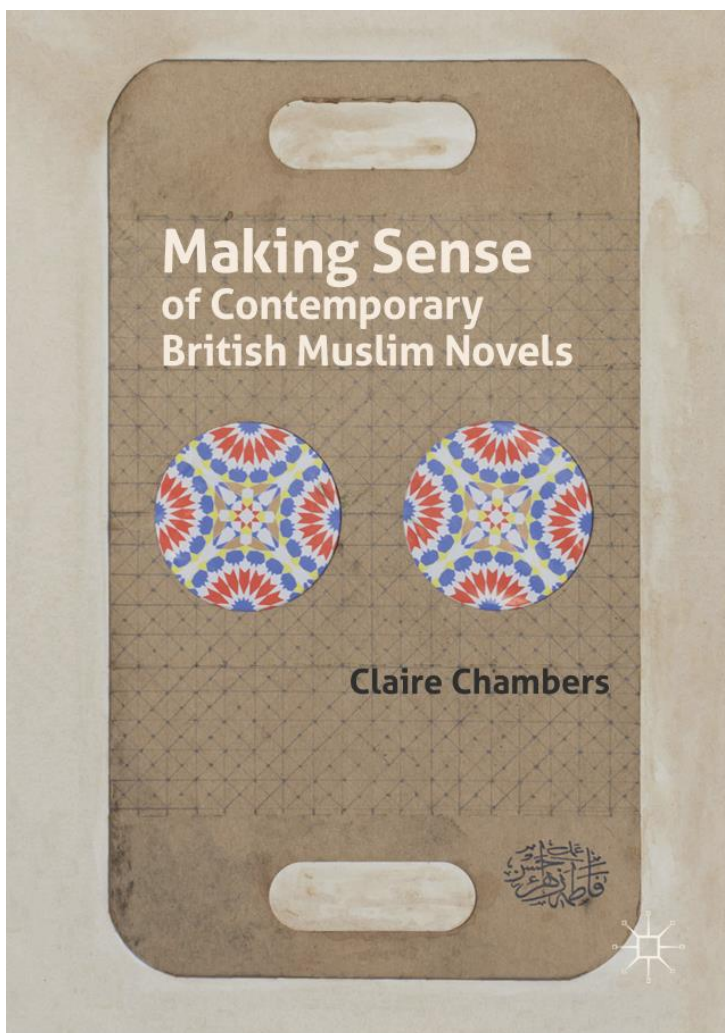


Claire Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 302 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-52088-3.



In her *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780-1988* (2015), Claire Chambers addresses the representations of Britain in Muslim travelogues and fictions combining facts with imagination, which led to the broader exploration of the senses in the work under review here. In her *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2020), the senses become a starting point for venturing through the novelists' cultures and backgrounds with some religious touches. Chambers accentuates the significance of the five senses in Muslim traditional

cultures, especially when these cultures – mostly of Asian origin – merge or overlap with British culture and values. Contesting the privileging of sight over other senses, this book aims to deliver a “full-bodied” approach to tackling Muslim fiction. In this way, it allows readers to regard Muslims and their culture from an inclusive and empathetic perspective.

In her introduction, the author compares the effects of the Rushdie affair in Britain to the effects of 9/11 in the US and the rest of the world. The impact of these tragic episodes on both Muslim minorities and the rest of the society is pivotal, as Muslim communities in Britain condemned Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). When Chambers characterises this incident as a milestone for Muslims in the UK and their relationship with other communities in the country, she chooses it to mark the boundary between her two books. While *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* studies novels published after the Rushdie affair, Chambers’ 2015 book, as the name suggests, is “a literary history of representations of Muslims in Britain from the late eighteenth century to the eve of Salman Rushdie’s publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988).” As regards *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, to further justify her choice to analyse the selected works, the author states that she has substantially more critical commentary to make on contemporary Muslim writing, as the majority of works from after the Rushdie affair attempt to balance critical matters with literary-historical ones. Hence, Chambers goes beyond sociology and other disciplines that seek to study Muslims and their culture. She applies literary-critical methods in order to understand the development in Muslims’ worldviews. This book follows the evolution of representations deployed by these writers from the post-Rushdie era to the last decade of Arab revolutions.

In this three-part book, Part One titled “The 1990s: ‘It Was Only Through Touch That We Really Knew Things’,” Chambers discusses Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995). Chambers deals with different types of touch – sensual, kinetic, and brutal, to name but three – to address how Ahdaf Soueif (1950-) and Hanif Kureishi (1954-) employ various kinds of bodily depictions: gendered, disabled, brutalised, and so forth. Reading the first chapter, “Touch me, Baby” of Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* and investigating the role of touch in the life of the character Asya, Chambers asserts the superiority of touch over sight, as the skin is all over the body while eyes have a limited place. Because of her adulterous behaviour, the protagonist suffers abusive consequences, as the novel investigates violent touch by representing torture, painful cosmetic surgeries, and the medicalised body. Chambers defends her argument well, attributing much knowledge to haptic experience given that a wide variety of touches are explored, ranging from the sensual and loving to the violent and abusive.

The second chapter is entitled “‘I Wanted a Human Touch’: Kureishi’s *The Black Album*.” Kureishi is a British novelist, playwright and screenwriter of

Pakistani-English heritage. He has extensive experience in writing film scripts: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) followed by four other titles in this genre. His debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) was followed by six other novels. Chambers examines *The Black Album*, which is set right after the Rushdie affair to depict the Islamic upsurge that occurred in the 1990s. Narrating another illicit relationship, the novel represents the sensual touches of Shahid and his lecturer lover. Chambers notes that the organs related to all other senses except touch are located in specific parts of the body, but the skin is limitless and one area of the skin shares experience with all the rest. Both novels highlight the importance of touch in gaining knowledge as well as different reactions to the wide variety of touches and their sequences: from obtaining *pleasure* through copulation to masochistic fantasies.

The author combines two senses in the book's second part titled "Smelling and Tasting 2000s." Nevertheless, Chambers confirms that what she means by taste is not the physical sense but "practices and politics of consumption and appetite" (125). In the third chapter, "Fiction of Olfaction: Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," Chamber states that both writers, when investigating multiculturalism, have employed representations of the sense of smell. Both writers have Asian heritages; Nadeem Aslam (1966-) moved from Pakistan to Britain when he was thirteen while Monica Ali (1967-) has Bengali and English origins and left Bangladesh for Britain at 4 years old. Aslam has to his credit so far five novels which have won many awards and been shortlisted for others. Ali, meanwhile, has received many awards for her debut novel studied here, which has been followed by three others. For Aslam, olfaction has allowed the depiction of various viewpoints through the intermixing of different scents, paralleling the copresence of multiple regions through a kind of connective disharmony. In her discussion of *Brick Lane*, Chambers presents the relationship of the sense of smell with Ali's representations of culture, class, and religion, among other factors. Both novels, which have critical outlooks on Islam and Muslims, deploy unpleasant odours to express their attitudes, and there is a collection of superbly exotic smells, intense and spicy, connected to the subcontinent. By highlighting the prominent connection between olfaction and memory, this chapter presents how Muslim writers enrich their novels by utilising this sense when representing different aspects of their political, cultural, and religious views. Supported by her wide knowledge of South Asian culture, Chambers astutely discusses the importance of smells and the significance of the nose to people from that part of the world.

While the previous chapter discusses the sense of smell, the next one focuses on taste and is entitled "Taste the Difference: Leila Aboulela, Yasmin Crowther, and Robin Yassin-Kassab." What *Minaret* (2005), *The Saffron Kitchen* (2006), and *The Road to Damascus* (1989) have in common is the exploration of the relationship between religion and food. Chambers argues that the sense of taste

depicted in these novels indicates the reconversion of the protagonists to their religion and traditions. Unlike in many other Muslim works from Britain, the protagonists of *Minaret* and *The Road to Damascus* change their stance towards religion to become more devout. In her discussion of *Minaret*, Chambers explores the connection between food and the three of the five pillars of Islam in *Minaret*: Zakah (compulsory charity), fasting during Ramadan, and performing Hajj. Even more interesting is how Chambers connects the label of the novels of Aboulela 'halal' (Islamically permissible) with food labelling. Furthermore, regarding Crowther's novel, Chambers contends that *The Saffron Kitchen* employs vivid elicitation of the flavours of food and drink to emphasise exotic traits. In this novel, various British foods and drinks are represented as challenging national identity as they are attributed to the dismantled British Empire. In the section discussing Yassin-Kassab's novel, Chambers maintains that the ideas embraced and expressed by Muslim characters that negate Islamic teachings often conform to their thinking about consuming food, drink and drugs. By taking a middle position concerning Islam and its followers between the condemning Aslam and the idealistic Aboulela, Yassin-Kassab is able to deploy a serene ending that combines living needs with religious obligations, highlighting a connection between the sense of taste and an adaptable set of beliefs. These novels of the 2000s adjust the scale of representations of Islam against earlier works published in the previous decade utilising the sense of taste.

The last part of Chambers' book is titled "Taking Soundings in the Technologized 2010s." In the fifth chapter, "Sound and Fury: Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane* and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*," the author contends that both Tabish Khair (1966-) and Kamila Shamsie (1973-) have established a fusion of writing and sound as writers passionately interested in a wide range of texts, extending from sacred ones to online contemporary messaging. Khair is a prize-winning Indian writer who moved to Denmark from India in the 1990s to obtain a PhD from the University of Copenhagen. He resided temporarily in the UK while working for York, Cambridge, and Leeds Universities. In addition to his creative writing (fiction and poetry), he has authored numerous critical and academic books such as *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Indian English Novels* (2001) and *The Gothic and Postcolonialism and Otherness* (2009), among others. Shamsie is a British writer of Pakistani and Indian origins who received her formal education in the US. She has published six novels, many of them shortlisted for prestigious awards, and won the 2018 Women's Prize for Fiction. Chambers argues here that Khair and Shamsie illuminate in contradictory and paradoxical ways the reality of the experience of extremists and the agonising consequences of their actions. These novels depict terrorism and radicalisation from a different point of view to explore the complexity of these terms. The sense of hearing and radicalisation are deeply associated, as texts are typically applied and turned into action by persuasion and demands from leaders.

Chambers devotes the last chapter in this book, “The Doors of Posthuman Sensory Perception in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*” to one writer. Mohsin Hamid (1971-) is a prominent British-Pakistani writer who was born in Lahore, graduated from Princeton and Harvard, and later settled in the UK. His masterpiece to date is arguably *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), which was shortlisted for several prizes and won others. Chambers, in her discussion of Hamid’s magical-realist *Exit West* (2017), expresses her astonishment at how the conflict between humans and machines is depicted. Furthermore, she considers how cyborgs and posthumans displace humans with unforeseen ramifications. In this chapter, the author concludes her exploration with some deep thinking about the effects of living in the information age on research into the senses.

Chambers ends *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* with a short discussion of examples of other works that can be investigated using the same method applied in her book. Given her wide exposure to Muslim cultures, she shows how Muslim writers have employed depictions of the senses in their writing as a major source of knowledge in addition to language and logic. Exploring the role of the senses in postcolonial studies may enrich them by adding a humanistic touch to their arguments. Even if some readers might find it challenging to follow the argument as a result of some digressions, they exhibit substantially deep investigation of Muslim culture. *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* provides a multidisciplinary exploration of Muslim cultures and their relationships to Britain that may contribute to mutual understanding and, perhaps, to a more peaceful world.

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