf after thirty years of factory work, and it stirs its tea for minutes on end as though there are pebbles at the bottom of the cup instead of grains of sugar. But the neighbourhood is also quiet: it hoards its secrets, unwilling to let on the pain in its breast. Shame, guilt, honour and fear are like padlocks hanging from the mouths. No one makes a sound in case it draws attention. No one speaks. No one breathes. The place is bumpy with buried secrets and problems swept under the carpets.³¹

Aslam posits this neighbourhood as quiet not as a result of the pensive silence that occurs in some quiet fiction but as a result of a community's fear of being seen to transgress boundaries and become the subject of gossip. This is expressed through Shamas when his desire for Suraya is coupled with "fear that someone had seen her talking to him" and he feels that to speak to her would equate to crossing a boundary: "[h]e must try to remain quiet and not point out any more books to her".³²

³¹ Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (London: Faber & Faber), 45.

³² Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, 162, 164.

Silence is an effect of Islamophobia in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. It is evident in the passive response of passengers when a white racist verbally abuses a bus driver, and the presence of National Front graffiti on a wall that hints at the longstanding racism in the town. For some characters, noise masks problems. Kaukab feels the pain of loneliness after her children leave home and thrives on neighbourhood gossip. Mah-Jabin cannot bear the introspection that silence brings: she “never telephones home if she knows there would be idle or free time after the call to dwell on the conversation: she always makes sure there is an activity lined up for immediately afterwards”.³³ Shamas’ act of solitary reading works to articulate a binary distinction between his discerning, critical practice of reading and what is suggested as the uncritical reading practice of his wife Kaukab, who reads the Qur’an in Arabic, a language she does not understand, and relies on the advice of local clerics to direct how she reads. Shamas prefers the quiet space of a bookshop by the lake to the company of his wife, privileging his creativity over her study of Islamic orthodoxy. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, the murder of lovers Chanda and Jugnu — the main narrative ‘event’ — precedes what occurs in the novel, resulting in a narrative that speculates on the lives of the town’s inhabitants beyond the media spectacle of ‘honour killings’. This is similar to the ways in which *Akram’s War* and *The Song of Gulzarina* eschew ‘event’ to prioritise readerly focus on systemic inequalities, structural violence and the, sometimes hidden, histories of racism in Britain.

³³ Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, 325.

A quiet setting is underscored in *Akram's War* when Akram tells Grace about his life in the intimate space of her bedroom, which seems to afford him confidence to be honest and direct in communicating his thoughts and feelings. *Love Marriage* and *Asghar and Zahra* both draw from the 'domestic novel' and the 'family marriage plot' and Jane Austen and Edith Wharton's quintessentially quiet novels. Both Rahim and Ali gesture towards a deeper reading of other people beyond stereotypes and stereotypical assumptions. Yasmin, who struggles to make sense of her relationship with Joe and his mother, feels most at ease when in quiet companionship with her elderly patients. Asghar and Zahra retreat to the relative quiet of coffee shops and libraries to read and reflect. Revealingly, Zahra enjoys novels by Dorothy L. Sayers, whose 'golden age' detective fiction provides an escapist outlet and Asghar reads the Qur'an alone, in quiet devotion. In *The Study Circle*, an EDL protest that initially appears to be significant dissipates into a melée that leaves no resolution or easy answers to any of the problems that Khan's novel raises. In this way, the writers highlighted in this thesis seduce readers with familiar plot types and popular genres and narrative expectations but subvert familiarity by populating their novels with complex and multi-dimensional British Muslim characters as an antidote to— and critique of— the simplistic, trope-laden and egregious depictions that are so common in popular media and culture. The concern Rob Nixon has with distractive technologies, the idea with which this Conclusion opened, is shared by Rachel Sykes in her disquisition on contemporary fiction that is redolent of the "insistent beeps, flashing lights and bright screens [that are] characteristic of modern technologies"

and which now “pose a threat to formerly quiet environments”.³⁴ In this sense, these novels may be read as ‘slow’ as well as ‘quiet’ for the ways in which they focus secular liberalism, multiculturalism, and Islamophobia in thoughtful ways. In my reading, contemporary Muslim writers demonstrate a cognisance and complexity that emerges through close, slow reading.

Fundamentally, these novels are characterised by thoughtful and sensitive social realist portrayals of ordinary Muslims. This marks a change from writers who explored Muslim identity in comedies and magical realism. There is a much more serious and pressing concern about Islamophobia now and writers feel a responsibility to engage with it through fiction. This may be a trend because it is becoming notable in Young Adult and children’s fiction that addresses Islamophobia seriously and it is not limited to Britain. *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* (2021) by Pakistani American Saadia Faruqi is a Young Adult novel about Islamophobic bullying after 9/11, and how Bangladeshi American cartoonist Priya Huq explains the thinking behind her graphic novel *Piece by Piece, The Story of Nisrin’s Hijab* (2021) is telling: “I wanted to write something for young people that explained what life was like when I was their age”.³⁵ Among examples of life writing, Nadeine Asbali’s *Veiled Threat: On Being Visibly Muslim in Britain* (2024) has been recognised as “a sharp and illuminating examination” of how it feels to be a visibly Muslim woman in Britain,

³⁴ Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel*, 58.

³⁵ Priya Huq quoted in “Identity and Islamophobia in a Post-9/11 Graphic Novel for Teens,” *Yes Magazine*, 12/9/2021, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2021/09/12/9-11-islamophobia-identity-graphic-novel> accessed 21/4/2024.

“a nation intent on forced assimilation and integration and one that views covered bodies as primitive and dangerous”.³⁶ Mohsin Zaidi’s *A Dutiful Boy* (2020), a memoir about a gay man’s struggle for acceptance, is similarly illuminating; it dispenses with the clichés of second-generation Muslim narratives that eschew the values of the former generation in favour of assimilation, and is “anything but a tired reworking of racist tropes”, instead expounding on the “transformative power” of love, and all these texts are antithetical to the orientalist polemic of texts like Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *The Caged Virgin* (2004) and the ‘misery memoirs’ that became popular after 9/11.³⁷

Asked in 2021 whether he thought interesting stories were being told about British Asian lives, Kureishi said, “[t]here’s never been a proper Muslim drama on British television like, say, *The Sopranos*, with a really in-depth look at business and culture and relationships and marriage. I’d really like to see that”.³⁸ In effect, Kureishi has called for the kind of drama that is already emerging in literature. For

³⁶ Nadeine Asbali’s book is described by Biteback Publishing, online at: <https://www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/veiled-threat> accessed 21/4/2024.

³⁷ Ashish Ghadiali, “A Dutiful Boy by Mohsin Zaidi review – utterly compelling,” *The Guardian*, 25/8/2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/25/a-dutiful-boy-by-mohsin-zaidi-review-utterly-compelling> accessed 9/5/2024; Claire Chambers observes, “in much life writing by Muslims (especially ‘misery memoirs’ and male autobiographies about Islamism), the individual undergoes a transformative experience that tends to involve a turning away from Islam”. She examines how Yasmin Hai and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed counter this persistent trope in their writing. “Countering the ‘Oppressed, Kidnapped Genre’ of Muslim Life Writing: Yasmin Hai’s *The Making of Mr Hai’s Daughter* and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf*.” *Life Writing* 10:1 (2013): 77–96.

³⁸ Hanif Kureishi quoted in Arifa Akbar, “Hanif Kureishi: ‘I’d like to see a British Muslim Sopranos’,” *The Guardian*, 20/5/2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/may/20/hanif-kureishi-id-like-to-see-a-british-muslim-sopranos> accessed 21/4/2024.

Sairish Hussain, author of *Hidden Fires* (2024) the focus should be on “ordinary families”. Her novel about the Grenfell tower fire disaster in June 2017 was inspired by her “heart-wrenching” experience of witnessing the tragedy and its politicised aftermath in real-time during Ramadan, and she makes thought-provoking correlations with the impact of Partition in 1947.³⁹ Mariam Ansar’s writing is influenced by the ways in which her identity as a Muslim from Bradford was undermined in everyday situations while studying at Cambridge University. She even felt frustrated when speaking to fellow Muslim students, which seemed to require a certain code-switching from the way she spoke at home, “[i]f only to be heard beyond half-baked stereotypes; privileged braying laughter; the regional distinctions between people of colour”. Her Young Adult novel *Good for Nothing* (2023) imagines life in a Yorkshire town for young Muslim characters in ways that evoke her own experiences and those of the year 9 class she teaches, as well as the “silent majority” of Muslims who are rarely depicted in British fiction. In her view, “it is the job of the writer to notice what goes unnoticed - and, to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison: ‘to make the local global’”.⁴⁰ Local concerns with global reach are at the forefront of Mariam Pirbhai’s fiction. Pirbhai was deeply affected by a shooting in a mosque in Quebec in January 2017 and has shared that she felt

³⁹ Sairish Hussain quoted in Carys Vickers, “Hidden Fires: Interview with Sairish Hussain,” *New Writing North*, 8/12/2023, <https://newwritingnorth.com/journal/hidden-fires-interview-with-sairish-hussain/> accessed 21/4/2024.

⁴⁰ Mariam Ansar, “Good for Nothing: British Muslim author Mariam Ansar on skewing stereotypes,” *Middle East Eye*, 6/7/2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/good-for-nothing-book-mariam-ansar-bradford-global> accessed 11/5/2024.

compelled to write about the “escalation of violence and how it impacts those families”. In a novel that she entitles ironically *Isolated Incident* (2022), she imagines how second-generation Canadian Muslims react to a violent attack on a mosque in the Greater Toronto Area. All too aware that “[o]ne book is not going to change anything”, Pirbhai posits her fiction as “part of a larger conversation” in the belief — and the hope — that “art has a significant impact on representation. ... Each story we tell is an opportunity to widen the lens and perhaps have a more meaningful conversation”.⁴¹

British novelists are contributing to that conversation today meaningfully and innovatively, across an expanding and evolving range of representations that stretch from coming out novels like *This Way Out* (2022) by Tufayel Ahmed to Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) which has been described as a “Muslim Bridget Jones”.⁴² British Muslim writers are pushing readers to imagine Muslims and Islam in new ways. As new writers emerge, it will be interesting to see how far liberal paradigms are challenged as Islam is explored and understood as a dynamic resource for identity in multicultural Britain.

⁴¹ Mariam Pirbhai quoted in “New novel by Laurier Professor Mariam Pirbhai tackles Islamophobia through the eyes of young people,” Wilfred Laurier University, 20/10/2022, <https://www.wlu.ca/news/spotlights/2022/oct/new-novel-by-laurier-professor-mariam-pirbhai-tackles-islamophobia-through-the-eyes-of-young-people.html> accessed 21/4/2024.

⁴² “In Conversation With: Ayisha Malik Author *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*,” *Sonder & Tell*, 28/1/2019, <https://sonderandtell.com/2019/01/ayisha-malik/> accessed 12/5/2024.

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