**Claire Chambers interview**

**(*British Muslim Fictions* and *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780-1988*).**

**AV: I am looking forward to our discussion here on your latest monograph, *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780−1988* (2015). It’s 100,000 words: that’s a very long book! But how long has it taken you to write it?**

CC: In a way this book goes all the way back to the mid-1990s when I’d had a gap year in which I taught English to school children in Pakistan. I’d been motivated to go to Pakistan because of my experiences growing up in Leeds with many British-Asian friends. I first stayed briefly in a northwestern city called Mardan, which was quite conservative. After leaving Mardan, my friend and I went to what seemed to us to be the big smoke of nearby Peshawar, the capital of what was then called the North-West Frontier Province, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was in 1993−1994, not long after Osama bin Laden had left the city in 1990, having made it his home for eight years (Rashid 132−33). At that time few Europeans knew about the region. From spending ten months in Peshawar I became aware of tension and volatility stemming from the civil war in nearby Afghanistan, despite the city’s many charms and gracious hospitality. In my book *Rivers of Ink*, which is a collection of essays many of which come from the columns I regularly write for the Pakistani national newspaper *Dawn*, I include a short account of my time in Peshawar.

Thinking back on all this a decade later in the mid-2000s, I realised that my middle-class British-Asian friends and I hadn’t really understood what was going on in our own city. The south of Leeds (districts like Beeston and Holbeck, where three of the London bombers of 2005 came from) is quite separate from north Leedswhere I’ve always lived. To find out more about the postcolonial in the metropole – in my country and my city – I redirected my research focus away from South Asia and onto literature by Muslims in Britain. There was little criticism on Muslim writing at the time. The late 1990s had seen the publication of a collection of essays, *The Postcolonial Crescent* (1998), edited by John C. Hawley, and a monograph by John Erickson (1998), neither of which I found terribly useful. Then around the same time that I began this project, Amin Malak (2005) published his *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, which quickly became a key text for those of us working in what became the field of Muslim writing.

**AV: What about Lyn Innes’ ([2002] 2008) *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain*? Was that useful to you at all?**

Yes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain* was inspiring for this research, even though its focus wasn’t explicitly on Muslims. I especially turned to it while writing *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*, because it quickly became clear to me that the book was going to be a literary history with a much longer scope than I had thought. One of the eighteenth-century authors Lyn examined was Sake Dean Mahomed, and I too included a section on his life and work in my monograph. Lyn was kind enough to read a draft and offer constructive criticism. The *Making Britain* project was also influential and I couldn’t have written my book in the same way without the scholarship of Susheila Nasta, Rehana Ahmed, Florian Stadtler, Sumita Mukherjee and others.

My central thesis in *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* pivots on a transition that happens in the representations being produced between 1780 and 1988. For most of this period, the Muslim writers are members of what I call the England-returned class. They come to Britain, usually for education or tourism, and stay for up to about a decade before going back home, changed by their experiences. On their return, at first they might feel alienated from home because of their education and newly acquired world view, but often they become extremely privileged and powerful. Dean Mahomed is one of the exceptions. He stays on, marries an Irishwoman, has at least eight children, and writes in English so he’s a unique figure for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But what happens towards the end of the period, particularly among those who arrive in the post-Second World War era of mass migration, is that they are more likely to belong to what I call the myth of return group. Your plan is to make money, send it back home, and when you’ve made enough you’ll go home. But the return never happens, because you get married. Your wife comes. You put down roots. Your children become very British and as time goes on, you can’t go back. This is also a transition from writing being dominated by the elite writers to the emergence of authors from middle- and working-class backgrounds. However much they might want to go back to the country of origin, they often simply don’t have the resources, and so return becomes a myth.

I felt nervous about the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century context because I’d always seen myself as an academic working in the contemporary period. The previous book, *British Muslim Fictions*, was a collection of interviews with authors of Muslim heritage such as Tariq Ali and Kamila Shamsie. I saw this as a two-book project.

**AV: Yes, the two-book approach works very well and allows for a more rounded view of the field to emerge.**

CC: My original idea was that the overall project would really begin in 1988 with the publication of Salman Rushdie’s (1988) *The Satanic Verses* and bring us up to the present. Anyway, I rang three academic publishers and pitched the idea of an interviews book to them. All were all a bit unsure about what to do with the interviews book as a genre, though they all found my ‘British Muslim fiction’ approach interesting.

**AV: I see – so you had to find a way to convince these publishers?**

CC: At this point, I had already conducted several of the interviews. I knew what I wanted my book to look like and was quite excited about seeing it through to completion. Eventually I also wanted to write a literary history, but saw that as a project for the distant future. We are now here though and it is done! (Well, it’s not completely done, actually, but that’s a story I will tell you in a moment.) The publisher that was most interested was Palgrave, and they said: send us a two-book proposal. We want to consider the interviews book and the literary history as a package. So I had to work hard and make a lot of decisions about the shape of the overall project at that early stage in 2009.

**AV: Yes, you were certainly proposing some very big projects and also bringing to the fore some very original material and reading it in a new and fascinating light.**

CC: Thank you; that’s kind of you to say, Anastasia. Because not much work had gone before, I felt I needed the book of interviews as a foundation for writing the literary history. It was completely educational talking to all these writers.

**AV: It also allowed you to explore the novelists that you yourself had clearly engaged with. I noticed that the questions that you pitch are very in-depth.**

CC: The interview with Nadeem Aslam was originally 21,000 words long. We talked about a lot of things, so I had to edit the transcript hard. After the interviews book came out in 2011, I started on the literary history, tracing all the representations I could find by Muslims in and about Britain. During two periods of research leave, one in 2012 when I was at Leeds Beckett and the other in 2014 from York, I first did the groundwork and then the final push on this book. My biggest realization was how wrong I had been about starting with *The Satanic Verses* and seeing this as a contemporary history. Muslim writing isn’t a contemporary phenomenon at all. The more writers I spoke to – people like the amazingly well-read Aamer Hussein and Muneeza Shamsie – the more I became conscious of all the wonderful texts that go way back in time. The only book before *The Satanic Verses* I’d had in my mind from early on was Tayeb Salih’s ([1966] 1991) classic *Season of Migration to the North.* That 1960s novel set in the inter-war period was, I always thought, the first book that I would talk about. But I assumed I would discuss Salih in the introduction as an early precursor to Rushdie. In the end it is one of the last novels I explore in *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*. I kept uncovering more and more historical material – travelogues, memoirs and fiction – even though I was restricted to what was available in translation. I’m ashamed to say that I‘ve only mastered a tiny bit of spoken Urdu and can’t read.

**AV: I don’t think that this should be an impediment. I don’t want to be a ‘gatekeeper’, even though I have Arabic. I work in English.**

CC: That’s interesting, and another important point to make is that there is of course no ‘Muslim language’. I know a few words of Arabic because of what has filtered into Urdu. But *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* includes Anglophone writers from various parts of the globe such Attia Hosain (India), Abdulrazak Gurnah (Zanzibar) and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (Malaysia); several Persian writers; Arabs; and also a handful of authors who worked in Urdu.

Less than a month before the deadline for *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*, I had to confront the fact that my literary history was in fact *two* books (thus making a three-book project if you include *British Muslim Fictions*). I was enjoying the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing more than I would have imagined. And then I discovered some works of Urdu modernism: material from the early twentieth century such as Sajjad Zaheer’s([1938] 2011) *A Night in London*. It was fascinating stuff: often politically committed, aesthetically rich and experimental. I felt as though I was creating a new canon of Muslim writing. And I continue to feel that I’m helping to create literary categories. For good or ill.

**AV: It’s also a different way of thinking. What is this thing called Muslim? But you sort of have to do it to have a definition, or at least a working definition. You need a premise.**

CC: Yes, there has to be a religious or a cultural affiliation.

**AV: You do want a starting point but thereafter the material must shape it.**

CC: Yes. That was the big question. I feel more comfortable about it now, but I really worried about not pigeonholing writers and text through limiting categories. In the early years of the project − for example, when writing the introduction to *British Muslim Fictions* − two of my most pressing research questions were: what is British Muslim writing? And is it a good idea to talk about this as a category? Certain writers really challenged me on it, while others were completely relaxed. And now all sorts of students and fellow researchers around the world get in touch using ‘Muslim writing’ as though it’s an established and transparent definition! I know some intellectuals who are quite devout Muslims, and they interpret ‘Muslim writing’ as meaning that the author has to submit to Islamic doctrine and practice. The only authors they would therefore consider Muslim writers are practising individuals such as Leila Aboulela and Zahid Hussain. That’s a perfectly valid point of view. But I did not want to impose this limit on my work. For me, as non-Muslim, it would be problematic to make this judgement. Also such a perspective can lead to criticism that gives authors points for their religiosity on an imagined scale…

**AV: Yes, and then we find that we are only reading certain issues into the writing. And this comes at the exclusion of other things they might be trying to bring out.**

CC: We are, in any case, all familiar with Jewish writing as a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon. A writer can be vehement in their secularism and still have important things to say about religion: I interviewed Tariq Ali and Hanif Kureishi, both of whom are open about their sacrilegious lives [laughs] but are nevertheless quite preoccupied with Islam. I think Muslims have had the spotlight shone on them especially aggressively since the Rushdie affair and even more since 9/11 and the War on Terror. In the current Islamophobic climate, having a Muslim name, not to mention a beard or a hijab, marks you out. Now with Donald Trump’s mooted Muslim travel ban, the perils of ‘flying while brown’ have got even worse. As I said, the book developed a life of its own and became so long that I had to cut it in two. For me the obvious turning point was the publication of Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and the Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa against Rushdie in February 1989. A lot of people − especially and understandably our millennial students − assume that Muslim writing is a post-9/11 body of work. Of course 9/11 was important. Like Debjani Ganguly (2016), I think that 1989, the year of the collapse of communism as well as the Rushdie affair, marked more of a watershed moment in perceptions of Muslims than 9/11 – especially in Britain. That is why I begin the book I’m writing now, *Muslim Representations of Britain, 1988−Present* with chapters on *The Satanic Verses* and the long shadow this novel cast on the fiction being produced by Muslims in the UK.

**AV: Yes, this isn’t a post 9/11 literature project. Tell me, how do you source and decide on your materials?**

CC: That was the hardest thing about researching *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*. Much of the reading came to me by word of mouth, with writers, academics and general readers giving me recommendations. Then one lead would take me to another, in a kind of snowball effect, and three archival websites – Project Gutenberg, Archive.org, and Openlibrary.org – proved to be treasure troves of open access books I could download and then devour on my e-reader. One of the most useful works of criticism that led me to further material was Rasheed el-Enany’s monograph, *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arab Fiction*. Another influential book was Nabil Matar’s *Europe through Arab Eyes*, *1578-1727*. I combined and reconstellated these two books’ titles in an affectionate hat tip.

Indeed, eyes, looking and the gaze were themes that kept recurring in the literature by early Muslims in the UK. Take Sajjad Zaheer’s *A Night in London* ([1938] 2011), for example: that novel and several of the other texts are about a young, naïve South Asian or Arab man, who comes to England, gets educated, and as I suggested earlier starts to see through new eyes. There is a loss of vision, but there are also gains. Authors often use the trope of being blind before, and now they can see. They also get a jolt from looking at their own culture in a newly distorted way. These themes of looking, experiencing a shock at being in Britain and another shock on return are extremely common. In Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* ([1966] 1991), to take another example, things come into the narrator’s mind and people come to his eyes. He doesn’t look, but rather passively receives images. He’s a voyeur, really. And in Yahya Hakki’s novella *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*,the fiancée whom the narrator has left behind in Egypt to come to Britain for his educational enlightenment ends up going blind. I make a lot of eyes and various modes of looking in this literature. I’m especially interested in what is to some extent a reversal of the Orientalist gaze.

**AV: So it is not Occidentalism in that way? It’s more about a certain curiosity.**

CC: It’s a process of de-familiarizing. This is not a hostile gaze. In fact, often these authors’ views of Britain are highly positive. An additional interesting finding was that the writers were often quite unusual or unorthodox in their religious, class and ethnic backgrounds. There were a lot of Shia, Ismaili or Bohra writers, and the characters that they create tend to be only minimally practising Muslims. They had an attachment to Islamic culture but for the most part they didn’t think of religion very much in the early period. The reason why 1988/1989 is such a tipping point is that after the publication of *The* *Satanic Verses* and the furore that followed, Muslims come into the crossfire of public attention and literature changes soon after that. In the 1990s, new preoccupations emerge, such as Hanif Kureishi’s fascination with mosques, purity and ‘fundamentalism’ in *The Black Album*. Non-Muslim 1990s writers like David Caute and Nigel Williams are interested in these themes as well – Williams’s (1993) comic novel *East of Wimbledon* features a Muslim faith school and even a debate about whether there is such a thing as a Muslim writer!

**AV: How much have you thought about non-Muslim writers writing about Islam?**

CC: In *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* I decided not to examine non-Muslim authors, because there is already plenty of research into eighteenth-century and more recent Orientalism (see Said [1978] 1995 and Franklin [2005] 2006). I’ve found this issue more of a dilemma when it comes to the sequel, because it covers a shorter period so I can do more. I’m not tempted to trespass into representations of Muslims by such mainstream authors as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan or Sebastian Faulks, since this is ground that is already well trodden. What I have included in the essay collection *Rivers of Ink* is, for example, an angry chapter about a little-known ‘comic’ novel written by Boris Johnson long before he became Foreign Secretary, in which he fictionalized (without doing much research) the sensational topic of violent extremist. *Rivers of Ink* contains another chapter about Bengali fictions about Britain that are often quite different to Monica Ali’s famous account in *Brick Lane*. While *Brick Lane* is important and I’ve written about it, I also wanted to look at non-Muslim Bengalis who write about Bengali Muslims living in Britain. There’s this whole body of work that no one is talking about. People are interested in post-9/11 novels which deal with white characters gazing at and interact with Muslims but what about South Asians who are from a different religion? There may be a social gulf between Bengali Hindus and Muslims, but one thing they do have is a shared experience of racism. I am thinking of authors like Amit Chaudhuri, Neel Mukherjee and Sunetra Gupta. These Hindu Bengali-origin writers show an interest in Sylhetis in Britain, Bangladeshi curry house restaurateurs, and working-class Bengali Muslim culture. It’s not their culture. However, they speak the same language and Partition is this terrible history that they share. In his 2014 novel *Odysseus Abroad* Chaudhuri riffs on how his Indian protagonist Ananda feels a certain sense of kinship with the Bangladeshi waiters in establishments like the Gurkha Tandoori on the edge of Bloomsbury.

**AV: The trope, or motif, of travel that you explore is very useful. Kay Dickinson’s new book *Arab Cinema Travels* is keen on the conceptual possibilities around ports and travelling. It’s a very Arab, Middle Eastern theme.**

CC: This is what you see a great deal of during the early period – what I term, following Said (‘Traveling Theory’), travelling autobiography and travelling fiction. Even if the authors are writing within other genres than the travelogue, it is very rare that they limit themselves to a British location. These are cosmopolitan, well-travelled authors, and their characters are also shapeshifters. Actually, you mention ports, and for *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*’ cover image, what I had in my head was an old photograph of a Muslim traveller on the deck of a ship that’s sailing either into or out of a British port. A picture like that would have provided a snapshot of the dynamic *movement* of these writers under discussion, but I never managed to find one.

I was also surprised and pleased to find two South Asian Muslim women travel writers who travelled to Britain in the early twentieth century. Atiya Fyzee and Shahbano Begum Maimoona Sultan were from elite backgrounds − especially Maimoona, who was in Britain to attend George V’s coronation with her mother-in-law, the Begum of Bhopal. Atiya was more unorthodox in both her behaviour – she would have been considered a spinster as an unmarried 29-year-old – and her writing style, which I argue has a modernist lightness of tone. Despite their differences, for both Atiya and Maimoona to travel halfway across the world and to write about these travels is an extraordinary thing. Their life writing challenges widespread assumptions about the oppressed, secluded, uneducated Muslim woman.

**AV: It is also interesting to think about the ways in which culture is shared with people from different religions, and religion is shared with people from different cultures.**

CC: Out of a South Asia diasporic context, Alex Tickell (2012a, 2012b) has done brilliant work on the early twentieth century. While researching the radical student politics that emerged from London’s India House in the 1900s, he found few Muslim activists. The reason for this could be the popularity of Hindu nationalism. Alienated by Hindu rhetoric, Muslims found themselves more attracted to socialist movements such as the Progressive Writers’ Association. They were no less interested in radical politics than anyone else, but radical nationalism alienated many Muslim-heritage people. Even if you are the most strident atheist in the world, it’s horrible to have your culture made to feel invisible or to feel that that culture is seen as pernicious. Moreover, South Asian Muslims made connections with other Muslims that wouldn’t have been so easily forthcoming to Hindus, Sikhs or Parsis. The mosque experience in Britain, such as attending the Woking Mosque which was purpose-built in 1889, would have introduced South Asian Muslims to people from many other cultures, including white converts. One of these converts was Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. People tend to remember him for his translation, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an* ([1930] 2004). Most don’t realise that he wrote about 30 novels. He was as well-known in the early twentieth century as H.G. Wells and E.M. Forster, and those authors thought he was great. He was a young Englishman from a conventional background, but he had a breakdown after being bullied at public school and ended up going abroad for what we’d now call a gap year (or several years), a bit like me! His formative years were in the Arab world, and he lived out his last 15 years in India, working for the Nizam of Hyderabad. Amongst the Muslim converts you get people like me, who in their late teens, go east and it alters their lives and their careers forever.

**AV: Thank you, Claire!**

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