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BRITISH-PAKISTANI FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS

Feminist perspectives on sexuality, marriage, and domestic violence

Aqeel Abdulla

According to the UK's last official census in 2011, British citizens with a Pakistani background are the second largest non-white British ethnic group, only slightly behind British Indians (Office for National Statistics 2012). We also learn from the British Council of Muslims' analysis of the census that 38 per cent of British Asians have a Pakistani background (Muslim Council of Britain 2015). This percentage is particularly significant when we know that British Muslims come from over 150 ethnic and national backgrounds, and that the second largest ethnic-national group amongst British Muslims is from Bangladesh, making up 14.9 per cent of British Muslims, which is less than a third of those with a Pakistani background. Most British Pakistanis either came to the UK at the same time as the large-scale immigration of South Indians in the 1960s, or are descendants of those who came in that wave of immigration; and this makes British Pakistanis not only the largest group within British Muslims, but also one of the longest-existing groups – that is, of course, if we consider waves of immigration to the UK rather than individual cases. Alongside the numbers and facts that establish the strong presence of the British-Pakistani community as a whole, there are many individual stories of high-profile success for British people with a Pakistani background, the latest and most prominent being that of the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. The media representation of the British-Pakistani community, however, is usually negative, and links are constantly made, directly or indirectly, between this community and issues including radicalism, forced marriage, and gangs that groom and sexually abuse teenage girls. Whether positive or negative, generalisations are dangerous; at worst, they lead to discrimination and the persecution of people who belong to a certain group due to no fault of their own; at best, treating a group as large as British Pakistanis as a monolith brings with it the danger of taking away agency and establishing assumptions about people's experiences and preferences.

Assumptions about what people from specific minority groups need or prefer are usually not in the best interests of women; Susan Muller-Okin expresses concern that giving special rights and treatment to certain minority groups may lead to patriarchal and misogynistic practices being tolerated, or even encouraged. Okin claims that 'Some proponents of group rights argue that even cultures that "flout the rights of [their individual members] in a liberal society" should

be accorded group rights or privileges if their minority status endangers the culture's continued existence' (1999: 11). To further clarify this point, instead of sharing some facts and statistics, I will share an incident that happened to me personally, and very recently, which I think exemplifies the problem perfectly. At a community theatre company where I work, in Bristol, UK, we decided to do outreach and target members of the refugee community to try to engage them in the drama sessions that we offer. As part of this outreach initiative we paid a number of visits to an organisation that supports refugee women. My co-worker and I made three visits, spoke with many women, and managed to tempt some of them to join our drama group. On the third visit, the manager of the organisation, who had invited us to come and speak to the women, came up to me and asked me very apologetically to wait outside but let my co-worker, a woman, carry on speaking to the women. I immediately complied because I assumed that one of the women present was not comfortable with having a man in the room, and I did not wish to impinge on her comfort during a weekly session that is very useful for women in her situation. I later discovered, however, that the person who asked the manager to request that I step aside is a white Englishwoman who occasionally volunteers at the centre. The same woman approached my co-worker as soon as I left and said to her, quite patronisingly, 'I don't know what kind of cultural training you as an organisation [meaning the theatre company] have. How did you think that it is okay to bring a man into a women's group?' My friend tried to explain to her that we were actually invited by the manager, that this was the third week we had been there, and that every time we came we felt welcomed by the women, that they were keen to listen to what we had to say, and that there were no signs on the door indicating that men were not allowed. The woman replied that 'These women are vulnerable and we need to be sensitive around them. You see, I have been helping refugee women for so long that I now feel I think like a Somali woman, not an Englishwoman!' As for the Somali women in the group, like whom this woman claimed to be thinking, they actually joined our drama group and had been sharing stories and playing drama games and exercises facilitated by me, a man, and my female co-facilitator for months. The group also includes Muslim women from Iran, Iraq, and Ivory Coast. In fact, Muslim women have been heavily involved with a community theatre for years, and we have created five plays with groups of predominantly Muslim women. The group of women whom the white English volunteer was trying to protect from me are now working with me on a new play, whose topic, which they chose, is women's strength and their ability to overcome challenges and control their future. It is very clear that the volunteer was not thinking like a Somali woman at all, but rather like someone with 'white saviour' tendencies, someone who makes assumptions about Muslim women and patronises them and others in accordance with her views.

It is a sign of maturity in any community to engage in a constant process of internal observation and self-criticism that challenges the status quo, especially when it relates to social and gender issues. This becomes a necessity even, and not just a duty, when one is surrounded in wider society by a colonial mindset that still maintains the right to patronise minority groups, and still gives itself a mandate to 'protect' them. This chapter is an attempt to show how three feminist British-Pakistani playwrights, Alia Bano, Nadia Manzoor, and Emteaz Hussain, are taking on this responsibility to comment on the issue of gender in their society, with all the different layers and definitions of the word 'society' in mind.

Dimple Godiwala writes that 'British Asian theatre is constructed through differences in acculturation, as it is modified through intercultural exchange and socialisation, avoiding the false representation produced by rigidly antithetical and binary categories which lead to a need for "authenticity" and "elitism"' (2006: 103). This is clearly the case with the current wave of new feminist British-Pakistani playwrights to which Bano, Manzoor, and Hussain belong. These

playwrights are not trying to speak on behalf of a group or to offer an 'authentic' representation' of them or of the issues that concern them, rather they are trying to offer perspectives and provocations to drive discussion of issues they are passionate about. The current British-Asian theatre companies have all been founded on the principle that British Asians need to be represented and their culture needs to be present within wider British culture. Tara Arts was founded in 1977 as a response to the murder of a Sikh boy by white English fascists (Hingorani 2010: 14), and the founding members were mostly university students who had no experience of drama but wanted to counter political and social racism artistically (Dadswell and Ley 2011: 13). Seeking to represent one's culture and heritage is not, therefore, a problem in itself, but authors, artists, and dramatists need to be careful not to be controlled by a perceived need to represent culture and tradition 'authentically' because, as Godiwala puts it, 'the pursuit of the preservation of these [traditions], fossilizes them' (2006: 12). In short, when the British-Asian community needed a way to remind wider British society that they exist, and that they are neither a marginal nor a temporary presence in the UK, this is exactly what British-Asian theatre companies did, by bringing their culture and art forms to British stages. However, since 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings, a certain section of the British-Asian community (i.e. Muslims, and particularly Muslim women) has faced a different challenge, which is to counter the patronisation and manipulation to which they are subjected by two opposing camps in Britain: one with a colonial mindset that wants to 'liberate' Muslim women, and one with a traditionalist/radical mindset within the Muslim-Pakistani community that wants to 'protect' Muslim women from being Westernised.

After Tara Arts was established in 1977, and Tamasha Theatre in 1989, South Asian women playwrights have seen added support since 1991, when Kali Theatre, who prides itself on being 'the UK's only theatre company dedicated to championing women writers from a South Asian background', was founded. Over the last decade in particular, a new wave of young female playwrights have provided us with plays with strong feminist messages, and I will look at how Bano, Manzoor, and Hussain have engaged with the issues of marriage, sexuality, and domestic violence in ways that defy taboos and expectations.

Sexuality and Marriage

Controlling the sexuality of women is probably the most important, or at least most visible, aspect of patriarchal control over women. I will state the obvious here and say that I find the drive to have dominion over women's sexuality to be a cross-cultural patriarchal practice, and not in any way exclusive to Muslim societies. However, different patriarchal practices have different manifestations and intensities in different societies due to many circumstances, and sexuality is an issue that is undeniably intensely sensitive in Muslim societies. In her attempt to analyse Muslim men's particular fixation with controlling women's sexuality, renowned Moroccan feminist theorist Fatima Mernissi argues that there is an explicit and an implicit theory regarding attitudes towards women's sexuality in Islam:

The explicit theory is the prevailing contemporary belief that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. The implicit theory, driven far further into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam Ghazali's classical work. He sees civilization as struggling to contain women's destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that can foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers.

(2000a: 22)

This explicit theory about women's sexuality in Islam, Mernissi argues, leads to two different rhetorics: the first is the misogynistic belief that women enjoy playing the role of victim, a prey awaiting the hunter, a subordinate awaiting the leader. The other rhetoric accepts the premise that women's sexuality is *fitna* (an Arabic word that means 'seduction', 'disorder', or both in some contexts), but rejects the belief that it is entirely women's responsibility to protect society from this *fitna* by covering up. Proponents of this rhetoric argue that men too have a responsibility to fight this *fitna* by practising self-control, and that focusing only on women covering up is unjust, and also suggests that men, not women, are the weaker sex because they are unable to control their sexual desires.

The sensitivities around women's sexuality in Muslim families in the UK are present in most of the contemporary plays written by British-Pakistani writers, and I will focus on Bano's *Shades* (2009), with a brief reference to *Hens* (2010), to see how her writing deals with issues and tensions related to Mernissi's implicit and explicit theories about women's sexuality in Islam. I will also look at how Nadia Manzoor exposes and satirises these sex-related tensions in a strict British-Pakistani family.

Bano is a London-based British playwright, born and raised in Birmingham by her parents who came to the UK from Pakistan in the 1960s. *Shades*, Bano's first full-length play, was commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre and premiered in January 2009. In an interview I did with Bano in London on 9 March 2012, she said:

In a way, [the play] was a microcosm of the world I inhabit [...] I tend to write about things that annoy me, or that I have questions about. If I don't know the answer I write a play to see if somebody can give me the answer.

Just like Bano at the time of writing *Shades*, Sabrina, the protagonist, is a Muslim woman in her twenties who lives and works in London, away from her family. She is single and eager to get married, so she tries her luck with Muslim speed-dating! The play actually starts at a Muslim speed-dating event; Sabrina is sitting at a table waiting for the next person to join her, feeling out of place and eager to leave. Her next 'date', Ali, is nice looking, but he is 'the *haram* police', as Sabrina puts it. He wastes no time in addressing how she dresses, and her unconventional job (an events organiser). Proving Sabrina's worries were justified, Ali's questions become a long interrogation:

ALI An events organizer- [...] So, you're a party girl [...] Perhaps another occupation might be more suitable [...] You must work late at nights [...] Aren't you scared as a woman [...] Are you seriously looking? [...] How do you think your partner would feel about you working late? [...] How religious are you? [...] Do you pray? [...] Do you drink? [...] Have you ever been in a relationship? [...] Have you ever been out with someone? [...] I just can't believe someone with your looks and dress hasn't –

SAB Hasn't what?

PAUSE. *Ali tries to choose his words carefully.*

ALI – attracted the attention of the opposite sex.

SAB Right. (*Beat.*) What about you?

ALI What about me?

SAB Have you ever 'attracted the attention of the opposite sex'?

ALI I don't think I'm going to answer that question.

SAB Then neither am I.

(Bano 2009: 5–7)

This conversation in scene one establishes the main issue of the play; a young, liberal Muslim woman tries to balance the two worlds to which she belongs: her Muslim British–Pakistani family, and her liberal independent life. She does not wish to break away from her Pakistani and Muslim identities, but she is also not prepared to play the role of traditional housewife. Sabrina expresses this inner conflict again in scene two, in a conversation with Zain, her flatmate. Zain asks her what kind of guy she is looking for:

SAB Just a normal guy.

ZAIN There's plenty out there.

SAB Just wish they were Muslim.

ZAIN Stick to wanting diamonds.

SAB I just want someone with a pulse and a brain. And that's hard to find round here. [...]

ZAIN So log onto shaadi.com

SAB [...] I only did it for about five minutes. I was attracting the wrong types. I was attracting the really religious types. God knows why.

ZAIN Just face it: you want to marry a white guy.

SAB Marry a white guy when there's millions of Pakis about? My mother would just love that.

(Bano 2009: 9–10)

In the first few scenes Bano introduces Sabrina as someone who hates being Muslim and Pakistani, someone only looking for a Muslim Pakistani husband because she does not want to upset her family. So far, one can see one-dimensional characters that represent opposite ends of the divide between liberal and traditional British Pakistanis, or British Muslims in general. When Ali asks Sabrina how religious she is, she answers, 'I never know how to answer this question. I mean, how do you measure religiousness?' (Bano 2009: 6). And in scene two, when Sabrina and Zain are contemplating whether she is getting too old to be a suitable Asian wife, Zain says: 'Look, when you hit thirty, just stick on a scarf. Your marriage rating would go up' (Bano 2009: 10). One can sense there is no mutual respect between the two sides of the divide; in fact, when Zain, who also works with Sabrina as an 'events organiser', wants to punish her for being late in scene three, he could not think of a worse punishment than to partner her with Reza, a volunteer who is a devout Muslim, and the son of a scholar. However, building Sabrina's character in this way at the beginning only adds to the intensity and complexity of the plot that ensues. Instead of another judgemental member of the '*haram* police', as she expected, Sabrina finds Reza to be an open-minded, loving, and compassionate person. From their first encounter, Reza acknowledges his differences with Sabrina and talks about them openly and light-heartedly, which immediately puts Sabrina at ease. To complicate things, Ali – from the speed-dating event – is ominously revealed to be Reza's friend. In the following scenes, Sabrina and Reza start falling for each other, much to the disappointment of Ali who, since their first encounter, interpreted Sabrina's attitude, job, and dress as indicators that she is someone with whom he can have casual sex. Ali tries to sabotage the emerging relationship between Reza and Sabrina by telling Nazia, Reza's elder sister, that Sabrina hit on him and he had to push her away. Initially, Ali's plan works, and with the help of Nazia, Reza decides to remove himself from Sabrina's project in order not to get further attached to her. However, the play ends with hope as Reza discovers Ali's lies, so he comes with his parents to the charity event that he was helping Sabrina to organise and asks her to meet them.

Sexuality and all the tensions and stereotypes associated with it in Muslim society are at the heart of the plot of *Shades*. Ali, Nazia, and Reza are clearly threatened and alarmed by elements

of Sabrina's lifestyle which they interpret as sexual liberty: her dress code, the fact that she shares a flat with men, and that her job entails working at night. Ali is so sure of his analysis of Sabrina's character that he even asks her, suspiciously, at the speed-dating event whether she was seriously looking for a husband. The hypocrisies and contradictions that Mernissi points out in her explicit and implicit theories are reflected in Ali's simultaneous disrespect for Sabrina because of her sexuality, and his lust after her for the same reason. Moreover, Bano avoids a clichéd ending in which Reza and Sabrina reconcile and get together after he apologises for making negative assumptions about her. Instead, she reluctantly agrees to see Reza's parents after her friends encourage and reassure her that they will be there for her no matter what comes out of meeting them. This ending seems like a commitment from Bano to show the extent of the gap between people with liberal and traditional attitudes towards sexuality in a Muslim community. The ending suggests that reconciliation between the two worlds is a work in progress.

Following the success of *Shades*, Bano won the Charles Wintour Award in 2009 for Most Promising Playwright at the Evening Standard Awards. In 2010, she wrote her second play, *Hens*, which is about a group of young women – three from a Pakistani background, and one white English – on a hen do weekend in Paris. The main theme of the play is the expectation in traditional, conservative Asian families that a woman is supposed to dedicate herself to her husband and his family after marriage, which will naturally affect friendships and individual aspirations, perhaps even destroy them. Another theme is how these women negotiate the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or unacceptable by Muslim standards when it comes to behaviour and dress codes. As in *Shades*, Bano offers a non-stereotypical portrayal of British Muslim women in *Hens*, and addresses the issue in a way that focuses on personal stories rather than a generic representation. The three girls from Pakistani families are portrayed as liberal and outgoing, whereas the white woman, who is married to one of their brothers, is the one wearing a *hijab* and constantly criticising how the others are dressed.

Manzoor's *Burq Off!* takes an in-your-face and uncompromising approach to the subject of female sexuality. It is a one-woman autobiographical play, written and performed by Manzoor, who is also the founder of the company that produced the play, Paprika Productions. The play was first performed in December 2013 in New York, and I saw it at the Cockpit Theatre in London in September 2014. Manzoor tells her life story from when she was a little girl until she left her family home at the age of twenty-one. She offers a comedic narration of her story, exploring themes of identity (British, Pakistani, and Muslim), gender roles, and sexuality. One childhood story early in the play establishes the topic of the paranoia surrounding sex within traditionalist Muslim families. Young Nadia innocently shows her father a letter that she wrote to a boy at school in which she tells him that she wants to lie under silky sheets and 'do sex' with him, just like in the TV show *Dallas*. Nadia mentions earlier in the play that she was always taught not to say the word 'vagina', and every time she says it her mother would say 'shame, shame', so when she shows the letter to her father and he angrily shouts 'where's your shame?', she innocently points to her vagina and says 'Abbu? Shame, Shame?', and she receives a slap in the face.

Sex, according to Nadia the narrator, is not a subject that exists in the Pakistani family, or even in Pakistani movies. She mockingly dances to a song from a famous Pakistani movie, and at the end of the dance mimes how she suddenly has a baby in her hands. The narrator says that this is how babies are born in Pakistani movies: through dance and a spiritual love, but no sex! Later in the play we come to the story of how Nadia loses her virginity at university, and in complete contrast to the way the song and dance portray the physical relationship that produces a baby, Manzoor makes sure her portrayal of Nadia's first sexual experience is as raw as possible (within the limitations of a one-woman show!). Manzoor replicates the positions, the

awkwardness, the pain, the intense facial expressions, the noises and moans, and the ridiculousness of a man's face when he climaxes!

There are two very symbolic scenes in the play that depict two different experiences in her life, and represent very well the inner conflict and identity crisis that Nadia has had to deal with throughout the play. In the first, teenage Nadia goes on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) with her family, and there she wears a *burqa* for the first time in her life. Nadia says, 'I stepped out, into the dusty streets of Mecca. I was a Muslim in a *burqa*'. She then comes from one corner of the stage, eerie music playing, a spotlight on her, and dimmed light on the stage, walking very awkwardly and obviously self-conscious, and starts moving her hands, which are covered by the *burqa*, as if she is discovering now that she is actually completely covered. Suddenly, she becomes comfortable, the music changes to happy dance music, and Nadia dances around excitedly, including on a table that is a central prop throughout the play. At a later point, adult Nadia lies to her parents about spending a week at her white English friend's home, when actually they were going to Majorca together. There, Katy convinces her to get rid of the burqini that her mother brought her from Pakistan and wear a bikini instead. The moment in the *burqa* in Mecca is repeated again: 'I tied the three pieces of string around my boobs and stepped out, onto the sandy beaches of Majorca. I was a Muslim in a bikini'. Nadia then comes from the other corner of the stage, walking as awkwardly as she had in Mecca, looking very embarrassed, trying to hide her breasts with her hands, and mimes pulling down her bikini bottom to cover more of her bum, while the spotlight is on her and the same eerie music from the Mecca scene plays. Then, again mirroring the scene from Mecca, she suddenly becomes comfortable and repeats the same excited dance as before, around the stage and on the table. Manzoor is clearly trying to depict here the two extremes between which a young British Muslim female is torn, and the contradiction is very visually apparent when it comes to the body of a woman and her dress code. The two scenes also show that Nadia is not completely comfortable in either of the two situations; and indeed, the play ends with her making the decision to leave home after her mother's death. She says that she had to leave,

Not through imagination and out of the window, not by covering myself up in layers of cloth, nor by taking it all off. But through the front door, of my home, one foot in front of the other, with only one possible destination.

Domestic Violence

In *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, Rosemarie Tong quotes fellow feminists Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg's five reasons why they and other feminists believe that 'women's oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression' (1989: 71). One of these reasons is that 'women's oppression is the most widespread, existing in virtually every known society' (1989: 71). This concept of the universality of women's causes is never truer than in the very domestic sphere of the family. Patriarchal societies insist on placing the woman in second place, behind the man, and they propagate the idea that it is a necessity for family and society, if they are to function, that men should always lead and protect their women.

In Islam, the position and role of the woman in the family, and the degree of power and control that a man has over a woman, is certainly a thorny and controversial issue where theory and practice can be, and usually are, at odds. The Qur'an and a plethora of stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad prove that in the historic, social, and geographic context within which Islam emerged, Islamic laws related to women (marriage, family, inheritance, etc.) were actually progressive and a step forward for women. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini points out, the tradition of

patriarchy in Islamic jurisprudence comes mainly from classical jurists between the twelfth and sixteenth century, not from the Qur'an. She quotes these jurists who describe marriage as 'a contract whose object is that of dominion over the vagina, without the right of its possession' (2009: 29). Similarly, marriage is described as 'a kind of slavery, for a wife is a slave to her husband. She owes her husband absolute obedience in whatever he demands of her, where she herself is concerned, as long as no sin is involved' (Mir-Hosseini 2009: 30). Mir-Hosseini shows that many misogynistic *fatwas* and rulings are social, traditional, regional, and archaic, but because of the revered status of the jurists who issued them, they 'were sanctified, and then turned into fixed entities of *fiqh* [jurisprudence]. That is, rather than considering them as social, thus temporal institutions and phenomena, the classical jurists treated them as "divinely ordained", thus immutable' (2009: 33). *Bahishtī Zewār* ('Heavenly Ornaments') is a perfect example of what Mir-Hosseini's work describes. It is a book written about a hundred years ago by a famous Indian religious scholar called Ashraf Ali Thanwi, and it teaches women how to be good wives and mothers. Anyone with even a basic knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith* can easily see as they read through this book that its most misogynistic rulings and *fatwas* have no basis in these two main sources of Islamic law, in fact it sometimes contradicts key concepts in the Qur'an and *hadith*. Nevertheless, this book is a popular gift for future brides in the South Asian Muslim community.

The line between leadership and protection, on the one hand, and control on the other, can be blurred, and usually is. Similarly, the line between patriarchal control and domestic violence is also blurred. This is particularly evident in communities/cultures that create a direct link between a woman's sexuality and her honour, and then between her honour and the family's/community's honour. Such belief is not in any way exclusive to a certain religion or society, but it has a strong resonance with the more traditionalist components of Muslim Pakistani communities due to the factors mentioned above, and also due to the sensitivities around sexuality that I discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

Arranged, or even forced, marriages and insistence on the woman's pre-marriage virginity are the two main reasons behind the violence and crimes committed against Muslim women. One common reason behind the crimes against Muslim and Asian women in the UK is the rejection of an arranged marriage (Siddiqui 2005). Another common reason for so-called 'honour killings' is the discovery that a bride was not virgin on her wedding night. In fact, Nawal El-Saadawi (1998) recounts a practice in rural areas in Egypt where the wedding party does not end before the mother of the bride proudly displays to the guests a piece of blood-stained white cloth that proves that her daughter was a virgin and has just been deflowered. A forced marriage is often used to hide a family's shame when they discover that their daughter has had a relationship (Carroll 2000: 245). In Syria, it was not rare for me as I grew up to hear stories about families who tried to hide the shame of a daughter losing her virginity before marriage (or sometimes even the shame of her being seen publicly with her lover) by meeting with the lover's family and arranging a quick marriage. As a teenager at school, I personally knew people who were hurriedly and forcibly married this way; in fact, most people married in this way, especially girls, are usually teenagers. In some cases the police will mediate the proceedings and give a young man who has deflowered a teenager the choice of either marrying her or going to jail.

British playwright and performance poet Hussain has personal experience of domestic violence because she escaped the family home to go to a women's refuge at the age of sixteen. Her first play, *Sweet Cider*, produced in 2008 by Tamasha, is about Tazeen, Nosheen, and Jasvinder, three Asian teenagers who run away from their families to a refuge. Jasvinder is Sikh, and she escapes her family because she is in love with a Muslim boy, Aki. She eventually comes to the realisation that Aki is never going to marry her, so she leaves

the refuge without telling anyone, which leaves them worried about her fate. Nosheen and Tazeem, the main characters of the play, are both Muslims from Pakistani families. Nosheen escapes because when she tells her family that her uncle tried to molest her, they warned her to keep quiet and not to repeat her claims to anyone. She is saddened by the fact that her family did not make any effort to find her, as if they are relieved that she left. She is a sceptical and angry character who does not trust people easily, and self-harms. We do not know why Tazeem escaped, but we see her father meeting a bounty hunter whom he pays to find her and bring her back. The mood of the play is generally ominous and eerie, and this is particularly apparent in three scenes. First, when Tazeem's father, Fiaz, meets Mahmood the bounty hunter:

FIAZ Hey, they call you the bounty-hunter ey na?

MAHMOOD No, no, no, not the bounty-hunter, not me. Me, me, I'm a community mediator. I keep families together.

FIAZ Don't know who she thinks she is kutee [bitch] breaking up the family, our family, my family [...] these young ones they don't understand, they have no idea how hard we've worked, what we've had to deal with, what we've had to do. Do you understand bhai? They have no idea, they've got it easy, so easy in this country [...] They don't understand bhai, they don't understand what we've been through, our ways, our culture, ey zoroori gal hai [important] so important it's family, it's who we are, izzat you understand is everything, understand, it's who you are. It's who we are, identity, izzat. Got to protect it. Stop it from dying away.

(Hussain in Robson and Gillieron 2013: 208–209)

Mahmood's confidence, tone, and body language are ominous and convey a sense of inevitability, especially as he says, 'Most of the time I don't need to use my stick', and repeats the phrase 'once they're in my car, they're alright' twice in his conversation with Fiaz. Moreover, his conversation with Fiaz, the way he describes himself as a community mediator, and the way he talks about protecting *izzat* ('honour') and family portray him as a representative of the type of oppressive patriarchal system that Tazeem is escaping. When Mahmood eventually finds Tazeem, this sense of inevitability about him and what he represents is present again; he comes face to face with her in the park where she hangs out with Nosheen, she looks behind her and sees another man approaching, then Mahmood signals to her with his finger to come and, as if surrendering to her fate, she goes to him without even attempting to escape.

Hussain's second play, *Blood*, produced in 2015, also by Tamasha, is about a young couple, Caneez and Sully, who fall in love, but are not supposed to. Caneez's brother, Saif, is a notorious local gangster who has plans for his sister's future that do not include a broke student like Sully. We only see Caneez and Sully in the play, but we are introduced to other characters through their speech, which most of the time is directed straight to the audience as narration.

On his way to the airport, where he is supposed to meet Caneez to travel together to Egypt for a week, Sully is attacked by Saif's thugs. They warn him not to get in touch with Caneez again, or next time they will break her knee caps instead of his. He ends up in hospital and stays away from Caneez, who is ignorant of what has happened, and so thinks that Sully has abandoned her. We are then introduced to another character, Yousuf, Saif's friend and a suitor for Caneez who has the blessing of the family. After initially appearing to be friendly and compassionate, Yousuf ends up taking advantage of a time when Caneez is at home alone, and he rapes her. Caneez escapes with Sully because she realises that her brother and mother are aware

of the truth about Yousuf, and yet take his side. In hiding, we see Caneez writing a message to her mother on her laptop, she faces the audience and the message becomes a moving soliloquy:

Dear Amma,
I hate you for taking Saif's blood money [...]
I hate that you don't question it
I hate you for not listening to me
Thinking about me
I hate that you put what other people think above what I think or feel [...]
[Yousuf] hurt me bad
really bad [...]
under our roof [...]
and I hate him for what he did to me
and what he's doing to you
and I hate you because you're too fuckin' stupid
but I know you're not stupid, Amma
you just don't see [...]
'n' I hate you for choosing not to see.

(Hussain 2015, 67–68)

Although the topic and plot of *Blood* are as dark as in *Sweet Cider*, one can feel that Hussain made a decision to make this play more optimistic and light-hearted. The first half of the play was pleasant to watch, a feel-good teenage love story between two characters who are funny and adventurous. Obviously, the play takes a bad turn when Sully is attacked and the drama starts to unfold, but the very last action of the play makes the audience smile again: while the couple are in hiding and quite paranoid about Saif and his thugs finding them, they hear something outside their door. Sully goes to check, and when he comes back he acts as if he has been shot or stabbed, Caneez is terrified, then he laughs and we realise he is just teasing her to lighten the mood, and the play ends with the two laughing and kissing.

Reflection

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Bano, Manzoor, and Hussain emerged among a new wave of feminist British-Pakistani playwrights and, more generally, a wave of British-Muslim feminist playwrights. It is a new genre of Muslim feminist writing that is trying to balance the narratives and debates about Muslim women that have been hijacked by politics, self-appointed community leaders, radical religious speakers, and the manipulative and sensationalist British media.

The general atmosphere within which British-Pakistani feminist playwrights work and produce new writing is one in which Muslim women are being pulled in different directions in what looks like a game of cultural and political tug-of-war. One side is trying to pull them towards a traditional and uncompromising understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman, an understanding that is patriarchal and misogynistic. The other side is pulling them towards a hegemonic, and also uncompromising, understanding of what it means to be British. Bano, Manzoor, and Hussain are clearly rejecting both camps.

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