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1. 'The *Satanic Verses* controversy', aka 'the Rushdie affair', references the firestorm ignited in 1988–89 by Salman Rushdie's novel, which was widely condemned as insulting to Islam. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and other US locations on 11 September 2001, and the London subway '7–7' bombings of 2005, the *Satanic Verses* controversy was problematically interpreted as a prefiguration of an escalating crisis between 'Islam' and 'the West'. See Paul Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times: 'The Rushdie Affair' and the Future of Multiculturalism* (London: Continuum, 2009).
2. Rehana Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 7.
3. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.
4. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) and Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999).
5. See Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
6. My article is deeply indebted to several

British Muslim Feminisms on Stage

Meenakshi Ponnuswami 

British Muslims have encountered escalating scrutiny and hostility since the Rushdie crisis of 1988–89 and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005,¹ during which time, as Rehana Ahmed puts it, they 'have come to figure increasingly as secular modernity's fundamentalist Other'.² Commentators point to the widespread resurgence of colonial-era stereotypes, including depictions of Muslim men 'as threatening, untrustworthy terrorists'³ and of Muslim women as silenced prisoners of tyrannical patriarchies.⁴ Second-generation writers of Muslim descent have played a crucial role in contesting and helping to reshape such figurations,⁵ but relatively little attention has been devoted to contemporary British Muslim women playwrights, whose work is the focus of this study.⁶ These writers examine the gender and sexual politics of Islam in the context of increasingly polarised debates about immigration and multiculturalism in Britain. Subverting Islamophobic stereotypes and conservative efforts to define or delimit Islam, they provide intimate views of diverse, self-critical, and adaptable subcultures. The three plays discussed in this article focus specifically on British Pakistani communities during the important transitional years before and after the London attacks of July 2005, when the spectre of so-called 'home-grown' terrorism came into view: Yasmin Whittaker-Khan's *Bells* and Azma Dar's *Chaos* were performed in 2005 a few months before the 7/7 bombings; Emteaz Hussain's *Sweet Cider* was produced a few years later, in 2008.⁷ In 2008, after watching an evening of plays by British Muslim writers, prominent theatre critic Michael Billington commented, 'in the course of an hour, I learned more about what it's like to be a young Muslim than I have from acres of newsprint and miles of TV footage'.⁸

As Billington's comment implies, the perspectives of second-generation Muslims acquired a certain commodity value after the 2005 attacks,⁹ as the prospect of 'home grown' jihadism bewildered the British public.¹⁰ Even before the attacks, a series of contentious events involving Islam had coloured European perceptions of Muslims: the British government's

important studies of British Asian theatre: Gabriele Griffin's ground-breaking *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs, eds., *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice* (Dramaturgies No. 19, Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A., 2006); Dimple Godiwala, ed., *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006); Dominic Hingorani, *British Asian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Process and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (London: Routledge, 2011); Graham Ley and Sarah Dadswell, eds., *British South Asian Theatres: A Documented History* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012) and its companion volume *Critical Essays on British South Asian Theatres* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012).

7. Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, *Bells* and Azma Dar, *Chaos* (London: Oberon Books, 2005); Emteaz Hussain, 'Sweet Cider', in *Plays for Today by Women*, ed. Cheryl Robson, Rebecca Gillieron, and Gillian Plowman (Twickenham: Aurora Metro Press, 2013).
8. Michael Billington, 'Acts of Faith', *Guardian*, May 6, 2008 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/may/06/theatre.religion> (accessed September 26, 2016).

2003 decision to join the American war on Iraq; the French government's 2004 ban on 'conspicuous' religious signifiers like the veil; the international conflagrations over the 2005 publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Such events, in addition to the London '7/7' attacks, led many young British Muslims 'to think of themselves as Muslims for the first time in a public way' (to adapt Tariq Modood's description of the effect of the Rushdie controversy).¹¹ Several British Muslim playwrights explain a renewed motivation for writing in terms of the impact of 9–11, the Iraq war, and July 7. Avaes Mohammad explains, 'I was on a different career trajectory. I was going to be a scientist. But since 9/11 I felt I had no option but to write. I do it because this is my home and I want to make it a better place'.¹² Yusra Warsama, who was 19 when the Iraq war began, recalls that she 'couldn't see it as anything else than an attack on Islam':

I remember that intensity of frustration. I was used to the institutions in British society making a bit of sense, having some clarity of thought, but here was the government you had been asked to trust, randomly perpetuating the hate against you. That is scary because where do you go? For me, one place is art or theatre.¹³

Similarly, for Asif Khan, 'everything changed' after 2007, when he 'felt a particularly steep rise in negativity about Islam. [...] I wrote *Combustion* because as a British Muslim I have a lot to say. I feel that my voice, as well as the voice of many ordinary British Muslims is under-represented. Muslims are frequently in the news, but it's always the negative stories that make the headlines. I constantly find myself thinking, "I'm a Muslim, but that's not who I am, that's not my Islam".¹⁴

Coincidentally, it was in the early 2000s, in the wake of the *Eclipse* Theatre Conference of 2001,¹⁵ that black and South Asian writers found increasing opportunities to work in the theatre. Lynette Goddard has shown that the *Eclipse* report created a 'boom in black playwriting in 2003',¹⁶ and it also influenced a new wave of plays by British Asian writers, including several by Muslim women.¹⁷ By 2000, British Asians had been an active presence on the British stage for more than 20 years. Theatre companies such as Tara Arts, Tamasha, and Kali¹⁸ had established reputations for producing provocative and socially conscious work such as Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* (Kali's inaugural show, 1990) and Ayub Khan-Din's celebrated *East Is East* (Tamasha, 1996). As Graham Ley and Sarah Dadswell observe, Kali Theatre Company was the only one of these companies to emphasise the development of new scripts. Nevertheless, a number of aspiring playwrights 'succeeded outside the confines of British Asian theatres', including Hanif Kureishi, Tanika Gupta, Parv Bancil, Meera Syal, Harwant Bains, and Maya Chowdhry.¹⁹ Although many of these writers were Muslim, their works centered on cultural rather than religious identities; writers of any particular South Asian subculture often referenced other subcultures. Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* and Syal's *Bhaji on the Beach* depicted Sikh families although neither writer is of Sikh ancestry; Syal's *My Sister-Wife* focused on a Pakistani Muslim family.

9. Ahmed, 183. Ahmed attributes 'the proliferation of autobiographical memoirs by writers of Muslim heritage on both sides of the Atlantic' to 'demands of the market'.
10. Sam Mullins, 'Home-Grown' Jihad: Understanding Islamist Terrorism in the US and UK (London: Imperial College Press, 2015), 27.
11. Tariq Modood, *Still Not Easy Being British: Struggles for a Multicultural Citizenship* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2010), 2.
12. Interview with Tim Adams, "'Art Gets Things Out in the Open": Young British Muslim Artists Tell Their Stories', *Guardian*, April 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/apr/12/young-british-muslim-artists-mohammed-ali-aveas-mohammad-yusra-warsama-aishazia> (accessed December 10, 2017).
13. Interview with Tim Adams, 'Art Gets Things Out in the Open'.
14. Asif Khan, 'Combustion: Using Theatre to Challenge Perceptions of Muslims in Britain', *A Younger Theatre Blog*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/blog-combustion-using-theatre-to-challenge-perceptions-of-muslims-in-britain/> (accessed December 10, 2017).
15. The Eclipse Theatre Conference was organised in 2001 by Arts Council England to promote diversity initiatives in theatre. It was established following the Macpherson commission's 1999 inquiry into the murder of a young black teenager, which concluded

Such pan-South Asian representations faded in the 2000s; the increased funding prompted by *Eclipse* expanded the range of South Asian-origin theatre at precisely the same time that an interest in representations of specifically Muslim lives and perspectives gathered momentum. Increasing emphasis was placed on 'authenticity', for instance in the form of memoirs by and verbatim theatre based on interviews with 'actual' Muslims. But, as Ahmed observes, the 'designated status' of such British Muslim voices 'as 'insider' accounts that are representative of 'Muslim experience' endows them with a particular potency to challenge but also, alternatively, to reproduce and confirm'²⁰ mainstream narratives about British Muslims. Ahmed draws attention to a key concern, that British Muslim playwrights run the risk of confirming rather than repudiating prejudices. As a result, Billington's comment that he 'learned [...] what it's like to be a young Muslim' is reassuring but also alarming, and suggests we need to critically interrogate the stories of inter-generational conflict that have been the bread and butter of British Asian theatre, film, and television. In paradigmatic works like Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's notorious *Behzti* and Gurinder Chadda's *Bend It Like Beckham*, a cosmopolitan younger generation desperately, and often comically, find themselves at odds with provincial immigrant elders (whether Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh). This younger generation is shown to be struggling to break the stranglehold of tradition and setting out to embrace an idea of 'Britishness' defined primarily through the negation and ridicule of the immigrant culture. Gender and sexual politics have typically occupied centre stage in such narratives. Prominent British Muslim writers of South Asian background, such as Hanif Kureishi and Ayub Khan-Din, have represented immigrant men in ways that promote what Ahmed describes as 'culturalist fears of a retrogressive and violent [...] patriarchy'.²¹ As E. Haschemi Yekani laments, 'the representation of Muslim masculinities still cannot emancipate itself from images of rigidity and repressiveness' – 'somebody always has to be the fanatic'.²² Immigrant Muslim women, even when conceived by South-Asian writers, are typically represented as passive, tradition-bound, and unassimilable victims of repressive patriarchies.

The plays I examine here belong to a wave of new millennial works that provide more nuanced representations of Muslim families – including some tyrannical patriarchs and cowering women – exploring differences between customary and specifically religious practices as well as immigrant communities' capacity for change. These complex discourses signal allegiances to Islam, Britain, and feminism, reframing racist and sexist narratives by insisting that, in spite of the 'otherness' of race or veil, Muslim women also have a place at the table of British modernity.

Yasmin Whittaker Khan, *Bells* (2005)

Produced at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre by Kali Theatre Company in a 2005 double bill with *Chaos*, Khan's *Bells* depicts exploitative mujra clubs, where young dancers imported from South Asia on 'entertainment visas' are forced into prostitution before being repatriated. Khan's interest in the subject may have been triggered by newspaper reports in the early 2000s

that the London Metropolitan police force was 'institutionally racist'. Arts Council England, *Eclipse: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in Theatre* (London: Arts Council England, 2002) http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Eclipse_report_2011.pdf (accessed November 15, 2017).

16. The *Eclipse Report* was commissioned by the Arts Council of England, East Midlands Arts Board, Theatrical Management Association and Nottingham Playhouse as an initiative to 'combat racism in theatre'. Report available here: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Eclipse_report_2011.pdf. Goddard highlights the report's 20th recommendation: 'By March 2003, every publicly funded theatre organisation in England will have reviewed its Equal Opportunities policy, ascertained whether its set objectives are being achieved and, if not, drawn up a comprehensive Positive Action plan which actively develops opportunities for African Caribbean and Asian practitioners'. Lynette Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8–10 (9).
17. Helen Kolawole, 'Look Who's Taking the Stage', *Guardian*, July 25, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jul/26/whoswhoinbritishtheatre.features> (accessed November 14, 2017);

which documented the popularity of such clubs in cities with large Asian populations.²³ The tone of these articles is echoed in Whittaker-Khan's indignant preface, which criticizes South Asians for remaining callously unconcerned about the real-life practice while flocking to popular 'Bollywood' and 'Lollywood'²⁴ movies in which mujra is 'romanticised'. She writes:

My research has left me sickened by the hypocrisy, psychological bullying, use of money as power and the seediness of these clubs. Some *respectable*, even *religious* men visit the Mujra clubs – condemning these vulnerable women in public while pursuing them in private.²⁵

The 'seediness' of *Bells*, the nightclub depicted in the play, is manifest in its location above a butcher shop (the scenes are entitled as cuts of meat for sale, such as '4 lbs Lamb Chops'), and in the spectacle of pound notes being thrown over the bodies of the dancers after performances. Whittaker-Khan criticizes reviews that characterized *Bells* as 'a play about Muslim brothels', because such 'sensationalist shorthand [...] placed the focus on religion over and above the desperate circumstances of the women, which is what I was trying to convey'.²⁶

The reviewers' 'focus on religion' was unsurprising, as *Bells* followed the Rep's controversial production of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behzti*, which condemned the Sikh religious establishment.²⁷ Indeed *Bells* directly targets Islam, specifically what Dominick Cavendish calls 'a hypocritical divide between Muslim worship and sexually exploitative practice'.²⁸ In the opening scene, the three main characters – Ashraf, Madam, and Aiesha, all Pakistani immigrants – are shown reading Namaz quietly on mats, 'completely absorbed in prayer'. These devotional interludes are repeated thrice, between bouts of drinking, smoking, dancing, and extra-marital sex, gay and straight. Ironically, despite their own 'deviant' behaviour, the characters themselves accuse the wider Muslim community of hypocrisy; the owners of *Bells*, Ashraf and his partner 'Madam', condemn the local mosque because its members censure *Bells* as a 'whorehouse' but beg to be let into the club after hours.²⁹

At the same time, Whittaker-Khan looks beyond sexual abuse and religious hypocrisy to consider whether genuine love and intimacy can flourish in such contexts. 'Beneath the exploitation and degradation of the unprotected and sometimes helpless', she writes in the preface, 'there are many lonely and pained individuals – both buying and selling the entertainment'.³⁰ Cavendish argues that, while 'opening up a neglected area of British life for debate', the play 'draws a soft veil of relishable gentle comedy and soapish romance over this twilight activity', minimizing 'the violence which threatens this play's principal courtesan Aiesha'.³¹ I would argue, however, that *Bells* deliberately contrasts the threat of patriarchal violence with what it suggests are 'authentic' traditions of Muslim art and beauty. Whittaker-Khan's preface describes how 'fascinated' she was by mujra scenes in South Asian films she watched as a child, attracted by 'the pretty clothes, the dancing prowess and apparent natural grace of the courtesans'.³² This nostalgic, libidinal pull is apparent in the play's costumes and set and in its references to the erotic lure of the

Lyn Gardner, Theatre Blog, 'New Writing Is a Risk but It's One Theatres Must Take', *Guardian*, July 5, 2016. Gardner describes several initiatives encouraging script development by new BAME playwrights but argues that established theatres are reluctant to risk programming the new work.

18. See Ley and Dadswell, *British South Asian Theatres* and Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain* for a more comprehensive list of theatre companies. See also the Khayaal Theatre Company, which was founded in 1997 to promote 'Muslim world literature and the experience of Muslims in the modern world on stage, radio and screen.' Khayaal, <http://www.khayaal.co.uk/about/> (accessed December 15, 2017).
19. Ley and Daswell, *British South Asian Theatres*, 242.
20. Ahmed, *Writing British Muslims*, 184.
21. *Ibid.*, 7.
22. E. Haschemi Yekani, "'Who's the Fanatic Now?' – Father-and-Son Conflicts in *My Son the Fanatic* and *East Is East*", *Kritische Berichte*, April 2007, 86 <http://journals.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/kb/article/view/10034/3891> (accessed October 12, 2016).
23. David Brown and Natasha Narayan, 'Asian Dancers Are Lured into Prostitution', *Independent*, April 8, 2000, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/asian-dancers-are-lured-into-prostitu>

dancers. Whereas a 2003 newspaper report about actual mujra clubs describes 'vulgarily dressed Asian women offering titillating jerks',³³ Whittaker-Khan depicts beautiful artists steeped in traditions of Mughal courtesan culture:

*PEPSI and AIESHA appear wearing dancing bells on their ankles. They kiss their hands, touch the ground in front of their feet and then place each hand on each ear. This is a way of asking for forgiveness before they dance. It is a ritual before each dance.*³⁴

The 'Persian/Pakistani' aesthetic of the club, 'with rugs, big bolster cushions and glittery curtains',³⁵ similarly evokes Mughal courtly luxury, albeit of film-industry origin. The décor and the dances reference an opulent, pleasure-oriented Muslim history which, I would argue, challenges associations of Islam with rigid doctrine or male violence.

Uma Chakravarthi notes that South Asian patrons of mujra 'are tapping into the culture of their homeland. It plays on their nostalgia'.³⁶ Such nostalgia hypnotizes Charles, a patron of Indian ancestry whose family is 'more English than the English'.³⁷ Through his relationship with Aiesha, he pursues a growing fascination with his ancestral roots, guided by two unrelated aesthetic influences: Oscar Wilde's poetry, and his recent viewing of mid-1970s blockbuster Hindi movies, *Dharam Veer* and *Kabhi Kabhi* (neither of which exemplifies the Mughal-influenced cinema that popularizes mujra). For the culturally uprooted Charles, orientalist aestheticism and Hindi cinema romance find common ground in the courtliness, sensuality, and exoticism of mujra. 'My heart is Indian', he tells Aiesha, who is Pakistani, upon falling in love with her at first sight.³⁸ 'You've filled what has been missing in me all my life. You're my culture, my Urdu, my poetry, my history and you're my future'.³⁹ As Valerie Kaneko Lucas puts it, Charles's 'romanticization of Pakistan has more than a touch of Orientalism',⁴⁰ and Charles himself mocks Wilde as a 'fake Eastern mysticism guide'.⁴¹ However, Wilde's poetry harmonizes with the ecstatic strains of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Sufi *qawwali* to provide a rich accompaniment to the pleasures of dance and sex, transcending the sordidness of the business on the wings of art.

Whittaker-Khan's depiction of mujra works to counter portrayals of Islam as joyless or uncultured, and importantly she brings a feminist critique to the institution. Despite toying with the idea that Aiesha will find love and fulfilment with Charles, *Bells* implies that Aiesha's agency is limited whether she fulfils male sex fantasies in captivity as a dancer, or in 'freedom' as Charles's wife. The play's most explicit feminist intervention is reserved for the final 'escape' scene. Throughout the play, Whittaker-Khan has shown that Ashraf's predatory, tyrannical power is buttressed by the love and loyalty of Madam and Pepsi, Ashraf's young gay lover. However, Charles and Aiesha's planned escape depends on Madam's courage to defy patriarchal intimidation. When Aiesha and Charles are caught trying to elope, Madam intervenes, brandishing a sex-toy whip to stop Ashraf. The lovers flee, and he turns furiously to assault Madam. It is clear that Madam's small symbolic act of resistance will not transform the entrenched system of oppression, but *Bells* suggests that change becomes

tion-5371611.html (accessed July 16, 2016); Tony Thompson, 'Revealed: Bollywood Craze that Is Fuelling London's Vice Racket', July 26, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/jul/27/race.ukcrime> (accessed July 16, 2016).

24. Cinema industries based in Mumbai and Lahore respectively.
25. Whittaker-Khan, *Bells*, 5; original emphasis.
26. Whittaker-Khan, 'My Mother Was the Victim of an Honour Killing', *Daily Mail.com*, September 8, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-480719/My-mother-victim-honour-killing-reveals-Muslim-playwright.html#ixzz4UoihUn3N> (accessed July 16, 2016).
27. No protests followed *Bells*, but Whittaker-Khan has reported being harassed. See Whittaker-Khan, 'My Mother'.
28. Dominic Cavendish, 'Light Comedy Reveals Some Dark Truths', *Telegraph*, March 29, 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/3639479/Light-comedy-reveals-some-dark-truths.html>, (accessed July 16, 2016).
29. Whittaker-Khan, *Bells*, 105–6.
30. *Ibid.*, 5.
31. Cavendish, 'Light Comedy'.
32. Whittaker-Khan, *Bells*, 5.
33. Ishara Bhasi, 'Dance of Lust', *India Today*, August 25, 2003 <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/girls-imported-from-india-pakistan-keep-alive-for-bidden-mujra-night-clubs-in-london/1/>

possible only when those most enmeshed in the system acknowledge and oppose its brutality. It is significant that within this play challenges to patriarchy are not dependent upon Muslim women's escape into 'secularism' or the 'West'; rather, the community is shown to be capable of self-criticism and renewal on its own terms.

Azma Dar, *Chaos* (2005)

As in *Bells*, Dar's *Chaos* depicts a modest yet significant act of feminist resistance by an older Pakistani woman locked in an intractable socio-cultural system. The play represents the disintegration of a Pakistani Muslim couple two months after 9/11, when their son Babar leaves England to join a militia which defends Muslim victims of the 'war on terror'. In exploring Babar's apparent 'radicalization', *Chaos* implicitly references Kureishi's influential 1997 film *My Son the Fanatic*: in both narratives, the father's grovelling efforts to assimilate into British society blind him to his wife's alienation and son's emerging 'fanaticism'. Dar actively corrects reductive associations of Muslim masculinity; neither Jameel Rizvi nor his sons, Salim and Babar, fit the stereotype of tradition-bound immigrant Muslim patriarchs. At the same time as exploring British Muslim masculinity, *Chaos* calls attention to Jameel's wife Safia, offering a feminist critique of patriarchal privilege and arrogance in liberal, secular families.

Dar initially structures the play's gender conflicts around a binary that contrasts male assimilationism with female piety. Jameel, the father, is launching his political career by running as a candidate for the local council in Wembley. Dedicated to the social advancement of British Muslims, he envisions modern secular Britain in attractively utopian terms as 'a multicultural rainbow, where all the colours blend, harmonize, and complement each other'.⁴² Jameel advocates 'British-born leaders',⁴³ warning against 'ambitious men who want to control the mosques' and '[make] maniacs out of our youth'.⁴⁴ He sharply criticizes his wife Safia's apparent piety, mocking 'her fatal fatwas' ('You'll roast on God's barbecue if you eat a bacon crisp') and declaring she has 'never understood that true faith has to come from the heart'. Elsewhere, he condemns religion altogether, calling it an 'obsessive lunacy'.⁴⁵

The play mines the comic potential of Jameel's irreverence but demonstrates that his simplistic dismissal of faith blinds him to the complexity of his family's motivations and desires. His younger son Babar's sympathy for the 'fighters' abroad, for example, is rooted primarily in his political solidarity with Muslim victims of the 'war on terror' – '[t]he one organised by your new friends in Westminster', he taunts Jameel, '[t]he one that's turning our brothers and sisters into orphans and widows and corpses. [...] Those people are utterly defenceless. They've got nowhere to go. They wait for death to drop out of the sky'.⁴⁶ Babar seems to echo what Sam Mullins calls 'Islamist anger at the British government', which he argues 'came to a boil soon after troops set foot in Iraq'.⁴⁷ However, Babar heatedly denies Islamist affiliations, asserting, 'I'm not going on a suicide mission with a bomb in my backpack'.⁴⁸ Babar never speaks of Islam, and indeed, no one

- 205422.html (accessed July 16, 2016).
34. Whittaker-Khan, *Bells*, 132.
35. *Ibid.*, 133.
36. Quoted in Brown and Narayan, 'Asian Dancers Are Lured into Prostitution'.
37. Whittaker-Khan, *Bells*, 179.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 182.
40. *Ibid.*, 180.
41. Valerie Kaneko Lucas, "Shameless" – Women, Sexuality and Violence in British Asian Drama', in Godiwala, ed. *Alternatives within the Mainstream*, 378. See note 6.
42. Dar, *Chaos*, 29.
43. *Ibid.*, 28.
44. *Ibid.*, 55. Jameel strongly echoes Kureishi's Parvez here.
45. *Ibid.*, 57–59.
46. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
47. Mullins, 'Homegrown' *Jihad*, 106.
48. Dar, *Chaos*, 55.
49. *Ibid.*, 21.
50. *Ibid.*, 55.
51. *Ibid.*, 90.
52. *Ibid.*, 82–4.
53. *Ibid.*, 94.
54. *Ibid.*, 96–7.
55. *Ibid.*, 32.
56. The most prominent cases involved sharia courts in Nigeria, such as Amina Lawal's. See A. M. Jaggar, "Saving Amina": Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue'. *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2005): 55–75, (119). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/200508574?accountid=9784>. (accessed July 9, 2011).

in the family seems particularly motivated by faith. Islam is certainly referenced as an ethical foundation and cultural practice – 'framed Arabic surahs'⁴⁹ are mounted on the walls; and Jameel reminds Babar that in Islam, 'God says that killing even one man is like killing the whole of humanity'.⁵⁰ But in this play religion generally plays a secondary role – occasionally even a comic one, as when Safia dons a burqua to annoy Jameel, or when Jameel orders halal sausages for his party.

Dar can be seen to reframe Safia's religiosity, implying that she clings to religion in desperation because she is neglected and alienated as a woman. Neither Jameel nor their older son Salim has noticed that she has not left her house for three years, or that she is close to a nervous breakdown. Her grievances have festered since discovering lurid sex-fantasy diaries which Jameel has kept throughout their marriage and which he defends as 'private [...] poetry'.⁵¹ The final scenes of *Chaos* focus closely on Safia's state of mind. When a miscommunication leads them to think Babar has been killed by an allied strike (he is later discovered to be safely in British custody), Safia loses her fragile grip on reality, making suicidal gestures and wretchedly imagining his body like 'meat in a mincing machine'.⁵² She has earlier tried to provoke Jameel's attention by humiliating him at his soiree by dressing in a burqua; she now emerges in a 'sparkly sleeveless' outfit, wearing high heels and 'roughly applied' makeup. 'Horried by her appearance' and aghast when she begins reciting racy passages from his diary, Jameel explodes in contempt, calling her a 'frigid menopausal homebody turned decrepit old tart'.⁵³

His cruelty finally prompts the older son, Salim, to confront Jameel for his neglect and hostility: 'you've been partying and giggling and rising up in the world', he says, while Safia has done 'what she's supposed to, being a wife, with or without a smile on her face'.⁵⁴ By this point, Safia no longer needs her sons' help. The final scene, despite its ambiguity, offers a charged image of Muslim feminist revenge against the recognisably patriarchal structure at the heart of the family's 'chaos' and collapse. Safia appears with a bag of her husband's cherished, recently installed driveway gravel along with some heavier stones, and, holding a knife to Jameel's throat, instructs Salim and her friend Moona to stone him as a punishment for adultery.⁵⁵ Salim intervenes before the ritual can proceed, but Safia's gesture, targeting her secular liberal husband, represents a feminist recasting of an ancient law traditionally applied against women by men. Safia significantly chooses the Biblical punishment of stoning for adultery, which, at the time the play was written, was a trope of 'Islamic justice' predominantly associated with Nigerian Muslim women accused of sexual transgressions.⁵⁶ Safia's gesture mirrors that of Madam in *Bells*, each woman retaliating against a patriarch whose misogyny has been facilitated by those around him. Once again it is significant that the victim does not set out to escape or assimilate into Western culture but rather stands her ground in order to challenge her oppressor.

Emteaz Hussain, *Sweet Cider* (2008)

Produced by Tamasha at the Arcola Theatre in 2008, Em Hussain's *Sweet Cider* also ends with an act of violent retribution against misogynistic familial structures. The play focuses on young Pakistani Muslims: two runaway women, Nosheen and Tazeem, and men they meet in a park, Aki and Amir. Hussain's characters, like their millennial counterparts in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and Roy Williams's *Fallout*, explore new ways of thinking and being even as they struggle on the fringes of British society, economically disenfranchised and spiritually lost. Hussain describes herself as a 'spoken word artist'⁵⁷ and draws upon British Asian dub and hip-hop to convey the fragilities, strengths, and subtle poetry of her characters. As Ashley Dawson argues, 'contemporary Asian hip-hop in Britain [...] offers a critical counterpoint to contemporary social and political orthodoxies', acting as 'a vector for a radical anti-imperialist politics' and 'asserting a sense of pride in Muslim and Asian identity'.⁵⁸ In *Sweet Cider*, these political identities are still latent as the characters are at a moment of critical transition, away from their immigrant roots. Whereas the men are pulled back towards these roots, the women struggle to find new ways of articulating relationships to their cultures of origin. As I discuss below, the play suggests that the women lack both the material support of 'a room of their own' and a feminist 'mother tongue' capable of countering the language and ideology of their forefathers.

The two young runaways, Tazeem and Nosheen, have been living in a women's refuge in a city 'in northern England where there is a strong Pakistani Kashmiri community'.⁵⁹ Exultant after a night out clubbing, Tazeem, who has recently shifted to her own flat, celebrates her escape from her family, her new job, and the liberty 'to do exactly what we want'.⁶⁰ However, her uncle has hired a private detective to track her down, and she starts feeling like 'an animal being hunted'.⁶¹ Nosheen has been rejected by her family after revealing that her uncle abused her. She secretly cuts herself with a razor, wears a hijab, and initially seems less adventurous than Tazeem because she is reluctant to leave the shelter. But Nosheen's vulnerability disguises reservoirs of strength: she articulates the play's feminist principles by stating her own intention to reject the cultural codes which have driven them from their homes; she challenges chauvinistic men to repudiate patriarchal norms; and she stands in uncompromising solidarity with Tazeem, urging her to resist defeatism and self-loathing.

The men they befriend, Aki and Amir, have also broken cultural and social taboos. Aki sells stolen trainers to fund his drug addiction and has been dating a Sikh girl, Jasvinder, who has risked familial ostracism and possible violence as a result of leaving home to be with him. Amir is in love with a working-class white boy, Steve, but feels compelled to marry a Pakistani girl selected for him by his parents. Entangled in patriarchal kinship systems, the men lack agency but are subconsciously aware the systems work to their benefit. Aggravatingly misogynistic, Aki criticizes Nosheen and Tazeem as 'crazy refuge girls' who 'ought to just stay at home makin' their 'rotis'.⁶² He teasingly reminds Amir that arranged

57. Hussain, *Sweet Cider*, 237.

58. Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 181. Dawson discusses groups like Fun-Da-Mental and Asian Dub Foundation.

59. Hussain, *Sweet Cider*, 190.

60. *Ibid.*, 191–2.

61. *Ibid.*, 194.

62. *Ibid.*, 235.

marriage offers tangible benefits for men: 'such a good Muslim boy, waiting for your girl from the village [...] good thinking man, a little nowkrani [servant] from back home: good cook, good in bed, does whatever she's told'.⁶³ Amir criticizes Aki's sexism, but fears resisting his own parents even as he agonizes that it would be unethical to marry Khadega. Despite mocking their masculine bravado, *Sweet Cider* does not entirely condemn Aki and Amar's behaviour. Nosheen is shown to exonerate her peers when she consolingly says, 'I think we're all confused, we all do our best, with what we have, everyone's just doing their best'.⁶⁴ However, the male characters are shown to have choices, whereas the female characters are demonstrably vulnerable whether at home, in the refuge, or on the streets.

Although Hussain specifies a 'Pakistani Kashmiri community',⁶⁵ the characters' relationship to Islam is imprecise. The play references staple Islamophobic signifiers (forced marriages, honour killings) but represents Islam as a gentle, poetic undercurrent rather than a defining or determining presence. Amir describes a powerful sensory experience akin to love:

I love my religion
y' know how it gets me, in here
the azan [call to prayer], the sounds, the smells
that's how it gets me in here (*Touches his heart*)⁶⁶

Hussain suggests that British Asians' deep emotional ties to culture and religion are not easily dislodged by their otherwise very 'British' lives. This pull is evident in Nosheen's relationship to her hijab, which causes conflict between the women. Tazeem condemns Nosheen for swearing and smoking while wearing it, accusing her of using it as 'a fashion statement'.⁶⁷ Indeed, the opening stage directions indicate Nosheen's headscarf is '[wrapped] around the back of her head (a bit like a funky version of a hijab that some girls wear these days)'.⁶⁸ But Nosheen resists Tazeem's insistence (and arguably the audience's) on limiting the meaning of her headscarf, which she says she wears 'cos it's part of me, something to hold on to'.⁶⁹ As Pnina Werbner argues, the hijab is 'a symbolically laden vehicle which may stand alternatively for modesty, a defiant, oppositional "Islam" or a rejection of "tradition"'.⁷⁰ In depicting Nosheen's attachment to her veil and Amir's to Islam, Hussain indicates that younger British Muslims are evolving new structures of feeling which do not align tidily with traditional expressions of devotion.⁷¹

However, in this play as in *Bells* and *Chaos*, familial loyalties are shown to have a deeper impact than religion in shaping the ideological foundations of the community, especially for men. The runaway tracker Mahmood sees himself not as a 'bounty hunter' but a 'community mediator' who 'keep[s] families together'; Tazeem's uncle Fiaz hires Mahmood to restore their family's honour.⁷² Amir agonizes he 'can't let go/y' know my 'roots/my people'.⁷³ But Hussain demonstrates that familial bonds suffocate younger British Asian women. Nosheen wearily submits to community surveillance and shaming when she meets Masi, a motherly Asian woman (whose daughter is also a runaway). Masi is so desperately happy to see Nosheen's veil, and so anxious to believe

63. Ibid., 196.

64. Ibid., 233.

65. Ibid., 190.

66. Ibid., 206.

67. Ibid., 233.

68. Ibid., 190.

69. Ibid., 233.

70. Pnina Werbner, 'Veiled Interventions in Pure Space: Honour, Shame and Embodied Struggles among Muslims in Britain and France', *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 161–86, (163).

71. See Reina Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2015).

72. Hussain, *Sweet Cider*, 208–29.

73. Ibid., 204.

Nosheen is a 'good girl', that Nosheen feels compelled to hide her cigarette and tell a lie about phoning home frequently.

Within this encounter, Hussain shows that younger women are denied important networks of support when mothers are complicit in administering patriarchal codes. In *Sweet Cider*, the women's shelter fails to provide support; it is not a sanctuary but rather an ineffective regulatory apparatus of the state. This marks a significant departure from the earlier generation of British Asian women's theatre and film, such as Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* and Syal and Chadda's *Bhaji on the Beach*. In works such as these, women's refuge shelters, and by implication the state, played a critical role in helping women escape what were depicted as the regressive sexual politics of their homes. Deprived of the effective caretaking structures of the family or state, Hussain's young women are shown to be lost: as Nosheen rages, the job of one's family is to 'keep you warm, pay and look after you': 'that's what family is for, if family can't that's why we have care services and then if they fuck you up what's left?'.⁷⁴

74. Hussain, *Sweet Cider*, 228–9.

75. *Ibid.*, 234.

76. *Ibid.*, 231–6.

Hussain has Tazeem hit rock bottom at the end of the play, at which point Nosheen promises, in effect, to mother her: 'You're my family now [...] I would never leave you'.⁷⁵ For Tazeem the dream of freedom has dissolved. Pregnant, betrayed, and 'a bit drunk', she spray paints the word 'jihad' on the park wall and declares 'holy war'. Soon after, when Tazeem is kidnapped by Mahmood, Nosheen exhibits similar rage⁷⁶: she douses petrol around the park and on herself and is on the brink of setting herself on fire when Rabia, the park's caretaker, intervenes. Nothing in their characterisation or stated relationship to religion anticipates the women's use of Islamist language and imagery, and their adoption of jihadist rhetoric does not signal an ideological shift. Rather, I would argue that the women appropriate the masculinist discourse of terrorism as a desperate last resort because their own creative and productive forms of expression have been repressed. They cannot write in 'white ink'; their mothers' phallogocentrism is shown to have robbed them of the protective strength of what Amy Tan has described as a 'mother tongue' – namely, her immigrant mother's 'broken' but powerful English, which mapped Tan's path to survival, '[shaped] the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world'. In Nosheen and Tazeem's momentary adoption of jihadist expressive codes, *Sweet Cider* shows the devastating consequences of maternal absence and silence.⁷⁷

77. Amy Tan, 'Mother Tongue', *The Threepenny Review*, No. 43 (Autumn, 1990): 7–8. To 'write in white ink' is a reference to a feminine way of writing coined as part of *écriture féminine*. It is taken from Helen Cixous' 'Laugh of the Medusa', published in *SIGNS*, Vol. No. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–93 (881).

Nosheen is rescued from this systemic collapse by a radical feminist alliance with Rabia, a quasi-mythical, grandmotherly, and ideologically independent figure who lives in the park during the day as its self-appointed caretaker. Hitherto a helpless witness to the unravelling of the community, she prevents Nosheen from setting fire to herself, offering an alternative *écriture féminine* in the form of a poetic vision of feminist spirituality based in Muslim lore: the legend of her namesake Rabia of Basra, a Sufi mystic who ran 'through the streets [...] carrying a burning torch, [and] a jug of water'. Rabia of Basra claimed that:

I want to extinguish the fires of hell, and burn down the gardens of Paradise, they block the way to god, to Allah, I do not want to worship

for fear of punishment or the promise of reward, but simply for love of Allah.⁷⁸

78. Hussain, *Sweet Cider*, 229.

79. *Ibid.*, 229.

For Rabia, the park-keeper, this feminist Sufism suggests a way of '[f]eeling whole, [...] connected not broken, fragmented, this park connects me to bigger things, keeps me whole, keeps me loving'.⁷⁹ For Nosheen, the legend offers a much-needed sign of hope; it proposes a philosophy that can potentially encompass her religious heritage, feminist ideology, and personal ethics. The play ends on a note of forced optimism when Nosheen drops the lighter and begins planting flowers with Rabia, implying that the collective unconscious of the park may still offer possibilities for renewal and growth. As with the other plays under discussion *Sweet Cider* eschews a narrative resolution built around escape or assimilation and instead offers a symbol of hope and optimism from ancient Muslim lore. Rabia's ideology represents a peaceful and optimistic feminist alternative to the 'masculinist' violence of terrorism.

Conclusion

As Morey and Yaqin observe, 'the two most well known stereotypes of Muslim women have been those of the harem and the veil', which 'have succeeded in normalizing a particular perception of "Muslim" cultural practices with reference to women in Western societies'.⁸⁰ The focus on Muslim alterity in the post-9/11 world has obscured the immense diversity of British Muslim women's experiences and ideologies. All the plays I have discussed contest such perceptions but pay relatively little attention to the misrepresentations of Muslim women which currently inform heated public debates around the future of multiculturalism or the politics of veiling. Instead, they focus on issues of domestic importance within communities of British Muslim women, and as such remain focused on relatively small acts of resistance within a private experience. Nevertheless, Dar's *Chaos* and Whittaker-Khan's *Bells* are uncompromisingly critical of the privilege and influence wielded by autocratic patriarchs such as Jameel Rizvi or Ashraf. Hussain's *Sweet Cider* is hostile to misogyny, but its plea for Muslim unity and leadership is marked by a cautionary tone rooted in the experience of 7/7. The absence of parental figures in *Sweet Cider* further suggests an urgent need to focus on the lives and voices of younger Muslim women. Even if the playwrights differ in their assessments of the relative importance of theology or practice in the daily lives of Muslims, these plays (and the many others written by emerging Muslim women playwrights working in the shadows of racism and xenophobia),⁸¹ promote a concept of Islam, and a concept of being Muslim that is compatible with British modernity, secularism, and feminism. These playwrights affirm that the British Muslim body and family have the potential to be 'normally' and even unremarkably 'British'. They actively work to resist narratives popularized in films and plays of the late twentieth century that represent Muslim emancipation in terms of an 'escape' from oppressive family regimes and full

80. Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 178.

81. Several plays besides the ones I have discussed here deserve recognition and critical attention: Rukhsana Ahmad's *River on Fire* (2000); Amber Lone's *Paradise* (2003) and *Deadeye* (2006); Alia Bano's *Shades* (2009); Athiha Sen Gupta's *What Fatima Did* (2009); Naylah Ahmed's *Mustafa* (2012); Iman Qureshi's *Speed* (2014); Aisha Zia's *No Guts, No Heart, No Glory* (2014); Yusra Warsama's *Rites* (2015); Shazia Ashraf's *Sweets and Chocolate*; and, most recently, the controversial play by Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif, *Homegrown* (2017).

assimilation into British culture. Above all, they stress that Muslims are fully human, with inconsistencies and weaknesses, capable of self-questioning and change.

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