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'Sexual misery' or 'happy British Muslims': Contemporary depictions of Muslim sexuality

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Abstract

We begin this article with a close look at some contemporary pictures of sexual life in the Muslim world that have been painted in certain sections of the Western media, asking how and why these pictures matter. Across a range of mainstream print media from the *New York Times* to the *Daily Mail*, and across reported events from several countries, can be found pictures of 'sexual misery'. These 'frame' Muslim men as tyrannical, Muslim women as downtrodden or exploited, and the wider world of Islam as culpable. Crucially, this is not the whole story. We then consider how these negative representations are being challenged and how they can be challenged further. In doing so, we will not simply set pictures of sexual misery against their binary opposites, namely pictures abounding in the promise of sexual happiness. Instead, we search for a more complex picture, one that unsettles stereotypes about the sexual

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lives of Muslims without simply idealising its subjects. This takes us to the journalism, life writing and creative non-fiction of Shelina Zahra Janmohamed and the fiction of Ayisha Malik and Amjeed Kabil. We read this long-form work critically, attending to manifest advances in depictions of the relationships of Muslim-identified individuals over the last decade or so, while also remaining alert to lacunae and limitations in the individual representations. More broadly, we hope to signal our intention to avoid both Islamophobia and Islamophilia in scrutinising literary texts.

Keywords

Muslim, sexualities, media, misery, happiness, literature, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, Ayisha Malik, Amjeed Kabil, Sara Ahmed

Introduction

Writing for the *New York Times* in February 2016, the French-Algerian writer Kamel Daoud painted a picture of ‘one of the great miseries plaguing’ Arab nations and indeed the Muslim world in general: ‘its sick relationship with women’ (2016b: n.p.). Daoud consequently located a series of sexual assaults within an expansive sexual ecology encompassing cultural, ethnic, national and religious groups, which he took to include Arabs, North Africans, refugees and, above all, Muslims. The sexual assaults examined in Daoud’s article had taken place in the German cities of Cologne, Hamburg and Stuttgart a month earlier. This article published in the *New York Times*, like many other reports and features disseminated across a number of different media platforms including newspapers and websites, communicated a seemingly coherent picture which appeared to explain the assaults with ease. It portrayed Muslim men as tyrannical, Muslim women as downtrodden or exploited, and the wider world of Islam as culpable (see also Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Daoud linked the actions of a small number of individuals to wider cultural and religious groups, beginning with the million or so refugees who had recently been granted asylum in Germany and extending to the wider Arab world, North African and Middle Eastern peoples and cultures, as well as to the Islamic world more broadly.

The counterpoint to the ‘miserable’ Muslims identified in the *New York Times* article was, of course, an equally stereotypical West. Daoud implicitly characterised the West as a culture and a people upholding values pertaining to gender equality and sexual harmony. In the context of powerful Orientalist myths about the Arab and Muslim world as a hotbed of repressed sexuality – which Daoud admittedly acknowledged – it was damaging that his article also employed the diction of contagion. It described the intersecting groups of Muslims and Arabs as sexually dangerous, their ‘sick relationship with women’ threatening the ‘healthy’ European body politic.¹ According to Daoud, a disease – implied

as sexual in nature – is ‘spreading to [Western] lands’. This ‘pathology’ is also broadening from a mental to a physical register, where its expressions range from hymen reconstruction surgery to the actions of suicide bombers (2016b: n.p.). It should not escape the reader’s notice that, both according to Daoud and amongst some of the Islamic religious authorities he decries, an emphasis on what is deemed ‘healthy’ and wholesome and what is labelled as ‘sick’ forms an ideological substratum for controlling what women do with their bodies and with whom. Small wonder that feminists and queer theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Ann Cvetkovich have called for the ‘depathologization’ (Cvetkovich, 2012: 5) of negative affects such as misery. These scholars have drawn attention to various manifestations of unhappiness as racialised categories associated with ‘melancholy migrants’ (Sara Ahmed, 2010a: 121–159). They posit that, in the context of (neo-)colonialism, such emotions are ‘not so much a medical or biochemical dysfunction as a very rational response to global conditions’ (Cvetkovich, 2012: 5). Accordingly, these theorists call for a recalibration of widespread, and potentially damaging, assumptions that happiness is automatically equated with the reductive concept of ‘good’ and misery is diametrically opposed as ‘bad’.

Returning to Daoud, his argumentational thrust is remarkably familiar. Indeed, this latest iteration of counterproductive stereotypes and sometimes wilful confusions can be traced back through European colonial histories. However, this moralistic discourse of difference has shifted and expanded over time, mapping onto contemporary developments and events. Kamel Daoud’s *New York Times* article reworked an original piece – ‘*Cologne, lieu de fantasmes*’ (2016a) – which the French newspaper *Le Monde* printed on 31 January 2016. These two articles were simply the latest instalments from a subgenre of journalism in which current events with broadly sexual content were, and indeed are, reported on and interpreted against a common backdrop or, as Edward Said put it (2003/1978), an imaginative geography. A jumbled picture of Arab and Islamic worlds is sketched on this backdrop, centring on North Africa and the Middle East and spilling over into any place where Arab and/or Muslim men come into contact with others. Such an imaginative geography exists primarily in the European mind, but it is mapped onto real people and places, forming the lens through which events are interpreted. This is a metaphorical place of misery, where tyrannical men objectify and exploit women and girls, both within and outside their own communities.

To understand this emphasis upon misery, it helps to focus more closely on Sara Ahmed, whose monograph *The Promise of Happiness* exposes an emotional apartheid in which unhappiness (or, in our case, misery) is kept quarantined as far away from happiness as possible:

[T]he very idea of contagion can be evoked in the self-regulation of feeling worlds. You might refuse proximity to somebody out of fear that you will be infected by unhappiness, or you might seek proximity to somebody out of hope that you will be infected by happiness. An affective geography of happiness takes shape. Unhappiness is pushed to the margins, which means certain bodies are pushed to the margins, in

order that the unhappiness that is assumed to reside within these bodies does not threaten the happiness that has been given. (2010a: 97–98)

Ahmed communicates that the much-vaunted affect of happiness, which is usually assumed to be within every individual's grasp, is intimately connected to privilege. Denying the significance of 'the hap of what happens' (2010a: 31, 33, 41) means that '[f]eelings can get stuck to certain bodies' (2010a: 69). Thus, happiness and misery map onto 'good' and 'bad' Muslims respectively, and in turn, as we will argue, 'good' and 'bad' Muslims map onto Islamophilia and Islamophobia.

At stake in Daoud's article, as in several other media reports and commentaries on the sexual assaults in Germany, is the creation of a composite category of the sexually rapacious refugee, Arab and/or Muslim man. As previously mentioned, the actions of relatively few individuals are axiomatically identified with this increasingly capacious and allegedly predatory group. Each of the subcategories matters, but one stands out as the usual suspect in this burgeoning genre of current affairs reporting: the Muslim man. In response to the *New York Times* article, a group of academics, including David Theo Goldberg, Ghassan Hage and Laleh Khalili, published an open letter also in *Le Monde* on 11 February protesting Daoud's 'psychologization' of 'more than a billion individuals' from Muslim backgrounds (Goldberg et al., 2016: n.p.).

Muslim studies tend to be dominated by social science disciplines, including sociology, human geography, religious studies and criminology. Breaking new ground, the AHRC-funded Storying Relationships research project from which this article stems focuses on the concomitant importance of arts and humanities scholarship in the field of Muslim studies. By bridging the social sciences and literary or cultural studies approaches and aiming to transcend the pernicious dichotomies of good Muslim and bad Muslim or Islamophilia and Islamophobia, our research seeks to find a middle ground between polarised positions. This is especially salient in light of the recent rise of extremism – Islamist, Hindutva and white supremacist. In Tariq Ali's, 2002 book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, he positions American imperialism as the most dangerous 'fundamentalism' of our contemporary moment. More recently, in *Age of Anger* (2017), Pankaj Mishra reveals that ISIS, white supremacy and Hindu fundamentalism have a surprising amount in common. Like Ali, Mishra categorises blind adherence to global capital as a type of fanaticism (2017: 37, 44, 78, 351). Keeping in mind both the rise of violent extremism accreting to Islam and the resurgence of the far right, we seek to unsettle hostility towards, as well as uncritical praise of, Muslims through detailed analysis of literary texts. The contrasting pictures of the 'sexual misery' of Muslims on the one hand and 'happy British Muslims' on the other are unpicked in this article, which takes creative non-fiction and novels as more illuminating points of reference than media representations. While this article begins with an in-depth discussion of descriptions of Muslim men, the article then moves on to examine the portrayal of Muslim women and to a particularly female-associated literary genre – namely, chick lit. Finally, we consider the stories about

Muslim sexualities that are not yet in circulation. We ask how these stories could be produced, circulated and consumed, and, whether through their telling and sharing, sexual relationships could be reimagined.

Mainstream depictions of Muslim sexualities

Before examining the work of a number of Muslim-identified writers who relate stories about relationships and sexualities within their communities – thereby bringing hitherto unheard stories and experiences to wider audiences – it is necessary to develop a clearer picture of what they are writing *against*, whether explicitly or implicitly. As outlined above, journalists have adumbrated an expansive sexual ecology of Islamic sexualities through reference to stereotypes and caricatures. This article is concerned with the form that these stereotypes currently take in the UK, as well as with Muslim writers' responses to such vignettes. Close reading allows us to differentiate a series of themes that go beyond the inflammatory headlines equating sexual misery with Muslim men. We argue that literature by Muslim-identified writers fleshes out conventional mediations of this 'misery'.

First, it is essential to highlight some of the specific ways in which Muslim sexualities have been portrayed in mainstream discourse in the context of Britain. An important and indicative example of this mainstream discourse, in the form of media and political commentary, is provided through consideration of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). CSE/A has been widespread throughout the UK, but has been especially and alarmingly prominent in a number of post-industrial, socially and economically deprived parts of the Midlands, Lancashire, Yorkshire and more recently Tyne and Wear. Geographically, there is an overlap between areas affected by CSE/A and those with substantial populations of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups,² notably those with Pakistani Muslim heritage.

Dominating prevailing discussions of CSE/A is a narrative in which commentators claim to have discovered and transgressed a purposeful and cowardly silence maintained by liberals and those belonging to associated professional classes in their refusal to blame Pakistani, Muslim or Asian men and their wider communities for acts of sexual exploitation and abuse. Breaking this taboo – acknowledging what the (London) *Times* reporter Andrew Norfolk (2012a) has called the 'elephant in the room' – these commentators go to some lengths to explain precisely how and why the men in these targeted minority groups are culpable. Today, their interventions have become sufficiently commonplace that any claims about elephants in rooms are no longer tenable. Indeed, these claims have reached beyond their most obvious home – right-wing and populist British print newspapers such as the *Times* and *Daily Mail* – to permeate more liberal-identified voices, including that of the former New Labour Home Secretary and Blackburn MP Jack Straw. This observation resonates with Joseph Massad's argument that Islamophobia and liberalism are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, he argues, they are mutually

constitutive (Massad, 2015; see also Phillips, 2016). Commenting on the conviction of two rapists in 2011, Straw asserted:

We need to get the Pakistani community to think much more clearly about why this is going on [...] These young men are in a western society; they act like any other young men, they're fizzing and popping with testosterone, they want some outlet for that, but Pakistani heritage girls are off-limits and they are expected to marry a Pakistani girl from Pakistan, typically. (BBC, 2011: n.p.; see also Batty, 2011)

Straw's confidently confrontational tone has been echoed and apparently vindicated more recently by those in the professional classes and others in positions of power and authority. This is evidenced in Alexis Jay's (2014) report, which investigated the circumstances surrounding the sexual abuse of at least 1400 children in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 (see Tufail, 2015), and the Casey Review, which examined the alleged failures of social integration in the UK. These discussions, which have clearly become orthodox wisdom and therefore no longer taboo, demand a closer look.

The dominant, and arguably hegemonic, discourse on Muslim sexualities is inconsistent in its use of ethnic, racial and religious categories and terms, but its primary concern ultimately lies with Muslims. In an op-ed on the Rotherham child abuse, Norfolk accused 'Muslim men, mostly of Pakistani origin' of being the perpetrators (Norfolk, 2012a: 11); this demonstrates a widespread tendency to slip between these and related terms, effectively using them as synonyms. In another article, entitled 'Role of Asian Gangs is Played Down by Report on Thousands of Child Victims', Norfolk quotes Michael Gove, the Conservative Member of Parliament, and now Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and jingoistic Brexiteer, as complaining about the establishment's silence on 'Asian abusers' (Norfolk, 2012b: 12). The media's far too regular (and unexamined) slippage between categories, including Muslim, Pakistani and Asian, refugee and immigrant, is open to interpretation. It may be argued that journalists, in seeking to vary their language, are merely reaching for synonyms. Equally, it may be that their muddled reportage betrays ignorance. Whatever the case, categories are conflated, particular terms are used as surrogates for others, and out of this confusing picture the category of the Muslim floats to the surface. In the context of post-7/7 British media reportage on Muslims, Maria Sobolewska and Sundas Ali argue that the coverage 'follow[s] a pre-existing media narrative' (2015: 677), which may, in turn, be located within a much larger discursive system – namely, that of sexualised Orientalism (Phillips, 2016).

Sexualised Orientalism, though a historically coherent and repetitive narrative, is also marked by local variations and apparent contradictions. Sexualised Orientalist figures – of which Muslim men are prime examples – are in some cases depicted as sensuous and hypersexualised, in others as sexually repressed, and in certain cases as embodying both of these contradictory tendencies at once (Phillips, 2016). Straw's description of British Muslim men, for example, refers to

young men ‘fizzing and popping with testosterone’. Yet it simultaneously alludes to a culture that denies these men a healthy sexual ‘outlet’, allegedly driving them to take action in extreme ways, such as through the sexual exploitation of children. In his assertions about the closed sexual ecologies of British Pakistani Muslims, Straw also dismissed the women in those communities, constructing them as sexually unavailable, repressed figures, devoid of sexual desire and experience.

Although this damaging and incorrect image of Muslim sexualities is becoming increasingly common and widespread, the media and various individuals responsible for creating and sustaining this story have not been entirely successful in eradicating other perspectives. The simplistic picture of Muslim sexual aggressors and white victims has been undercut, for example, by Manveen Rana’s report for the BBC’s *File on 4* radio documentary series (2014: n.p.). In this programme Rana exposed the fact that Asian women were victims in Rotherham too, but that their voices have been silenced. Similarly, the *Guardian* ran an article by Deputy Children’s Commissioner Sue Berelowitz, who unequivocally stated that CSE/A is ‘not a problem within one particular faith or ethnic group’ (Berelowitz, 2012b: n.p.). Berelowitz argued that the ethnicities of abusers and victims alike mirrored those of the communities in which these events took place – with a majority of abusers, in fact, being white.

The BBC and *Guardian*’s critical and sympathetic coverage illustrates that the emergent narrative of CSE/A as a Muslim problem is contested. Furthermore, this is not simply a matter of mainstream voices (of non-Muslims and white people) being pitted against those of Muslims, even though this is part of the story. And, while some non-Muslims are searching for a gradated approach, a number of Muslim-identified commentators are taking an opposing stance. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, identifying herself as Muslim, took issue with Berelowitz (2012a), whom she accused of failing to name and blame those who were disproportionately responsible for CSE/A: Muslim men of Asian, specifically Pakistani, heritage. Alibhai-Brown alleged that this official was held back by political correctness and the fear of being labelled ‘racist’. In keeping with the shrill and combative tone of the right-wing British tabloid newspaper for which she was writing, Alibhai-Brown dramatised and sensationalised. ‘Circles of sexual hell for young girls are run by gangs of Muslim men (most of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage) who mostly prey on white girls’, she claimed (2012: n.p.). This journalistic extrapolation, in which localised events are linked to a bigger picture and Muslims are pinpointed as blameworthy, is often implicit; however, there are also instances where this is unequivocally spelt out for the reader. The *New York Times*’ reporter Emma-Kate Symons drew simplistic parallels between the New Year assaults in Cologne and those that took place in Rotherham. Symons claimed that white girls in the northern English town were ‘targeted ethnically by Pakistani gangs’, and that both Rotherham and Cologne formed part of a wider ‘sexual jihad’ (2016: n.p.). This phrase seems to have been borrowed from India, where a right-wing Hindutva urban myth, spread through the social media platform WhatsApp, has whipped up majoritarian anger over allegations about Hindu women being

abducted by Muslim men, forcibly converted to Islam, coerced into marriage and then held captive by their ‘husbands’ (see Sethi, 2015: 33–37). The coinage of ‘sexual jihad’ may also be a reaction to Amina Wadud’s 2006 publication of an urgent, radical book entitled *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform of Islam* (notably, Wadud is an African-American academic and in 2005 became the first woman to lead a New York City mosque congregation in prayer). More generally, though, the idea of sexual jihad revisits and renews a wider discourse in which Muslim men are portrayed as sexual tyrants and, conversely, sexual tyrants are portrayed above all as Muslims.

The issue of CSE/A is not just explored with journalistic relish, as evidenced by its treatment in Nadeem Aslam’s acclaimed anti-clerical novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*. From his controversial opening line on the subject – ‘[s]emen was found on the mosque floor late last evening’ (2004: 234) – onwards,³ Aslam provides details of the sexual abuse of a child by a Muslim preacher. This cleric has been employed in a northern English mosque despite his known history of assaults on children, and the novel traces the religious community’s cover-up of this abuse. It is important to examine this example in the context of Aslam’s manifest aesthetic qualities, as well as his problematic overloading of religious maltreatment in the novel. *Maps for Lost Lovers*’ primary plotline centres on the ‘honour’ killing of an unmarried British Pakistani couple who live together, but subsidiary cruelties include the violent exorcism of djinns, women’s lack of rights under Islamic divorce and the pernicious effects of gender segregation.

These descriptions, some of them caricatures and all of them freighted with negativity, touch on many of the themes that various Muslim-identified and non-Muslim writers, from journalists to novelists, have written against. We now turn to some of the counter-hegemonic representations that these writers have produced.

Happier pictures of Muslim sexualities

Responding to the pervasive pictures of misery evaluated above, more positive perspectives on Muslim sexualities are gaining traction and attention. To begin with the mainstream media, the *Herald Scotland* (Duffy, 2014: n.p.), BBC (2003: n.p.) and *Guardian* (Samira Ahmed, 2013: n.p.) have run stories about the popularity of speed dating and modern matchmaking experiences in Muslim communities. The very act of publishing these stories serves to establish Muslims as rounded human beings who engage in diverse dating and relationship norms, thus challenging commonplace perceptions of Muslim relationship practices. Within such reportage, young British Muslim men and women openly break down stereotypes of the traditional Muslim and instead reveal a glimpse of the real-life experiences of the everyday Muslim who could easily be the assumed white, secular reader’s Muslim neighbour, colleague or friend. For example, in the *Guardian* article ‘Single Muslim Women on Dating: “I Don’t Want to Be a Submissive Wife”’, journalist Samira Ahmed focused in particular on Asma, who described several dating horror

stories with wry humour and open-mindedness (Samira Ahmed, 2013: n.p.). Similarly, in 2015, left-leaning tabloid the *Mirror* published an article “‘Tinder for Muslims’ Targets Religious Singletons who Are Sick of Shallow Hook-up Services’. In it, Jasper Hamill (2015) interviewed Shahzad Younas, the 30-year-old founder of halal dating app Muzmatch, who drew attention to his female-focused algorithms and the app’s emphasis on encouraging marriage matches rather than dick pics. In a longer journalistic investigation into the ‘Islamic Tinder’ phenomenon, Triska Hamid (2017) spoke to the users (rather than the CEOs, as had previously been the norm) of dating apps such as Muzmatch, Minder and Salaam Swipe. In this article, three consumers – Amira, Noura and Ayesha (respectively a lawyer, a civil servant and an entrepreneur) – bemoan the ‘quality’ of men to be found online and in the ‘real world’, stating that their high-powered jobs make them ‘intimidating’ to single men of their own age (Hamid, 2017: 84). As single Muslim women looking for love, Asma, Amira, Noura and Ayesha highlight through their stories those challenges faced by ordinary Muslim women. These challenges often turn out to be not so different from those of any other single woman looking for love, irrespective of religion or culture.

Working alongside, and sometimes within, the mainstream media, a new wave of young Muslims are also finding ways to present their friends, families and communities as confident, contented people who enjoy life and engage in well-rounded relationships. For example, in 2014, a YouTube video entitled ‘Happy British Muslims’ was disseminated by an incognito group of British Muslims known as Honesty Policy as a tribute to African American singer-songwriter Pharrell Williams. ‘Happy British Muslims’ quickly went viral as a joyous antidote to the dominant narrative of ‘sick’ Muslim sexuality. At the time of writing, the video has garnered 2,378,323 views and many inches of newsprint. It features men, women and children from various ethnic groups dancing, even body popping, to Williams’ hit song ‘Happy’. Comprising an emblematic slice of contemporary Muslim society, some of the women featured are muhajibah while others are not. Similarly, the everyday people highlighted in the video wear everything from Guy Fawkes masks to abayas, shalwar kameez to jeans and children’s fancy dress costumes. It is the ordinariness of the people depicted in the video together with the upbeat soundtrack that is both affecting and effective. Identifiably British settings, such as skateboard parks, suburban living rooms, a greasy spoon cafe, council estates, dreaming spires and a mosque form the backdrop to the video.

Two record-scratch moments briefly pierce the exuberant optimism, providing hints of a gloomier experience. Firstly, Cambridge scholar Sheikh Abdal-Hakim Murad, also known by his birth name of Tim Winter and renowned for his serious demeanour, stares impassively at the camera before holding up an explanatory ‘I’m happy’ sign (Honesty, 2014: n.p.). Later in the YouTube clip, another dis-comforting moment arises and then quickly passes when two Muslim men appear to square up to each other, but soon stand down and break into jiving together to Williams’ catchy vocals. There was limited criticism of the video as haram, and this

judgement that it was not permissible for believing Muslims possessed a sexual angle, because music and dancing are seen as gateways to impropriety. However, the primary critic – an online Muslim news source the *Shaam Post* – quickly removed its article stating that Sheikh Murad had distanced himself from the video, when Murad turned around and contradicted this stance by speaking to the *Independent* in favour of Honesty Policy’s activism (Merrill, 2014: n.p.). Some online commenters were less circumspect, however, with one, Mohammad Ghasemi, expressing his strong distaste for the free interaction between the male and female dancers, as well as the expressions of sexuality present in the video when he remarked: ‘It is Haram [against Islam] for women to dance in front of men. You are not real muslims. This video is vomiting [sic]’. At the other end of the political spectrum, another commenter (A Freeman) succinctly demonstrated the prevalent ‘everyday racism’ Muslims regularly encounter when (s)he wrote as follows: ‘There are NO “British Muslims” – only alien invaders and colonists OR native convert traitors to their nation and heritage. Their nation is Islam, not Britain, and their British passport is simply a flag of convenience’ (Honesty, 2014: comments section, 5 January 2017). Freeman’s rather incoherent comment seems to accuse all Muslims of being ‘enemies within’ the British nation-state, whose loyalties reside outside Britain with the Ummah or global community of Muslims. Honesty Policy’s presentation of British Muslims’ performance of happiness was innovative in that it cut across and contradicted contemporary portrayals of British Muslims as dour, sexually repressed and ‘alien’ to perceived Western contemporary lifestyles.

However, there is an adversarial quality to the stories we have discussed so far. Stereotypes of miserable Muslims, personified in the figure of the tyrannical Muslim man who preys on white girls and women while his wife, daughters and sisters fester at home behind closed doors, are countered by depictions of happy and sexually liberated Muslims. Arguably, both of these perspectives are simplistic: one dwelling on problems that have some substance but which are exaggerated and wildly distorted, and the other glossing over tensions and challenges in its effort to present a more positive picture of the sexual lives of Muslims. The latter, however well-meaning, idealises Muslims, potentially dehumanising them. Imen Neffati (2016: n.p.), a Tunisian researcher based at the University of Sheffield, contends that Muslims are too often rendered as ‘angelic’ and ‘innocent’, especially by leftist writers. Neffati defends Daoud in the face of such *angélisme*, situating him as a North African Muslim scholar criticising Islam from the inside. And yet, as we have argued, Daoud’s article is unbalanced in its attempt to confront the problems, however real, that led to the sexual attacks in Germany.

Pulling in an opposite direction, Pnina Werbner provides fascinating, but perhaps overly optimistic, discussion of everyday multiculturalism and conviviality amongst British Muslim communities, even as she recognises that these positive interactions usually take place in gender-segregated private spaces (2013: 405). However, her references to displays of ‘interethnic amity’ (2013: 402) at the 2012 London Olympics and the mostly warm British reception towards then-emerging

Muslim athlete Mo Farah are complicated by her own acknowledgement that no British Asians won medals at those Games and that the *Daily Mail* ignorantly labelled Farah and other British medal-holders born outside the UK as ‘plastic Brits’ (2013: 413).

In the face of pervasive stereotype and counter-stereotype, hard criticism and pulled punches, a balanced approach is sorely needed. This, we suggest, cannot be found in combative or sensational writing, nor in turning a blind eye to horrific and extreme events. A more variegated picture of the sexual lives of Muslims is found in stories told *by*, rather than *about*, the people who are involved. It is, of course, unwise to treat one person who identifies as a Muslim as representative of all (British) Muslims. It is important to query this claim of authenticity, as evinced by our discussion of Yasmin Alibhai-Brown’s (2012) comment piece in the *Daily Mail*, Daoud’s bleak view of Muslim sexuality as ‘diseased’, and Honesty Policy’s Pollyannaish counter-vision of harmonious, music-loving Muslims. Operating ‘as Muslims’, Alibhai-Brown added her weight to the agenda the *Daily Mail* had been peddling for some time, while the translation of Daoud’s article was undertaken by the *New York Times* directly after a period of significant trauma and tension for Germany. Although there are many problematic descriptions of Muslims by Muslims, both in fiction and in the media, it remains crucial to hear from rather than just about this cultural and religious group. If we are to challenge negative stereotypes with something more layered than a counter-stereotype like that created by Honesty Policy, it is necessary to examine long-form non-fiction and creative writing by Muslims of various political persuasions. Leaving aside a few honourable exceptions of non-Muslim authors who write about Muslims with sensitivity (Caute, 1998; Sahota, 2011), many others such as Martin Amis (2008), Ian McEwan (2005), Sebastian Faulks (2010) and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson (2005) have fictionalised sensationalist topics such as terrorism and created simplified representations of the figure of the violent extremist. The legacy of this kind of pigeonholing of the Muslim experience is damaging (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Turning to Muslim writers, they are uniquely capable of examining Islam from an insider’s perspective in a variety of subtle ways, while sometimes also voicing criticism of religious practice and cultural accretions.

More nuanced stories of Muslim sexuality: Shelina Zahra Janmohamed

While the most successful critical journalism creates nuanced stories with space for unresolved tensions and manifest complexities, the natural home for these stories is undoubtedly fiction. For subtle and searching depictions of Muslim experiences of courtship and marriage, then, we reach for works such as Ayisha Malik’s (2016) *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* (2009).⁴ While not discussed at length in this article, the grittier topic of forced marriage is the subject of Sufiya Ahmed’s *Secrets of the*

Henna Girl (2012), whereas in her debut novel, *Stained* (2016), Abda Khan broaches the complex nature of ‘honour’ crimes, rape and the shame that surrounds it in one northern English Pakistani community. Several other published works (while not focused on to any significant degree here) also embrace exploration of extra-marital affairs, such as in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995) and Nadeem Aslam’s (2004) *Maps for Lost Lovers*, as well as young people coming of age, as in Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Zahid Hussain’s *The Curry Mile* (2006).⁵

To analyse literary representations of Muslims’ relationship experiences, close reading – the sine qua non of literary studies – is employed as a methodology (see Federico, 2016; Lentricchia and DuBois, 2003) through which to interpret Muslim-identified authors and their written works. In our search for a figure who is capable of communicating a particular religious Muslim experience but does not claim to speak for all Muslims, we come to Shelina Zahra Janmohamed – a writer whose extensive works range across the spectrum of journalism, as well as complex, playful and literary media. Janmohamed is a practising Muslim with East African Asian heritage who has regularly lectured at her local mosque (Janmohamed, 2009: 129), and is increasingly in demand as a media spokesperson on Muslim issues such as 2016’s burkini ban in France. Until 2015 Janmohamed wrote a popular blog, *Spirit 21*, and she often contributes opinion pieces for such print media as the *Times*, *Guardian* and *Muslim News*. In both her fiction and her journalistic reportage she presents textured pictures of Muslims’ sexual relationships and explores connections between religious, national and ethnic identities, thus enabling her to tell stories and share experiences with greater precision and wholeness than those found in the mainstream media.

In 2013, Janmohamed wrote a much-discussed article for the *Telegraph*, entitled ‘What Muslim Women Really Want in the Bedroom’. According to Islamic teaching, sex is supposed to be between a married couple, but within that prescription the author takes pains to communicate that there is considerable leeway. For example, she interviewed the CEO of El Asira, an online shop selling a range of halal sensual unguents and candles, as well as an Irish Muslim convert who runs a course teaching Muslim women their sexual rights. Peppering the article with examples from Islamic teaching, Janmohamed recalls a famous incident from the Sunnah in which the Prophet Mohammed rebuked an overly pious husband for sexually neglecting his wife. Also recounted is the teaching that Allah gave nine parts of desire to women and only one to men. ‘What Muslim Women Really Want in the Bedroom’ makes clear, contrary to popular belief, that ‘Islam has always been extremely open about sexual pleasure, and in particular women’s pleasure’ (Janmohamed, 2013: n.p.).

This understanding also runs through her first book, *Love in a Headscarf*, which was published in 2009. *Love in a Headscarf* is at once a memoir, a *Bildungsroman* and, as Lucinda Newns demonstrates (2017), a type of self-help book and chick lit novel.⁶ With a narrative arc shaped by the author’s search for a compatibly religious, attractive and intelligent husband, it is a memoir heavily inflected by what Sara Ahmed calls ‘the promise of happiness’. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed demonstrates

(2010a: 7), heteronormative positive psychology problematically posits marriage as one of the foremost gauges of happiness.

Love in a Headscarf contains echoes of the genres to which Janmohamed is indebted – there is more than a touch of Bridget Jones to the protagonist – but it is strikingly different from bestselling chick lit novels such as Helen Fielding’s fiction, as it explores relationships through a Muslim-identified lens. For example, the story departs from the individualistic underpinnings of other works in this genre: ‘My marriage’, declares Janmohamed, ‘[...] was a collective experience’ (2009: 64). *Love in a Headscarf* narrates the author’s wearisome relationship journey as she deals with interfering aunties and matchmakers, hapless and unsuitable rishtas and the emerging rules of (Muslim) Internet dating – all the while striving not to compromise her faith.

Janmohamed incorporates an experience of speed dating into *Love in a Headscarf*. This contemporary dating phenomenon is detailed towards the end of the book when the narrator has almost given up on finding a husband, and the tone is thus ruefully reflective. She attends two speed dating events designed specifically to connect single Muslims. From the outset, the first event instills a sense of uneasiness due to the (remarkably unsuitable) venue – a ‘nightclub-cum-bar’. Naturally, as a teetotaler, she is unfamiliar with this environment. Her discomfort fails to dissipate over the course of the evening; in fact, if anything it increases. There are few men, and those who do circulate the tables show no interest in this modest hijabi, only having eyes for women who are dressed with Bollywood extravagance. The second speed dating function has more promise, largely because there is a substantial fee involved and the organisers undertake vetting procedures, which Janmohamed compares to ‘an all-encompassing Auntie process’ (2009: 242). With this comment, she gestures towards the often-made point that online dating algorithms are not dissimilar to the matchmaking techniques responsible for many South Asian arranged marriages. Yet even at the more professional function, men are in short supply and largely uninterested. Indeed, it transpires that a number of them have even been paid to attend the event and make up the numbers. Janmohamed concludes this speed dating chapter by depicting the ‘paired’ couples at the event dissolving into the throngs encircling the sacred Kaaba at Mecca on her subsequent Hajj pilgrimage. Watching the reverential crowd, her narrator positions love as a communitarian rather than an individual pursuit:

I knew that I was different because I was me, but I was also the same as everyone, because I was a human being. Each of us occupied so many spaces and identities, and that made us multiversal, not identical. I had been searching to find a partner to love and had been trying to learn about Divine love. In front of me now I realised that there was one more kind of love that was essential: the love for other human beings (2009: 246).

In *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World* (2016), a work of creative non-fiction, Janmohamed develops a number of themes related to relationships

and sexuality, while representing young practising Muslims – ‘Generation M’ – as a digitally connected, creative and enterprising faith group. Continuing *Love in a Headscarf*’s agenda and chiming with the increasingly prevalent literary strategy (also seen in Ayisha Malik’s fiction) of writing against the ‘misery memoir’ (see Chambers, 2013), *Generation M* is centrally concerned to dispute the intertwined stereotypes of the repressive Muslim man and downtrodden Muslim woman. Without denying that some Muslim women face oppression, Janmohamed sketches a group of exuberantly consumerist yet pious women who identify as British Muslims and who possess complete agency over their lives, including their sexuality and relationships. When describing themselves, their choice of clothing and the businesses they have established to market their stylish but devout lifestyles, these women use playful portmanteau words like ‘hijabilicious’ and ‘Mipster’ (Janmohamed, 2016: 28, 29, 135, 136).⁷ All this is summed up in a single Tweet that Janmohamed uses as a chapter heading: ‘Forgot to be Oppressed, Too Busy Being Awesome’ (2016: 221–244). Raising the issue of how Muslims meet their future partners, she argues that Generation M are engaging in leading-edge practices around sexuality just as they are in the finance, tech, food, creative and fashion industries which she also explores in detail. Evaluating Muslim matrimonial sites such as SingleMuslim.com, Janmohamed insists that these form ‘a natural extension’ of longstanding networks of family members (2016: 92) as well as unrelated ‘Buxom Aunties’ and other fixers, who are depicted in *Love in a Headscarf* (2009: 46) as setting up meetings with potential husbands. As such, the Internet is regarded as a convenient and efficient space in which to find a fellow Muslim life partner without having to adjust to the perilous world of “‘Western-style” dating’ (2016: 92).

Janmohamed has long been an advocate of stories and narratives as vehicles through which to disseminate positive aspects of Muslim experiences, including those connected to desire, love and relationships. In ‘What Muslim Women Really Want in the Bedroom’, she draws attention to ‘contextually appropriate teachings’ (2013: n.p.) on sexuality, from Saudi Arabian author Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *No Sex in the City* (2013) to the controversial UAE sex manual, *Top Secret: Sexual Guidance for Married Couples* by Wedad Lootah (2009). By focusing her full attention on ‘good news stories’, though, Janmohamed sometimes misses details that complicate the bigger picture. For example, in her discussion of Sufiya Ahmed’s writing (Janmohamed, 2013: n.p.), she concentrates on Ahmed’s self-published Khadija Academy series about a Muslim boarding school (2007, 2010b, 2011), but fails to mention her more high-profile Puffin Young Adult novel about forced marriage, *Secrets of the Henna Girl* (Ahmed, 2012). Tellingly, the latter text does not fit with Janmohamed’s anti-miserabilist approach to Islam and literature. Her neglect of stories that do not tessellate with her approach suggests that there are limitations to Janmohamed’s purview. Before discussing these limitations, the sad fact should not escape our notice that Janmohamed’s work seems innovative precisely because she reframes British Muslim female sexuality as happy, healthy and ordinary.

Sexuality as silence and tension

Janmohamed's exclusion of Ahmed's most well-known novel from her analysis points to a more general argument: stories about Muslims exploring and enjoying their sexualities, at least within married life, do not tell the whole truth. If we took this discussion no further, we would be guilty of glossing over tensions and complexities which are perhaps universal experiences of human sexuality. Indeed, the purpose of this article is to contest the simplistic but widespread binary thinking about Muslims, including in relation to their sexuality. This binary way of thinking was especially evident in Tony Blair's Manichean rhetoric and policies, but continued in David Cameron's diction of 'muscular liberalism', which he preferred to the so-called 'passive tolerance of recent years' (Cameron, 2011: n.p.). Today, it also informs Theresa May's dualistic attempt to separate 'organisations that respect British values' from 'extremist organisations' (May, 2014: n.p.). These specific interventions mobilise a more generic binary discourse, which Mahmood Mamdani (2002, 2004) has influentially called the 'good Muslim, bad Muslim' dichotomy: 'Good Muslims are modern, secular, and Westernised, but Bad Muslims are doctrinal, antimodern and virulent' (Mamdani, 2004: 25). In other words, Muslims constructed as 'good' are those who conform to Western understandings of happiness, who have given up their heritage and community in favour of individualism, believe religion should be relegated to the private sphere, and are unequivocally in favour of liberal democracy. Within this Eurocentric discursive logic, the 'good Muslim' is the exception that proves the rule since, as Joseph Massad (2015) persuasively argues, Islam is constructed as liberalism's 'other'. From this perspective, the 'bad Muslim' comes to be seen as Islam's true face and the 'good Muslim' is viewed as an aberration (Shryock, 2010).

It may be tempting to counter negative descriptions of Muslims by asserting counter-stereotypes, which answer Islamophobia with Islamophilia, 'bad Muslims' with 'good Muslims'. And yet, as Andrew Shryock argues in his 2010 monograph *Islamophobia/Islamophilia*, this simply reproduces problematic binaries and stereotypes:

The 'good Muslim', as a stereotype, has common features: he tends to be a Sufi (ideally, one who reads Rumi); he is peaceful (and assures us that jihad is an inner, spiritual contest, not a struggle to 'enjoin the good and forbid the wrong' through force of arms); he treats women as equals, and is committed to choice in matters of hijab wearing (and never advocates the covering of a woman's face); if he is a she, then she is highly educated, works outside the home, is her husband's only wife, chose her husband freely, and wears hijab (if at all) only because she wants to. (2010: 10)

Shryock argues that Islamophilia – as well as its more obviously harmful opposite Islamophobia – rests on stereotypes. Islamophilia, he suggests, constrains Muslims within black and white saintly categories out of 'wishful thinking and a politics of fear' (2010: 10).

There are important implications here for thinking beyond simplistic representations of Muslims' sexualities and relationships, beyond the clichés that they are either 'miserable' or 'happy'. While it is important to recognise the happiness and fulfilment which many Muslims experience in their sexual relationships, it is equally important to acknowledge the difficulties that also exist, some of which are directly related to being a Muslim and a member of a family and community influenced by Islam.

One specific issue, which is illustrative of the limitations some Muslims experience in their sexual lives and which speaks to the existence of desires that cannot be contained within conventional marriage, is same-sex sexuality. This is addressed by Muslim writers in two different ways: first, through silences or awkward mentions, much as though to an elephant in the room; second, through stories of love and desire featuring gay or bisexual Muslim men and women. In Janmohamed's work, homosexuality constitutes silence. As a sexual preference and identity, it is either avoided altogether or only very briefly mentioned. A possible reason for this could be that her views on sexuality are heteronormative, as are those (broadly speaking) of the chick lit genre in general.

Without straying too far from our primary focus, it should also be observed that chick lit in general and Janmohamed's work in particular often reinforce traditional gender binaries. *Love in a Headscarf* is hardly a feminist text and, while Janmohamed pays some lip service to feminist achievements around women's dress choice and campaigns for workplace gender equality, her argument implicitly conflates diverse feminist groupings as being transhistorical, Islamophobic and concerned with the single issue of white women's rights (2009: 170). Although inventive in the way that the book challenges the norms of companionate marriage (Newns, 2017) and received ideas about submissive hijabis (Ahmed, 2015: 208), this post-feminist chick lit-esque memoir may also be responsible for feeding patriarchal discourses.

To provide an example of heteronormativity from *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed's narrator takes issue with some orthodox Muslims' belief that it is necessary for women to cover their hair in order to forestall men's inevitable and uncontrollable sexual desire. Her objections to this position of belief concentrate on refuting the implication that men are 'sex-crazed monsters' (2009: 160) and asserting that modest dress is necessary for women *and* men, both of whom are perfectly capable of self-restraint. Same-sex desire is never even raised as a possibility in this piece of life writing which recounts the search for a marriage partner to complete one's faith.

Moving to *Generation M*, homosexuality is discussed on one occasion, amidst an evaluation of sexuality as a 'hot topic' for contemporary global Muslims. In this instance, Janmohamed acknowledges in a carefully neutral tone that '[t]he place and role of LGBTQ groups is part of the mix' of such discussion (2016: 189). She goes on to condemn the mass shooting perpetrated by an American Muslim at Pulse – the gay nightclub in Orlando – in June 2016, just as *Generation M* was going to press. The murders of gay clubbers, Janmohamed blandly suggests,

‘further heightened discussions that were already happening about Islam and sexuality, pushing for greater openness and understanding’ (2016: 189). Lack of clarity around the grammatical subject allows her to evade specificity as to who is doing the pushing and what this ‘openness and understanding’ will entail. She then moves swiftly on to repeat a rather conservative point made in ‘What Muslim Women Really Want in the Bedroom’ – namely, that the modern world’s ‘highly sexualised’ atmosphere is difficult and fraught for ‘those Muslims who want to live a chaste life – especially in environments where virginity is often seen as freakish’ (2016: 189; see also 2013: n.p.). The juxtaposition of the Orlando nightclub shooting alongside her point about preserving virginity in an eroticised environment implies that gay sex is a sin that should be discouraged, but that the sinner should be granted understanding and support. This viewpoint is reinforced by the fact that while Janmohamed interviewed a range of Muslim men and women for *Generation M*, she apparently did not reach out to speak to any openly gay Muslims.

Recently, a new type of chick lit novel has emerged which focuses on Muslim dating and marriage, as exemplified by Ayisha Malik’s two novels, *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* (2016) and its sequel *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017). Like *Love in a Headscarf*, these novels aim to rework Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999) from a Muslim perspective and explode some stereotypes in the process. Indeed, in her article ‘*Quand l’Angleterre invente la «Bridget Jones» musulmane*’ (‘When England Invented the Muslim “Bridget Jones”’), H elaine Lefran ois quotes Malik on her motivations for writing the novel: ‘*Je ne voulais pas d’une  ni me histoire sur une femme musulmane qui arrache son voile, couche avec des hommes et, au final, adopte une mode de vie auquel elle ne croit pas*’ (‘I didn’t want another story about a Muslim woman who removes her veil, sleeps with men, and ultimately adopts a lifestyle she doesn’t believe in’) (Lefran ois, 2016: n.p.; our translation).

Unlike her predecessor, however, Malik does make some effort to acknowledge, or at least register, same-sex desire as a possibility. Like Bridget Jones and Malik herself,⁸ *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated*’s titular protagonist works for some time in the publishing industry. After her office Christmas party, a senior colleague and friend, Katie, persuades Sofia to go clubbing with her, setting the scene for some of the novel’s finest jokes and most intriguing reflections. Outside the club, Sofia runs into a man she had gone on an online date with some weeks before, during which he emphasised how much he enjoyed attending mosque with his father. This good-looking young British Pakistani whom she had privately nicknamed ‘Hottie’ is shamefaced to see her there and it slowly dawns on Sofia that he is gay. Of course, Hottie may genuinely enjoy attending mosque and also be gay. Sofia’s thought process, however, appears to be that Islam and LGBTQI+ sexualities are incompatible, as evidenced when she guiltily thinks: ‘I’ve not punctured a tiny hole in his veneer – I’ve exposed everything completely’ (2016: n.p.). Sympathetic to his apparent fear that Sofia might ‘out’ him to his family, she plays along with his pretence that he is simply waiting for friends coincidentally

outside the predominantly gay superclub Heaven. While Malik's engagement with same-sex desire is for the most part funny and thoughtful, it is disappointing that the encounter is so brief and tinged with sympathy for the gay man's apparent melancholia. As Hottie and Sofia are about to part ways, he calls out to her:

I turned around. He stood isolated in the middle, cast in the shadow of flashing lights. 'I really do love going to the mosque with my dad.'
 In that moment he looked so beautiful and so sad, I wanted to take him home and make him a cup of tea. But I couldn't. He won't ever want to see me again. I smiled and nodded. 'Never doubted it.' (2016: n.p.)

Here, Malik portrays her heroine as free-thinking and tolerant – as well as quintessentially British, given the suppressed impulse to tackle a crisis with tea. Problematically, Hottie is figured as a misfit who is wistful that he can never share his full self with his parents without the spectre of potential ostracisation or similar ramifications. Malik seems unable to imagine a positive future for a gay man within family-oriented British Muslim culture. Sara Ahmed perceptively discusses such projection of sadness by straight people onto what she terms 'unhappy queers': '[T]he queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life, as a life without the "things" that make you happy, or as a life that is depressed as it lacks certain things: "a husband, children"' (2010a: 93). Entirely pushed to the margins and confined within an assumed affective geography, Hottie swiftly disappears from the pages of what *Candis* magazine dubs a 'light-hearted book crammed with witty humour' (2016: blurb).

If Ayisha Malik constructs *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* as a counter-narrative to the Muslim misery memoir, then her sequel, *The Other Half of Happiness*, focuses on a relationship's afterlife once the euphoria wears off. As Sofia tells a journalist who interviews her about her Muslim marriage guidance book: 'You and I both know that happily ever after doesn't exist' (2017: 188). The 'other half' of the title is Sofia's Irish convert husband Conall who, to adapt Sara Ahmed (2010a: 17, 223), makes Sofia 'hapless' in love. The novel pivots on the couple's fraught first year of marriage, replete as it is with misunderstanding and discord, despite their mutual desire and affection. The novel goes further, indicating that Pakistani Muslim marriage is not merely made up of the two 'halves' of husband and wife. Readers are also presented with Sofia's widowed mother, who sacrifices her own hard-won, nascent romantic relationship out of sympathy when Sofia and Conall separate. The mother too, frames this in terms of misery and joy, so that Sofia realises '[t]he only threat to Mum's happiness has been me' (2017: 362).

One of the factors that contributes to Sofia's marital breakdown is her paranoia about the beauty and easy intimacy of Conall's friend and colleague, Hamida. That she turns out to be a lesbian is merely a plot device to reveal that she is no threat to Sofia and Conall's happiness. As with Hottie in *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated*, Hamida vanishes for a significant portion of the novel; yet, unlike Hottie, Hamida does reappear, albeit briefly. Indeed, when Hamida reappears, it

is to demand that Sofia gives Conall a divorce, thus allowing him to find happiness in the future. Interestingly, Hamida is also present in Pakistan for the novel's cliffhanger of an ending where Sofia confronts Conall. In this coda, Hamida accuses Sofia of being a bigot and fearing that Hamida will make sexual advances towards the straight woman, to which Sofia self-deprecatingly responds by stating that she does not view this possibility as any danger (2017: 398). Once again, Malik's queer character merely serves to showcase Sofia's broad-mindedness and remains little more than a cipher. Sofia claims not to judge Hamida but, as Sara Ahmed astutely observes in another context, the straight subject pushes the queer body to the margins, associating her with 'an imagined future of necessary and inevitable unhappiness' (2010a: 93). This is made apparent when Sofia claims that '[t]he only thing that made me sad for [Hamida] was that people had rejected her so spectacularly that she'd rejected her faith' (2017: 399). With Sofia dissociating herself and her Islamic faith from Hamida's parents' and others' homophobia, Malik seems to have an imaginative blockage that prevents her from conceptualising same-sex love as anything but peripheral and 'sad'.

In sum, it is important to acknowledge that much of this women's writing is market-driven and, as such, seeks to present a commercial 'Muslim Bridget Jones' that at times recycles gender and sexual norms and stereotypes. Yet it is also necessary to highlight the self-conscious timbre of Malik's novels in particular, wherein the heroine works for a publisher and is invited to write her books for overtly commercial, profit-oriented reasons. In this way, Malik does not pretend that the books are more or less than what they are, working as they do within the constraints of the medium and market. The light-hearted tone that is a key feature of chick lit (problematic though that term may be),⁹ is also positive in its efforts to work against the portrayal of misery and to demonstrate something light, breezy and undeniably engaged in the pursuit of happiness.

Same-sex Muslim relationships

We now make space for texts that give same-sex Muslim relationships direct and full attention – such as Amjeed Kabil's *Straightening Ali* – even if these texts have blind spots of their own. Kabil's novel is about 24-year-old Ali Mirza, a gay Pakistani-heritage man from Birmingham. Ali comes out to his family before the novel opens after exploring his sexuality while a student at the University of Wolverhampton. Regardless of his open communication regarding his sexuality, he is nonetheless under pressure to submit to an arranged marriage with a 20-year-old woman, Sajda, whom he has never met. Emotionally blackmailing Ali, his mother fakes a heart attack to force him into accepting her wishes. Ali's family also have an ulterior motive, as they hope that the marriage between Ali and Sajda will function as a conduit to gain entrance into the high echelons of the Nottingham Pakistani community, where Sajda's family hold prestige and power. The Mirzas are also keen, as the title suggests, to 'straighten' out the youngest boy in the family. They view Ali's sexuality as a phase brought on by contact

with white fellow students who fail to ‘understand [...] our culture’ (2007: 8), as his sister puts it. Awash with guilt over his mother’s distress and ‘heart attack’, Ali ends his long-distance relationship with his boyfriend, Steve, who has been living in Strasbourg. However, despite his compliance with the proposed marriage, Ali still faces horrific homophobic abuse from his family. For example, his ‘fundamentalist’ elder sister Yasmin argues that gay people ‘should all be put on an island and shot’ and informs him that it is a parent’s ‘Islamic duty’ to arrange their child’s marriage (2007: 4, 134), while his macho older brother Yunus repeatedly beats him and calls him a ‘batty boy’ (2007: 8, 10). Even Ali’s supportive younger sister Aneesa insists that he is ‘lucky’ and the family ‘modern’ to allow him to meet his bride before the wedding (2007: 23, 25).

A series of set pieces unfolds; these scenarios are typical of the British-Asian marriage plot but are poignantly altered by the backdrop of non-heteronormative sexuality. The two prospective families-in-law meet over samosas, and Sajda and Ali are generously given five minutes together while they are watched from a distance by a chaperone (2007: 51, 52). After a mournful twist on the British tradition of the stag party at a Bollywood night in Ali’s favourite gay club, Sajda and Ali partake in gender-segregated events such as the mehndi ceremony. At the wedding, Ali’s father-in-law communicates the bride’s consent, while Sajda’s emotional response is limited to crying (as is customary) on leaving her family. Sajda’s distress soon abates, it becoming awkwardly apparent that she and Ali have different expectations of their wedding night.

Kabil seems just as incapable of imagining happiness for his protagonist within the ‘gay community’ as he is of envisioning a positive future for him in a British Pakistani milieu. After fobbing Sajda off from her conjugal rights, Ali considers suicide and dreams of escape. He flees his marriage without consummating it, boarding a plane to Strasbourg, on which he has to fend off the advances of a lecherous older Italian man named Benigno. If contentment for Ali cannot be found within the family, equally outside of this kinship group he is bereft of the social and economic security he once knew and relied on. This leaves Ali vulnerable and dependent on equally undesirable sources of livelihood, symbolised by Benigno. When Ali arrives in Strasbourg, it transpires that Steve has quickly moved on to a new relationship. With no other option and rapidly running out of money, Ali returns to Britain. While his father-in-law sends him a poisonous letter and Sajda tries to convince him that she can help him ‘be normal’, Ali descends into depression and poverty, eventually succumbing to homelessness and becoming prey to an older gay man. Finally, Ali is offered a glimpse of freedom. This support does not come from either the Pakistani or gay communities, but rather from HITS Homes Trust (a Leicester based social housing organisation for which Kabil worked for several years). The Trust offers Ali a small flat, and the novel closes with his bittersweet pleasure on moving into this new, if isolated, home. This plot device carefully avoids accusations of white saviour discourse by introducing a Pakistani, Naureen, as one of the HITS employees. However,

as Shamira Meghani states, Naureen ‘is undeveloped as a character, and [only] appears at a point in the narrative that is invested in Ali’s survival’ (2015: 178).

Kabil’s novel cuts through the silence and tensions that envelop Janmohamed’s allusions to same-sex desire and relationships. However, its publication by an under-resourced American press means that the writing is often error-ridden, inelegant and clichéd, its narrative at times little more than an extended family argument with the volume turned up. The novel largely falls back on stereotypes that taint Muslims as ‘homophobic [and] sexist’ (Haritaworn et al., 2008: 85) and Islam as easily co-opted into Muslim parents’ overbearing obsession with arranging marriages for their single children. As Kavita Bhanot writes with heavy irony about this overworked trope in her anthology of ‘new generation’ British Asian fiction *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough*: ‘[O]ppressive parents [. . .] hold us back from the pleasures and normality of western life: they don’t let us [. . .] go to pubs and clubs; [. . .]; they don’t allow us to have relationships of our choice and want us to have arranged marriages’ (2011: vii, viii).

The received ideas in *Straightening Ali* can be usefully interrogated in the light of Jasbir K. Puar’s notion of ‘homonationalism’. In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Puar coins this term to delineate how America and the wider ‘Western world’ scrambled to reinvent itself as tolerant towards same-sex desire after 9/11. Puar argues that this rush towards national identification as freethinking and tolerant was simply a means by which to cast Muslims, especially Arab Muslims, as ‘a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other’ (Puar, 2007: 37). Certainly, Ali’s mother is portrayed as irredeemably ‘other’ and non-national, evidenced by her wedding – at the alarmingly young age of 15 to a stranger more than a decade older than she – as the bleak marital model. Ali’s mother repeatedly uses her late husband’s, her own and Ali’s happiness as the excuse to pressure him into agreeing to a joyless marriage (Kabil, 2007: 7–13). This accords with Sara Ahmed’s parsing of the speech act ‘I just want you to be happy’, through which, Ahmed argues, ‘the desire for just happiness appears to give the other a certain freedom and yet directs the other toward what is already agreed to be the cause of happiness’ (2010a: 133). In this way, and similarly to *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* and its sequel *The Other Half of Happiness*, *Straightening Ali* is complicit with certain Western narrative conventions (in this case, the myth of European ‘tolerance’ of non-normative sexualities) for the sake of marketability.

Straightening Ali is nonetheless significant in being one of only a few texts¹⁰ that deal with the experiences of British Muslims whose desires and relationships are oriented towards their own sex. It is to be hoped that, over the coming years, the British literary scene will be able to boast some subtler representations of same-sex Muslim relationships,¹¹ just as Saleem Haddad’s new novel *Guapa* (2016) is receiving plaudits in the United States for its portrayal of gay Arab-American Muslims. This is not to call for a ‘British Muslim gay literature’ modelled on its non-Muslim British and American counterparts. It may take that form, but equally it

may explore same-sex desires and relationships in ways that have not yet been imagined.

Conclusion: possible ways forward

A challenging but valuable component of some Muslim-identified literature is the acknowledgement that sexual intimacies and relationships can be both joyful and difficult, and that many of these contrasting experiences stem from being Muslim. In this acknowledgement, which moves beyond negative stereotypes of miserable Muslims but refuses to counter these with equally simplistic stories of happy Muslims, it is possible to move beyond the repetitive clichés that dominate the mainstream media. That said, it would be simplistic and sweeping to dismiss media representations as caricatures while celebrating the supposedly subtler achievements of creative writers. The former characterisation may be disappointingly accurate, as illustrated in the first part of this article, although exceptions and counter-currents must also be acknowledged in the form of critical journalism. The latter – literary works as nuanced and critically engaging – must equally be interrogated rather than simply applauded. This interrogation should include a critical examination of commercially driven publishers which encourage works that engage with emerging but unstable genres such as ‘Muslim chick lit’. Critics should also look for literary works that may be located within, as well as against, dominant discourses, such as the Western and arguably neo-colonial liberal discourse that gives rise to binary characterisations of good and bad Muslims (Massad, 2015).

More sustained and nuanced pictures of same-sex desire and relationships in Muslim-identified literature, situated in the context of a broader discussion rather than just concentrating on same-sex sexualities, are surely a constructive way forward. Such literary work, in the form of storied explorations of Muslims’ relationships and sexualities, would find ways to attend to various taboo issues. Stories might achieve this through modes that are appropriate in different Muslim-identified settings, not necessarily replicating the ‘taboo-busting’ gestures of the wider society. This creative work could also examine themes that some mainstream sources regularly misrepresent or confuse. These include the different roles played by religion, ethnicity and culture in the relationship experiences and practices of Muslims.

While calling for more direct attention to the silences inherent in some Muslim-identified literature, the real achievements that have already been made are to be commended. There are other writers – some publishing through formal channels, others self-publishing, still others blogging or using alternative media (see, for example, Humza, 2010; Qureshi, n.d.) – who have not yet received the attention they deserve. Critics, ourselves included, therefore must be more imaginative and probing in the Muslim literatures we recognise and engage with. The Bradford Literature Festival and various other festivals and literary events are already providing space for new writers to share their work and for audiences to engage with

them and with each other. Such a nurturing infrastructure should be encouraged and further developed.

Throughout this article, we have discussed journalists and writers, newspapers and publishers, and have therefore focused upon those with the privilege and the power to convey their experiences and views through formal and high-profile channels. In doing so, we realise that we have omitted many people who really count: those who buy newspapers, browse newspaper websites online, read novels and discuss all these stories with their friends and families. Here, among unseen audiences, is where many of the real meanings are made: where stories are believed or doubted, where individuals recognise themselves or their family members or where they decide that their own experiences have been misconstrued or ignored.

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Notes

1. The authors would like to thank Ghaziyah Weller for suggesting this point.
2. We use the term BAME to reflect British policy discourses, which employ it to refer to minority ethnic populations of non-white backgrounds. This is similar to 'Black (and) Minority Ethnic' (BME), but the 'A' in 'BAME' singles out Asian communities as the largest minority assemblage alongside Black British. However, it is important to note that the term bundles together populations with highly diverse national, cultural and ethnic origins. Whilst such acronyms have their uses when grouping those people who find themselves on the receiving end of racism, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of such homogenising terminology, which can mask the varying degrees of disadvantage suffered by people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds within that grouping.

3. In this sentence, Aslam recalls an inflammatory story from *Angaaray* (Shingavi, 2014), the 1933 collection of socialist short stories which was banned by the Indian government in response to protests. Sajjad Zaheer's story, 'A Vision of Paradise', concerned a Muslim cleric who falls asleep while he is praying and has a wet dream while still on the prayer mat. Aslam would be aware of this story, which sparked riots in India, because his father was an communist poet exiled from Pakistan due to his political beliefs (Jaggi, 2013: n.p.).
4. Nasreen Akhtar's (2008) *Catch a Fish from the Sea (Using the Internet)* was more interesting for being one of the earliest novels in this emerging genre centring on a Muslim woman searching for a suitable partner than for its (rather uneven) form or content.
5. It is important to recognise that these texts often explore several topics at once, with Aslam's novel, for example, dealing with 'honour' killing (as well as the CSE/A we have already discussed), and Kureishi representing same-sex desire in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.
6. 'Chick lit' consists of 'heroine-centered narratives' (Smith, 2008: 2) about the triumphs and tragedies of women 'in their twenties and thirties' (Ferriss and Young, 2006: 3), with their subject matter mostly clustering around love, work and friendship. Often humorous (Lefrançois, 2016: n.p.), their frequent celebration of consumerist culture leads to them being described by Rocio Montoro as 'cappuccino fiction' (2012: 1).
7. 'Mipster' is a blend word that means Muslim hipster (see also Herding, 2013; Sheikh, 2013).
8. Ayisha Malik worked for several years as for Random House. By coincidence, one of the project team, Claire Chambers, interviewed her in 2009 about her experiences as a young muhajibah publisher. In this interview Malik stated that she had not been on the receiving end of any discrimination during her few years in the publishing industry. However, she did feel marked out at book launches, where she was usually the only person present who had her head covered. She also wryly noted: 'if there's a book being published about Muslims, I find that some editors will come to me and ask me you know, what do you think of this? Is this offensive? Is this not offensive?' (qtd. in Chambers, 2009: n.p.). These experiences doubtless informed her portrayal of the publishing industry in both novels to date. It is finally worth noting that Malik recently ghostwrote *The Secret Lives of the Amir Sisters* (Hussain and Malik, 2017) for Nadiya Hussain, the politically perceptive and popular British-Bangladeshi who in 2015 won the BBC show *Great British Bake-Off*.
9. H elaine Lefran ois claims that Ayisha Malik 'pr ef ere parler de "fiction commercial"' ('prefers to speak of 'commercial fiction') (Lefran ois, 2016: n.p.; my translation; emphasis in original).
10. See also Sarif (2008). Because Samim Sarif's novel *I Can't Think Straight* is about a lesbian relationship between a Christian Palestinian and a South Asian British Muslim, it falls outside the immediate purview of this study, which deals with depictions of British Pakistani Muslims' sexual relationships. However, for discussion of this novel and its film adaptation (*I Can't Think Straight*, 2008), see Alberto Fern andez Carbajal's excellent (2017) article.
11. Near to the time when this article was going to press, a play by one of the research project 'Storying Relationships' partner writers, Kamal Kaan, was broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Kaan's *Breaking Up with Bradford* (2017) centres on Kasim, who returns to his

hometown of Bradford after having fallen in love with another man, Richard, during three years of university life in Cambridge. Given the theme of same-sex desire, it would have been easy for this young playwright to perambulate the well-travelled 'woe is me' road. As is the case with Janmohamed and Malik, Kaan chooses to say little about extremism, honour killings and child grooming, instead finding clever but unobtrusive ways to poke fun and subvert all those expectations (bearing in mind the generally mild and monocultural Radio 4 audience). He takes a more joyous and only occasionally poignant route, exuberantly referencing the northern works Emily Brontë's (1847/1996) *Wuthering Heights*, Ayub Khan-Din's (1999/2007) *East Is East* and Chris Morris's (2010) *Four Lions*, among other imaginative texts that have acted as influences. Although from a Bangladeshi background, Kaan's upbringing and residence in Bradford make him intimately familiar with British Pakistani Muslim ways of life, and it is to be hoped that his radio play heralds the emergence of other creative works treating same-sex relationships with wit and subtlety.

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