

Chambers, Claire, Nafhesa Ali and Richard Phillips, editors. *A Match Made in Heaven: British Muslim Women Write About Love and Desire*. London: HopeRoad, 2020. Pp. 284. UK £10.99 (paper). ISBN: 9781916467194.

Phillips, Richard, Claire Chambers, Nafhesa Ali, Kristina Diprose and Indrani Karmakar. *Storying Relationships: Young British Muslims Speak and Write about Sex and Love*. London: Zed Books, 2021. Pp. 212. UK £ 76.50 (ebook). ISBN: 9781786998460.

Review by Amy Burge

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It's not often that an academic research project successfully and meaningfully combines literary analysis, creative writing, and sociological research. These two publications – one a collection of creative writing by Muslim women (2020), the other an academic book (2021) – emerged from a UK funded research project, 'Storying Relationships', that asked "how young British Muslims, particularly those with Pakistani heritage, talk and think about their personal relationships" ("About Us: Storying Relationships"). Reading these two books together offers a holistic overview of the project and its findings.

A Match Made in Heaven and *Storying Relationships* join a number of recent publications focused on Muslim experiences of romance, love and desire; from graphic novels (e.g., Satrapi) to chick lit (e.g., Malik), romance (e.g., Jalaluddin) to memoir (e.g., Janmohamed), and Young Adult fiction (e.g., S. Khan) to essay collections (e.g., M. Khan, *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race*). What is common to these predecessors and to both *A Match Made in Heaven* and *Storying Relationships* is their explicit countering of stereotypes of Muslim women as "oppressed, submissive, and forced into arranged marriages by big-bearded men" (Mattu and Maznavi ix). Such characterisations have been prolific in Anglophone literary production, most obviously through the popularity of what Peter Morey has called the 'Muslim misery memoir'

in which Islam is presented as oppressive, especially for women, who are shown as “carriers of cultural baggage and the focus of Western sympathy” (97). Recent popular and genre works written by Muslim women have explicitly challenged these stereotypes and emphasise the importance of ‘own voices’ (echoing wider calls for diversity in publishing). As Shelina Janmohamed puts it in the introduction to *Love in a Headscarf*, an autobiographical account of her “search for love”(xiii):

Stories like mine have remained unheard, as they do not fit neatly with prevailing stereotypes which tell tales of Islam’s oppression or of those rejecting Islam. Nonetheless, such stories are just as crucial to our understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman (xiii).

In the introduction to *It’s Not About the Burqa*, Mariam Khan states “It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? We should be the authors of our narrative and identity: we should be the ones speaking ‘about’ us” (1). Similarly, the back cover of *A Match Made In Heaven* promises an exploration of “the sexual lives of young Muslims through their own stories and in their own voices”; in their co-authored introduction, Chambers, Ali and Phillips acknowledge that the stories “are sure to challenge some received ideas about the Muslim experience” (x).

A Match Made in Heaven gathers stories written by Muslim women authors, several of whom wrote their contributions in creative writing workshops organised by the ‘Storying Relationships’ team in Yorkshire, Glasgow, and Tyne & Wear. As a result, *A Match Made in Heaven* contains an interesting mix of established literary voices (e.g., Sufiya Ahmed, Roopa Farooki, Shelina Janmohamed, Ayisha Malik) and new authors. The closest comparator to *A Match Made in Heaven* is probably Nura Maznavi and Ayesha Mattu’s edited collection *Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women* (2012), which gathers 25 non-fiction pieces by Muslim-American women on dating, marriage, sexuality, and divorce (this previous work is acknowledged in *Storying Relationships*). However, Maznavi and Mattu’s publication differs from *A Match Made in Heaven* in that its first-person narratives are confessional, aligning the collection with the genre of memoir or life writing rather than fiction. Some of the stories in *A Match Made in Heaven* are analysed in the later academic book.

The sixteen individual pieces are heterogeneous in theme, genre, and style, although Islamophobia and generational differences are explored by many of the authors. Marriage is a frequent feature, whether arranged (as in Suna Ahmed’s ‘Moments in Time’), a result of unplanned pregnancy (Roopa Farooki’s ‘Frida’s Breakfast’), or ending. Sufiya Ahmed’s ‘Tears and Tantrums’, for example, details the breakdown of a marriage after the husband resolves to take a second wife, drawing attention to the legal status of Islamic marriage in the UK – a subject of recent political campaigning (see A. Khan, “How Not to Get Married”). In fact, several stories focus on the ending of a relationship – e.g., Mariam Naeem’s ‘Her Trials’ – with an emphasis on female solidarity and agency in the wake of male inadequacy, cheating, and cruelty. Family is another key feature, with supportive parents (e.g., Inayah Jamil’s ‘A Simple Nature’) meddling in-laws (e.g., Ayisha Malik’s ‘Heartbeat’, Farooki’s ‘Frida’s Breakfast’), and intergenerational conflict (e.g., Nazneen Ahmed’s ‘Ghazal’) present in many stories. Echoing a theme common in contemporary romantic fiction by Muslim women, technology plays a significant role in communication between lovers, and online dating is a feature of Sabyn Javeri’s ‘Marriage of Convenience’ and Noren Haq’s ‘Rearranged’. Some stories focus on

wider themes relating to Muslims: Sairish Hussain's 'Waiting for the Bus' is a poignant story of grief and eventual comfort set in war-torn Aleppo, Syria; Afshan D'souza-Lodhi's 'Acid Reflux' deals with the aftermath of an acid attack; and Shaista Sadick's 'Boneland' takes a humorous approach to contemporary Islamophobia in the USA.

Yet, while love and romance are dominant themes, not all of the contributions are strictly romance or even romantic. Malik's 'Heartbeat' borrows from noir fiction and psychological crime narratives; Shelina Janmohamed's 'Love Letter' is an autobiographical essay addressed to her daughter; Bina Shah's 'Peter Pochmann Goes to Dinner' is a sort of domestic melodrama; Sarvat Hasin's 'The Cat That Came in With the Dark' shades firmly into horror; and Farooki's 'Frida's Breakfast' is a disturbing account of a young woman's mental illness and pregnancy. Most of the romances are heterosexual, although Javeri and D'souza-Lodhi explore gay male and lesbian relationships, respectively. As expected for a collection focused on young women's voices, most story protagonists are their teens, twenties, and thirties, but Haq's 'Rearranged' features an older woman exploring dating after being widowed. While most contributors "keep it halal," (Chambers et al. xi) Sadick's 'Boneland' and Zarina Harriri's 'Proper and Perfect?' are more sexually explicit, featuring a Muslim author of Islamophobic erotica and a student's journey of sexual discovery, respectively.

Storying Relationships summarises the 'academic' side of the project. It focuses on close readings of three kinds of source material: 1) published 'relationship stories', including fiction (a mixture of literary and genre works) and blog posts; 2) creative writing from workshops organised as part of the project; 3) and 'conversations' – both formal interviews and more fragmentary exchanges at project events and workshops. To generate stories, the authors follow the 'storying' model created by Louise Phillips and Tracey Bunda which offers ways to broach sensitive and private topics, making it particularly useful for a project on sex and love. The authors argue that this blend of creative, imaginative storying complements the more straightforward, direct storying of conversation, noting that fictional stories and nonfiction "tell different truths" (171). The book is organised into eight chapters, following perceived relationship stages as other books on relationships have done (see Burge): 'single', 'meeting', 'dating', 'love', 'pressure', 'married', 'sex', and 'dreaming'. Each chapter presents extracts from young Muslims' creative writing or interviews, as well as published fiction, offering analysis of presentation and content (for example, noting nervous laughter, or hesitation). Excerpted interviews and creative works are listed at the end of each chapter. These chapters are interspersed with three 'interludes' in which the authors set out their claims and arguments – these are, as the authors note, the most critically-engaged and engaging sections of the book.

Storying Relationships as a whole is concerned with the twin constraints of Islamophobic stereotyping and community and cultural norms felt by Muslim young people in their sexual and romantic relationships. Some interesting findings and anecdotes emerge from the thematic chapters. In chapter 1, 'Single', a 'strategic singlehood' is identified, which young people use to delay the transition into adult relationships (i.e., marriage). The chapter's stories indicate that, contrary to stereotyping, singleness does exist for Muslims. Chapter 3, 'Dating', explores the negotiation of 'halal dating', defined by workshop participants as "dating with a chaperone present, avoiding physical intimacy, and dating with a view to marriage" (63). In chapter 4, 'Love', culturally-specific love narratives for young Muslims emerge: "love *after* marriage, dreams of love marriage, and lovers guided by Islam" (83-84). Chapter 5, 'Pressures', identifies a range of pressures – overt, external, internal, but

ultimately “resistable” (113) – around gender expression, sexuality, culture, community, family and “prescriptive notions of honour” (103). In chapter 7, ‘Sex’, one respondent recalls her mother leaving Mills & Boon books around the house for her to find in order to learn about sex “because that is what her mum did” (147). Many of the chapters identify a gendered dimension to relationships, with pressures felt differently for men and women, and more rules and stigma experienced by women. Heightened anxiety for many LGBT+ Muslims is also documented. Relationships include a “generational and gendered powerplay” (44), for example where families are involved in traditional meetings or *rishtas* (although the stories in chapter 2 indicate that more modern methods of meeting partners are being embraced).

A range of genre and literary works are analysed in *Storying Relationships: a ‘guide to resources’* at the back of the book offers brief summaries. While most would be classified as ‘literary’ fiction, it is encouraging to see genre works like Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017) being discussed alongside Fatima Bhutto, *The Runaways* (2019) or Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017). Chapter 6, ‘Marriage’, spends some time analysing stories published in the ‘sister volume,’ *A Match Made in Heaven*. Works by Muslim women form two-thirds of the published fiction discussed, indicating the importance of women authors in storytelling around love and relationships. Of interest to genre scholars is a brief comment on cliché (here presented as aligned with genre). Citing Martin Amis’ infamous dismissal of cliché, the authors assert that “cliché can function to protect speakers and authors” as genre “obscure[s] the individuality and specificity of the individual voice” (174). While not exactly a wholesale rebuttal of Amis’ critique, this is an interesting way to view genre as a literary device for storytelling. Genre can also provide space to explore issues; in the chapter on dating, the authors argue that the romantic comedy genre facilitates discussion of serious dating topics.

The ‘interludes’ step out of the chapter themes to tackle challenges in the research methodology and consider the power of storying to counter stereotyping of Muslims. Interlude 1, ‘Coming to Terms’ offers a honest and practical reflection on the workshops and interviews, exploring what went well, and what didn’t. For example, in early workshops, the authors asked for writing using the general topic ‘love and relationships’, in an attempt not to deter participants or impose a western idea of romantic love. However, this prompt generated stories about family rather than sexual or romantic relationships, so the researchers took a more direct approach in subsequent workshops. Relatedly, the authors sometimes found it difficult get young people to talk about their sexual and romantic lives – this ultimately led them to drop the word ‘sexual’ from the original title of the project, ‘Storying Sexual Relationships’ (although the term ‘sexual relationships’ is still used throughout this book).

Interlude 2 focuses on stereotyping, and the way certain stereotypes ‘haunt’ young Muslims’ accounts of sex and relationships. Specific Islamophobic stereotypes include passive brides, homophobic or homonegative Muslims, sexual predators, unhappy and unfulfilled lovers, and pushy parents. Such stereotypes push many young Muslims into ‘defensiveness’ or overt contradiction in their storying. The authors acknowledge the challenge for academic study to move beyond negative stereotypes without resorting to simplistic representations of “happy Muslims” (9) or Islamophilia. They note:

There is a danger that, with so many stereotypes in circulation, Muslims (and others who share their struggles against Islamophobia) might end up matching negatives with equally one-dimensional positives, and speaking about sex and love in ways that are reactive and defensive (98).

In response, *Storying Relationships* aims to offer an “unsensational picture” (9) that avoids over-simplification and does not shy away from complexity and contradiction.

Interlude 3, ‘(Not So) Different’, considers how young Muslims’ approaches to sex and love are distinct, identifying three common themes: “heteronormativity, homonegativity, and premarital virginity” (129). These are more colloquially described as expectations “that every adult who can get married to a member of the opposite sex should do so”, and “they should consummate the marriage and enjoy sex within it – but only within it” (129). Drawing on religious texts, critical work and young Muslims’ stories, the authors show how young people are using available ‘wiggle room’ (borrowing Sara Ahmed’s phrase) to negotiate within these norms. They notice that young people will reject certain aspects of relationship practices they see as ‘cultural’ rather than religious, “claiming to revere marriage customs that are genuinely religious, and jettisoning those they see as cultural” (133). Stories reveal an interesting identity shift as younger Muslims are more likely to identify “*as Muslims*” (emphasis in original, 130) in a fluid, international sense, as opposed to their parents, who identified with nations, especially their country of origin. For these young Muslims, relationship norms are not set in stone, and there is a variation of practice and belief within Islam, meaning it is important not to generalise about Muslims’ romantic and sexual lives.

In their conclusion, the authors pose two questions: what have we contributed to understandings of storying; and what have we learned about young British Muslims’ sexual relationships? On storying as an approach, the authors argue that bringing together arts and humanities methods (close reading) and social science approaches can be productive. They focus on *how* these stories have been told, identifying three ‘tactics’: indirect, hypothetical and conditional speech, creating “space for uncertainty and ambiguity” (173); using fiction to distance from the storyteller; and direct and sometimes defiant communication (172). In terms of what we might have learned about young Muslims’ sexual relationships, the authors identify three crosscutting themes: 1) many stories contradict stereotypes that Muslims do sex and relationships differently to non-Muslims; 2) “sexual relationships are fundamentally religious, framed by Islam” (179) and are “virtually synonymous with marriage” (179); 3) and relationships involve family, community, friends – not just the couple. Ultimately, by breaking silences and telling these stories, young Muslims are setting out “much-needed maps” (171) for stories to travel and to ‘matter’.

At a basic level, *A Match Made in Heaven* offers romance scholars a set of enjoyable, diverse fictional narratives about love, desire, and romance. More specifically, in their emphasis on experiences of Islamophobia, intergenerational conflict, marriage, and technology, these stories are a snapshot of current Muslim women’s popular fiction being published in English. As such, this affordable collection would be a useful tool for classroom teaching, potentially as a partner for Maznavi and Mattu’s USA-focused *Love, InshAllah*. The authors say that they deliberately wrote *Storying Relationships* in an accessible, jargon-free way, in the hope that this book might be of interest to the young Muslims whose stories form its backbone. While the price point might prove a barrier, on this count, I think *Storying Relationships* achieves its aim – and will be accessible to those outside of the specific

discipline as well. There are a few minor aspects to critique – the terms ‘storying’ and ‘storytelling’ are used somewhat interchangeably, blurring their distinctiveness, and the analysis of published works does not significantly expand existing critical discourse. However, the presentation and analysis of amateur creative writing and conversation does genuinely offer something new that will surely complement the existing, and growing, body of work on Muslim love and relationships.

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