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The Politics of Love and Choice in Muslim Chick Lit

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Abstract

Whilst Muslim women have written critically acclaimed texts of serious literature, their entry into the field of mainstream and popular literature has been on a far more precarious ground. Yet in the past two decades, Muslim women's foray into western popular culture through deliberately un-serious light-hearted genres, such as chick lit and the romantic comedy novel, has forced mainstream society to see the Muslim woman protagonist and Muslim women at large as more than just tragic victims of patriarchy, conservatism and Islamophobia. The comedy of rom-coms allows Muslim women authors the free site of play, where issues facing the gendered identity of Muslim subjects are represented outside the confines of academic seriousness; meanwhile, the romance of rom-coms allows a subtle shift in Muslim politics, foregrounding love as the motivation and the weapon for societal shifts. In the present paper, I seek to analyse the political possibilities of Muslim chick lit and rom-com. Uzma Jalaluddin's famous hetero-romantic novel *Ayesha at Last* taken alongside Sabina Khan's lesser-known queer rom-com *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* can open up newer discourses on love and sexuality for the Muslim woman protagonist, particularly with these novels highlighting their 'choices' ranging from reclamation of their religious identity or sexual identity to deliberate disavowal of either or both, while simultaneously delineating the tenuousness of the category of 'choice' as a whole.

Keywords: chick lit, Muslim rom-com, South Asian romance, Muslim YA romance, queer rom-com

Introduction

The term Muslim chick lit might, upon first glance, sound like an oxymoron. Chick lit is most commonly associated with the white middle-class heterosexual female subject, with Bridget Jones, Carrie Bradshaw and the like. The Muslim chick lit, although a successor to the white women's chick lit, does not simply 'include' a Muslim woman protagonist; rather, it is significantly preoccupied with the question of the Muslimness of characters and how Muslim identity significantly alters or influences a character's journey through 'chick culture.' It is to be noted that throughout the paper, I use the word 'Muslimness' as an all-encompassing term to refer to the experience of being a Muslim, including in a culturally dislocated context, as in the immigrant communities of Canada and the United States of America, where the two chick lit texts considered here are based. The use of the word 'Muslimness' is a nod to the whole

gamut of experiences that come as a result of one's social, religious, cultural and individual identification with a Muslim identity. This is more so because several characters in the novels under consideration have varying degrees of identification with Islam; some are devout practitioners, while others identify with only a few socio-religious aspects of being a Muslim, and yet others want to disentangle themselves from any identification with Islam. However, what is similar among all of them is their proximity to a Muslim identity, either self-chosen or attributed, which colours their experience of the world at large.

But before I arrive at the Muslim chick lit, it is necessary to first clarify the broad definitional contours of chick lit, which has already branched off into several sub-genres, spreading itself across continents, across ethnic and religious identities. The term 'chick lit' was first used in print, ironically, for a specific kind of British women's fiction, by Cris Mazza.[1] Chick lit, to use Heather Cabot's definition, features single women in their twenties and thirties 'navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships.'[2] Like many other forms of pop lit solely targeting women, chick lit was widely criticised by high-brow critics and litterateurs as trashy, a waste of time, or even anti-feminist.[3] But chick lit was also a phenomenal commercial success, crossing over to other forms of media from TV to cinema to merchandise, which in turn prompted the emergence of 'other' forms of chick lit, of which the Muslim chick lit is one among many. The offspring of chick lit included 'hen lit,' about women over forty; 'mommy lit,' about mothers trying to have it all; 'bride lit'; and adolescent chick lit or 'chick lit jr.'[4] Racially and ethnically expanding the genre, there is 'Sistah lit' and 'Chica lit,' or as I explore here, 'Muslim Chick lit.' The latter often deals with diasporic Muslim South Asian or Middle Eastern women of colour residing in the First World. The religious orientation of Muslim chick lit can perhaps find an uncanny predecessor in 'church lit' or 'Christian chick lit,'[5] which quite akin to the format of the 'halal romance,' tries to navigate how religious women negotiate their relationship between faith, romance and sexuality. What is significant is that all of these are instances of 'pop lit,' the kind often denigrated in critical circles. I use the term pop lit self-consciously, borrowing from Jaap Kooijman's useful differentiation between the terms 'pop culture' and 'popular culture.' The former, he argues, are typically 'commercially mass-produced and mass-mediated, intended to make a profit,' while popular culture might include '"underground" subcultures and folklore.'[6] In this case, the chick lit that I take into consideration, are, quite ostensibly like 'pop lit,' written for a mass audience that cuts across cultural lines, and its success is also measured by its ability to make a profit, as well as its potential for being duplicated and reduplicated multiple times, in multiple media formats.

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[1] Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 'Introduction,' in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (Routledge, 2006), 3.

[2] Heather Cabot, 'Chick Lit Fuels Publishing Industry,' ABC news, 30 August 2003, https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129475&page=1, as quoted in Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction,' 3.

[3] Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction,' 1.

[4] Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction,' 5–7.

[5] Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction,' 6

[6] Jaap Kooijman, 'Introduction,' in his *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 12, https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048501212-002.

Despite the reluctance of academic criticism to seriously consider Muslim chick lit, the past two decades have seen an enormous rise in its popularity. Notable examples include British Bangladeshi writer Rekha Waheed's *The A-Z Guide to Arranged Marriage,*[7] Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf,*[8] Randa Abdel-Fattah's *No Sex in the City,*[9] Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obliged*[10] and *The Other Half of Happiness*[11] and finally, Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last,*[12] which I consider here. Additionally, there have been several instances of Muslim Young Adult Romances, many of which adopt the adolescent chick lit format, including Tahereh Mafi's *A Very Large Expanse of Sea,*[13] Farah Naz Rishi's *It All Comes Back to You,*[14] Adiba Jagirdar's *The Henna Wars,*[15] Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed's *Yes No Maybe So,*[16] Sabina Khan's *Zara Hossain is Here*[17] and *Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali,*[18] the last of which I have taken up for a detailed study in this paper. The reason for juxtaposing a heteroromantic 'halal romance' such as *Ayesha at Last* and a Young Adult (YA) queer romance like *Love and Lies* is to see the manifold ways in which romance and its complex relationship with personal faith as well as socio-religious institutions are represented within the supposedly frivolous space of the chick lit. The two texts, taken together, also respond to two generations of Muslim women traversing the postfeminist postmodern social space where old identities are dislodged, new ones forged, and some traditions retrenched—all within the space of diasporic South Asian Muslim communities struggling to define themselves in a 'foreign' space.

The market for Muslim chick lit, as Aysha A. Hidayatullah and Taymiya R. Zaman argue in their analysis of American confessional narratives, is driven by a recognition of the pressing need that Muslim women should speak for themselves.[19] This recognition predominantly comes from mainstream western society that desires the Muslim woman to lift her veil and shed light upon her personal experiences, particularly those relating to love and sex. Chick lit becomes an essential modality of articulating Muslim women's experiences. Like the literature of any socially or racially marginalised group, Muslim literatures, particularly in the western context, are often expected to shed light on traumatic narratives of violence and abuse both inside the community and otherwise. The result is a literature steeped in trauma,

[7] Rekha Waheed, *The A-Z Guide to Arranged Marriage* (Monsoon Press, 2005).

[8] Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, *Love in a Headscarf* (Aurum Press, 2009).

[9] Randa Abdel-Fattah, *No Sex in the City* (Pan MacMillan Australia, 2012).

[10] Ayisha Malik, *Sofia Khan is Not Obliged* (Twenty7, 2015).

[11] Ayisha Malik, *The Other Half of Happiness* (Bonnier Publication, 2017).

[12] Uzma Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last* (Penguin Random House, 2018).

[13] Tahereh Mafi, *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (Harper Collins, 2018).

[14] Farah Naz Rishi, *It All Comes Back to You* (Quill Tree Books, 2021).

[15] Adiba Jagirdar, *The Henna Wars* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020).

[16] Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed, *Yes No Maybe So* (HarperCollins, 2020).

[17] Sabina Khan, *Zara Hossain is Here* (Scholastic Incorporated, 2021).

[18] Sabina Khan, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Scholastic Press, 2019).

[19] Aysha A. Hidayatullah and Taymiya R. Zaman, '"Speaking for ourselves": American Muslim women's confessional writings and the problem of alterity,' *Journal for Islamic Studies* 33, no. 1 (2013), 49.

that ironically caters to the western saviour gaze that sees Oriental cultures as forever trapped in generational cycles of violence and oppression. Such a literature of negative affects, as Claire Chambers et al. theorise, is sharply in contrast with the positive affects that some recent works by Muslim women seek to underline—particularly those that present upbeat narratives of Muslim women's engagement with love, sex, and the world at large. Chambers et al. argue in their perceptive study about the representation of happy British Muslims in non-fiction that each of these perspectives is simplistic: one dwelling on problems that have

> some substance but which are exaggerated and wildly distorted, and the other glossing over tensions and challenges in its effort to present a more positive picture of the sexual lives of Muslims. The latter, however well-meaning, idealises Muslims, potentially dehumanising them.[20]

The second category of literary and non-literary works, moreover, falls into an additional trap—that often ends up trivialising very real socio-political issues as escapable and avoidable by making good 'choices,' in other words, by being a 'good' Muslim, a good westerner, and more often than not a good and rich western Muslim. Whilst the criticism levied upon both ends of the spectrum of Muslim women's literature does raise valid questions about Islamophobia and Islamophilia and the task of representation, critical material seems nonetheless unable or unwilling to escape the concept of 'authenticity,' which is held up as a scale by which to measure the literature of any non-white group. The critiques seem to ask the question: how far is the experience represented thus authentic and holistic to the Muslim population as a whole? In Md. Mahmudul Hasan's reading of contemporary Muslim fiction for instance, neo-Orientalism seems replicated in a host of Muslim writers from Salman Rushdie to Hanif Kureishi to Fadia Faqir to Monica Ali (who is referred to simply as 'a British Author with a Muslim surname').[21] But an affective, reparative reading of Muslim women authors, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,[22] and a reparative reading particularly those of popular literature, will reveal a politics, which albeit imperfect, intercedes in popular cultural discourses in ways that complicate our understanding of Muslimness.

As argued above, not only is such a task of representation of an authentic experience unfair to place upon any individual author belonging to the community, but it also leaves critical opinion with no methodology to tackle those literatures by Muslim women that are deliberately, self-consciously, and playfully inauthentic—those literatures that flaunt their inauthenticity as the most colourful feathers in their plume. Popular literature, and in particular chick lit, offers Muslim women authors an unlikely avenue to depart from the burden of social realism and write what is ostentatiously unrealistic while remaining true to

[20] Claire Chambers, Richard Phillips, Nafhesa Ali, Peter Hopkins, and Raksha Pande. '"Sexual misery" or "happy British Muslims"? Contemporary depictions of Muslim sexuality,' *Ethnicities* 19, no. 1 (2019), 75, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796818757263.

[21] Md Mahmudul Hasan, 'Seeking freedom in the "Third Space" of diaspora: Muslim women's identity in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*,' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2015), 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2015.1007666.

[22] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid reading and reparative reading; or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you,' in *Novel gazing: Queer readings in fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Duke University Press, 1997), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382478-001.

a certain affective and lived experience of reality. In *Ayesha at Last,*[23] an outspoken female protagonist, a rishta reject (a woman repeatedly rejected in the traditional economy of arranged marriages or 'rishtas'), finds love in an unlikely conservative Muslim man. In *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali,*[24] Rukhsana's lesbian relationship is painstakingly, although ultimately heartily, accepted by not only her queerphobic parents but also the Aunties tasked with bringing rishtas. The generic categories of the chick lit or halal romance or YA romance or queer rom-com assures the readers even at the start of the novel, of the promise of a happy ending; a happy ending that would perhaps be unlikely in a social realist mode. But unlike the upbeat journalistic narratives of happy affects (like those to which Chambers et al. refer), popular romances lay no claim to represent an 'authentic' socially realist depiction of the community's experience with love or queerness; rather, the appeal of these novels lies in the fact that they present the protagonists' experiences as an anomaly. Whilst absolving themselves of the charge of authenticity, of representing their entire community in one go, Jalaluddin and Khan raise far more important questions, under the garb of the pleasure of the text: why is it that these experiences should be an anomaly? What are the systems in place that guard the pleasures that the rom-com provides outside of normative/authentic experiences in western and Muslim societies? More importantly, what are the possibilities, if any, of grappling with these systems?

Methodologically, this paper makes extensive usage of genre studies in chick lit and chick lit jr. (also referred to here as YA romance) along with theoretical modalities of postfeminism. Postfeminism is a contentious terrain, and it has always been intrinsically intertwined with chick lit, since the first (arguably) chick lit text *Bridget Jones' Diary* is widely acknowledged as the poster child of postfeminism.[25] Postfeminism has alternatively been seen as a backlash against feminism, as anti-feminism, and also as the natural culmination of second-wave feminism. In some forms, it retrenches and revives conservative traditions that were as discouraged in second-wave feminism, institutions such as marriage, religion, being a 'tradwife,' and so on. But in doing so, it also changes these social systems in manifold ways. As Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon aptly sum up,

> Postfeminism is both retro- and neo- in its outlook and hence irrevocably post-. It is neither a simple rebirth of feminism nor a straightforward abortion (excuse the imagery) but a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation.[26]

But underlying all of this, postfeminism emerges, as Imelda Whelehan puts it, from the concerns of young women who 'do not want the "rules" perceived to be handed down from the motherhood'[27]–whether that motherhood is a purist religious authority or a white feminist faction. This opens up spaces for plural Muslim feminisms to exist within postfeminism. As Fernando de Toro argues, post-theory at large emerges from the

[23] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last*.

[24] Khan, *Love and Lies*.

[25] Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, 'Introduction: Postfeminist Contexts,' in *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, ed. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A Brabon (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.

[26] Genz and Brabon, 'Introduction,' 8.

[27] Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 168, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-21182-7.

'deconstruction of current hegemonic systems, as well as the new knowledge being generated from the margins, or rather, from different centres.'[28] The very act of post-ing feminism allows new ideas and cultural positions to be introduced. But the essential feature of postfeminism, as adopted in chick lit texts, is that it is relentlessly individualist; it does not rely on Islamic feminists who interrogate scriptures and attempt to structurally shift socio-political practices. Rather the chick lit protagonist is rooted within her limited social circle, challenging prejudices and even navigating her religious beliefs at an individual level. The primary questions that the paper seeks to answer are the ways in which a deliberately flippant, non-serious mode of the chick lit is employed to trace the female Muslim protagonist's complex negotiations with sexuality, Muslimness and South-Asian identity positions, and what possibilities emerge as a result.

Love beyond first impressions: Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last*

Uzma Jalaluddin's 2018 novel *Ayesha at Last* adapts Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to a close-knit South Asian Muslim immigrant community in Toronto, with the primary narrative force being driven by the romance between Ayesha and Khalid. Despite the temporal, spatial, and cultural disparity between Austen's regency England and the world of Ayesha Shamsi, there seem to be more similarities between the marital practices of *Pride and Prejudice* with the arranged marriages of Toronto's desi community than one would expect. Austen has already had a unique affinity with the genre of chick lit as such, sharing a 'a kindred wit, the same obsession with choosing a mate, and a shared attention to the dailiness of women's lives.'[29] Using the Austenesque enemies-to-lover trope for the novel, quite similar to the Elizabeth-Darcy romance narrative, Jalaluddin attempts to place her novel both within the framework of chick lit texts such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* and also within a longer lineage of women's fiction, which in turn enables her to rework these generic categories from within, in order to shed light upon the experiences of diasporic Muslim subjects.

The conformity to and the subversion of chick lit happens first at the level of Jalaluddin's protagonists. Ayesha Shamsi, though a South Asian Muslim, is the usual chick lit protagonist—apart from her bright purple hijab, she seems to be no different from the Bridget Joneses of white woman's chick lit. Like the 'stereotypical chick,' Ayesha is 'single, lives and works in an urban center, is surrounded by a network of friends and is struggling to find a fulfilling job and a meaningful relationship.'[30] She is a spoken word poet past her prime dating age (although not quite), and more importantly, she is the responsible elder sister who seems to be constantly overlooked by the rest of the family, doomed to take care of her spoiled sister Hafsa. The narrator reminds us of her age, her profound sense of missing out, a longing for something more (usually for love, but rarely acknowledged as such), all of which are common characteristics of most chick lit and chick-flick heroines: 'Too old to never have

[28] Fernando de Toro, 'Explorations on Post-Theory: New Times,' in *Explorations on Post-Theory: Toward a Third Space,* ed. Fernando de Toro (Vervuert Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), 16, https://doi.org/10.31819/9783964563637-002.

[29] Kathryn Robinson, 'Why I Heart Chick Lit,' *Seattle Weekly* (9 Oct. 2003), https://www.seattleweekly.com/arts/why-i-heart-chick-lit/.

[30] Heike Missler, 'Introduction: Situating Chick Lit in Popular Culture,' in *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation* (Routledge, 2017), 1, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315626536.

held someone's hand. Too old to never have been kissed. Way too old to never have fallen in love or at least teetered on the brink of it.'[31]

But Khalid is an unusual protagonist—he may be rude and shy as the average Darcies of the chick lit usually are, but he is not, by any standards, considered desirable to the westernised female gaze, except perhaps for his familial wealth. Amy Burns in her analysis of the New Hero in postfeminist chick lit, makes a convincing case about how chick lit reverses the dominant male gaze by substituting it with a female gaze that sees the male protagonist as an object of consumption.[32] Muslim chick lit carries this one step further by introducing not only a female gaze but a Muslim female gaze of desire that actively looks upon the male subject and reframes our understanding of desirability, sexuality and romance. Burns identifies five main qualities for the 'New Hero,' and Khalid meets quite a few of them, but unlike the suave sexually experienced heroes of chick lit and chick flick, he does not wear a suit, the stereotypical marker of success and upward mobility, nor is he popular with women.[33] His white robe and unkempt beard are the primary visual cues the reader uses to identify him, and he is quite unlike any male protagonist chick lit or chick flick usually portrays. Khalid's presence in the genre of chick lit is quite easily summed up by Ayesha's observation after seeing Khalid in a bar: 'He looked a bit like a priest in a strip club.'[34] But this is a deliberate move; Jalaluddin's unusual male protagonist forces the readers to encounter blossoming romance between the female lead (with whom female readers would be likely to identify) and a male lead who proclaims his other-ness, and who necessitates altogether different metrics of male attractiveness. As Burns reminds us, there is immense political possibility in framing the chick lit hero in certain ways and not others, because chick lit texts 'are in fact forming female desire and pleasure.'[35] In this case, it represents Muslim female desire in novel ways—for the calm, collected, wealthy, handsome, upright religious man, the Muslim 'New Hero'—while also validating these desires as worthy of representation and pursuit.

The postfeminist preoccupation with the novel is moreover explicated in its uneasy position vis-à-vis tradition and modernity. What should be women's role in romantic pursuit? Can socio-religious institutions such as marriage be divested of their patriarchal connotations? What is an equal partnership or marriage? These are all questions that *Ayesha at Last* grapples with. Leger Grindon, writing about the Hollywood romantic comedy in a very different context, argues that romantic comedy has always been about a conflict between generations, where the older generations call 'on social tradition' that the lovers counter 'with the attractions of instinct, the force of their feelings.'[36]

In Jalaluddin's text, the generational conflict is slightly more complicated than an opposition between tradition and modernity. One of the most vocal rejections of the rishta

[31] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 108.

[32] Amy Burns, 'The Chick's "New Hero": (Re)Constructing Masculinity in the Postfeminist "Chick Flick",' in *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,* ed. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 132, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137306845_9.

[33] Burns, 'The Chick's "New Hero".'

[34] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 39.

[35] Burns, 'The Chick's "New Hero",' 144.

[36] Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (Wiley Blackwell and Sons, 2011), 3. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395969.

system comes from Ayesha's elderly grandfather while Khalid himself is posited as a devout believer in the system of arranged marriages at the onset of the novel. Moreover, younger characters, like Hafsa, hold several outdated, and one might argue, postfeminist opinions about marriage, insisting upon seeing her beauty and performance of docility in the rishta game as a means to climb the social ladder. Romantic love, at the conclusion of the novel, comes to be summarily accepted or accommodated within the social framework of love and marriage, while the more traditional extremist values associated with marriage are pushed to the periphery if not completely exorcised.

Ayesha at Last does not attempt to evade questions of romance and Muslimness, it dives head first into the fundamental precarity of being a Muslim, a South Asian Muslim in the West, in a neoliberal cultural climate. What kind of a Muslim is not Muslim enough? Who is too Muslim? The text throws open all these questions and has only tentative answers. Khalid can benefit from being less conservative, being more open to the modern world. Ayesha can benefit from moving beyond her 'first impressions' of judging more conservative practitioners of Islam as 'fundy' or fundamentalist. The text clearly indicts extremes as a problem– the extremism of Farzana (Khalid's mother) who wants women to be submissive wives and the libertine values of Tareq or Amer who fetishise, sell and consume Muslim women's bodies online. But what is perhaps more interesting is how all the Muslim characters seem to be engaged in a deadlock, in a dialogic interchange, where none can comfortably decide how much Muslimness is appropriate. Indeed, the only character who seems to accept all Muslims without judgement and prejudice is Clara, the unlikely white ally. This is not to suggest that Clara has a moral high ground inaccessible to the rest, but rather that mulling over the question of Muslimness is inherent to the act of being a Muslim in postmodern society, and anyone who seeks a comfortable resolution seeks to fall into the gaping trap of 'pride and prejudice.'

Anjula Razdan argues that chick lit in general is more focused on 'mundane, everyday, obsessive and superficial details of women's lives.'[37] Their obsession with little narratives also provides scope to move beyond the idea of religion as a grand narrative and see it as an everyday lived reality in women's lives. What is also significant about Jalaluddin's novel is a subtle questioning of the limit of rhetoric of choice in navigating out of the debates around faith. Khalid, in a moment of judgement during his first meeting with Ayesha (familiar to the *Pride and Prejudice* trope) remarks, 'I stay away from the type of Muslim who frequents bars.'[38] In the same vein, and with no apparent sense of contradiction, Khalid argues, 'I try not to judge other people's choices.'[39] Judgement, however, is inherent in his initial statement, and he refuses to see the irony in it. As the narrative progresses, Khalid learns to see past this judgemental rhetoric and eventually joins a company that produces lingerie for plus-sized women—where he had been reluctant to work initially. Similarly, Ayesha also has to learn to not reduce one's clothing choices to conservatism, to move beyond her immediate assessment of Khalid as a 'self-confessed fundy with no fashion sense and a controlling

[37] Anjula Razdan, 'The Chick Lit Challenge,' *Utne* (1 Mar. 2004), https://www.utne.com/community/thechicklitchallenge/.

[38] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 40.

[39] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 41.

mother,'[40] in order to understand a more complex individual and family dynamics. The novel seems to suggest that a simple acknowledgement of choice (a rhetoric that Khalid's Islamophobic boss also pays lip service to) is insufficient—overcoming pride and prejudice requires truly acknowledging and understanding 'other' perspectives.

The deepest frustration that Jalaluddin expresses in the novel, primarily through Ayesha's character, is against the trade of Muslim women's bodies, both virtually and otherwise. Visually, some women's bodies are marked as objects of exotic consumption, as the narrator notes in Ayesha's free indirect discourse: 'Veil-chasers thought women in hijab were an exotic challenge.'[41] Unlike the western hegemonic notion that the hijab suppresses and subsumes women's sexuality, in actual practice, it seems that women's bodies are relentlessly sexualised by the dominant male gaze, and the hijab, like any other attire marked by gender, can be turned into yet another means for patriarchal culture to subject women to its fetishising gaze. In the figure of Tarek and his porn website, Muslim women's bodies are put up for display, circulated and sold among men who fetishise them as orientalist objects of consumption. But bodies are traded even in the stultifying practices of the rishta system, they are exhibited, and their value, in terms of docility, assessed and determined. It is no surprise therefore that Hafsa is the one who is marked as a perfect victim for both, by Tarek and Farzana respectively, and Ayesha as the wiser, less docile subject, tries but fails to warn her sister against this commodification of her body. It is also no surprise that both Tarek and Farzana share the worst fate at the end of the novel. In trying to implicate the imam in a corruption scandal, they, quite literally, bring each other down.

While the novel largely follows the socially normative dictates of the 'halal romance,' as the genre has come to be referred to in recent times, in refusing to allow Hafsa to be married to Tarek, Jalaluddin dislodges the idea of marriage as a punishment to be meted out to sexually non-normative subjects. Furthermore, Jalaluddin's implicit feminist politics withhold the marriage between Tarek/Wickham and Hafsa/Lydia. It refuses to see either Hafsa or Zareena as ruined women because of Tarek's sexually exploitative schemes. Likewise, in postponing the marriage of Ayesha and Khalid to two years after the end of the novel, the text hints at a redefinition of the idea of marriage as not just a logical culmination, the teleological endpoint of all romantic and sexual relationships, but as a conscious choice between two adults, ideally supported by their families. As the subplot of Clara suggests, there is much faith still bestowed in the text upon the socio-religious institution of marriage, but in each iteration of marriage in the novel, the definition of marriage itself gets put up for debate. The marriage between Hafsa and Masood for instance, although socially acceptable, is more like a business partnership, while Khalid and Ayesha's promised marriage carries more romantic connotations. As a Muslim rom-com, Jalaluddin's intention seems to have been to unsettle definitions, to question given ideas, and far from rejecting all traditions, to arrive at a more empathetic understanding of cultural practices in order to make them more equitable, and perhaps, more feminist.

[40] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 168.

[41] Jalaluddin, *Ayesha at Last,* 38.

Love beyond race/religion: The love and lies of Rukhsana Ali

The adolescent chick lit, what Joanna Webb Johnson calls chick lit jr. features girls at the cusp of childhood and adulthood, navigating the rather difficult process of 'coming of age.'[42] A distinguishing characteristic of most of these novels is that they 'use humor to realistically portray emotionally difficult adolescent and preadolescent development and maturation.'[43] *Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* is a far more 'serious' novel than *Ayesha at Last*—the abuses suffered by Rukhsana and her mother and grandmother before her are far more gruesome and tragic than a few petty comments made by South Asian aunties in the rishta market. But *Love and Lies* still manages to employ a comic tone that neatly reflects the sardonic gaze and sarcastic tone of the Gen-Z girl. Given the predilection of the chick lit text towards first person accounts, Rukhsana's first-person narrative constitutes the bulk of the novel, interrupted only occasionally by her Bangladeshi grandmother's personal diary, also a confessional narrative by a young woman, albeit in a very different social context. Rukhsana, frustrated with her parents' attempts to kidnap and lock her in a room and thereby force her into a heteronormative arranged marriage, observes to herself, 'I could not fight my way out of this situation with snark or sarcasm.'[44] But the novel as a whole, does fight its way out of the situation (of homophobia and abuse) through snark and sarcasm, its flighty light-hearted tone allowing the predominantly young adult audience to engage with the traumatic events depicted without reducing the characters to tragic Muslim victims in need of rescue. Not only Rukhsana's sarcastic tone in narrating her life events but also the awkward attempts of her parents to unlearn their prejudices provide much-needed comic relief after the death of a Bangladeshi queer activist Sohail. For one example, Zubaida awkwardly suggests that Rukhsana can have kids through 'virtuous fertilization,'[45] a malapropism for 'in vitro fertilization' or Aunty Meena's tentative questions about lesbianism narrativise in a comic fashion, the uncomfortable and often rocky journey of unlearning and relearning.

Love and Lies fundamentally tries to tackle issues regarding South Asian Muslim identity and Rukhsana's queerness—the two identity positions often held to be incompatible by the panopticon-esque gaze of the close-knit social community. As Roberta Seelinger Trites noted about the YA novel, teenage characters

> agonize about almost every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emission, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and prostitution.[46]

Sexuality is an important concern in YA novels and chick lit jr., but sexuality cannot be divested of other socio-political structures including religion and race. What ensues in *Love and Lies* is a brutal depiction of homophobia and religious abuse within the family and community, and race/religion-based microaggressions in Rukhsana's largely queer-friendly

[42] Joanna Webb Johnson, 'Chick Lit Jr.: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens,' in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (Routledge,2006).

[43] Johnson, 'Chick Lit Jr.,' 142

[44] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

[45] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

[46] Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (University of Iowa Press, 2000), 84.

American high school network. Religion is constantly appropriated by Rukhsana's homophobic mother Zubaida, for instance, when she asks Rukhsana to 'grow out of' her queerness and get married to a Bengali Muslim man, by saying, 'No. We are Muslims. You are Muslim. Don't forget that. What you are thinking is wrong. I will not allow you to make such a big mistake.'[47] Zubaida, Nusrat, and several other 'adults' in the novel see queerness as completely at variance with their religious beliefs, but the novel complicates our understanding of religious abuse by showing how Zubaida's queerphobia cannot be simply reduced to religious orthodoxy, but that it is a complex interplay of trauma from sexual abuse as a child, fear of cultural prejudice, and also a desire to establish complete control and dominance over her daughter.

The Muslim chick lit refuses to reduce the adolescent protagonist's journey to the rather individualised act of finding oneself—instead it combines the coming-out narrative with the coming-of-age narrative to create a nuanced portrayal of the multiple intersections of one's identity. As the novel unfolds, Rukhsana realises that implicating religion, and one religion in particular, as the source of queerphobia, neglects other structures of violence that perpetuate discrimination, and it moreover denies the agency of practitioners of the religion who might not buy into the politics of hate. Coming out to her cousin Shaila, Rukhsana admits, 'I did assume that most people who observed the rules of my religion would judge me harshly.'[48] Shaila points out the latent Islamophobia in Rukhsana's assumption: 'You just assumed that because I live here and I pray five times a day that I'm also close-minded and judgmental.'[49]

Whilst *Ayesha at Last* engages with the question of the right way to practice one's faith, *Love and Lies* shifts the focus beyond individual dilemmas and spiritual debates in the practice of religion to socio-cultural customs that inflect that practice. *Love and Lies* does not depict Rukhsana as especially religious, or even religious at all—there is hardly any spiritual dilemma that she faces in negotiating her own queerness with her relationship with God. Rather, the dilemma lies in negotiating her Muslimness with queerness, in the struggle to not compromise one identity for the sake of the other. *Love and Lies* shifts the focus beyond individual dilemmas and spiritual debates in the practice of religion to socio-cultural customs that inflect that practice. Quite poignantly, Zubaida's shift in perspective towards queerness following the death of Sohail happens from a spiritual awakening, wherein she uses her interpretation of Islam to resist culturally enforced forms of queerphobia: 'You know, Rukhsana, I thought I was being a good Muslim, stopping you from committing a grave sin. But that night I realized I was the real sinner.'[50]

Apart from a few such rare examples, the text remains more focused on socio-cultural, rather than individual experiences of Muslimness, and in doing so, it partially disrupts the rhetoric of choice. Unlike *Ayesha at Last,* where redemption comes from negotiating with one's own religious beliefs and coming to terms with those of others, from 'choosing' to pursue romantic desires and 'choosing' to disidentify from an orthodox rishta system, *Love and Lies* delineates that such choices mean little unless one is supported by allies, unless the

[47] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

[48] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

[49] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

[50] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

culture itself agrees to undergo tectonic shifts that allow people, especially young girls without any social authority, to live out their own identity. In doing so, *Love and Lies* as a South Asian Muslim YA novel disrupts Johnson's assertion that 'chick lit jr. often gives the joking impression that becoming an adult is fairly easy, more like a choice: one simply decides and then actions naturally follow.'[51] Even though one can still argue that the conclusion to the novel, where Rukhsana's white girlfriend Ariana is happily accepted by her largely orthodox family is too good to be true, *Love and Lies* nonetheless does a meticulous job in painstakingly illustrating the processes through which the 'choice' of living a certain life is executed.

Conclusion

Heike Missler argues that the death of chick lit came with the more erotic and vampiric turn in popular culture, heralded by the Fifty Shades Trilogy. Is Muslim women's fiction then playing catch-up? Why resurrect a form that has arguably 'petered out towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium'?[52] Missler moreover argues that despite the wide heterogeneity and diversity in chick lit novels, a basic plot pattern dominates them all, 'namely the heroine's quest for happiness.'[53] Underlying this is the assumption that happiness at an individual level is both achievable and desirable, which in and of itself can have liberatory potential when associated with women who have been deemed to be situated outside of the discourse of happiness, within frameworks of oppression and humiliation. This is perhaps why Muslim chick lit has flourished in the market during the past two decades, even as the white women's chick lit has arguably been dwindling in terms of market presence. Muslim chick lit seeks to reclaim narratives of romance, love, and friendship, often beyond heteronormative structures—narratives that have frequently been seen as too light-hearted, too 'happy' for the Muslim girl and the Muslim woman. Both Jalaluddin and Sabina Khan identify a conscious political project of extending representational diversity to the South Asian Muslim community as their motivation for writing romantic comedies featuring Muslim heroines. How far these authors have succeeded in this project of authenticity is beyond the ambit of the literary criticism undertaken in this paper. 'You have no idea how hard it is to constantly feel like you have to represent your entire culture.'[54] The statement, made by Rukhsana to her well-meaning friends who, however, lack a requisite understanding of intersectionality, might well have been made by the novelist Sabina Khan herself. This paper sought to veer away from the representational burden placed upon Muslim women authors, instead to see how the comic affects or the affects of love and friendship that they highlight, undertake an alternate politics that make the expectation of a singular representation of a diverse Muslim community entirely impossible.

[51] Johnson, 'Chick Lit Jr.,' 152.

[52] Missler, 'Introduction,' 2

[53] Missler, 'Introduction,' 3.

[54] Khan, *Love and Lies.*

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