“My heart is in the subcontinent in many ways, though I am British and Irish”—A Scholar’s Journey Set in a Multicultural Milieu.

Sanjida Parveen,

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Born and brought up in a multicultural environment, Prof Chambers’ stay in Pakistan for a year during the 1990s shaped her research interest. Although she took up Amitav Ghosh for her PhD, her further research interest was triggered by her keenness towards Islam and Muslims. Three incidents—the Rushdie affair,[1] 9/11,[2] and 7/7[3]—shaped the course of her literary career. Though she leaves a "Rushdie-shaped hole” in her work, the Rushdie affair lingers as an absent presence throughout. At a tender age, she encountered Muslims from close quarters, studying individual lives and struggles. An author of two monographs on Muslim writing, she has to her credit the experiences gathered from a variety of engagements, social and intellectual. Her recent book, *Dastarkhwan* (2021), published amidst the ongoing pandemic, is an innovative take on food writing. This book delves deeper into the realms of culinary pursuits making it more than just gustatory appetisers. Besides, her authorship on Muslim fiction in three parts has garnered immense acclaim globally. First, the trilogy *British Muslim Fictions* (2011) is a book of interviews with authors who are Muslim by birth and living in Britain. It was followed by the monograph *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780-1989* (2015) and its sequel, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2019).

An interview with Claire Chambers on the 15th of July 2021 in Leeds, England.

Her research has been supported by the British Academy, AHRC (The Arts and Humanities Research Council), ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and the Leverhulme Trust. At present, she is associated with the University of York as Professor of Global Literature. Prior to this, she worked as a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University. She has also edited the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* for more than a decade.

This interview was conducted as a part of my PhD thesis on the 15th of July 2021. In this interview, Prof Chambers juggles, with utmost ease, remarks about her roles as an author, literary critic, and researcher, as well as touching upon issues of identity and problems with representations of Muslims over the years. For the sake of convenience, I limited my range of authors as previously decided for my PhD thesis.

CC: Claire Chambers
SP: Sanjida Parveen

1. **SP: Who is Claire Chambers? A scholar, a reader, a critic, an explorer. How would you define yourself?**
   CC: A well-known Pakistani anthropologist and public intellectual, Prof Akbar S. Ahmed once called me a "scholar-adventurer", which I was really flattered by. He said I was not like T. E. Lawrence or certain other colonial scholar-adventurers, but somebody whose work is non-coercive. I put the term on my Twitter bio because I felt it was so cool. I was really pleased that he "got" what I was trying to do. If I had to define myself, I guess "scholar-adventurer" would be it because I love research but it also has to be connected to going to the places and immersing yourself in their specificity.

2. **SP: "Muslim Writing" is a broadly contested term. What do you understand by it? Which one would you consider to be the first Muslim writing in English: *Sultana's Dream* (1905) or *Said the Fisherman* (1903)?**
   CC: I would say this category encompasses any creative writing that is by somebody who has Muslim heritage. I am not really interested in determining how religious a person is; it certainly wouldn't be my place to judge that. I think probably as well there has to be some element of talking about Muslim characters within the writing. Let's take as one example the author Zulfikar Ghose. He is a Pakistani writer who for much of his career has been exploring South America because he married a Brazilian woman.

For my purposes, that fiction (as good as it is) is less interesting than his novel *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, (1967) in which he talks about Pakistan's creation and partition, or the memoir about his higher education in Britain, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* (1965). Both could be categorised as Muslim Writing, but the South American novels are not very relevant to this canon even though they are interesting.

In *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, Amin Malak identifies Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) as the first work of Muslim Writing. *Said the Fisherman* (1903) as you know was written by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a convert, and it had actually been published two years earlier in 1903. Remember my project was about *British* Muslim fiction, so I couldn't include *Sultana's Dream* (1905) in my work because Rokeya doesn't talk about Britain. She is writing in English but is understandably quite focused on Bengal, then in British India. Meanwhile, we don't really know when Pickthall converted; the official date given for his conversion was around 1917. However, rumour has it that he actually became Muslim much earlier than that. He didn't want to upset his Christian parents while they were still alive, and he had been advised in a Syrian mosque to respect his elders and not break these loved ones' hearts. So, he might have kept his conversion secret for quite a long time. We don't really know, but I think in terms of the British Muslim canon, *Said the Fisherman* (1903) is really important to include. However, I am not interested in putting these two writers in competition with each other. Rokeya and Pickthall are doing very different things from very different backgrounds. For me, it's quite inspiring that a British writer was writing sympathetically and for the most part pushing against Orientalist narratives about the Arab and Muslim world at such an early point in the twentieth century. He would go on to write thirty novels in the early twentieth century, many of which deal with Islam and the Middle East.

3. **SP: Expanding on the previous question, do you think that refugee narratives, diasporic literature and immigrant narratives and travel writings may also be included within the canvas of "Muslim Writing"? Can all this writing be classified as post-colonial literature?**

CC: That's a very difficult question for me, as these are quite confusing terms. When you are talking about refugee narratives, diasporic literature and immigrant narratives, what writers are you thinking of? Because Rohingya, Syrian, Palestinian, or Arab/Persian writers are important to my work even though my primary expertise is South Asian Muslim Writing. Obviously, though, there are plenty of non-Muslim refugees, diasporic and immigrant writers. There are Christians who come from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Nigeria, for instance; and from war-zones like Syria, which many

Christians have fled just as Muslims have. So, these are complex and multifarious ideas, not so easily subsumed under a category of Muslim Writing. I am also not too interested in parsing terms like postcolonial, because I think an obsession with the terminology can obscure the specificity of texts and their contexts. For instance, one fascinating area of emergence is Rohingya writing. This work is diverse in terms of quality, but all of it is marked by trauma. It's important to assess this fiction and life writing without trying to slap a pre-determined label onto it.

4. **SP: Can this form of writing be seen as a form of "writing back"?**
   CC: Usually the term "writing back" is taken in quite a literal sense, as a rewriting of the classic texts. I think of responses to *Othello* by African writers such as Tayeb Salih in *Season of Migration to the North* (2009) and African American writers like Toni Morrison. Morrison's play *Desdemona* (2012) brings to the fore a very minor character such as Shakespeare's Barbary, imagining her as an African woman and showing her experiences. I can't answer that question without knowing what text you are talking about. If you're talking about a particular Muslim writer like Leila Aboulela who has said that in *The Translator* (2015) she was re-writing *Jane Eyre* (2008), then yes, I would consider that as a "writing back".[4] But this question seems vague, and without knowing what texts you are thinking of I can't easily say.

5. **SP: Well, the writings that I am talking about are immigrant narratives like *Minaret* (2007), *The Translator* (2015), *Brick Lane* (2008) and *My Name is Salma* (2008).**
   CC: *The Translator* (and *Jane Eyre*) and maybe *Brick Lane* and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) have minor "writing back" elements, but I can't see that the other two are specifically about "writing back". They might be better viewed as resistance literature. They are rewriting and challenging dominant narratives about migrants and Muslims, but "writing back" is quite a specific literary mode. Rather than turning to Bill Ashcroft and all, I think that the writers that you have mentioned are more useful to read through the lens of Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987). These texts do challenge Islamophobia but I don't think they are too concerned with Euro-American classics. I mentioned that the main exception is Leila Aboulela, and there's another example of "writing back" from her recent book *Bird Summons* (2019). This novel is partly about Lady Evelyn Cobbold who like Pickthall was an early convert to Islam. She was Scottish, and you know that Leila Aboulela has been living on and off or so in Aberdeen. So, *in Bird Summons* (2019), there is a "writing back" current to Cobbold's

early twentieth-century travel writing and musings on Islam. But as for the others, I don't believe they are "writing back".

6. **SP: "As cliched as it may sound, my worldview has been crucially shaped by my gap year, 1993-94, which I spent teaching English in Peshawar, Pakistan at the age of 18." (Chambers, 2011) What exactly triggered your research interest in South Asian literature?**

CC: Going there at such a young age was mind-altering and heart-opening. I was so privileged to be able to spend a whole year in Pakistan, a country which not many Westerners were familiar with within the 1990s. I had applied to teach in India because I have many British Asian friends and India felt kind of a known place, one that many travellers went to. I applied quite late for the teaching and the organisation I applied to were full for India. They told me there is room next door in Pakistan, it's similar, and so very naively I just went! But actually, northwest Pakistan is unimaginably different from India in many ways. It's a unique place, although of course in other ways it's got continuity with the rest of Pakistan and with India and the rest of the subcontinent. You can recognise foods and the warm hospitality culture, but in other ways, it's quite rugged. And also, at that time, you've got a civil war raging thirty miles away in Afghanistan and several million Afghan refugees in the region around Peshawar. In the city I was teaching Afghan refugees; a third of all our students were from Afghanistan. It really was foundational for a naïve teenager from Yorkshire to have this experience and to fast during Ramadan. I was homesick and only spoke five times in the year to my mum and every time I would cry over the phone. There was no internet, I mean it existed but people didn't know about it. Certainly not in Peshawar and nor did my friends and family have it back in Leeds. You just write letters … a lot of letters. That was good for my writing. Also, this was when I read Rushdie for the first time. I read *Midnight's Children* (1981), which I got out from Peshawar public library, and found it interesting, and I also read pretty much all of Thomas Hardy. Doing all this in Peshawar was when I thought I want to know more about this region. I was desperate to learn more about South Asia and so later, as you know, my PhD would be on Amitav Ghosh (Chambers, 2003). There weren't so many Pakistani novelists at that time, not much material that I could get my teeth into, so I turned to India. There was Zulfikar Ghose, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, those were well-known prose writers; there was also a handful of really good poets and an exciting Urdu scene which I didn't have access to at that time. But well-known figures were coming through like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati

Roy: there was a lot going on in India. That's why my career started in India and has subsequently moved westward.

7. **SP: You have also mentioned that you paid many visits to the region and did engagement work with diasporic communities. Do you mean Muslim diasporas or other diasporas as well? Precisely what kind of work did you engage in?**
CC: Mainly the Muslim South Asian diaspora. In the north of England, many of the South Asians tend to trace their roots to Azad Kashmir and Mirpur areas. The Mangla dam was built there in the 1960s, people were displaced, and there were opportunities to come to Britain in that decade. Individual men would come first and then bring their families. There are vibrant Mirpuri communities in Bradford and Leeds; there are also many Sylhetis from Bangladesh. As for engagement work, I did three projects over the years, the first was AROOJ[5] working to bring some of the Muslim writers I interviewed for *British Muslim Fictions* (2011) into Yorkshire schools and lead creative writing workshops with young people to inspire them to get into writing. That project got bigger and bigger, becoming focused on lots of different aspects around literacy and moving from secondary schools to primary as well. AROOJ[5] has been going on for almost a decade and is predominantly aimed at South Asian Muslim pupils in Leeds. Then I worked with little kids in Reception class - four- and five-year-olds - in that first year they go to school. This project was called Kids' Own Publishing and was to do with making really basic picture books, storybooks. The children would work with an artist, producing very simple but beautiful works in the home language and in English. In other words, these were bilingual books with a simple story and lots of pictures. The stories came from the little children's imaginations, and the artists helped them turn these into books in Urdu and Arabic and Polish, and other home languages. It was all about the value of bilingualism or knowing various languages.

The final project was called Leeds Meets Shakespeare, which was a multicultural Shakespeare project aimed at Year One students who are five or six years old. This was about introducing teachers to people like Muhammad Iqbal who was "writing back" to Shakespeare through great poetry, and also to Bollywood Shakespeare like the trilogy of films *Omkara*,[6] Maqbool,[7] and *Haider.*[8] This project was about improving the confidence of children who have English as an additional language. Little kids who don't use English at home but instead speak to family members in Punjabi, Pahari, Urdu or Bengali may initially feel at a disadvantage compared to monolingual kids. But they emphatically shouldn't be seen as having an educational deficit. Far from it,

because at home they have this wonderful resource of another language or several languages. That's extremely valuable because they understand how language works and have better knowledge of grammar. What's useful about Shakespeare for increasing confidence is that his plays are regarded as aspirational. These Year One pupils were working with GCSE[9] level material at a very early age, and this made them feel proud. What's more, Shakespearean stories function as a leveller, because none of the kids, neither the monolingual ones nor the EAL[10] children, understand Shakespeare's language. And all those unfamiliar Italian names … you know … who's ever met a Perdita or an Antonio? This unfamiliarity helped everybody feel equal and to start using language in inventive ways. Once again, practitioners came into schools, but this time it was dramatists who worked with the kids. At the project's end, there was a big celebration event at Leeds Grand Theatre. An excellent independent British Asian theatre group, Tribe Arts, did a performance of Shakespeare through a South Asian lens. People like Tribe Arts' Tajpal and Samran Rathore are rightly twisting and decolonising Shakespeare. All this is the kind of engagement I was meaning in my quote.

8. **SP: So, was it mostly school kids and teachers?**
   CC: Mostly, but I have also done creative writing workshops with young adults. I co-edited a trade book called *A Match Made in Heaven* (2020), which is about love and desire. I'm proud of this book, especially as several of the writers anthologised in the volume were unpublished until they did creative writing workshops and had their work brought out alongside that of reputed authors like Shelina Janmohamed, Roopa Farooki and Ayisha Malik.

9. **SP: What inspired you to work on Bengali author Amitav Ghosh for your PhD? Which aspects of his writing did you explore?**
   CC: What I find is that you can get a vast education through Ghosh's fiction, as he always does so much research to inform his storytelling. My thesis was all about power and knowledge, in a Foucauldian sense, because I was struck by the fact that during his early career each text was challenging established academic disciplines. In his debut novel *Circle of Reason* (2009) there was a lot of discussion of Louis Pasteur, Jagadish Chandra Bose and science. So, I did a deep dive in that chapter and the one on *The Calcutta Chromosome* (2011) into the history of science. For the *Calcutta Chromosome* (2011) chapter, I was interested in medicine. I researched Ronald Ross, the Nobel prize-winning British scientist, who discovered that malaria is spread via the Anopheles mosquito. In fact, what Ghosh suggests is that Ross got the idea from Indians, exploiting local knowledge. In this way, I looked at

how those two novels were interrogating Western models of science. In *The Shadow Lines* (2010), I argued that Ghosh was examining geography because the novel explores colonial and postcolonial mapping. Parts of the novel are set in Bangladesh, and the novel is fascinated by borders and lines so geography came in. Then for my *In an Antique Land* chapter, I wrote about history and anthropology and how Ghosh attacks Western realist conventions in historical and ethnographic writing. He challenges anthropology as a discipline that developed in tandem with colonialism. Meanwhile in the historical fiction strand of the novel, he recovered the history of a slave, Bomma. Ghosh examines the way history is portrayed in an authoritative and realist way, and then kind of bends that. So that was basically my PhD thesis: it was on Ghosh's first four books and is now easily downloadable online.

10. **SP: You grew up in a "British Asian Muslim milieu" in Leeds? What were your primary reservations or observations regarding the Muslims before engaging in research?**
CC: What I remember observing is that hospitality is key and that people were so welcoming. I had some of the best meals of my life with Muslim families. Food and family mean a lot, and a few of these friends became friends for life. I am very lucky to be from a place where different cultures mix. I am opposed to those in Britain who argue that multiculturalism has been a failure. I disagree with them and think we need more multiculturalism rather than less; the value migrants have added to this country has been immeasurable. There was a great project called Making Britain, which showed all the different ways Muslim and non-Muslim South Asian creative artists have contributed to this country. I would actually like to continue my work on food by writing an oral history of early restaurateurs. I don't want to just include males because originally a lot of the food pioneers were men from Bangladeshi Sylhet, and fewer from Pakistan and India. All of them set up this wonderful cuisine in the 1960s and 1970s but I would also like to talk to the women who make home food and bring in very diverse voices. When their generation dies, their stories will be lost. So, it is important to listen to these people talking in their own voices about their early experiences right up to the present.

11. **SP: How did 9/11 affect you as someone not from a Muslim background? How is it different from the perceptions of 7/7?**
CC: Remember I had been in Peshawar in the 1990s, which is the Pakistani city where Osama bin Laden was probably living just a few years earlier. This metropolis is very close to Afghanistan where a civil war was raging after the Russians' withdrawal in 1989 from their occupation. By the time 9/11 happened, I was doing my PhD. A lot of my American friends from the PhD were

very upset. I was upset too because obviously it was a terrible incident for the victims and terribly wrong. But I also knew what was going to happen next: I was sure that Afghanistan would face invasion. This was especially painful for me because my time teaching Afghan girls in Pakistan was still a fresh memory. The cataclysmic War on Terror changed everything about my thinking. I have not been directly affected, in the sense that I am acutely aware that white privilege and a Christian name mean I've seldom had problems at airports. But friends and allies have, and it angers me. My heart is in the subcontinent in many ways, though I am British and Irish. After 9/11 I started to realize that following my PhD on Amitav Ghosh and colonial power and knowledge, my next project should be to look at what was going on right now. Then in 7/7, it turned out that three out of the four London bombers had a connection with Leeds. Having seen other parts of the world, I had an inkling about the dissatisfaction that exists in the world and some of the fault-lines and colonial residues that maybe other people in Britain might have been unaware of. After finding out that these boys from Beeston were so dissatisfied that they committed such a terrible act, I thought I should find out more about what was happening in my own city and country, and how literature was responding to that.

12. **SP: You allude to Nigel Williams' *East of Wimbledon* (2013) where the protagonist speaks of "three approaches to Islamic English Literature". Which one can be ascribed to Muslim literature: literature by English, Scottish or Welsh Muslims, literature with a Muslim dimension or literature viewed from a Muslim perspective?**

CC: It was a bit of a joke; the novel was a comic novel but I thought it was quite interesting because these kinds of questions were things I too was puzzling over. What are my criteria when I am talking about Muslim Writing? Does it have to be literature that's by devout Muslims? About a decade ago, one author told me Muslims are people who submit to Islam and so only practising Muslims should be included in the category. By this criterion, secular writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Hanif Kureishi, or Tariq Ali would not be under the ambit. For me, as somebody who is more of an outsider, I felt it was interesting to look at a range of authors and observe the diversity without trying to give out points or place them on a scale of religiosity. For me, it's got to be the writing that's most central. Anyone from a Muslim background in Britain, I want to hear them, even if they themselves are atheist or agnostic or we don't know.

13. **SP: What I found problematic is that if somebody is an atheist how can one call him a Muslim because "Muslim" - the very definition - is somebody who surrenders?**

CC: I understand that but for me, Muslim Writing is a capacious, inclusive category, it's not the same as Muslim full stop. In Muslim fiction, writers take on different personae, so good writing by an atheist can still present a Muslim character and that should be worth listening to. Take the example of Jewish literature which is a more established category. The majority of these so-called Jewish writers are atheist or agnostic, but they've still got a culturally Jewish way of looking at things which is valuable to explore. And who really knows what's in the heart of a person? Opinions might shift over time or even from one novel to the next. Robin Yassin Kasab talks about this in his essay 'Am I a Muslim?' He concludes that it depends on which day you ask, sometimes he feels more British, sometimes he feels much more Syrian, and other days his Muslim identity comes to the fore. These categories are shifting and if you only spotlight somebody who is very open about being Muslim, then you are shutting out other voices that could be interesting, especially at a time when Muslims are being stereotyped and pigeonholed. Range and diversity are key characteristics of this writing, in my view.

14. **SP: "It is my contention that 1989 rather than 2001 was a crucial date for the representation of Islam and emergence of a specific form of Islamophobia in British culture" (Chambers, 2019). How would you base your argument?**

CC: You know, my project is British so this would not be the case in America for example where the Rushdie affair[1] didn't have as much impact. What I am saying is that in terms of literature in Britain, there was a seismic shift in the way Muslims were presented. They were regarded negatively for protesting against Rushdie and they were smeared and stereotyped. That's when comic novels like *East of Wimbledon* (2013) and Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (2018) started coming out. This is in the 1990s, well before 9/11. And it was in 1997, not the 2000s, that the Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia in their report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997). Of course, as I say 9/11 is a big turning point and it did accelerate and calcify Islamophobia, emboldening Islamophobes considerably. But the seeds had been sown in 1989[1] when ordinary British people became more conscious of Muslims in negative terms, unfortunately. Of course, Edward Said would rightly say that it goes much further back and that there has been Orientalism (1978) for centuries.

15. **SP: It has been more than two decades since the term "Islamophobia'" was coined in 1997 by Runnymede Report. Different authors have engaged with this issue in varying forms of urgency. Nazneen along with her husband Chanu witnesses the entire incident of 9/11 on television (*Brick Lane,* 2008*),* whereas in *Minaret* (2007), Najwa is subjected to public harassment and Shelina Zahra Janmohammed also writes about being equally shocked like non-Muslims. How far do such depictions help in countering Islamophobia and the stereotypes regarding Muslims?**

CC: Yes, and there are more examples you can give like Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008), which portrays 9/11 happening and a young hot-head character named Ammar being quite pleased about the attack. Similarly, if you think of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2009), Changez laughs when he watches the attack on TV. There are many other examples. Again, I think a diversity of representation can only be a good thing. When people think of 9/11 books, it is mostly white American and British mainstream authors that tend to come up: texts like John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2008), Martin Amis's *The Second Plane* (2013) and Sebastian Faulks' *A Week in December* (2010). Even our prime minister Boris Johnson, then a journalist, got in on the act with an execrable novel entitled *Seventy-Two Virgins* (2005). So, it's crucial for the counter-voices of culturally Muslim writers who know about these issues from the inside and have likely experienced Islamophobia to counter the stereotypes.

16. **SP: How responsible do you feel the mainstream media is for the propagation of stereotypes concerning Muslims?**

CC: It's a bit outside the area of my expertise but I do know that there is definitely stereotyping in Britain's mainstream media. I can refer you to a whole body of work on the media by experts like Elizabeth Poole, John Richardson, S. Sayyid and Abdool Karim Vakil. There is also a cluster of people doing excellent research on Islamophobia like Andrew Shryock, Arun Kundnani and Nisha Kapoor. I will say that tabloids and newspapers in the UK are very damaging not just from the perspective of Islamophobia but racism as well. Their way of reporting is to present a criminalised picture and a sensationalised view of terrorism. Newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* bear a lot of responsibility for the division in this country. I am no expert on the media, but what I know from my research is that for example the charity work that Muslim people do gets overlooked. Especially during Ramzan but also for the rest of the year, British Muslims are the most charitable people in Britain. That is not the story that is told; white British non-Muslims

are often surprised if you tell them about Zakat, the proportion of charity that people give. These are good news stories that are not being discussed; they're not sensational enough to be reported. We hear much more about arena bombings and less about attacks on mosques and women wearing hijabs.

17. **SP: Salma in *My Name is Salma* (2008) has to give up on her hijab to secure employment whereas Najwa in *Minaret* (2007) is derogated as "Muslim scum". Why do you think the hijab has been one of the most important issues garnering global attention when it comes to Muslim women?**
CC: The hijab is a visible symbol of Muslim womanhood, isn't it? It's different with beards since for men this signifier has been widely fashionable for at least ten years now. So, from a beard, you can't really easily identify whether the man is Muslim or not unless he is wearing other sartorial indicators. What people know and think they can read is the hijab. This garment, unfortunately, has gathered so many connotations over a long time via Orientalism. There has long been colonial desire in the question, "What's behind the veil?" The headscarf is exoticised and eroticised, shadowed by fear and hostility, and the material consequence is that this loaded symbol makes real women vulnerable. The example of the character Salma worrying her hijab looks unprofessional and deciding to take it off for work is sadly still recognizable and widespread. Some British Muslim women take their hijabs on and off according to the context, regardless of what they really want to do. The even worse instance is the "Muslim scum" attack, where Najwa has a soft drink, Tizer, thrown at her: it's awful. There are some anti-hate organisations like Tell MAMA[11] that specifically work for Muslim communities under attack. And there are many examples of women who have been targets of Islamophobic abuse, more than men because the hijab is hyper-visible. And this is not to mention the virulent fear and hatred around the niqab or face-covering, which is not even that commonly worn. If you look at France, face-covers are banned and it's ridiculous. People shouldn't tell women what they can or can't wear; these women should be able to make their own choices. The burkini, for example, is banned in France, preventing women from full coverage if they want to go swimming. But that's a shame, as it's a positive garment in many ways: it's good for women who are conscious of their figures, it's good for sun protection, as well as the religious angle. There are lots of reasons why women might want to be fully covered, and I really feel strongly against the idea that it is automatically oppressive.

18. **SP: After interacting and communicating with Muslims for such a long time do you feel Muslims are vilified and**

demonized across the globe? Do you feel authors have a responsibility to debunking myths and stereotypes?

CC: No, I don't, I feel it's context-specific. In a Muslim-majority country like Pakistan, certain Muslims are vilified, and the strong problem is sectarianism so Shia and Ahmadi Muslims are persecuted. On top of that, religious minorities like Christians, Hindus and Sikhs have a tough time. So, Sunni Muslim men, at least, do quite well within that context. Again, in the Middle East, in Egypt, Coptic Christians are under pressure and come under attack. But if you are talking geopolitically yes, the Middle East bears a heavy load. The majority of the world's refugees come from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and a disproportionate number are from Muslim backgrounds. In India, Muslims have been treated abominably under the Modi regime with the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the minoritization and vilification of Muslims. Rohingya people are some of the most suffering people in the world, the Palestine invasion is not being solved and, at the same time, there is a similar problem in Kashmir which is the world's untold story. It's absolutely awful, but it's context-specific. I don't believe that there is a Western conspiracy against all Muslims, and Muslim-on-Muslim violence is also a problem. From my position in Britain, I am interested in the persecution of Muslims that *is* happening, and which is our national shame. As for creative writers, I think they should write about what they feel passionate about writing about, they don't always have to be tackling such problems. But if they do decide to tackle them, I certainly think they should be careful not just to reproduce stereotypes. They need to think imaginatively and originally and try to show the world something it hasn't seen before, pushing language in new ways.

19. **SP: Do you feel Muslim women have the proper agency to voice their own concerns?**

CC: Again, it's hard to say. There is a big problem of illiteracy among women in the global south. So, if you are talking of voicing, I guess you mean in a literal sense. A lot of women can't read or write and they are stuck doing domestic tasks, as with many women around the world. There is a lot of inequality, not just between Muslim women and men, but the same would be true with Christians, Hindus or Sikhs in poor countries like India and Pakistan. But agency is a curious term, it's quite embedded within individualistic and single-issue feminist ideas at times, so you might want to explore that. If you are talking of agency in a relational way, that is more useful rather than putting too much emphasis on individual agency. I think there are many Muslim women who have a lot more relational agency than people credit

them with. There are some really exciting works by Muslim women writers. Take the example of Kashmir: the famous voices that we hear are Basharat Peer's in *Curfewed Night* (2010) and Mirza Waheed's in *The Collaborator* (2012) and *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2015). So, we hear male voices, also in the film *Haider*, which Peer himself wrote for. These are the male authors, but there is also a really interesting group of young Muslim women whose writing deserves great attention. There is Asiya Zahoor with her amazing poetry; she is also a fiction writer, playwright and academic. She is brilliant, but her voice isn't loudly heard. There is also a new book by Farah Bashir, entitled *Rumours of Spring* (2021), which is a memoir about growing up in Kashmir in the 1980s and 1990s. And then there is Fauzia Qazi, who published on Facebook a series of posts about the situation of Kashmir in 2016, which were then published as a journal article called *Curfew Diary* back in 2018. So, she's doing a really interesting kind of digital writing. It's a blend of resistance literature and life writing, using social media, specifically Facebook, to show what it is like to be under occupation and under curfew. For me, these are good examples of agency for women and it is quite a relational agency, focused on family, friends, the home, and reading. Meanwhile, male authors tend to be interested in terror networks, insurgency, government clampdown and torture and high geopolitics. Women writers have a different take in their writing, talking about going to university, meeting or falling in love, home life and the food you eat, but it seems to me that's equally valid. In conflict women's voices do get marginalised compared with the narrative of occupation and counter-violence. But women's writing deals with the effects of war on ordinary people. The world might not be there on every page, but events occasionally erupt. That is important too.

20. **SP: Do Muslims have a greater sense of compatriot-ship being brothers and sisters in the faith which transcends boundaries? Do you feel it is actually a threat to the discourse of nationalism?**

CC: We have to not overemphasize this idea of compatriot-ship and brotherhood because as we know Pakistan for example did not manage to hold together its west and east wing for very long. There were too many differences, language differences being the primary one, between the Bengalis and the Pakistanis. And in practical terms, the two wings were separated by more than a thousand miles, so a local nationalism could shatter that apparent unity of shared Muslim-ness. But as you suggest, solidarity can be found. It's quite striking talking to South Asian Muslims: many are quite aware of and well informed about what's going on in Palestine for example. And although Bangladesh is populous and very poor, it

has taken a lot of Rohingya refugees, just as Pakistan has many Afghan refugees, Lebanon housed so many Syrians and so on. Though their welcome is far from perfect, Muslim refugees are being taken in by other Muslim countries in large numbers, and this often gets forgotten amid talk of Europe's "refugee crisis".

21. **SP: Mimicry is seen as "a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline" and the mimic as "a reformed, recognizable Other," signifying resistance and subversion (*Of Mimicry and Man*, Homi K. Bhabha 2001). However, in the case of Salma (*My Name is Salma,* 2008), we find the result is disastrous with her completely being disoriented. Do you think the theories of mimicry are valid for accounting for the experiences of a Muslim immigrant in post-imperial space?**
CC: Yes, Bhabha says as well that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. I think he recognises that mimicry can be disorienting and disastrous, it can be subversive and something positive. I think Bhabha is an optimist, and he tries to look for a resistance in the mimicry inspired and coerced by colonialism. Maybe he is too sanguine at times. I prefer his more recent work on refugees, for example in the essay 'The Barbed Wire Labyrinth', in which he is doing important work on the current refugee situation with a darker tone and less optimism.

22. **SP: I read in your monograph, *British Muslim Fiction* (2011) that some other writers refused to be interviewed in order not to be categorized ethnically. As a critic of Muslim Writing, how harmful or helpful is the labelling of authors with categories such as "Muslim'" and "halal"?**
CC: I think categories can be harmful and I have been mindful of that from the beginning. You have to be careful, because if you are using categories, they need to be elastic and quite open. I wouldn't want to only talk about Muslim-ness, I want to talk about literary techniques, a writer's nationality if that's relevant, also maybe their regional affiliations, what genres they use: there are so many things. In 'British Muslim Fictions' (2011) I talk about the category as an enabling springboard rather than a constricting box which is via Robin Yassin-Kasab. There is no way, though, that we can get away from labels altogether; we need them for navigating reading. If we didn't have categories then how could we find that murder mystery or travel guide we wanted to read?

23. **SP: Your monograph, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2019) is really unique not just in its contribution to Muslim Writing but the manner in which the book is structured extolling the sensory human perceptions as means of assessing narratives. How did you conceive such an**

idea? What was your rationale behind the working of this monograph?

CC: For a long time, I have been thinking about body politics and so I wanted to turn to the body. The more I read, the more I noticed that the senses come up a lot. Without really meaning for this to happen, *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* (2015) ended up having a lot to say about vision, the gaze, and eyes, because that was what the writers of this early period (1780-1988) seem to have been interested in. But sight has more research conducted and books written about it than the other four senses combined. This is because the European Enlightenment privileged sight and held it up as the highest, most intellectual of the senses. By contrast, smell and taste have been seen as lesser senses associated with women and other Others. I was interested in how these two senses have become entangled with ideas of racism and sexism, and how writers explore them in really beautiful and sensual ways. I also think the senses are a way of exploring the human in a world where Muslims are all too often dehumanised and made to seem lesser. Authors show that these are people who like anybody else bleed if they get cut. I didn't know the monograph was going to be about the senses until quite late in the research. The idea just came to me on reading Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2018) because it had so much to say about listening. That novel was the start of it, and the more I thought about it, the more I started to see the senses everywhere in this body of writing.

24. **SP: Would you say that this actually paved way for your recent publication *Dartarkhwan* (2021)? How different is it from other cookbooks?**

CC: The senses and my chapter on food definitely paved the way to *Dastarkhwan* (2021), which connects to my having been thinking for so long about taste. It's not really a cookbook, although it does have a recipe accompanying each chapter. The book comprises nine essays and nine stories, and again these are diverse voices. Some of them emphasise authenticity in cooking, like the idea that you should only put fresh coriander on a dish when it contains haldi or turmeric. These are quite strict ideas, steeped in food heritage, and drawing on long and storied culinary knowledge. Others are deeply irreverent and stereotype-busting. Sarvat Hasin, to my surprise, sent a beautiful essay that is as much about pasta and tacos as it is about kali dal. As a second-generation British Pakistani Muslim, Sarvat refuses to be contained within the boundaries of South Asian food. Hers is quite an enabling chapter about learning to cook and learning to love food as women and not feel pressured to approach the kitchen in an "authentic" way. There are many different voices and stories, but one common thread in

the fiction half of the book is nostalgia for times when we eat together, as at a funeral or a celebration. There is quite a lot of melancholy in this second half, that's just the way it turned out and how the fiction authors decided to respond to the brief.

25. **SP: Despite all the hardships and limitations during the pandemic, it has also put to practice the digital form of learning and teaching. Would you consider this to be a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process?**
CC: Well, I don't enjoy online teaching, I don't think it's an adequate replacement for face-to-face even though it is convenient. On the other hand, I really like the way the digital has opened up meetings and conferences, reducing expenses and time and allowing for more international speakers without anything like the same carbon footprint as we face this climate emergency. During the pandemic I have spoken in "China", "Turkey", "Bhutan", three or four times in various cities in "India", and I am going to "Indonesia" next week on Zoom! If I had done this in real life, the planet would be on its knees even more than it already is. I think communication technology has really opened up the world as it's inexpensive to invite people, and the speaker can go back to their family as soon as they finish. The problems with online conferences are that there are no serendipitous encounters, it can be exhausting, and you don't really know if anyone is listening. But definitely, the future is more online.

26. **SP: I came across an undergraduate advanced module named "Decolonial writing" at the University of York taught by you. Is it an addition post-pandemic, and could you tell us more about what it comprises of?**
CC: It's a new project coming out of the pandemic really from 2020 onwards. A lot of new novels have already been published and whether they will stand the test of time is yet to be seen. There is a lot of creative non-fiction, but it takes longer to create a novel. The world has changed and the module is also about a whole lot of things. It's about Black Lives Matter, racism, inequality and health, food. The virus makes us think about so many other things. I've enjoyed the preparation for this module so much and all the reading that I hope this might end up being my next monograph, but we'll see.

Notes

1. The publication of the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by British migrant author Salman Rushdie caused discontent among Muslims across the globe as it struck the chord of religious sentiment. 1989 witnessed some of the most violent protests in the

form of demonstrations in some parts of UK, and Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death warrant against Rushdie. The entire episode is known as the Rushdie affair, and affected Muslims enormously. Muslims who protested were projected as culturally and religiously intolerant leading to subsequent othering and vilification.

2. Four co-ordinated attacks initiating with the Twin tower demolition of World Trade Center is remembered historically as 9/11. The incident that occurred on September 11, 2001 was blotched forever as one of the epoch-changing incidents of world history. This event claimed several thousand lives and left many injured, leading to a massive surge of Islamophobia worldwide.

3. On the morning of 7th of July 2005, London witnessed terror attacks in the form of simultaneous bomb explosions at four different spots. This is commonly referred to as 7/7 in media and literary discourses. 52 people were killed and 700 were injured. The identity of all four bombers who were killed in the attacks were later revealed to be young Muslim men who grew up in the UK. The militant group Al-Qaida claimed partial responsibility of this incident. This triggered an immense rise of reported Islamophobia quite like 9/11, and brought many Muslims across the globe under unnecessary surveillance.

4. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature* is a major theoretical work by the trio Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffin and Helen Triffin. Published in 1989 this non-fiction explores how major post-colonial literary works respond to the centre. The title alludes to Salman Rushdie's article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance"(1982). Henceforth the phrase "writing back" has been in frequent usage referring to the act of countering the ethnocentric literary canon by producing alternate narratives from margins.

5. A*ROOJ* is an organization set up by Tariq Mahmood in 2007 with a group of BAME professionals. It was intended to work for the cause of Muslim offenders within the criminal justice system.

6. *Omkara* is a 2006 Indian crime drama film adapted from William Shakespeare's *Othello*, co-written and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj.

7. *Maqbool* is a 2004 Indian crime drama film directed by Vishal Bhardwaj and starring Irrfan, Tabu, Pankaj Kapur and

Masumeh Makhija in an adaptation of the play *Macbeth* by Shakespeare.

8. *Haider* is a 2014 Indian crime drama film written, produced and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj. Set amidst the insurgency-hit Kashmir conflicts of 1995 and civilian disappearances, *Haider* is a modern-day adaptation of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*.

9. GCSE: GCSE is an acronym for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), an academic examination taken in a particular subject, in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

10. EAL: This stands for English as an Additional Language (EAL) referring to learners whose first language is not English.

11. Tell MAMA is a national project of the United Kingdom that aims to monitor anti-Muslim hatred and also provides support for victims of such hatred. It was launched on 21st February 2012.

Works Cited

Aboulela, Leila. *Bird Summons*. Hachette UK, 2019.

—. *Minaret: A Novel*. Open Road+ Grove/Atlantic, 2007.

—. *The Translator.* Birlinn Ltd, 2015.

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane: A Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 2008.

Amis, Martin. *The Second Plane: September 11, 2001-2007*. Random House, 2013.

Bashir, Farah. *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*. Harper Collins India, 2021.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis, Spring, 1984, pp. 125-133.

Bhatnagar, Sangeeta. *Dastarkhwan-e-awadh*. HarperCollins Publishers, India, 1997.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Chambers, Claire. *The Relationship Between Knowledge and Power in the Work of Amitav Ghosh*. Leeds: Leeds University Theses. 2003.

—. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Palgrave, 2011.

—. "British Muslim Fictions?" *Race Equality Teaching*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2011. pp. 35-39.

—. *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780-1988*. Springer, 2015.

Chambers, Claire, Nafhesa Ali, and Richard Phillips. *A Match Made in Heaven: British Muslim Women Write about Love and Desire*. Hope Road Publishing, 2020.

—. *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. Springer, 2019.

—. *Dastarkhwan: Food Writing from Muslim South Asia*, Beacon Books, 2021.

DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man: A Novel*. Pan Macmillan, 2008.

Faqir, Fadia. *My Name is Salma*. Random House, 2008.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Circle of Reason*. Penguin UK, 2009.

—. *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium, and Discovery*. Penguin Books India, 2011.

—. *The Shadow Lines*. Penguin Books India, 2010.

—. *In An Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale*. Vintage, 2011.

Faulks, Sebastian. *A Week in December*. Vintage, 2010.

Hirsch, Afua. "Runnymede Report". *Art Monthly*, 446, 2021, pp. 18-19.

Kureishi, Hanif. *Black Album*. 2018.

Hossain, Begum Rokeya Sakha. *Sultana's Dream*. Tara Publishing, 2005.

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Anchor Canada, 2009.

John Updike. *Terrorist*. Knopf, 2006.

Johnson, Boris. Seventy-Two Virgins. HarperCollins UK, 2005.

Malak, Amin. *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. SUNY Press, 2004.

Morrison, Toni. *Desdemona*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

Morris, Christopher, et al. *Four lions*. Optimum Releasing, 2010.

Pickthall, Marmaduke William. *Said the Fisherman*. Methuen, 1903.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children.* Jonathan Cape, 1981.
Runnymede Trust, London (United Kingdom). *Islamophobia A Challenge for Us All*. 1997.

Seymour, Susan. "Resistance." *Anthropological theory* vol.6, no.3, 2006, 303-321.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Routledge, Pantheon Books 1978.

Peer, Basharat. *Curfewed Night: One Kashmiri Journalist's Frontline Account of Life, Love, and War in his Homeland*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Waheed, Mirza. *The Collaborator*. Penguin UK, 2012.

—. *The Book of Gold Leaves.* Penguin UK, 2015.

Qazi, Fozia S. "Curfew Diary—Kashmir, 2016." *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 46.3 & 4, 2018, pp. 237-260.

Shamsie, Kamila. *Home Fire*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. New York Review of Books, 2009.

Yassin-Kassab, Robin. *The Road from Damascus*. Penguin UK, 2008.

Williams, Nigel. *East of Wimbledon*. Hachette UK, 2013.