

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 16 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



Edited by Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam

The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing

Aroosa Kanwal, Saiyma Aslam

Comic affiliations/comic subversions

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-9>

Sarah Illott

Published online on: 04 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Sarah Illott. 04 Sep 2018, *Comic affiliations/comic subversions from: The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-9>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

8

COMIC AFFILIATIONS/COMIC SUBVERSIONS

The use of humour in contemporary British-Pakistani fiction

Sarah Illott

'Yes I'm Muslim, Please Get Over It' is the title of Sofia Khan's blog. Sofia is the titular protagonist of Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and its sequel *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017). Appearing at the top of the first page of the first novel, alongside the title of the particular entry – 'Fight the Good Fight' (2015: 3) – the blog's title foregrounds the tension between affiliation and conflict which the novels' humour goes on to negotiate. The assumption of a conflict of perspectives that might lead to shock that the blog's author is Muslim, or mistrust, is immediately countered by the colloquial instruction to 'get over it', which implies a level of familiarity and establishes a closer relationship between the author/protagonist and reader. This chapter explores the use of humour to create new affiliative networks and subvert power hierarchies in the work of British Muslim Pakistani-heritage author, Ayisha Malik. Frequently dubbed the 'Muslim Bridget Jones', Sofia Khan's comical adventures in the world of dating and publishing engage with the cultural contexts of a white-dominated publishing industry, trips to Karachi, and the generation gap between first-generation Pakistani immigrant parents and their second-generation offspring.

There is little work to date that explores the role of comedy in relation to Pakistani and/or Muslim cultural texts. A notable exception is Mucahit Bilici's chapter on 'Muslim Ethnic Comedy', in which he explores stand-up comedy in the context of an increasingly Islamophobic America. There are parallels to be drawn between the cultural contexts of Britain and the US and the work required of comic utterances in their various forms, yet the relationship constructed between author/comedian and audience is markedly different for fictional uses of humour. Whilst stand-up comedy operates in the public domain and elicits an immediate response, relying on laughter to drive a comparatively short performance, fictional narratives operate primarily in the private realm over a long period of time and do not require readers to confront the author of the humour face-to-face. Unlike in stand-up comedy, moments of audible laughter are not prerequisites for the success of the comic fiction text. Bilici references the paradigm for 'Muslim ethnic comedy in the United States', in which 'a series of inversions [are] played out against a backdrop of Islamophobia' as a means of uniting an otherwise divided populace (2010: 196). This is comparable to occasional moments in Malik's work, such as when

Sofia's mum forgets white people's names, and Sofia's white friend Katie couches her friend's embarrassment by saying, 'To be fair, Sweetu – we do all sound the same' (Malik 2017: 144), playing upon and inverting racist stereotypes regarding Asians all looking the same. However, this comic paradigm is largely inapplicable to Malik's body of work. Though Islamophobia and racism are referenced in the novels, most notably when Sofia is called a terrorist and later a 'Paki bitch' (Malik 2015: 406) whilst travelling on the London Underground, the way that the audience is constructed through the texts works on the prioritisation of similarity over difference. It assumes a set of shared values whilst acknowledging but often downplaying the effects of difference (rather than exaggerating them to comic effect).

Stand-up comedy, such as that explored by Bilici, often operates according to the principles of the relief theory of comedy, as proposed by Sigmund Freud, in which laughter functions as a cathartic release of repressed emotions, enabling a temporary liberation from the reality principle as the pleasure principle takes over; there is an 'expenditure of psychic energy' – often taking the form of audible laughter – as the manifest content of the jokes 'yield pleasure through their disguised expression of unconscious wishes' (Freud qtd. in Bergmann 1999: 3). However, freed of the necessity of outbursts of laughter driven by the expression of otherwise repressed cultural taboos, such as Islamophobic beliefs, the humour of Malik's novels is better interpreted through the superiority and incongruity theories of comedy which acknowledge and engage with a set of cultural norms without relying on the more extreme subjects of cultural taboo. Premised upon the assumption of a series of cultural hierarchies and a set of acknowledged differences between 'others' and 'ourselves', the superiority theory of comedy, as proposed by Thomas Hobbes, states that 'Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others' (1840: 46). Dangerously conflating normativity with superiority, this form of comedy laughs down at others perceived as inferior due to a deviation from a preconceived set of norms. Malik's work engages with this brand of humour inasmuch as it tackles stereotypes that serve the dominant group in constructing Muslims or Pakistanis as Other. In so doing, it follows Homi Bhabha's imperative to engage with the 'effectivity' of stereotypes in order to displace rather than simply dismiss them (2000: 67; emphasis original). However, the dominant comic mode of Malik's work is that of incongruity, serving to highlight and derive humour from the gap between expectations and reality through the juxtaposition of conflicting discourses and the representation of voices in dialogue. For Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of the carnivalesque engages with instances of incongruity, the type of laughter engendered through this form of comedy is inclusive: it 'expresses the view point of the whole world' and 'he who is laughing also belongs to it' (1994: 201). There is no outside to the kind of carnival laughter that Bakhtin envisions, as individuals are joined together through laughter at a ridiculous world. Bakhtin's work demonstrates the potential for laughter to create new affiliative networks, or what Marie Gillespie refers to as the (temporary) community created by 'people alike enough in outlook and feeling to be joined in sharing a joke' (2003: 93). The remainder of this chapter engages with the ways in which Malik's novels subvert existing hierarchies (imagined and sociopolitically actualised) through an engagement with stereotypes and adoption of the position of butt of the joke, before moving on to consider ways in which new affiliative networks are created through the means by which the ideal reading audience is constructed by the novel and through intertextual affiliations that create and/or parody fields of reference.

In the author blurb at the start of both novels, Malik describes herself as a 'British Muslim, lifelong Londoner and lover of books', a tagline that could easily extend to her protagonist, Sofia Khan, a Londoner and practising Muslim working in a publishing house and living with her Pakistani immigrant parents. The narrative starts *in medias res* as Sofia confides, 'You'd have

thought that a break-up just before Ramadan would have inspired some kind of empathy from extended family members' (Malik 2015: 3). Inviting laughter at the absurd ending to her previous relationship, she goes on:

'O-ho,' one auntie might've said. 'I'm sorry that your potential husband wanted you to live with his family and a hole-in-the-wall.'

Perhaps even a show of shock – a gasp, a hand to the chest or to the mouth ...
'Hain? A *hole-in-the-wall*? What is this?'

Nope.

(2015: 3)

Encouraging readers to empathise with her situation and join in her incredulity at the aunties' inappropriate responses to her misery, Sofia recounts her woes in a melodramatic tone that sets the novel firmly in the genre of comedy rather than tragedy. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* and its sequel follow the protagonist's personal and professional forays into romantic adventure as she takes a practical approach towards researching a book on Muslim dating that leaves her with a converted husband-to-be and a book under her belt at the end of the first novel. Picking up shortly after the previous novel left off, *The Other Half of Happiness* opens following Sofia's elopement with her convert husband to Pakistan, as she balances marital bliss with a level of disdain for her Karachi surroundings and domestic boredom that leads her to return, alone, to London for work. The novel deals with life after marriage, and her husband Conall lives up to his name (Con-all) in revealing on their wedding day (arranged by her mother to make up for her elopement) that he is a divorcee with an ex-wife and child in Ireland, facts that he had previously neglected to tell his wife. The remainder of the novel sees Sofia taking comfort regarding their increasing estrangement in her friends (each of whom are struggling with their own romantic entanglements), her family, and an attractive colleague called Sakib in whom she deludes herself that she is not interested. The novel ends in Tooba Mosque, Karachi, where Sofia and Conall meet for a bittersweet divorce before Sofia returns home and – it is implied – to Sakib.

Part of the implicit work of the novels is to engage with and subvert stereotypes associated with Muslims and Pakistanis, identity categories that are conflated or made interchangeable in racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, particularly in the British context in which racism towards Pakistanis has quickly been superseded by – yet directed at the same groups as – Islamophobic utterances and attacks. Particular stereotypes countered by the novel relate to allegations that Pakistanis and Muslims are not funny – the objects of humour but never the authors – and that the practice of veiling signifies that Islam is a patriarchal religion and its female practitioners naïve and/or oppressed. The novels also function to resist homogenising discourses through Sofia's varied modes of identification (as Muslim, as Pakistani, as a Londoner, as a woman) and an internal othering of certain Asians and Muslims through Sofia's gentle mockery.

Writing in the long aftermath of the Rushdie and Danish Cartoon affairs, and in the midst of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in France, Malik would have been forced to resist and write back to the notion that Muslims lack a sense of humour. Citing the post-9/11 context, Bilici states that 'The simplistic idea that Muslims "hate us" has simultaneously produced rigid stereotypes and a countering desire to discover what those stereotypes deny: among other things, a Muslim sense of humor' (2010: 195). He emphasises the importance of acknowledging a sense of humour, as 'humor usually stands for humanity' and if 'someone has a sense of humor, then he is just like us: likeable' (2010: 195). He goes on to state that things like the Danish Cartoon affair exacerbated this problem, as despite the contestable 'degree to which the cartoons were actually funny or offensive, to whom, and for what reasons', the affair was constructed as demonstrating

a 'Muslim intolerance of humor' (2010: 195–196). In a European context, the recent surge in Islamophobia also piggybacks on a far longer history of racism towards Pakistanis, which often led to comedy in which Pakistanis were the butts of jokes. In the British sitcom *Curry and Chips* (1969), for example, white British Spike Milligan 'blacked up' to play an Asian immigrant called Kevin O'Grady, referred to by the racial slur 'Paki Paddy'. Despite the show's cancellation for its racism (director Johnny Speight defended it as highlighting rather than promoting discrimination to no avail), Milligan was invited to repeat his role twice in Speight's hugely popular *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–1975). These are brief examples taken from a long history in Britain of constructing Pakistanis as people to be laughed at rather than laughed with.

In this manner, Pakistanis and Muslims have been constructed as Other through racist and Islamophobic discourses that have had currency in Britain since the British Raj but gained steam following mass migration to the United Kingdom and then again following the Rushdie affair and 9/11. For Bilici, referring to the American context, 'Because the everyday world has become extraordinary, the Muslim [...] becomes an oddity when he appears "ordinary"' (2010: 205). The solution that he puts forward is that 'Those whose reality is already distorted because of stereotypes resort to humor to rectify and reassert their own sense of what is real' (2010: 205). Malik's work effectively asks readers to 'get over' any preconceptions about Muslims in the first line of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, and to accept the humour on her own terms. In addition, much of the humour of the novels functions to undermine expectations of po-faced seriousness associated with Muslim faith. In *The Other Half of Happiness*, the seriousness of the questions that the Imam asks as part of the marriage ceremony in Karachi are undermined through the interpolation of Sofia's inner monologue: 'Imam asked Conall in English: "You tell people? 'I am Muslim. I believe'?" He furrowed his dark brows. I resisted the urge to sing "In a Thing Called Love"' (2017: 4). This juxtaposition of the ceremonial rites of marriage and lyrics from a song by a ludicrous, spandex-clad British rock band called The Darkness both removes the possibility of undue seriousness and redraws the frame of reference to construct Britons familiar with contemporary rock as insiders on the joke.

Beyond the fairly obvious demonstration that Muslim faith is not limited to humourless expressions of devotion, there is also a regular confluence of the sacred and profane. For humour theorists such as Bakhtin, the incongruous convergence of the sacred and the profane in a carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies through the debasement of the spiritual to the mundane and grotesque serves to bring the high low and to strip it of its power. It involves the 'lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity' (1994: 205). For Bakhtin, this carnivalesque inversion has a political function as the temporary erosion of boundaries between the sacred and profane means that institutions lose their power. Much of the humour of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) performs this function, as the Prophet Muhammad and his wives are mimicked by a harem of prostitutes who adopt the identities of the Prophet's wives for the sexual gratification of their clients, marrying the poet Baal in an act of bawdy parody. As such, the irreverent humour of Rushdie's novel functions to undermine the religion and religious believers. However, for Malik the confluence of the sacred and the profane comes *alongside* her devout protagonist's expressions of faith: the humour functions to demystify Muslim practices without undermining the religion.

A focus on Sofia Khan's bodily functions – 'the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life' (Bakhtin 1994: 204) – serves to ensure that the character is humanised, rather than placed on a pedestal as an infallible representative of her religion. Sofia often does the work of introducing the bathetic plunge from spiritual ideal to grotesque reality herself. Swiftly on the heels of accusing her sister of failing to 'understand the spiritual transformation of the past

month', Sofia admits that 'Images of Dairy Milk only occasionally punctuated the formation of my new Zen-like personality' (Malik 2015: 7). Similarly directing a shift in focus from matters of the mind to matters of the body, Sofia interrupts a discussion about *kismet* – destiny – to inform her mother that 'Kismet, right now, tells me I need the toilet' (2015: 9). Sofia even associates her prayers with her tendency to overeat, joking that 'It's probably a good thing' that there are no biscuits in the house, as otherwise she would 'end up eating an entire packet and then spend the next three days wasting prayer time on asking for a stomach bug' (2015: 43). Sofia frequently presents religious practices in secular terms, such as describing *iftari* as the 'fast-breaking ritual of stuffing gob' (2017: 279) and comparing the practice of fasting to being 'on the 5:2 diet' (2015: 245). In this manner, Malik draws attention to Sofia's physicality, depicting her as a creature of appetites and desires rather than ideals alone.

Malik's novels also function to challenge and engage stereotypes regarding the practice of veiling, through their deployment of humour. Anxieties about veiling in a British context are evident in high-profile cases that received a huge amount of media attention in the decade leading up to the publication of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, such as Shabina Begum's lengthy court battle for the right to wear the *jilbab* to school (BBC 2006a), MP Jack Straw's expressions of discomfort regarding the face-veiling practised by his Blackburn constituents (BBC 2006b), and Aishah Azmi's dismissal from her position as a teaching assistant for her insistence on wearing a *niqab* (BBC 2006c). Such expressions of anxiety often take the form of a white saviour narrative, in which the Muslim woman is cast as the oppressed victim of a patriarchal religion in need of rescue by liberated Westerners, a discourse famously summarised by Gayatri Spivak as 'white men [...] saving brown women from brown men' (1994: 93). It is thus important that veiling is presented in Malik's novels as Sofia's decision, in line with (rather than in opposition to) her feminism. With reference to Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* (2009), a humorous memoir by a British Muslim with an East-African Asian diasporic background that similarly deals with the romantic life of a *hijabi*, Rehana Ahmed argues that:

The insertion of a veiled Islamic subjectivity into a post-feminist chick-lit femininity is an important political gesture [...] The narrative facilitates identification with the cultural Other while preventing the absorption of the (veiled) Other into the Self by making visible the former's significant difference.

(2015: 209)

Malik comparably redraws lines of identification through her protagonist, encouraging readers to laugh at stereotypes about veiled Muslim women as they are redeployed jokingly, as when Sofia redeploys the stereotype in a tongue-in-cheek retort to justify her momentary grumpiness to Sakib: 'I'm a hijabi. I'm meant to look sullen and severe' (2017: 283).

The subversion of stereotypes regarding veiling as symptomatic of a religion constructed as patriarchal and illiberal is partly enacted through the opposition that Sofia encounters to her decision. Whilst her father supports Sofia in her decision, made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, to adopt the *hijab*, her mother, who does not herself practise veiling, objects on the grounds that it will make her less desirable to future husbands. Her mother jokes that she looks 'like one of those *Gontonomo* Bay wives', with the exception, from which she derives much mirth, that 'at least they have husbands' (Malik 2015: 11). In so doing she both plays into patriarchal discourses that construct women in terms of their sexual desirability to men and, as a Muslim herself, demonstrates that there is a spectrum of religious beliefs and practices. A British Muslim BBC correspondent whom Sofia meets through online dating constructs his objection as follows: 'A hijab???? Seriously????!! You're living in the West!!!!', a position that is undermined

when Sofia ridicules his 'punctuation hysteria' (2015: 40). As a representative of the BBC, this view demonstrates the problem which secular liberalism has with religious belief and the notion that Islam and the West are mutually opposed (cf. Ahmed 2015). Finally, it is implied that Sofia's identifiable Muslim-ness motivates the Islamophobic and racist abuse that she receives at two instances from the same man when travelling on the London Underground, demonstrating that the principle of opposing the practice of veiling on the grounds of opposition to a patriarchal system is too easily co-opted by racists and Islamophobes. As such, the characteristics represented by those opposing Sofia's decision are made extreme and absurd in various ways through both the novels' humour and their more sombre moments.

In addition, suggestions of a correspondence between religious dress and seriousness are undercut by jokes that Sofia makes at the expense of her *hijab*. At Conall's question as to her omission of an umbrella on a rainy day, Sofia responds, 'Why do you think I wear a hijab? Part religious reasons, part good sense', reiterating that she is joking by recording Conall's inappropriate response: 'He put his umbrella over my head, not a flicker of a smile. Tough crowd' (2015: 200). Sofia maintains control over her decision by defining the parameters of discussion around her *hijab*. Tired of questions, she jokingly justifies her decision to veil as deriving from 'George [...] Michael. Gotta have faith', once again associating her religious beliefs with popular song lyrics and promising to give a 'normal response' only 'when the question is interesting' (2015: 329). In this manner, Sofia is represented as maintaining agency and control over the discourse by embodying the active role of joker. If her immediate audience fails to acknowledge her jokes, a stronger collusion is achieved with the wider reading audience through the former's exclusion from the bond created between teller and audience of the joke.

In addition to engaging and combating particular stereotypes, Malik reworks the roles of teller, audience, and butt negotiated in a joking exchange. Racist/Islamophobic jokes and stereotypes combine to cast Muslim women in passive roles, excluded from the joking exchange as the butts of jokes in a manner that simultaneously confirms the superiority and collusion of the joker and teller, and rendered passive through the anxious repetition of the stereotype that functions to 'fix' those constructed as culturally Other (cf. Bhabha 2000: 66). However, Sofia's character deconstructs this situation by merging the positions of teller and butt, poking fun at herself whilst maintaining authorial power in her self-mockery. Comparable to Helen Fielding's character, Bridget Jones (to whom I return later), Sofia Khan encounters her friends' gentle derision for her inability to cook (she is always asked to bring the salad), whilst manifesting through her diary entries a comical gap between aspirations and reality. The goals Sofia sets herself oscillate between the ambitious and mundane to comic effect:

Things to do: Finish book. Find next bestseller and become editorial star. Sort out Mum's love life. Give up biscuits. Fill each second of each day with forward momentum. DON'T LOOK BACK.

(2017: 307)

Furthermore, her target-setting is frequently undercut by an observation that demonstrates her immediate failure. Following a self-directed exhortation to 'maintain focus', for example, the following line reads, 'Ooh, Naim calling' (2015: 111). Sofia invites readers to join in self-deprecating laughter at her figure as she vows to 'avoid any [...] *hojabi* tendencies. I.e. stay away from jersey, Lycra, tight-knit material that leaves little to the imagination, and expose what can only be described as the *wrong* type of lady-lumps' (a decision that she suggests demonstrates her 'community spirit') (2015: 6). Whilst she sets her own figure up as a source of ridicule, she nevertheless retains power through the verbal dexterity of her jokes, as indicated through the

hijabi/hojabi wordplay. The combination of self-deprecation, lack of self-awareness, and inability to fulfil some of the impossible goals that she sets herself are represented as the source of humour, yet the manner in which Sofia narrates the book through her diary entries ensures that the laughter engendered is complicit and inclusive, rather than placing readers in a position of superiority over the character.

In this and other ways, Malik's novels employ humour to create a new community. The temporary spaces carved out through joking utterances and their attendant power structures are heterotopic in the sense conveyed by Michel Foucault, as they represent, contest, and distort contemporary social worlds (1997: 333). This is evident in the reconfigured power dynamic created when Sofia first meets Conall's father, Colm:

'Well,' he said, turning to look at me. 'Let's see what my son married without so much as an invite to his parents.'

His eyes took in my scarf; his face red and rugged and the distinct smell of alcohol emanating from his mouth. He took me by the shoulders and I saw Conall step forward.

'Colm, best you sleep this off,' said Mary.

'Be good to sleep off this whole nightmare, don't you think?' he said, leaning towards me.

I glanced at Conall. 'A coma right now wouldn't be a bad thing,' I replied.

His grip loosened a little as his eyes bored into mine. A few seconds passed as he burst into laughter, putting his arm around me as we walked to the table.

(2017: 208–209)

The quotidian response to Sofia's unwelcome presence is registered in the increasing sense of physical threat indexed through Colm's aggressive language and stance. An implicit binary is created between the alcoholic father-in-law and the daughter-in-law who makes her religious beliefs (which include abstention from alcohol) public in her choice of dress. However, the nature of the scenario shifts when Sofia jokingly and unexpectedly colludes with Colm's view, as the joke does the work of bridging the implied cultural divide. The humour is derived from the juxtaposition of the two worlds created in the scenario: Colm's animosity, which voices the Islamophobia and racism of the contemporary moment (Sofia is referred to in dehumanising terms as an object rather than a subject through the pronoun 'what', whilst the gaze directed at her scarf positions it as the cause of offence) is both registered and contested through the work of Sofia's joke.

Malik's creation of a new community based on shared laughter functions to rework the 'staged marginality' that Graham Huggan finds to be inherent in postcolonial literature. For Huggan, postcolonial literature is frequently complicit with 'the booming "alterity industry" that it at once serves and resists' by virtue of its status as commodity in the 'global late-capitalist system' in which works are produced and consumed (2001: vii). He defines 'staged marginality' as 'the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their "subordinate" status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience', clarifying that this is 'not necessarily an exercise in self-abasement; it may, and often does, have a critical or even a subversive function' (2001: 87). Examples are drawn from a variety of works including Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), another novel by a Pakistani-British author in which, Huggan suggests, 'Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other' (2001: 95). As I have argued elsewhere, Kureishi foregrounds questions of audience through his protagonist's occupation as an actor, meaning that 'Theatre becomes [...] an allegory for

society, where the processes of casting and staging, and the composition of the audience (“four hundred white English people”) are writ large’ (Ilott 2015: 105). It is implied that the audience for the protagonist’s plays is comparable with the audience imagined for (and through) the novel, meaning that the humour of Kureishi’s novel functions predominantly to parody white expectations and poke fun at those who would seek to position protagonist Karim and his father – the eponymous ‘Buddha of Suburbia’ – as exotic Others.

Questions of audience are similarly important in Malik’s work; however, through the juxtaposition of different modes of writing, it is made apparent that the novels’ imagined audiences will be sympathetic to – and understand – Sofia and her way of life. In a manoeuvre similar to Kureishi’s, Malik creates a foil for the reader, in this case through the world of publishing – ‘quite possibly the most white-centric, middle-class industry there is’ – which Sofia negotiates first as publicist then as author (2015: 18). Interrupted from a daydream in a meeting, Sofia finds herself inadvertently pitching a book about ‘her string of God-awful dates’ (2015: 7). There is a general air of awkwardness and lack of understanding amongst the majority of her colleagues, while her boss, Brammers, functions to voice any stereotypes that people might have about Sofia’s book on Muslim dating (which stands in for Malik’s book on Muslim dating). Engaging questions of audience, Brammers gushes, ‘It’d give a fascinating insight into modern Muslim dating and marriage’, imagining its coverage of ‘all types of things – forced marriages, honour killings’ (2015: 19, 20). Brammers’ senior, Trumps, reinforces the idea that Muslims are exotic Others about whom the white majority knows little to nothing, stating, ‘Muslim dating? Well, I had no idea you were allowed to date’, asking whether her parents are disappointed, suggesting that ‘It’s all very *western*, isn’t it?’, and voicing his concern that she will ‘get *stoned* to death for this’ (2015: 29–30). However, the asides that Sofia makes to readers imply that she imagines a different audience for the book she is writing, as illustrated in the following passage: “‘Sex?’ I asked. ‘What’s that?’ Apparently this wasn’t funny because only Katie let out a stifled laugh, whilst the others weren’t sure whether to laugh or be shocked. Indeed, my friends, indeed’ (2015: 20). The implication is that whilst the people present in the meeting might not understand that she is joking, the reading audience will. Referencing readers as ‘my friends’ at this significant juncture early in the novel constructs the reading audience as complicit with Sofia in her incredulity at her colleagues’ inability to acknowledge the joke for what it is.

Malik cleverly negotiates the fact that not all readers will be cognisant of the various cultural and religious practices that Sofia describes through the different modes of writing which the novels incorporate. The novels are predominantly comprised of Sofia’s diary entries, which allow readers access to a personal and unfiltered account. Also included are blog entries, which are more stylised but nevertheless similarly assume an audience of insiders, or people with shared beliefs. Finally, the first novel in the series includes excerpts from Sofia’s draft ‘Muslim Dating Book’. These excerpts are presented as works in progress with long passages *sous rature*; this implies that the readership has privileged access to Sofia’s inner workings, but also allows certain points to be explained – such as common confusions between Muslim and Asian dating practices – without giving the impression of patronising the audience. In one entry, Sofia writes:

Yes, we are devout, but don’t we have the same struggles as most other girls? (With the additional pressure of keeping God on side for the afterlife.) We smoke behind closed doors, don’t always tell our families who we’re seeing that evening, but never forget to set the alarm to wake up for morning prayers. [...] Faithful, flawed, trying to learn the true meaning of jihad as we teach it, we’re also girls who wouldn’t have it any other way.

(2015: 216)

This passage reads as a manifesto for the novel that Malik has written, but rendered in cheesier one-liners. It takes the same subject matter as the content of Sofia's blog and diary entries but presents it as if for an audience of outsiders. The key difference in mode is that whilst this passage is written in earnest, Sofia's more personalised accounts create the impression of experiences shared through the inclusive environment created by humour.

Part of the work of creating new affiliative networks is enacted through the field of reference that Malik creates through her use of intertexts and what Hans Robert Jauss has termed the 'horizon of expectations' created by the genre (1999: 131). For Malik's works, this has involved a process of distancing from the 'veiled bestseller' (Whitlock 2010) or misery memoir genre, her protagonist explicitly stating at one point in a note for the book she is planning: '*Whatever you do – if writing a guide to marriage, don't end up penning your very own misery memoir*' (2017: 40). The misery memoir genre is characterised by harrowing tales of forced marriage accompanied by the iconic cover imagery of a veiled woman gazing wistfully past the camera or with eyes modestly averted.¹ Instead, the paratexts of Malik's novels point to their inclusion in the chick lit genre.² The cover art of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* incorporates red looping script and figures rendered in cartoon silhouette, boasts endorsements from popular novelist Mhairi McFarlane and the 'Chicklit Club', and heralds its modernity and status in a consumer culture through the inclusion of a hashtag for the novel's protagonist (#SofiaKhan) and Malik's Twitter handle. *The Other Half of Happiness* sports on its cover a pair of perfectly manicured hands – one white, one brown – holding opposite ends of a winding silk scarf. The visual iconography and subject matter of Malik's novels situate them firmly in the emerging tradition of what Lucinda Newns terms 'Muslim Chick Lit', encompassing works such as Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's memoir *Love in a Headscarf*, whose cover art is similarly designed to distinguish it from 'one of the many veiled memoirs circulating in the marketplace' and to shape the reading experience differently: 'rather than reading *Love in a Headscarf* through a jumble of orientalist tropes, we are instructed to read it through the feminine and fashionable "cool" of chick lit, with its message of liberal consumerism and female empowerment' (Newns 2017: 10).

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) – the 'most canonical of chick lit titles' (Harzewski 2011: 58) – functions as a key intertext for Malik's first novel, and popular reviews of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* frequently refer to it as the 'Muslim Bridget Jones', signifying its successful incorporation into the chick lit genre. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, itself a rewriting of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), is emulated in Malik's work, through a post-feminist celebration of choice (in this case with reference to the marriage 'market') as the hallmark of liberation, through the protagonist's endearing combination of a humorous lack of self-awareness and self-deprecation, and through minutiae such as the protagonists' shared failings in the domestic space and anxieties over fluctuating weight coupled with a love of food. Where Bridget has a tendency towards uncensored outbursts that demonstrate her true feelings, Sofia's directness makes her incapable of couching the truth regarding her friends' relationships, refusing to sugarcoat her opinions that, for example, her friend Foz is 'throwing [her] life away to an unworthy cause' (Malik 2017: 310). Like Bridget, Sofia surrounds herself with a close group of friends who meet for regular coffee dates to discuss their various romantic adventures. Comparable to parody of the 'smug marrieds' in Fielding's novel, Sofia is sceptical about the forms that married life can take, despite her own romantic ideals. Malik's first novel begins, as does Fielding's, with the protagonist's list of resolutions. Sofia's mother's insistence on referring to her son-in-law as Colin (rather than Conall) might even be read as an intertextual allusion to Colin Firth, the actor who plays the romantic lead in both the BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* and the film adaptations of Fielding's novels. Finally, Sofia's story also has a sequel that – like *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2000) – 'indirectly problematizes the neat endings of Austen's marriage plots'

(Harzewski 2011: 59), in this case through an exploration of the lies and failed compromises on which a marriage falls apart.

What Stephanie Harzewski identifies as central to the chick lit genre in which Malik's novels participate is their humour, and the marketability that has meant that 'In the past decade major publishers have launched imprints capitalizing on a particular kind of feminine angst, fictionally rendered humorous or, as some readers have claimed, archetypal' (2011: 3). This humour involves elements of self-deprecation, accompanied by Austen's legacy in 'the satiric aspects of the novel of manners' (Harzewski 2011: 3), a 'caricatured portrait' of the protagonist's shortcomings that reflects back onto the reader (Harzewski 2011: 62), and, perhaps most significantly in this case, a parodic, ironic, or mocking stance towards the *Bildungsroman* genre (Harzewski 2011: 60–62). Each of these elements is undoubtedly evident in Malik's novels, as this chapter has demonstrated. However, one topic that escapes the novels' parodic gaze – which rests alternatively on family life, dating rituals, gender norms, and the internet-dependency of millennial life – is Sofia's Muslim faith. Whilst, as I have demonstrated previously, there is a blurring of the sacred and the secular/profane in a manner that encourages readers not to place the protagonist on a pedestal as an exemplar of the religion she practises, and fun is made of ceremonial rituals tied to cultural interpretations of the religion, there is no comparable ironic detachment from her faith itself, as it remains the one constant force in her life in the midst of tribulations and upheavals that range from disastrous dates, to her father's death, to the collapse of her marriage. In Harzewski's summary of Fielding's novel, she gestures towards the failure or limitation of the novel's humour, suggesting that it 'may succeed at lightheartedness, but this does not make for a spiritually uplifting reading experience. While through blunders she surpasses her predecessor [Elizabeth Bennet] on the point of endearing vulnerability, Bridget evokes not inspiration, but merely sympathetic laughter' (2011: 66). This, I would argue, is where Malik's novels differ: because the parody of the *Bildungsroman* form does not extend to the protagonist's spiritual maturation and development, the novels maintain a glimmer of hope that is premised on strength of faith rather than the promise of romantic fulfilment. Like *Love in a Headscarf*, in which Newns reads 'faith and spirituality, rather than media-driven consumption, as an alternative "solution" to the malaise left behind once the romantic myths can no longer hold water' (2017: 13), Malik's novels merge some of the hope inherent in the narrative of self-improvement or self-actualisation offered by the *Bildungsroman* with the light-heartedness and parodic gaze of chick lit.

Malik is not alone in her appropriation of the chick lit genre to centralise Pakistani/Muslim protagonists and position arranged marriages or the hunt for a husband in a tradition of literary romance dating back to Austen.³ Rekha Waheed's *The A–Z of Arranged Marriage* (2005) proclaims its generic affiliations through a cartoon image of a woman on the front cover and an unaccredited promise that it is 'unapologetically sassy'. Located in London, New York, and Dhaka, the trials of finding a husband amidst a diminishing stock of eligible bachelors are rendered by Waheed in a tone of comic glee. Nasreen Akhtar's *Catch a Fish from the Sea (Using the Internet)* (2008) sees its protagonist turn to the web after an excruciating interview for an arranged marriage. A number of other authors locate similar novels in a Pakistani, often Karachi, setting. Blending the romantic with the political in a manoeuvre familiar to this Pakistani/Muslim subgenre of chick lit, Maha Khan Phillips' *Beautiful from this Angle* (2010) promises an intoxicating cocktail of 'Chanel and cocaine, fundos and feudalism' on the journey to love and happiness. Saba Imtiaz's *Karachi, You're Killing Me* (2014) takes a comic approach to the crime genre, and has also been compared to *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Also Karachi-based, Shazaf Fatima Haider's *How it Happened* (2013) has drawn responses that focus on 'family comedy' and associate it with Austen's legacy through its description as 'Lizzie Bennett comes to Karachi'

(Soofi 2013). Moni Mohsin's trilogy *Duty Free* (formerly *Tender Hooks*, 2012), *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2013), and *The Return of the Butterfly* (2014) comes emblazoned with *Glamour* magazine's endorsement: 'Jane Austen meets Bridget Jones' (apparently oblivious to the fact that Austen and Jones have already 'met' in an intertextual sense).

In sum, Malik's appropriation of the chick lit genre to engage a Muslim protagonist enables a redeployment of the genre's humour to a variety of purposes. Creating a heterotopic space through her humour, social norms that work to stereotype and other Pakistanis and Muslims are acknowledged and subverted. Through the inclusive environment created by the novel's humour, which positions readers as insiders on the various jokes, Malik creates a British-Pakistani Muslim everywoman. Deviating from common media and literary representations of Muslim women's oppression through patriarchal systems and forced marriages, problems that Sofia suffers in her romantic life are not exoticised or presented as stemming from her religious or ethnic identity. Largely conforming to norms of the chick lit genre, the limits of the humour in leaving Sofia's faith unscathed by the parodic/ironic gaze employed elsewhere mean that Malik can demonstrate what is missing when fulfilment is sought – in true post-feminist fashion – in sex and shopping alone.

Notes

- 1 Newns cites Jean Sasson's *Princess* trilogy (1992, 1994, 2000), Latifa's *My Forbidden Face* (1985), and Betty Mahmood's *Not Without My Daughter* (1978) in her discussion (2017: 2).
- 2 I do not employ the 'Chick Lit' classification as a slur, but to designate a popular and critically maligned genre that has a rich potential for social commentary. I nevertheless recognise the negative connotations that this post-feminist genre has accrued for being frothy, un-literary, or even debilitating to the feminist movement (see Harzewski 2011).
- 3 Thanks go to Rabaha Arshad, Claire Chambers, Aroosa Kanwal, Ayisha Malik and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed for their recommendations of similar books in this genre.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, R. (2015) *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Akhtar, N. (2008) *Catch a Fish from the Sea (Using the Internet)*. London: Greenbirds.
- Austin, J. (1813) *Pride and Prejudice*. London: T. Egerton.
- Bakhtin, M. (1994) 'Rabelais and his World'. In *The Bakhtin Reader*. Ed. by Morris, P. London: Edward Arnold, 194–244.
- BBC. (2006a) 'School Wins Muslim Dress Appeal'. *BBC News* [online]. Available from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4832072.stm>> [15 December 2017].
- BBC. (2006b) 'Straw's Veil Comments Spark Anger'. *BBC News* [online]. Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5410472.stm> [15 December 2017].
- BBC. (2006c) 'The Woman at Centre of Veil Case'. *BBC News* [online]. Available from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6068408.stm>> [15 December 2017].
- Bergmann, M. (1999) 'The Psychoanalysis of Humour and Humour in Psychoanalysis'. In *Humor and Psyche: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. Ed. by Barron, J.W. Hillsdale: Analytic Press.
- Bhabha, H. (2000) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bilici, M. (2010) 'Muslim Ethnic Comedy: Inversions of Islamophobia'. In *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*. Ed. by Shyrock, A. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 195–208.
- Fielding, H. (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary*. London: Picador.
- Fielding, H. (2000) *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. London: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (1997) 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias'. Trans. by Miskowiec, J. In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. by Leach, N. New York: Routledge, 330–336.

- Gillespie, M. (2003) 'From Comic Asians to Asian Comics: *Goodness Gracious Me*, British Television Comedy and Representations of Ethnicity'. In *Group Identities on French and British Television*. Ed. by Scriven, M. and Roberts, E. New York: Berghahn, 93–107.
- Haider, S.F. (2013) *How it Happened*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin.
- Harzewski, S. (2011) *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1840) *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes Volume 4*. Ed. by Molesworth, W. London: John Bohn.
- Huggan, G. (2001) *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Ilott, S. (2015) *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Imtiaz, S. (2014) *Karachi, You're Killing Me*. Noida: Random House.
- Janmohamed, S.Z. (2009) *Love in a Headscarf*. London: Aurum Press Ltd.
- Jauss, H.R. (1999) 'Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature'. In *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. by Duff, D. London: Longman, 127–147.
- Kureishi, H. (1990) *The Buddha of Suburbia*. New York: Viking.
- Malik, A. (2015) *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*. London: Twenty7.
- Malik, A. (2017) *The Other Half of Happiness*. London: Zaffre.
- Modood, T. (1990) 'British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair'. *Political Quarterly* 61(2), 143–160.
- Mohsin, M. (2012) *Duty Free*. London: Vintage.
- Mohsin, M. (2013) *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. London: Vintage.
- Mohsin, M. (2014) *The Return of the Butterfly*. London: Vintage.
- Newns, L. (2017) 'Renegotiating Romantic Genres: Textual Resistance and Muslim Chick Lit'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* [online]. Available from <<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021989416686156>> [15 December 2017].
- Phillips, M.K. (2010) *Beautiful from this Angle*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Soofi, M.A. (2010) 'Book Review: How it Happened'. *Live Mint* [online]. Available from <www.livemint.com/Leisure/PMpZmxUK7hoD2WMegjqlBK/Book-Review--How-It-Happened.html> [15 December 2017].
- Spivak, G.C. (1994) 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. by Williams, P. and Chrisman, L. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 90–105.
- Waheed, R. (2005) *The A–Z Guide to Arranged Marriage*. London: Monsoon Press.
- Whitlock, G. (2010) *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.