

Institution: University of York		
Unit of Assessment: 27 - English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Writing by Muslims in South Asia and the British Diaspora		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Oct 2012 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Claire Chambers	Professor of Global Literature	01/10/2012 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Conceived of from the start as altering the contours of Muslim writing and especially its capacity to address issues of social justice, Chambers' field-defining work on the Muslim literary cultures of South Asia and Britain has had substantial impacts. Her research has shaped the profile and account of Muslim writing in the media in Pakistan and Britain, and thus also reached creative writers and wider publics. Established and emerging creative writers have found her research critical to their own understanding of their work and have sought her out as an editor and mentor. Thus her work has directly shaped Muslim writing. Her research and work with writers has influenced publishers' creation of opportunities for Muslim writing to appear in print. Her research on decolonizing Shakespeare has translated into extensive attainment-raising impacts in schools in UK and South Asian marginalized communities.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Chambers' research has defined a field of literary and cultural production in South Asia and the Muslim diaspora in Britain. Her research complicates and contests the largely negative reification of the Muslim, and draws attention to a fascinating but often neglected body of writing by Muslims. She established that there exists a body of creative writing that we might usefully think about as 'Muslim writing'. This is deployed as a capacious category, rather than imposing particular criteria or constraining work within stereotypical tropes. Until Chambers' intervention, such fiction tended to be subsumed under broader 'multicultural' or 'postcolonial' canons, or narrower national or ethnic classifications. Her research has raised the profile and highlighted the quality and social importance of 'British Muslim writing', a term that is now widely accepted and used as an enabling springboard into a constellation of texts.</p> <p>Her monograph <i>Britain Through Muslim Eyes</i> [3.1] analyses Muslim perspectives on Britain up to the publication of <i>The Satanic Verses</i> and the ensuing controversy. A key finding is that the Rushdie affair has been more of a turning point in perceptions of and by Muslims and the literature they produce than the vaunted watershed of 9/11. <i>Rivers of Ink</i> [3.2] makes the case for an accommodating, fluid, and overlapping world of literature from South Asia and the diaspora, making a strong case for drawing this writing more centrally into the mainstream English canon. Reprinting academic articles with essays published in the press, it reflects how Chambers' work serves as a conduit between research and public intellectual writing. Many of the essays mediate between cultures, establishing a fruitful exchange between British Muslim and Pakistani literature. Her essay on postcolonial Shakespeare, first published in the journal <i>Postcolonial Interventions</i> [3.3], explores how Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> has been adapted and challenged by a range of global authors.</p> <p><i>Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels</i>, created out of six columns in <i>Dawn</i>, represents the symbiotic relationship between her public and academic writing [3.4]. It shows how, in relation to rising Islamophobia, the chosen novelists demonstrate shared commitment to questions of experience, specifically as mediated through the senses.</p> <p>Chambers was CI on the AHRC project 'Storying Relationships', an interdisciplinary exploration of the ways in which young Muslims speak and write about experiences of and attitudes towards sex and relationships. As part of this project, Chambers was the lead author for the article "'Sexual Misery' or 'Happy British Muslims'? Contemporary Depictions of Muslim Sexuality' [3.5]. Modelling the avoidance of both Islamophobia and Islamophilia, the authors turned to literature for a complex picture that unsettles tired doxa about the sexual lives of Muslims without idealizing</p>		

them. Chambers was lead editor of *A Match Made in Heaven* [3.6]. This anthology came out of the project's public workshops. First-time authors had the opportunity to hone their creative writing and get published alongside well known writers. She found that while British Muslims' love lives are regularly sensationalized in the media, something different emerges – ordinary, funny, arch, or reticent – when Muslim women tell their own stories. In sum, Chambers' research simultaneously insists on the key authors' belonging in Britain and on the plurality and quality of Muslim creative writing. It has been key to defining British Muslim fiction as a literary category.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1. (2015) *Britain Through Muslim Eyes: Literary Representations, 1780–1988*. London: Palgrave. * +

3.2. (2017) *Rivers of Ink: Selected Essays*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

3.3. (2016) "To Love The Moor": Postcolonial Artists Write Back to Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1:2, 1-39, [URL](#). Reprinted in 3.2. * +

3.4. (2019) *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. * +

3.5 (2019) With Richard Phillips, Nafhesa Ali, Peter Hopkins, and Raksha Pande "Sexual Misery" or "Happy British Muslims"? Contemporary Depictions of Muslim Sexuality', *Ethnicities* 19.1, 2019, 66–94, [DOI](#). +

3.6. (2020) With Nafhesa Ali and Richard Phillips (eds) *A Match Made in Heaven: British Muslim Women Write About Love and Desire*. London: HopeRoad.

Quality of research (shown by awards / funding / esteem)

* = submitted to REF2021, + = peer-reviewed

3.5 and 3.6 supported in part by AHRC award (CI), GBP473,066 Storying Relationships, 2016–2019.

3.4 funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, GBP49,698, 2017–2018.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Chambers' research was designed from its inception to impact on literary culture in Pakistan and the British Muslim diaspora. In these closely interconnected contexts, literary culture is politically and socially engaged, contributing to how both communities have negotiated key issues. As Chambers says in an interview with Akbar Ahmed (see below): 'I think writing, and education about writing, can be a force for resistance, social justice and building bridges' [5.1a]. She works to ensure that her research impacts on a range of **beneficiaries** including the **media** (and through them **wider publics**), **creative writers**, **publishers** and **schools** in **Pakistan** and **Britain**. A key element of her work is the intertwined nature of her research, its pathways to impact and the impact itself.

Media – Press and Literary Festivals

Directly influencing the media's account of Pakistani Writers in English has been an important route for **Chambers' research to shape literary culture** in Pakistan. Her impact on the **press** is evident in her prolific **column in Dawn** (47 columns in this REF cycle). The oldest and most prestigious broadsheet newspaper in Pakistan (print circulation, approximately 100,000; online version approximately 1,550,000 page views daily [5.2b]), *Dawn* is a hub for high-quality public discussion and news, shaping and being shaped by the Pakistani literary scene. As **Sabyn Javeri**, novelist, short story writer and academic testifies: 'Her regular column in... *Dawn*, has been very influential in shaping literary tastes and promoting the work of local authors...Chambers reignited literary criticism which had faded greatly from the English press in Pakistan during the...dictatorships when art and literature were discouraged' [5.3a]. Chambers' *Dawn* columns 2013-20 have had an estimated 979,000 views [5.2a]. Her journalism also appears in other major news outlets in Pakistan and India, including *The Hindu* and the Pakistani edition of *Newsweek*. Her 'Pakistani English Writing 101' in *Newsweek* is characteristic of her journalism as a whole, drawing on her research to argue for a challengingly inclusive view of the field and for the political power of art and literature [5.2c].

The impact of Chambers' research on the press is also evident in reviews of her publications and in the way her work is held up as a touchstone by journalists, both mainstream and politically activist, when covering Pakistani writing. Eminent Pakistani journalist and novelist **Muneeza**

Shamsie, in *Dawn*, identifies *Rivers of Ink* as key for mediating postcolonial studies beyond the academy. Writing in the political monthly *Newsline* she recommends *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* as adding ‘a new and important dimension to literary studies on Muslim writing’ [5.1b]. **Akbar Ahmed**’s op-ed, ‘Dr Chambers’ Gift to Pakistan’, in the Pakistani *Daily Times*, the USA *Pakistan Link* and the Saudi *Al-bilad* (English version), pays tribute to the impact of her research. The distinguished academic, diplomat, journalist, novelist and filmmaker describes her as ‘a true ambassador between East and West’. He recommends her work to journalists: ‘all those wanting to make sense of the world we live in and appreciate its rich literary and cultural diversity owe Chambers a debt of gratitude’ [5.1a].

The impact of Chambers’ research on the media is evident in invitations to participate in **literary festivals in Pakistan and the UK**. The British Council in Pakistan describes literary festivals as the most ‘significant **internationally visible**’ collaborations in the **cultural and creative industries** in Pakistan [5.4a], while the Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) founder underscores the importance of the festival: ‘It is a movement. It is a mini-university as it affords Pakistanis an opportunity to broaden their horizons, to gather courage to speak out against the inequities of society’ [5.4c]. Chambers has had a strong presence, as a chair and a speaker at the KLF (2014, 2018, 2020 and at the Southbank Centre in 2017) and also the Lahore Literary Festival. Her participation in KLF 2014 and 2018 was reported in the Pakistani *Express Tribune* (affiliated with the *International New York Times*) [5.4b]. **Javeri** highlights Chambers’ presentations at literary festivals as ‘extremely motivational and encouraging in promoting creative writing’ [5.3a]. This work at literary events is replicated in the UK, where Chambers has been invited to chair and speak at the 2018 and 2019 **Muslim Arts and Culture Festival (MACFest)** in Manchester and at each **Bradford Literary Festival** 2014-2017. Award-winning UK-based Sudanese novelist **Leila Aboulela**, commenting on her session at MACFest, chaired by Chambers, saw it as ‘a wonderful opportunity for me to reach a majority Muslim audience’ and notes Chambers’ reputation for ‘broadening community engagement with Muslim culture and heritage’ [5.3b].

Creative Practice and Publishing

Chambers works actively with a hub of Muslim writers, both established and emerging, in Pakistan and the UK. **Writers have benefited both from her research and mentoring**, while her research draws on her close and active engagement with writers. In evidencing the impact of her research on creative practice, this section puts the words of writers in the foreground. A key element of Chambers’ ability to contribute to creative practice has been the **trust** she has built up with writers both through her pluralist, non-stereotyping, open-minded representation of Muslim literary culture in her publications, and through her deeply respectful and warm personal interactions. **Shelina Janmohamed**, best-selling author of *Love in a Headscarf*, writer in *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and the BBC, twice named one of the UK’s most powerful Muslim women, explains: ‘Her work is impactful because she applies a very rigorous academic professional approach to the authors and to the work, remaining outside. However, she brings nuance, depth and insight with warmth and approach[es] the work with human connection’ [5.3c]. **Bina Shah**, the Karachi-based author of acclaimed novels and short stories who is a regular contributor to the *New York Times*, *Al Jazeera* and the *Huffington Post* and frequent guest on the BBC, writes that reading her work ‘enriches my own work as an essayist’ and points to her impact on her fiction writing: ‘I can send her anything...and she will read and edit carefully, critically and compassionately, giving me generous feedback...Her assistance while I was writing my most recent novel...has been invaluable’ [5.3d]. **Javeri** concurs, writing that Chambers’ ‘research on the representation of...women’s identities in fiction by Muslim women authors had a vast impact on my research and helped me reflect on my own practice as a creative writer’ [5.3a]. **Aboulela** credits Chambers’ research with having ‘greatly influenced the critical engagement with my work’. Years in development, the chapter section on Aboulela’s fiction from *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* [3.4], as well as other outputs, led to Chambers becoming a ‘trusted reader’ of her fiction in draft [5.3b]. The award-winning Indian fiction writer and poet **Tabish Khair** writes that their shared research interests shaped his creative writing as he came ‘to value her tastes, knowledge and discernment. It was...a natural decision that...she became my first – and best – reader’ of his novel *Jihadi Jane* in draft [5.3e].

Turning to emerging writers, Chambers' research and editorial support remain interconnected in their impact. The workshops Chambers initiated as part of the AHRC 'Storying Relationships' project provided an opportunity to work with young British Muslims, including mentoring some to publication. **Sairish Hussain**, who published her first novel, *The Family Tree*, with Harper Collins, writes trenchantly: 'As I am all too aware, opportunities like this...aimed directly at people like me are incredibly rare. Claire helped to found a safe space for young Muslims to write freely about love and relationships and this has since developed into a publication opportunity. The groups gave me the opportunity to see myself as a part of, and contributor to, a vibrant and resisting group of emerging Muslim writers.' Hussain credits Chambers' advice for 'allow[ing] me to gain greater creative control over the presentation of my work- and not to pander to the often exoticised and stereotypical demands of publishers' [5.5a]. Another participant, the aspiring writer **Noren Haq**, found the experience transformative, as she developed from someone whose 'previous attempts to join courses and writing groups were far from positive as I experienced Islamophobia and felt out of place and isolated' [5.5b]. Haq's first published story appears in *A Match Made in Heaven* [3.6]. The collection testifies to the community of writers Chambers has fostered: Pakistani writers join British Muslim writers, and the presence of established writers supports and draws attention to promising new voices. Haq flags the power of the project to reach beyond its participants: 'the exposure I have had has led to a shift in attitudes' for 'other Muslim women of south...Asian heritage.' She traces this exposure to both *A Match Made in Heaven* and her appearance on **BBC Radio 4's** flagship programme '**Woman's Hour**' (during which the host Jane Garvey commented on the 'real impact' the project had had on Haq herself) in a segment on the 'Storying Relationships' project and *A Match Made in Heaven* [5.5b, 5.5c].

Muslim writers in both Pakistan and the UK face difficulty in finding **publishers** due to lack of infrastructure and an industry which trades in Western stereotypes [5.3c, 5.5a]. In the UK, Chambers has **brokered important creative relationships between writers and several publishers** who provide homes for authors whose work might otherwise not be published or stay in print. **Peepal Tree** (Leeds), **Beacon Books** (Oldham), and **HopeRoad** (London) all attest that her work has generated new audiences and commercial impact. The founding managing director of HopeRoad writes that they have been 'inundated' with enquires from Muslim writers since *A Match Made in Heaven*. From a **commercial** angle, she adds that HopeRoad benefits from Chambers' using 'her influence to open up an exciting new strand of publishing'. She confirms strong sales for *A Match Made in Heaven* and that working with Chambers made HopeRoad 'keenly aware of new market opportunities for Muslim writers' [5.6a]. Beacon confirm the 'increasing impact' her research has had on them, helping them move to 'a new genre of books that we have not published before' and to 'broker new connections', a benefit also confirmed by Peepal Tree [5.6b, 5.6c]. Beacon attest that her research has 'helped to move the discourse on from the usual "Islam and the West" type of books to a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the Muslim presence in the West' [5.6b].

Education and impact on marginalized communities

Chambers' research on the **decolonizing of Shakespeare** [3.3] and adaptations by authors from formerly colonized countries has translated into extensive work in both **UK-based and South Asian communities and educational settings**. This has been transformative in its pedagogic and cultural reverberations. Her project has been taken up both locally and internationally, in cross-fertilization with **Indian educational practice** (Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) are taking the project to Gujarat, while the project is cited in the regional interest group report for Berkshire & Hampshire [5.9]). Teaching materials are disseminated online as Open Access resource packs and YouTube films [5.8b]. Chambers partnered with **Globe Education**, **Leeds Playhouse**, **Artforms**, and British Asian organization **Tribe Arts** for **Leeds Meets Shakespeare**, with communities from the **Arooj** ('Arising') schools, an ongoing initiative to improve attainment and enrich the curriculum in Leeds schools with a high proportion of Bangladeshi- and Pakistani- heritage pupils. **Arooj**, for which Chambers has been a key consultant since its inception in 2010, has produced durable change for under-pressure, hard-to-reach communities, which has continued in the period since 2014 [5.9]. A review of the project on the Leeds.gov.uk website notes that 'Pakistani heritage pupils' are 'a key priority for the council as **attainment levels**...remain below their peers' and says that the project 'had a **marked impact on**

pupils' confidence and engagement particularly for lower ability and less confident pupils', as well as enriching teachers' understanding of pupils' cultural heritage and raising aspirations [5.7].

The Shakespeare programme involved innovative methods of teaching literacy through dramatic and decolonizing approaches to Shakespeare in two phases, the first involving 360 and the second 150 KS1 children, at 6 Arooj schools with high proportions of English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils. Both phases were received with enthusiasm by participating teachers, many of whom reported on the positive outcomes for their pupils' attainment and for multiracial inclusion. One described the initiative as 'a positive and unique step in bringing people of colour into the conversation', while another pointed to significant improvements in pupils' vocabulary as well as their behaviour. Some found 'staggering' the level of both emotional involvement and understanding the children were able to grapple with and one confirmed that 'the children's reading and engagement with texts was functioning at a higher level to what I would usually expect at this point in the academic year'. Teachers also testified to the impact on themselves and their ongoing teaching practice, reporting fresh confidence in using this material, and enhancements to their own understanding. Many participants confirmed they would continue to use drama in similar ways in their teaching, and no longer shy away from using demanding texts when working with small children. One teacher commented that they 'couldn't imagine how we used to teach in any other way'; and another that 'I can't imagine us doing literacy any other way from now on...I can't wait to teach it again' [5.8a].

The Learning and Improvement Consultant at Leeds City Council confirmed that 'the majority of pupils made significant average gains in both vocabulary and grammar scores during the project period (particularly in terms of the development of grammatical structures)', with 'marked impact on pupils' confidence and engagement, particularly for lower ability and less confident pupils' [5.8a]. She also attested to the scheme's becoming internally renewable through teachers involved in Phase 1 mentoring those in Phase 2: 'the sustainability of the project is very evident' [5.9]. Free teaching resource packs allow teachers at other schools to make use of the same materials. These are available in hard copy (28 packs delivered by Leeds City Council and 32 by Chambers and her Co-I and Shakespeare specialist, Dr Sarah Olive [York Education Dept]) and online (183 hits to the website). Reading comprehension in Key Stage 1 demonstrably improved as a result of *Leeds Meets Shakespeare*. The **Renfrew Action Picture Test (RAPT)** showed an average gain of 15.4 months in grammar in just 3.5 months of the project in 2018 (as compared with 12 months gain for the control school), whilst Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) data released in 2019 shows a significant increase in percentage of pupils reaching the required level in reading in a majority of the 6 participating schools [5.7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 (a) Akbar Ahmed's op-ed, 'Dr Chambers' Gift to Pakistan', in multiple press outlets; (b) Muneeza Shamsie, 'Re-reading the texts' in *Dawn* 3 June 2018 and Review of *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* in *Newsline* April 2016.

5.2 (a) CoverageBook report of Chambers' media coverage; (b) *Dawn* circulation statistics; (c) sample *Dawn* columns and media articles by Chambers.

5.3 Testimonials from established fiction writers: (a) Sabyn Javeri; (b) Leila Aboulela; (c) Shelina Janmohamed; (d) Bina Shah (e) Tabish Khair.

5.4 (a) British Council report: Cultural and Creative Industries in Pakistan; (b) article on Karachi Literature Festival in *The Asian Writer*, 14 July 2017; (c) article on Karachi Literature Festival in *Gulf News* 12 Feb 2018.

5.5 Testimonials from writers who participated in 'Storying Relationships' project: (a) Sairish Hussain (b) Noren Haq; (c) Woman's Hour [episode](#) (from c. minute 28).

5.6 Testimonials from publishers: (a) Hope Road; (b) Beacon (c) Peepal Tree.

5.7 Leeds City Council website article and Leeds Meets Shakespeare Data Outcomes (RAPT 2018 and SATs 2019).

5.8 (a) British Shakespeare Association, *Teaching Shakespeare* Special Issue April 2019 and (b) downloadable teaching resources.

5.9 Testimonial and emails from Learning and Improvement Consultant, Leeds City Council.