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Edited by Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam

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Aroosa Kanwal, Saiyma Aslam

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Kavita Bhanot

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# LOVE, SEX, AND DESIRE VS ISLAM IN BRITISH MUSLIM LITERATURE

*Kavita Bhanot*

At the 2015 Jaipur Literature Festival, in a discussion on sex and writing, Hanif Kureishi declared sex and writing about it to be acts of political resistance against ‘Muslim fascism’. ‘It’s important to write about sex’, he said:

because we are desiring creatures. Particularly in the Muslim world, it’s distorted and forbidden [...] In the present context the love of sensuality, love of desire, our sexual love of one another seems to have become a political act. Remember that, every time you’re f\*\*\*\*\*, you’re defying political Islam. One of the things radical Islam thinks about is pleasure, all the time, in the negative [...] Islam is a death cult of extreme fascism – we also have to have a resistance from the side of pleasure. It’s partly our duty to keep pleasure alive.

(quoted in Nelson 2015: n.p.)

This pitching of love, sex, desire, and pleasure in opposition to Islam has been central to Kureishi’s fiction, in particular his novel *The Black Album* (1995), about the Rushdie Affair.

The aftermath to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* signified the emergence and development of a perceived British Muslim identity, while subsequent events, such as 9/11, 7/7, the Bradford riots, and state media responses to these continued to contribute to a process of creating and fixing a British Muslim subject. A number of critics (Mondal 2015; Ahmed 2017; Nash 2012; Yaqin 2012; Morey 2012; Upstone 2010) have articulated the role that British literature has played in reflecting and contributing to the idea of a threatening Muslim ‘other’. Apart from novels by writers such as Ian McEwan and John Updike, a number of texts by Muslim/South Asian writers have grappled, overtly or implicitly, with the Rushdie Affair, as well as ensuing events, such as 9/11 and 7/7, that have formed pressure points for British Muslims. Above all, while seeming to give a voice to the British Muslim perspective, they have reflected and confirmed mainstream representations and suspicions of British Muslims; young British Muslim believers are caricatured in this literature as radical, rigid, unreasonable, fundamentalists.

These literary representations can be traced to *The Black Album*, published in 1995. The novel charts the main character/narrator Shahid’s simultaneous attraction to what are presented as dichotomous ways of living: the liberal pleasure-seeking hedonism of his teacher, Deede

Osgood, and the revivalist, politicised religiosity of the Muslim students at his college. These students are presented in sinister and caricatured tones, and it is therefore inevitable, as the plot hurtles towards its climax, in which a book (unnamed but analogous to *The Satanic Verses*) is burnt by these students, that Shahid will ultimately choose the pleasure-seeking liberalism signified by his teacher/lover. According to Anshuman Mondal, this paradigm in *The Black Album*, along with the accompanying representation of young British Muslims, has become an archetype or resource that has been recreated in a number of literary works that followed Kureishi's novel – including Kureishi's own short story 'My Son the Fanatic', Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (Mondal 2015: 34–35).

This chapter focuses on love, sex, and desire as a central aspect of this dichotomy, in three texts that form a central thread through the category of 'British Muslim' literature: Kureishi's *The Black Album*, Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), and Sarfraz Manzoor's memoir *Greetings from Bury Park* (2007). All of these texts grapple with love, desire, and sexuality (as aspects of Western liberalism, entangled with abstract notions of music, literature, creativity, imagination, beauty, and freedom) in relation to Islam, which is seen to repress and forbid them. Whilst the binary is stark in *The Black Album* and *Greetings from Bury Park*, with a clear association with whiteness (e.g. love and sexual pleasure are associated with a white lover), this dynamic is more complicated and somewhat obscured in Aslam's novel due to the articulation of what Sadia Abbas refers to as a 'Sufi aesthetic' (2014: 193) that is rooted in the subcontinent, and entangled with Islam.

### ***The Black Album***

At the heart of *The Black Album* is a dichotomy between Islam and literature (along with everything that the narrator Shahid associates with literature: intelligence, love, imagination and creativity). Islam's rejection of these is captured in the novel's representation of the Rushdie Affair. The novel appears to present different critical arguments via characters such as Riaz and Chad (Shahid's Muslim friends) and the socialist Brownlaw, who questions Shahid's elevation of literature and intellectuals, his assumption that literature represents a neutral perspective, and the 'good intentions' of liberals. Shahid is shown at times to have been swayed by the arguments of his new friends; however, the moment when the book is burned in the college is a turning point. It becomes clear to Shahid at that moment which side he is on: 'He never wanted his face to show such ecstatic rigidity! The stupidity of the demonstration appalled him. How narrow they were, how unintelligent, how [...] embarrassing it all was!' (Kureishi 1995: 225). Characters who represent alternative perspectives ultimately slip into caricature or carry a sinister edge, undermining their arguments, ratifying the liberal perspective of the novel. What Shahid finally chooses, over what is presented as the certainty, narrowness, and rigidity of young Muslims, is to embrace fluidity, openness, freedom: 'There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity' (Kureishi 1995: 274). In this way, the specific perspective which Shahid/the novel represents assumes a neutrality, objectivity, and universality, with love and pleasure as aspects of this apparently free, fluid, and creative path. Shahid's Muslim friends are shown to deny themselves this pleasure. For example, Shahid describes the repressed sexual energies between Nina and Sadiq: 'Forbidden to kiss or touch, they liked to fight: Sadiq had pinched her and now Nina was poised for the chance to pinch him back' (Kureishi 1995: 126).

'Pleasure and self-absorption isn't everything', Chad explains to Shahid (in whose mind a 'terrible torment' is 'working itself up') 'One pleasure [...] can only lead to another [...] A man

is more advanced, surely, if he conquers himself, rather than submits to every desire?' (Kureishi 1995: 128–129). Around these Muslim friends, Shahid is filled with guilt about the parallel life of pleasure, sex, drugs, raves, and alcohol that he is leading with his teacher, Deedee. He repeatedly uses imagery of water, of drowning, of being carried by a current, almost against his will. He has 'plunged', he thinks as he watches the men pray, 'into a river of desire and excitement' (Kureishi 1995: 132). Out of guilt, he tries to expunge thoughts of Deedee from his mind while with his new friends: 'Instead of bathing in the warm memory of the love they'd made and the pleasures she'd introduced him to [...] he became aware of a bitter, disillusioned feeling. How he'd been drowning in his senses in the past hours!' (Kureishi 1995: 130). At one point, he feels himself 'empty of passion and somewhat delivered and cleansed' while praying (Kureishi 1995: 131). By the end of the novel, Shahid frees himself of the influence of these friends, and therefore of any guilt, in order to succumb to all the joys that life has to offer. He and Deedee commit themselves, finally, to their latest adventure, 'until it stops being fun' (Kureishi 1995: 276).

The novel is an ode to hedonism, pleasure, playfulness. This is what constitutes the sacred for Shahid; feeling unsure of what he is supposed to think during prayer,

on his knees, he celebrated [...] the inexplicable phenomenon of life, art, humour and love itself – in murmured language, itself another sacred miracle. He accompanied this awe and wonder with suitable music, the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth [...] which he hummed inaudibly.

(Kureishi 1995: 92)

Sexual pleasure and love become intertwined with, and analogous to, forms of art such as literature and music. Thinking of Deedee, for Shahid, is 'like listening to his favourite music; she was a tune he liked to play' (Kureishi 1995: 130). And at another point, as he is writing, Shahid's 'typing fingers, sensing Deedee's body beneath them, danced on the keys too euphorically for the subject matter [...] He pulled himself together, but got an erection which just wouldn't go away' (Kureishi 1995: 76). Shahid is here typing up Riaz's work on religion and, as an act of mischief and what is shown to be innocent joy in his relationship, and therefore almost accidental, he brings sex and innuendo into Riaz's writing. It was a celebration of passion (Kureishi 1995: 234), he later tells Hat, one of his Muslim friends. This act of blasphemy, or of rebellion, becomes a small feat of heroism in the novel (and also a comment on the Rushdie Affair). We see Shahid perpetually writing or imagining writing stories about sex, weaving in religious imagery: 'He began composing an erotic story for Deedee, "the Prayer-mat of the Flesh"' (Kureishi 1995: 134). Later, 'he embarked on a story which he wanted to call "The Flesh, the Flesh"' (Kureishi 1995: 166). The implication is that it is the job of the writer to offend religious sentiment. As he is quoted as saying at the beginning of this chapter, for Kureishi, writing about sexual pleasure is a form of resistance to Muslim fascism.

The idea of love is evoked throughout the novel: 'He would spread himself out, in his work, and in love' (Kureishi 1995: 274), Shahid decides in the final pages of the novel. He does question, at one point, whether his relationship with Deedee is love, reflecting on Riaz's assertions that:

Without a framework in which love [can] flourish [...] love [is] impossible [...] people merely rented one another for a period. In this faithless interlude they hoped to obtain pleasure and distraction; they even hoped to discover something which would complete them. And if they didn't soon receive it, they threw the person over and moved on. [...] In such circumstances what permanence or deep knowing could there be?

(Kureishi 1995: 240)

Shahid wonders if his relationship with Deedee is an instance of this, whether they

had plunged into a compelling familiarity. They'd gone out a few times, confessed, and shared the most uninhibited passions people could participate in. Surely though, their lovemaking was merely an exchange of skills and performances? How much did they know one another? They had been tourists in one another's lives.

(Kureishi 1995: 240)

However, such questioning, attributed to his Muslim friends' influence, becomes another instance in the novel of a counter-perspective being offered, but not taken up.

The implication by the end is that Shahid has chosen the path of love. Apart from a lack of depth and emotion in the depiction of love in the novel, there is also a lack of complexity and politics. Instead, love, as well as creativity, beauty, music, art, and imagination, are ultimately idealised and abstracted. Although we see hints of the inequalities between Deedee and Shahid, these are brushed under the carpet, absolved of significance. We don't get a sense that power dynamics are addressed or overcome in order for their love to flourish. For example, at one point, Shahid reflects on his relationship with Deedee, the fact that she is an older white woman, and his teacher. 'What prevented her taking other Asian or black lovers?' he wonders. 'Perhaps she took a different lover each year, using men as [Shahid's brother] Chili had used women' (Kureishi 1995: 240). Shahid is echoing here what Sadiq has suggested to him: 'Osgood is taking lovers among the Afro-Caribbean and Asian students [...] For political reasons she selects only black or Asian lovers now'. Tahira echoes this: 'Our people have always been sexual objects for whites' (Kureishi 1995: 228). This is another example of a counter-perspective in the novel, but in the logic of the narrative, such questions simply remain as paranoia or petty vilifying, not truly considered.

Abstract ideas of love and sex are emptied of complexity and power relations. However, the fetishisation of young black/brown male bodies is an obstacle to the possibility of love, in the same way that men's objectification of women is. At one point, during one of their liaisons, Shahid says: "'You're looking at me as if I were a piece of cake. What are you thinking?' 'I deserve you'", Deedee replies. 'I'm going to like eating you' (Kureishi 1995: 117). Fetishising Shahid's skin colour from a location of power, Deedee tells him to undo his shirt. 'I love that café-au-lait skin', she says (Kureishi 1995: 210). Perhaps this power dynamic is all the starker because it tends to be normalised when the female is being objectified by a man. It is perhaps a decolonial counter-reading of the novel that leads us to think about Deedee's whiteness in the relationship. Meanwhile, it also remains the case that the novel inhabits a male gaze in its representation of love and desire. This is how Shahid recalls his first meeting with Deedee:

She crossed her legs and tugged her skirt down. He had, so far, successfully kept his eyes averted from her breasts and legs. But the whole eloquent movement – what amounted in that room to an erotic landslide of rustling and hissing – was so sensational and almost provided the total effect of a Prince concert that his mind took off into a scenario about how he might be able to tape-record the whisper of her legs, copy it, add a backbeat and play it through his headphones.

(Kureishi 1995: 25)

This description (again bringing together music and desire), from Shahid's point of view as the narrator, is normalised as the perspective of the novel. It is not problematised or separated as the perspective of the main character or narrator. Although we see glimpses of Deedee's insecurity

in the novel, the relationship between her and Shahid seems to rest on her self-alienation, a disconnection from her own vulnerability. In this way, Deedee, as a sexually liberated, assertive female teacher, appears as a male fantasy. She talks to Shahid about 'The Story of O' – which is about female submission; the female protagonist is prepared to be a slave. She is whipped and says, 'I'll be whatever you want me to be' (Kureishi 1995: 118). Deedee says, 'I'm thinking of preparing a literary wank list for my students'. And Shahid says, 'How do you turn the pages?' (Kureishi 1995: 118). It is clear in his comment that he assumes it to be men who are the recipients of this 'literary wank list'. As Deedee masturbates before him, he thinks 'without losing her soul she was turning herself into pornography' (Kureishi 1995: 119). From a male perspective, this is perhaps ideal: a woman willingly objectifying herself. The dynamic between Deedee and Shahid, the expression of their desire and sexuality, is specific to a particular context, history, and cultural expression, and perhaps, through these cracks in (or in the illusion of) abstraction, the specificity or parochialism of the Western liberalism which the book embraces is revealed.

### *Greetings from Bury Park*

While Manzoor's memoir *Greetings from Bury Park* is chronologically the latter of the texts I am discussing, it is a clearer articulation, in continuity with Kureishi's novel, of the binary of a liberal, Western framework contrasted with Islam. It all the more clearly occupies a position that is simultaneously 'post-ethnic' and proudly British. An inheritor of Kureishi's ideological framework, Manzoor's memoir clearly reveals its implications to us.

*Greetings from Bury Park* is a commercial response to 7/7. It is also located in the post-9/11 and post-2001 Bradford riots context, wherein former *Prospect* editor David Goodhart recommended 'earned citizenship' (citizenship granted only to the most assimilated subjects). This has been the face of aggressive British government policy since 2002, when multiculturalism and the allowing of 'difference' to flourish was blamed for the growing 'segregation' behind the Bradford riots. In the background, dating back to the Rushdie Affair, exacerbated and overt since 9/11 and 7/7, has been the demonisation of Muslims as the embodiment of the uncivilised 'other'.

Post-9/11 and 7/7, there has been a political and commercial imperative to present 'authentic' Muslim voices – but also for writers to illustrate, through their work, that they are 'good', integrated, 'normal' Muslims with a shared understanding with the white middle-class reader towards whom a text such as Manzoor's is directed, of what it is to be normal. This is one of the key functions of Manzoor's text – it is overt in its celebration of Britishness, declaring by the end that 'every opportunity, every job, and every chance to pursue my dreams has been offered by this country [...] Britain [...] is my land of hope and dreams' (2007: 268–269).

At the centre of the memoir is a celebration of Bruce Springsteen's music, which becomes a signifier in the memoir of integration/assimilation into the West. The subtitle for the book is *Race. Religion. Rock 'n' Roll*, and the blurb talks about the book as a tribute to the 'power of music to transcend race and religion'. Blurring the specificity of the music that Manzoor's book is celebrating and the accompanying liberal ideology, music is assumed to be a pure, universal realm that brings people together: 'It was this shared love of music that quickly helped me see Kenny and Al as friends first and Americans second' (2007: 142).

An aspect of the dichotomy (West vs East/Islam) at the centre of Manzoor's work is the idea of romantic love and sexual pleasure. It is from Western music that Manzoor has acquired a sense of the importance, even the concept, of falling in love: 'I didn't know what love felt like, but according to the songs I was listening to when I was fourteen, it was overpowering, and its

power overwhelming' (2007: 186). Elsewhere, he tells us that 'listening to Bruce had ruined my love life. All those songs about love had affected my expectation' (2007: 204).

Being a 'true fan' of Springsteen, 'absorb[ing] the wisdom in his songs', seeing him as 'a role model, someone who had married a woman he loved and did a job he enjoyed, surrounded by some of his best friends' (2007: 203), involves a responsibility to follow the same path. Islam is presented as being an obstacle since it is shown to be fundamentally opposed to individual freedom, pleasure, sensuality. The only way to be Muslim, he had thought, 'was to be obedient, deferential and unquestioning, it was to reject pleasure and embrace duty, to renounce sensuality and to never ever ask why' (2007: 238). His parents' faith torments him as he apprehends the forbidden possibility of falling in love, which

would have been deeply inconvenient as it would have involved my parents disowning me and throwing me out of their home [...] My father treated the concept of love with a withering mixture of contempt and pity. 'What is love, anyway?' he would ask. Love is childish, anyone can fall in love. [...] Naïve individuals fell in love, good sons got married.

(2007: 186–187)

A dichotomy is created between love and marriage; while the West signifies love, Muslims and Pakistanis are concerned with the practicalities of marriage, including its cynical use/abuse for visa purposes. 'That was one of the problems with arranged marriages and importing husbands and wives from Pakistan', Manzoor writes at one point, 'they thought marriage was a free ticket to an easy life' (2007: 68). In this way, the text becomes almost a form of propaganda for state policies which argued – in the name of community cohesion after the 2002 Bradford riots – for 'integrationism as the new framework for race, immigration policies' (Kundnani 2007: 131), and recommended to this end a clampdown on arranged marriages with foreign spouses.

Manzoor writes about the unlikelihood of meeting a Pakistani girl he can fall in love with – a girl who listens to Springsteen; 'my ideal girl would be someone to whom I could play "Born to Run", "Backstreets" and "Racing in the Street" and who would get it. There wasn't a chance I was going to find that amongst any Pakistani girls' (2007: 204).

Love, sex, and desire are entangled in Manzoor's memoir, along with whiteness – all the more overtly since there is no girlfriend/lover, real or fictional. But the assumption is that any girlfriend Manzoor might have is likely to be white; the assumed inevitability of this feeds Manzoor's angst in the memoir. Looking through the local newspaper, Manzoor says that he has never seen 'an Asian man with a white bride' (2007: 179). Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's writing about the black man's attraction to the white woman (2008), Manzoor writes: 'I sometimes wondered if perhaps the price of having gone to school and grown up with whites was that it was only going to be white girls to whom I would be attracted and who would like me' (2007: 198).

This supposition that the woman with whom he will fall in love will be white belies the apparent freedom that the 'West' is supposed to signify, in opposition to the rigidity of arranged marriage. It suggests a certain conformity or ideology in the cultural expressions that Manzoor is celebrating, which renders only white women attractive, and also instils in Manzoor a sense of inferiority. Indeed, Manzoor repeatedly articulates an adolescent self-loathing connected to not being white – a feeling that he is not attractive to women (2007: 185–186).

When he is asked by his friend's mother if it would matter if he fell in love with a white girl, and when his friend responds that Sarfraz would never have an arranged marriage – that he is 'English like me', Manzoor's response is 'he was right of course' (2007: 193). There is no bristling at his friend's mother's patronising question, or his friend's declaration. Implicit in this

recounted scene is the assumption that if he doesn't have an arranged marriage, Manzoor will inevitably fall in love with/marry a white woman.

All this suggests a need to interrogate the 'abstract' pure idea of love that Manzoor asserts he has inherited through Western culture, which is contrasted with oppressive Islam. There is also no critical engagement with the power dynamic between men and women in this articulation of love and sex, of the male gaze, of the exploitation and objectification of women. As a boy, Manzoor would look at pages from pornographic magazines, with a 'delectable cover girl [...] displayed in all her naked glory', and would feel 'a surge of electric pleasure' (2007: 184). He talks about blue movies, about secretly looking at the photographs of naked women in back copies of *The Sun* in his father's friend's home. Pornography is simply a part of the sphere of pleasure, sex, and desire which Islam is shown to suppress, and Manzoor articulates his torment due to the guilt induced by his religion and family:

While I spent my afternoons poring over discarded porn magazines or browsing the videos on the top shelf of the video store [...] I spent my evenings reading the Koran. [...] I [...] hoped that my teenage curiosity did not make me a bad Muslim. Was I going to suffer in Hell because I had lingered too long on the underwear models in the catalogue?

(2007: 184)

This angst is reminiscent of the guilt that Shahid goes through in *The Black Album*, which carries a similar dichotomy or dilemma. These magazines and videos are shown to represent healthy desire, 'teenage curiosity'. Meanwhile, it is not only Islam that is opposed to the 'freedom' of the West to 'love'. 'Fact is', says his friend Amalok, who is shown to 'endure' wearing a turban due to parental pressure, 'there's no way I'm getting any pussy with this on my head' (Manzoor 2007: 100). 'Getting pussy' is normalised as an aspect of the freedom, the love, sex, and desire, that is being oppressed by the young boys' prospective cultures and religions.

### *Maps for Lost Lovers*

Both *The Black Album* and *Greetings from Bury Park* are responses to pivotal moments for Muslims in Britain, where pressure was exerted upon them to assert their allegiance to Britishness. The writing and publication of these texts have also been intertwined with a commercial and political imperative. In this way, the political agendas and positions in these works are overt. This dichotomy appears to be more complicated in Aslam's novel, which was written over eleven years. This is largely because *Maps for Lost Lovers* is more deeply immersed in the details and lived lives of the South Asian/Pakistani community in a fictional northern British town. Rather than setting up an East vs West dichotomy in which a normative white Britishness is contrasted with a traditional South Asian identity, the context of the novel appears to be a more specifically British-Pakistani identity.

This specificity exposes, perhaps inadvertently, the false universalism assigned to love, beauty, art, music, and literature in the work of Kureishi and Manzoor. Whilst *Maps for Lost Lovers* also articulates such apparently universal values, it is primarily through a specific Punjabi/Urdu Sufi perspective and context, revealing the narrow frame through which Kureishi and Manzoor articulate these values. For example, unlike Kureishi's novel and Manzoor's memoir, and most British-Asian literature (where the possibility or idea of love is usually entangled with whiteness), the beloved in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is not necessarily white. The only white character in the novel is Stella, the ex-wife of Charag, Shamas and Kaukab's son. Similarly, while both



Manzoor and Kureishi celebrate an abstract idea of music, their references are almost entirely Western: singers such as Springsteen (Manzoor's memoir) and Prince (Kureishi's novel), along with the specific ideologies intertwined with these forms of music. It is this music that is seen to signify love in opposition to Islam. However, even in these works, Sufism is hinted at as an exception. In both *The Black Album* and *Greetings from Bury Park*, references are made, albeit in passing, to the Sufi music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his nephew, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan; their music seems to have transcended cultural boundaries into the Western sphere (Manzoor 2007: 226, 237; Kureishi 1995: 45). Sufism and Sufi music and poetry alone have come to signify an acceptable aspect of Islam – often adopted or appropriated by secular left liberal elites in the subcontinent or by the West.

Sufi music and literature are also exceptionalised, indeed centred, in Aslam's novel as signifying the idea of love; the novel is entangled in what Sadia Abbas refers to as Sufi aesthetics (2014: 193). This engagement frames the novel's articulations of love, sex, and desire through a specific context and history. In particular, we see references throughout Aslam's novel to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who sings Sufi *qawwalis*. It is no coincidence that it is at a concert by him that Suraya and Shamas, who will have a short-lived affair, meet. Nusrat's *qawwalis* represent freedom, sensuality, disorder, and defiance in the novel. Their performance, as articulated in Virinder Kalra's work, in some contexts (e.g. in an all-night *urs* in Pakistan) become 'demotic and carnivalesque' (2014: 5). We see a glimpse of the transgressive aspects of these performances in Aslam's novel, where Nusrat comes to perform in the fictional town:

People are jubilantly throwing double handfuls of banknotes at Nusrat as he sings. A young woman gets up and, dancing there and back, goes to place a rose in Nusrat's lap; her open movements of pleasure are seen by some as a lack of womanly restraint and they win disapproving looks from a number of people in the audience, male and female.

(2004: 190–191)

Sufi *qawwalis* are closely associated with the *qissa* or 'fable' tradition. Throughout *Maps for Lost Lovers*, references to the *qissa* of Heer are contrasted with the terrifying Islam that pervades the closed community. Heer becomes the defiant female figure who devotes herself to love. Forced to marry into another family, she refuses to consummate the marriage and continues to pine for her lover. Nusrat sings from Heer's perspective in the novel:

Nusrat's voice has now become the fabled Heer [...] *Don't anybody call me Heer, says Nusrat-Heer in a pining tone, call me Ranjha, for I have spoken his name so many times during this separation that I am become him.*

(Aslam 2004: 191)

This is a specific kind of love, in which the female and the male merge, through submission to love. The male lover represents the *murshid* or guru, who also embodies love and leads the devotee (signified by the female) to God. Love exists on these two levels, the mystical and the worldly – perhaps the worldly is a metaphor for the mystical, perhaps there is no distinction. An abstract God is signified by the human figure of the *murshid*/guru, while romantic love is intertwined with the material, with sexuality, desire, lust. And so, in stories such as that of Heer, the merging of the bodies is central to the idea of losing oneself in love.

The novel's emphasis on 'the worldliness of love' (Abbas 2014: 193) is tied to a certain interpretation of Sufi *qissas* that elides, perhaps, the spiritual dimension. As Sadia Abbas argues, the

novel is concerned with the idea that ‘the body is all that humans have [...] If everything ends with the grave, there is no reward to be gained by deferring the body’s pleasure [...] the idea of resurrection is a cheat, not a promise’ (2014: 193). The novel is therefore a counter to the denial or postponement by orthodox Muslims (or indeed, in Aslam’s novel, all believing Muslims) of pleasure and desire, echoing Kureishi’s articulation quoted at the opening of this essay. For Shamas (the character closest to the novel’s perspective),

there was hardly anything more beautiful than [...] young people, fumbling their way through life, full of new doubts and certainties, finding comfort in their own and others’ bodies:

And more wonderful still the single sheet  
over two lovers on a bed.

(Aslam 2004: 144)

Worldly, physical love is given importance in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Chanda and Jugnu are killed for living together outside of marriage. The last we see of them, towards the end of the novel, is an elegy of sorts to their lovemaking:

They – Chanda and Jugnu – would lie in the various rooms of this house on secret trysts, the windows curtained and the clocks daringly put away the way they are in casinos – but they wouldn’t know in enough time that they were gambling with their lives. They contrived to meet for sensual dalliance in other places too, in the age-old manner of lovers.

(Aslam 2004: 362)

This reminds us of Heer Ranjha, who also met for secret trysts over twelve years (this number could be metaphorical rather than literal). Aslam’s novel refers repeatedly to Heer, who has been depicted in Sufi literature, poetry, and music as a fearless woman going against her family and society, and, above all, taking on her religion and its clergy, for love (2004: 191). The Sufi saints, and the poetry they wrote, which Nusrat sings, celebrate Heer’s rebellion and resistance to the hegemony of her time: her family, the community, orthodox clerics. Similarly, Chanda is shown to display agency and defiance, going against her family and community, loving Jugnu openly. She is perhaps the only Muslim woman in the novel who shows the strength and courage to do this and, like Heer, dies for her rebellion, killed by her brothers in the name of honour:

Always it was the vulnerability of women that was used by the poet-saints to portray the intolerance and oppression of their times: in their verses, the women rebel and try bravely to face all opposition [...] And, in every poem and every story, they fail. But by striving they become part of the universal story of human hope.

(2004: 191–192)

It is this idea of universality (tying in with the assumed universality of Kureishi’s *The Black Album* and Manzoor’s *Greetings from Bury Park*) that becomes problematic in Aslam’s novel. For the form that love/resistance takes in the different contexts represented in these novels is not universal, and neither is the form that power takes.

For example, the idea of love/desire, freedom, and agency in the Sufi context, as a kind of submission to love, a willingness even to face death for love, does not resemble the conception of love in Kureishi’s and Manzoor’s works, it is not analogous, for example, to the hedonism of

*The Black Album*. Instead, it is closer to the idea of agency through submission that is articulated in the work of Talal Asad (1993, 2003) and Saba Mahmood (2011), as they complicate the idea of agency.

Meanwhile, the form that power takes is also not universal. Aslam's novel draws on eighteenth-century Sufi *qissas* which articulate forms of resistance, through love, to Muslim orthodoxy combined with institutions such as the family and the state. This is applied to the present in a way that becomes disingenuous, even duplicitous. Referring to stories of resistance to power in an earlier period, and applying these, as if there were a line of continuity, to the contemporary moment, to oppression by a community that is amongst the most oppressed today, thus contributing to an endemic Islamophobia, is a distortion of the political and philosophical foundations of such traditions which fail to take account of power dynamics in the world today.

The oppression enacted by Muslims depicted in the novel is relentless. There is an honour killing at the centre, that of Chanda and Jugnu. Chanda's brothers, who have killed the couple, are shown as violent, hypocritical, monstrous; they kill Chanda and Jugnu for living together without being married. Meanwhile, the couple were unable to get married, because of religion (Chanda's husband had to divorce her first and refused to): 'Chanda too could not marry Jugnu due to the laws about Islamic divorce and women' (Aslam 2004: 201). Suraya, with whom Shamas has a brief relationship, is similarly shown to be in a difficult situation due to Islam – her violent husband says *talaq* three times when drunk one night. In the morning, he regrets having accidentally divorced his wife – who now, according to Islamic law, must find another man to marry and then divorce her so that she can remarry her first husband, with whom she has a child.

This is not to suggest that religion, especially in its orthodox form, is not experienced as oppressive in certain contexts, by women in particular. However, the relentless articulation in the novel of all that is wrong with Islam, and all believing Muslims, suggests another agenda in Aslam's work. There is only occasional mention of racism, including Islamophobia, in local, national, and global contexts. The primary oppression for the inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii, particularly those who pursue love and desire, is the relentless violence of Islam. Virtually every Muslim man in the novel is shown to be dangerous and abusive, while the entire town, predominantly Pakistani Muslim, is shown to be inward-looking, claustrophobic, a place of sheer terror; murders happen regularly, everybody is under constant surveillance by the community. The words 'terror' or 'danger' are used repeatedly. As Shamas thinks about Suraya, there is 'fear that someone had seen her talking to him and that she is even now – somewhere – being harmed for it. This terror has been hurtling around inside him like a grenade with the pin pulled out' (Aslam 2004: 162). As he waits for Suraya, 'a part of him hopes she doesn't come [...] he is too aware of the dangers' (2004: 163).

Meanwhile, female characters such as Kaukab and Suraya are depicted as simultaneously oppressed and oppressive, reproducing patriarchy as much, if not more than, the men, shown to be hardly aware of the ways in which the religion they follow oppresses them. Mah-Jabin reflects on Kaukab: 'Trapped within the cage of permitted thinking, this woman – her mother – is the most dangerous animal she'll ever have to confront' (Aslam 2004: 110). Kaukab's religiosity is shown to contribute to the breakdown of her relationship with her husband – the discovery that she is making their youngest son, a baby at the time, fast for Ramadan leads Shamas to hit Kaukab for the first and only time in their married life (feeling his frustration, the reader does not judge him harshly for it) and he temporarily leaves her. She is shown not to satisfy Shamas' emotional and physical needs, due to her faith, so the reader is sympathetic when he seeks a relationship with Suraya. We see, in this way, the patriarchy or maleness inherent in the novel's perspective.

Shamas (along with his murdered brother Jugnu) is a reasonable character – kind, compassionate, in touch with nature, beauty, art, and literature. He is an atheist who loves Sufism. Beauty, art, and literature are shown to be the connection between him and Suraya – she represents, for him, all the things that he values; they meet at the Nusrat concert, they often meet at the Safeena bookshop and discuss literature. She tells him of going, as a girl, to a poetry performance by the poet Wamaq Saleem which, as it happens, Shamas co-organised, and she talks of presenting a shawl to the poet. Shamas ‘realises he’s smiling, feeling light if not lightheaded. She seems to be one of those people to meet whom is to meet oneself’ (Aslam 2004: 155). Suraya encourages Shamas to start writing poetry again. All this is part of what Rehana Ahmed refers to as the ‘fetishization of creativity’ in the novel (2017: 214).

These associations signify the sanctity of Shamas’ love for Suraya. On one occasion, after they have made love, ‘he slid his hand out from under her head and gave her a book of henna patterns to rest her head on: “Quite appropriate. Pillows filled with henna blossom are used to induce restful sleep”’ (Aslam 2004: 201). Nature, beauty, and art are in this way intertwined with love, sexuality, and pleasure. Shamas is shown to be a gentle, generous lover, unlike virtually every other man in the book, including the abusive husband whom Suraya believes that she loves and wants to return to, even if it is primarily to be with her son. She ends up with another man who exploits her, marrying her because he wants a child. It is due to Suraya’s attachment to her religion, her inability to shed the conventions of religiosity and internalised patriarchy, that she is shown as unable to fully embrace Shamas’ love.

This mystification of love and desire in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, entangled with Sufism, must be questioned. There is little engagement with its politics, for instance with the power dynamic in the relationship between Shamas and Suraya, who is a woman in her late thirties, while Shamas is an important community figure, married, in his sixties. There is inequality and a degree of exploitation in such a relationship, all the more due to Suraya’s vulnerability, her situation. But the novel leads us to dwell instead on Suraya’s duplicity, as she tries to ‘trap’ Shamas into marrying her. This is contrasted with Shamas’ earnest, boyish enthusiasm as he falls for Suraya – fantasising about her, forming an obsession that could be seen as sinister and disturbing. Similarly, the relationship that is central to the novel, although it takes place in its margins, that between Jugnu and Chanda, is also more complicated than the beautiful rebellion it is depicted as. For Jugnu is also three decades older than Chanda – he has travelled the world, is worldly and educated, while Chanda has always lived in Dast-e-Tanhaai. There is no exploration of the politics/layers in such a relationship. Instead, an abstract idea of love/desire, with an assumption of its radical potential for resistance, is suggested to be equalising. Chanda’s (and Heer’s) efforts to negotiate patriarchy, the celebration of their devotion to men, at the cost of both their deaths, and the reading of this as female agency, can also be connected to the male gaze. Meanwhile, this almost metaphorical idea of love, entangled in Sufism, is conflated in the novel with a Western liberal idea of individual freedom – which Britain/British laws are seen to protect.

According to Abbas, Aslam’s novel is an example, like ‘Pakistan’s most popular band, Junoon, which calls its music Sufi-rock’, of Sufi forms and themes being adopted as forms of ‘counter-cultural assertion [...] fight[ing] the neo-orthodox revival that the Islamists prefer and reject(ing) Western imperialism’ (2014: 195). However, this understanding doesn’t account for the power, class, and location of those such as the Sufi-rock band Junoon and writers such as Aslam. Abbas and the novel conflate Sufism, which is entangled with the lived religiosity of ordinary people’s lives, with resistance or resilience ‘from below’, with an elite secular perspective that is threatened by the form of religiosity constituted by Islam. This is another instance of Sufism being used in the service of Islamophobia – in the West, such differentiation between good

Islam (Sufism) and bad Islam has been a common practice of proponents of global imperialism. 'The secular elites' writes Geoffery Nash:

have frequently adopted anti-religious positions, attacking the Islamic beliefs, practices and cultures of the lands to which they notionally belong [...] Sometimes non-authoritarian forms of Muslim culture such as Sufism or local traditional Islams are appropriated to attack revivalist Islam.

(2012: 36)

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, it is not Sufism but a hammering anti-Islam sentiment that pervades the novel. It is therefore questionable whether, as Abbas asserts, by using Sufi poetics, Aslam 'deAnglicises' the novel, 'hook[ing] it firmly to a South Asian literary genealogy, and through that process, claim[ing] English literature for Britain's most despised immigrants' (2014: 192). Rather, Aslam seems to have set out to vilify Muslims, Britain's 'most despised immigrants', primarily for white readers – confirming their worst fears. This ties in well with British foreign and domestic policy (which emphasises integration as assimilation); demonising Muslims has eased the attacks on and invasion of Muslim countries. As Ahmed argues of Sufism 'in its modern form', 'It is no coincidence that the only acceptable form of Islam is a politically quietist individualised understanding of faith and culture' (2017: 219).

Sufism, allied with the West/Britain, is presented as the only positive aspect of Muslim/South Asian culture. For while, on the one hand, Pakistani Muslims are shown as creating their own mini-Pakistan in a corner of Britain, Pakistan is shown to be much worse, particularly in how it treats its women. It is there that Mah-Jabin endures her Pakistani husband's violence, as does Suraya, along with the violence of other men in her husband's family. Shamas, the voice of conscience in the novel, says, 'Pakistan is not just a wife-beating country, it's a wife-murdering one' (Aslam 2004: 226). Towards the end of the novel, we are told that killings such as that of Chanda and Jugnu 'are not uncommon in Pakistan, but the killers usually killed openly and were proud of their deed' (2004: 347).

England is therefore shown to be a safe haven compared to Pakistan. The inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii, especially women, are protected somewhat by British laws. We are told that Suraya's husband won't send their son to visit her in England, saying that 'the laws in the West are favourable to women: the authorities will side with you and I won't be able to do anything' (Aslam 2004: 199). It is thanks to the British legal system that Chanda's and Jugnu's killers (Chanda's brothers) are rightfully convicted and punished. We are told that:

they knew the law of this country would not view their crimes indulgently. They boasted of having killed her and Jugnu – but only in Pakistan, where the laws and religion and the customs reinforced their sense of having acted properly, legitimately, correctly.

(2004: 348)

The message at the heart of the novel seems to be, like that in *The Black Album* and *Greetings from Bury Park*, the need to integrate. Shamas' children are all shown to have escaped the town of their birth, they are secular and integrated into white Britain. Shamas' ultimate tragedy in the novel is that, due to his good intentions and politics, because he wanted to help the community, he never left. In this way, the articulation of love, sex, and desire in all three texts discussed here is tied up with Britishness – the suggestion is that it is only in inhabiting a conditional

Britishness (integrating into the mainstream) that love and desire can be expressed, fitting well into dominant ideologies and propaganda of the British state and media.

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