
Navigating the Third Space: Diaspora, Hybridity, and Female Identity in Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*

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Abstract

This article examines the construction and negotiation of identity in Ayisha Malik's debut novel, *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015), through the theoretical lens of diaspora studies. Utilizing the conceptual frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha's "third space," Stuart Hall's theorization of cultural identity as "becoming," and Avtar Brah's "diaspora space," the study explores protagonist Sofia Khan's negotiation of British citizenship, Pakistani heritage, and Islamic faith in contemporary London. The article contends that Sofia's identity crisis is not merely a psychological affliction but a structurally produced condition arising from the intersection of racially gendered norms, community surveillance, and secular Western hegemony. By analyzing the novel's deployment of humor, the study argues that Malik uses comedic narrative as a sophisticated technique to transform existential fragmentation and identity incoherence into a legible, politicized subjectivity. Ultimately, this paper situates the novel within the broader canon of British South Asian fiction, furthering critical discourse on Muslim female representation and the evolving aesthetics of 21st-century diasporic consciousness.

Keywords: *Diaspora Studies, Third Space, Muslim Female Identity, Hybridity, Comedic Narrative*

1. Introduction

The question of identity occupies a uniquely fraught position in contemporary British fiction by and about Muslim women of South Asian descent. The British Asian novel has developed considerably since the early comedic mode of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), evolving into a complex and internally varied literary genre capable of accommodating multiple and competing visions of belonging, alienation, and cultural negotiation. Within this tradition, Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) stands as a formally inventive and thematically significant work: a novel that deploys the conventions of romantic comedy to explore the identity crises of a British Pakistani Muslim woman in her late twenties as she navigates the competing demands of faith, family, ethnic identity, and conjugal autonomy.

The novel's protagonist is Sofia Khan, a book editor in London who is forced by her publisher to

write a guide to Muslim dating – one that she initially refuses to do, declaring as she does in the book’s title, “I’m not obliged”. Malik uses this encounter to immediately establish the “stranger-making” Sofia faces within the secular professional sphere. When her boss, Guy, reacts to the book pitch, his response epitomizes the exoticization of the Muslim subject: “Brilliant idea! Excellent! Muslim dating? Well, I had no idea you were allowed to date.’ Then he leaned towards me and looked at me sympathetically. ‘Are your parents quite disappointed?’” (Malik, 2015, p. 12). The story follows her journey of meeting a series of men via the halal dating circuit, all while navigating her family’s wishes from Pakistan, her coworkers’ desires, and her own religious beliefs. Malik’s text transcends the standard romantic comedy by moving beyond a superficial addition of cross-cutting identities. It achieves this through a sustained focus on the psychic and social costs of navigating intersecting categories that dominant cultural discourses frequently frame as mutually exclusive. Sofia never quite fits into the secular west, never quite fits into the immigrant community and never quite fits into being a good enough Muslim for the religious traditionalists. It is a triple bind which shapes the novel’s comedy and its pathos equally.

This article explores in a sustained literary critical manner the notion of the novel as a diaspora text and suggests that the novel’s narrative structure, along with her protagonists’ subjectivity, stages the theoretical dynamics that have been theorized as key in the formation of migrant and second-generation identities. The theoretical framework employed in this article draws primarily on the work of Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the concept of the “third space of enunciation”; Stuart Hall (1990) who theorized the cultural identity as a process of “becoming” and not “being”; Avtar Brah (1996) who created a map of diaspora space; and Sara Ahmed (2000) who developed a phenomenological approach to stranger-making in multicultural societies. Within these frameworks, the article examines how the novel can be read as a socially produced identity crisis of Sofia, as the novel engages in the negotiation of essentialism and hybridity in its portrayal of British Muslim femininity, and as the comedic narrative form used by Malik represents a certain and politically charged way of representing the diasporic condition. This study begins with a review of pertinent diaspora theories before moving into a thematic and formal analysis of the novel’s portrayal of hybrid identity.

The article goes on as follows. Section 2 offers a concise overview of pertinent theoretical texts on diaspora and identity, with the view of creating a language for analysis. In Section 3, Sofia’s multiple and competing subject positions are explored, the Britishness, Pakistaniness and Islamic identity. Section 4 discusses how gender is a vehicle in constructing Sofia’s identity crisis, and the tensions that are bound up within diasporic Muslim femininity. Section 5 explores the role of language, humor and story voice in dealing with the fragmentation of identity. Section 6 situates the novel within the broader tradition of British South Asian fiction and considers its contribution to that canon. Section 7 examines Avtar Brah’s “homing desire” and questions of generational belonging, focusing on the emotional and psychic aspects of Sofia’s identity. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of Malik’s novel for debates about Muslim representation, literary form, and the politics of diasporic identity in the contemporary moment.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora, Identity, and the Third Space

The study of diaspora as a critical category experienced a paradigm shift in the late 1980s and 1990s with the work of scholars in the fields of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and sociology who theorized diaspora beyond the older immigrant assimilation model of diaspora studies. While the assimilationist paradigm assumed a sequence of foreign origin to domestic incorporation, the new diaspora studies emphasized cultural difference, multiple transnational attachments and cultural mixture’s generative possibilities.

One of the seminal essays of this paradigm shift was Stuart Hall’s 1990 “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” Hall identifies two approaches to thinking about cultural identity: one is an identity as a ‘collective essence’, a collection of shared culture, history and common descent; the other is an identity that

is never complete but continually produced and transformed in the process of representation (Hall, 1990). It is through this second account of Caribbean (or any diasporic) identity, one that recognizes continuity along with difference from cultural origins, that Hall conceives his own. What is important, however, is Hall's insistence that this is not a question of 'roots' versus 'routes', but rather of how 'cultural identity' is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It is 'a part of the future as much as the past' (Hall, 1990, p. 225).

This formulation has been very fruitful in exploring British South Asian fiction, which is so often defined by the question of what it means to be British and Pakistani, or British and Muslim. In these stories, the protagonists don't merely take their identities from their parents or the place of their birth, but create them, in not their own choosing, in the process of everyday negotiation in multicultural urban life. Sofia Khan is an especially striking case in point of this Hallian subject: she becomes not the inheritor of a stable Pakistani Muslim identity, but rather its continual and sometimes painstakingly produced subject in conditions that always question her authenticity.

Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" provides an alternative and more radically deconstructive description of the functioning of diasporic identity. For Bhabha, all cultural statements and systems are enunciated in a "third space of enunciation" which constitutes the discursive conditions that ensure cultural symbols have no primordial unity. He argues that: "The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). This "destruction of the mirror" is precisely what occurs in Malik's narrative; Sofia refuses to be an "integrated code" of either Britishness or Islam. Instead, she inhabits a space that is not just a point between two fixed cultures—not merely the hyphen in "British-Pakistani"—but a process of always renegotiating and exceeding that hyphenated identity.

The third space is not a philosophical option that is freely available to the diasporic subject, but it is a form of living. What Bhabha is saying is that this is not merely a disabling process but rather a way by which the diasporic subject constructs new forms of cultural meaning and political agency: it allows the diasporic subject to resist the cultural norms of the majority society and minority community and to reveal the constructedness and contingency of identity categories that both parties take as natural and essential. It is in this third place, this productive ambivalence, that Sofia Khan lives to make her way out of the identity categories that bind her.

Avtar Brah's notion of "diaspora space" (1996) builds on these insights, by focusing on the relational and multi-directional nature of the formation of diasporic identity. Brah's conception of diaspora space is not only for people who have migrated, but also includes the entire spectrum of social relations, including those who see themselves as indigenous, in which migrants and their descendants find themselves. So, diaspora space is "the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dislocation as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (Brah, 1996, p. 181). This formulation argues that the diasporic subject's identity crisis is not separable from the larger networks of power, racism, patriarchy, class inequity, religious sectarianism and other structures that create and sustain the boundaries that contain the crisis.

Sara Ahmed (2000) has analyzed the figure of the 'stranger' in multicultural thinking, which is phenomenological and a dimension that is added to this theoretical image. Instead of being simply unknown, the stranger is, according to Ahmed (2000), "Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place" (p. 21). The Muslim woman in today's Britain is a very compact stranger-making: she is made a stranger by virtue of her religion, her ethnicity, her manner of being a woman, and her refusal of the scripts of secular liberal feminism. If she doesn't wear hijab and if she's not the caricature of oppressed Muslim womanhood, she still must explain and justify herself to interlocutors who already have decided what she is.

All these theories point towards the conclusion that the identity act staged in *Sofia Khan is Not*

Obliged is not a mere personal failure but a structural inevitability: the inevitable result of a social formation in which the British Pakistani Muslim woman is structurally disjointed, perpetually in-between, never quite enough for any of the identity categories that would have her. The novel's success lies in its ability to capture this state in such a funny, and cleverly thought-out manner, as it requires.

Multiple and Conflicting Subject Positions: Britishness, Pakistaniness, and Islam

One of the central formal devices Malik uses to stage Sofia's identity crisis is the plurality of audience addresses. Her story is told to her family, her British colleagues, the Muslim dating community, her readers (the book she is writing within the book) and to herself. Every one of these audiences expects a different kind of identity, and the novel's humor has a great deal to do with the fact that it is impossible to appease each of these audiences simultaneously. The mimicry called for by the colonial and postcolonial subject is always "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, p. 86), describing Sofia's mimicry very well.

Sofia's relationship with Britishness begins with familiarity and cultural fluency but is repeatedly ruptured by moments of racialized alienation. She is clearly British in her cultural skills; she reads British newspapers, she doesn't have an accent, she knows how to maneuver around in the world of work, and she has absorbed a British sense of irony which is an important part of the cultural identity of the present-day British. However, she also constantly feels reminded of her difference, whether through the exoticization of her work colleagues, as in "You're so normal" that, as a signifier of her difference, acts as a kind of backhanded compliment and exposes the stereotype of what is expected of her or through the constant reference to her Pakistani background as a way of explaining or containing her behavior.

In Britain, the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy's (1987) study *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* exposes a hegemonic discourse which places non-white people in an "always already elsewhere" position, irrespective of the number of generations they have lived in Britain. Although Gilroy's analysis is mainly concerned with the Afro-Caribbean communities, the logic that he identifies applies with equal force to the British South Asian community and the Muslim community and it helps to clarify the spatial aspects of Sofia's experience. Always she is not too Pakistani, she is not too Muslim in any context, always her Britishness is provisional, always it may be withdrawn.

Sofia's relationship with her Pakistani heritage is also complicated. She has a real love for, and sense of belonging to, her family, likes Pakistani food and culture and has a specifically Pakistani Muslim moral code in her personal life. However, she also critiques certain aspects of culture which she sees as oppressive or irrational, especially issues to do with gender. Her opposition to *izzat*—the honor culture that regulates the reputation of Pakistani households—is not simply an opposition to Pakistani culture per se but a more nuanced critique of how notions of honor in gendered ways restrict women's behavior and choices. It is this internal critique which sets Malik's novel apart from the uncritical celebration of ethnic culture in some multicultural fiction as well as the exoticization of "oppressive" Muslim practices in certain liberal feminist talk.

Kobena Mercer (1994) has talked of the "burden of representation" placed on minority artists and cultural producers to represent or speak for their community, as opposed to representing or speaking for themselves. For Sofia Khan, that burden is heavy: she has to be good all at once; to be an ambassador for Islam, a representative of Pakistani culture, an embodiment of progressive Muslim femininity. Sofia actively deconstructs the "oppressed woman" trope by asserting her own definition of self: "I'm a marginally intelligent, selectively confident, assertive woman who isn't defined by what's on her head, but by what's inside it" (Malik, 2015, p. 79). The impossibility of this triple ambassadorial role is one of the novel's persistent jokes, and one with political teeth. It reveals the absurdity of the expectations heaped upon minority subjects in a multicultural society that celebrates diversity only when it can be read.

The third characteristic of the identity of Sofia, in relation to Islam, is probably the most refined and the most politically charged. Malik's treatment of Sofia's faith is remarkable because it avoids both

oppression and emancipation and instead maintains a movement that is defined by its complexity and unknowability. Sofia is a practicing Muslim, who prays, fasts during the month of Ramadan and is dedicated to seeking a partner in the halal way. Her religion is real to her; that is, she does not practice it merely for her family's sake, but as her chosen moral code, one that she is choosing. This conception of faith is conducive to a description of 'lived Islam' that has been used to characterize the study of Muslim female writing, a perspective which highlights the diversity and individuality of Muslim women's religious experiences and rejects the monolithic and deterministic nature of Islamic identity (Moghissi, 1999; Göle, 1996).

The outcome of these three identity nodes – British, Pakistani, Muslim – yields what Bhabha (1994) would identify as the classic state of hybridity: that can ever be fully dominant in their identity and in the "third space" of synthesis, the subject is never not explaining herself, as Sofia often says. One of the hallmarks of the diasporic experience is the need to explain, justify and translate identity for various audiences, and Malik renders this negotiation with sustained acuity.

Gender, Surveillance, and the Diasporic Muslim Woman

Sofia's identity crisis is worth revisiting as it has gendered aspects that complicate a purely ethnic or religious view of diasporic identity. But Sofia's experience of the "third space" is not just that of a British Pakistani Muslim, but one that is always British Pakistani Muslim female: the gendered assumptions about this location are if anything doubly restrictive and doubly self-contradictory.

The academic work on South Asian women in Britain has described in detail the ways in which their gender is being policed and controlled in particular ways in the diaspora (Brah, 1996; Dwyer, 2000), ranging from the policing of their sexuality and choice of marriage partner in order to preserve family honor to the pressure on them to reproduce and transmit the ethnic and cultural tradition of the diaspora, especially that of Muslim women who are targeted within the wider public discourse in the West as either representative of victimhood or as a source of threat. All these pressures are dealt with by Sofia in various ways, with varying levels of success and equanimity, and the comedy of the novel can't be separated from the dissonance between the seriousness of these structural pressures and Sofia's cheerfully ironic treatment of them.

The idea of *izzat* (family honor) is a strong tool which regulates gendered identities in the novel. In the case of young British Muslim women, as Claire Dwyer (2000) has pointed out in her study of this group, the idea of *izzat* is a practice of "cultural policing" which is directed at women's behavior (e.g. dress, movement, socialization, sexuality). If a woman fails to meet the norm in terms of modesty and propriety it is not seen as her own fault, but a discredit to the whole family. This results in a specific type of identity crisis for second generation women such as Sofia, who are simultaneously subjected to the values of their community and the conflicting values of British culture, which values the sexual autonomy of women.

Malik is quick to point out Sofia's criticism of how it is being practiced in the country and not of the whole concept of Pakistani or Islamic values. Sofia does not merely use the novel to 'escape' community expectations with a liberal secular identity; she is still involved in her family and community, who is true to some of its values and practices and who has a critical attitude towards some of its oppressive and irrational elements. This is what Nirmal Puwar (2004) has termed the "ambivalent inhabitation" of normative space - being both in and not in the community's space, neither in compliance nor in resistance.

The gendered dimensions of Islam are handled no less complexly. Sofia's yearning for Islamic principles, around the issues of gender and sexuality – her search for halal relationships, her physical restraint before marriage, her belief in taking her faith seriously as an ethical system – is not depicted as her being in a false state of consciousness or a mode of oppressive socialization, but as an expression of her values. This treatment is consistent with the ongoing scholarly debate on Muslim feminism and women's Islamic activism and the view that it is not necessarily a case of capitulation to patriarchy but can be an

Islamic feminism in and of itself (Wadud, 1999; Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002).

The experiences of diaspora, as well as gender in Sofia's case are a good example of what Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) have called the "triple jeopardy" of race, class and gender that minority women face in Western societies. This triple jeopardy is not an oppressive sum, but an intersectional matrix in which each axis of difference affects, inflects and intensifies the others in the case of Sofia. Her experience of sexism in the Muslim community is racialized and religiously marked her experience of racism in the workplace is gendered and her experience of religious discrimination is racialized and gendered. This intersectional complexity renders her identity crisis unsusceptible to being reduced to any one theory, and Malik's novel is more of a text than a simple story of cultural warfare between East and West. The intersectional struggle for autonomy in contemporary diasporic fiction mirrors the dynamics found in historical narratives, where gender and power similarly converge to define female agency (Rashid & Akram, 2025). Just as Lucrezia de' Medici's noble status complicates her subjugation in the Renaissance, Sofia's professional and religious identities create a unique matrix of marginalization.

Language, Humor, and Narrative Voice as Identity Strategies

The use of a narrative voice is one of the most formally distinctive aspects of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, whose use of a particular brand of self-deprecating, ironic, and culturally bilingual humor is a deft handling and transformation of the existential tensions of diasporic identity. Post-colonial and diaspora scholars have increasingly come to appreciate the importance of the form and the strategy used in the articulation of diasporic subjectivity, and that such a strategy is as crucial as the content itself (Rushdie, 1991; Spivak, 1988; Young, 1995). For Malik, that comedic voice is not just a means of entertainment but a highly evolved epistemological and political device.

The novel is narrated in the first person and is composed of journalistic entries that are also interspersed with text messages, emails and direct interior monologue. The addressing of multiple audiences, and the use of multiple voices in the same context, are all part of this polyphonic structure which replicates the condition of the diasporic subject that has to constantly switch registers, address multiple audiences and maintain different versions of the self for different contexts. Whether addressing colleagues, family, or boyfriend, Sofia's voice oscillates between the polite English of the workplace, the loving Punjabi flavored English of home, the distinctly British Muslim slang of the halal dating scene, to the unedited stream of consciousness through which she thinks in English. Such changes are not just stylistic effects, but the real language skills and strategies used by second generation British South Asians as the result of their complex social location.

In this sense, migrant literature has a "double perspective", as famously claimed by Salman Rushdie (1991), which makes it both inside and outside the culture it inhabits, and thus critically estranged, a thing that is impossible for people who are completely enveloped in one culture. Sofia Khan's narrative voice is in particularly acute form as it is both within and without British culture, within and without Pakistani Muslim culture, and it is from this double positioning that her comedy is most insightful.

It is worth exploring at length the type of comedy that Malik uses. It's not the outsider looking in comedy – the comedies that exoticize or pathologize the minority community, nor is it the comedy of assimilation, in which ethnic difference is a series of charming quirks to be gently teased on the way to cultural incorporation. It more closely resembles what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the comedy of mimicry: the comedy that is produced when the incomplete mimicry of the colonial subject suggests that the norms of culture themselves are arbitrary and constructed. But when Sofia tries, and fails, to keep up with British secular dating culture, she is not just a Pakistani woman trying to be British, but one whose very attempt to do so exposes the norms, and how they are socially constructed and not given.

As Linda Hutcheon (1994) has suggested in her study of postmodern irony, all ironic talk is about something (a text, context or social norm) and its purpose is to generate a space between the said and the

meant, which may be filled with critical and subversive meaning. Sofia's irony continually produces this disjuncture in relation to the normatively expected behaviors that are imposed on her – when she writes about the absurdities of the halal dating circuit, she is also a part of it and revealing its absurdities. This “comedy of mimicry” takes a literal turn during a moment of physical absurdity: “He didn't say anything. Then something felt odd in my head... I put my hand on my head and then caught a glimpse of my scarf draped over the arm of the sofa: what the hell is it doing there when it's on my head? ... I realized; if my scarf was on the sofa, then it definitely wasn't on my head” (Malik, 2015, p. 28). This dual gesture of participation and critique is indicative of the subjectivity of the third space as Bhabha calls it, “ironic.”

The novel's language too resonates with the complex linguistic practices of second generation British South Asian. Vijay Mishra (1996) attributes the use of Urdu and Punjabi words that are not translated for the reader in Sofia's speech to what he calls the “diasporic imaginary” which is the presence of the original culture in the language of the adopted culture, creating a hybrid linguistic space where neither culture belongs completely. Such linguistic hybridity is not only the reflection of a personal history but a formal enactment of the third space she inhabits: her language is as much a product of a continuous negotiation between the various cultural traditions she cannot and should not abandon as is her identity.

Situating the Novel: British South Asian Fiction and Muslim Female Representation

Sofia Khan is Not Obligated has a particular place in the lineage of British South Asian fiction and one needs to know its place in the lineage to understand its role in the discussion of the representation of Muslim women and diasporic fiction generally. British South Asian fiction has gone through several phases since the post-war period, each corresponding with the South Asian diaspora's different social and political circumstances in Britain.

The first wave was largely about the experience of first-generation immigrants and was defined by a sense of diasporic resilience and a nostalgic sense of loss for a homeland. The second, which came along in the 1980s and early 1990s with writers like Hanif Kureishi and Meera Syal, focused on the second generation and its struggle to negotiate between the two cultures – parent and dominant – and many used comedy and satire to expose the conflicts of multicultural Britain. The third phase started in the late 1990s and accelerated following the events of September 2001 and has seen a greater emphasis on anxiety surrounding the Muslim identity, as the British Muslim has become the focus of anxiety in UK public discourse (Chambers, 2008; McLeod, 2004).

It is in this third phase that Malik's novel is to be located, and the particularity of its intervention is most legible. The post-9/11 and post-7/7 world in Britain imposed certain unique representational pressures on British Muslim writers and their characters: the pressure to represent Islam in a manner that would not reinforce the dominant media portrayals of Islamic extremism and the oppression of women, and the pressure not to merely write for a “moderate” Islam that was secular liberalism in disguise. It has been difficult for British Muslim writers to maneuver through this space, with texts that are often self-consciously trying to respond to the political context of their production, and feeling overdetermined or defensive (Morey & Yaqin, 2011).

What Malik has accomplished in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* is to largely avoid this burden, not to take on the responsibility of the “Muslim novel” (sociological use of the term), but to write a romantic comedy in which the Muslimness is not constantly explained. What is not a question to be answered or a cause to be argued is Sofia's faith; the novel does not have to persuade the reader she is a normal Muslim; it assumes that she is and the reader keeps up. This approach recalls what Asha Sen (2009) has called the “post-multicultural” mode of British Asian fiction, which is not engaged in the anxious negotiations of the multicultural political field, but in asserting a “British specificity” without necessarily asking for the approval of the majority culture.

Representation has been the issue that has been highly debated in the context of Muslim women's

literature. On one side, there is a liberal feminist tradition that tends to read the accounts and experiences of Muslim women as largely stories of oppression and liberation which reduces complex texts to simple stories of liberation from the culture of patriarchy (Abu-Lughod, 2002). On the other, there are scholars and critics who have suggested that the integrity of the minority perspective is necessarily compromised in the process of writing in English and for a mainstream audience (Spivak, 1988). By eschewing the binary of the “liberation narrative” versus community conservatism, Malik’s novel instead centers on the irreducible complexity of the diasporic experience.

The genre being used by Malik – the romantic comedy – is itself a space where identity politics plays itself out. She’s not only made a British Muslim woman the leading character of a romantic comedy but has also made it clear exactly what kinds of obstacles are in her protagonist’s way when she chooses to pursue a romantic relationship in the world that Sofia inhabits. The genre plays with its conventions, making legible and sympathetic the unfamiliar situation of Muslim dating, but it also challenges the genre’s own normalizations about love and marriage, as well as women’s rights to self-determination.

Diaspora Space, Belonging, and the Longing for Home

Avtar Brah’s notion of “homing desire” is especially relevant in the discussion of the emotional and psychic aspects of Sofia’s identity crisis. Brah (1996) clarifies the dichotomy between “home” as a mythic location of desire in the imagination of the diasporic subject, and “home” as a lived and material space of where one belongs. “home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (Brah, 1996, p.188). This homing desire—a longing for home—does not have to mean a desire for the homeland of origin; it may be a desire for a place of emotional security, a place of belonging, a place that may be in the present.

The desire to return home is a complex and multi-directional one for Sofia. She does not want to migrate to Pakistan; she is quite British in this respect of her daily habits, her interests and commitments. But she is not quite at ease in Britain either: in the novel she is always reminded of moments of alienation, of not-belonging, moments that break up her London existence. The homing desire is, in Brah’s terms, a desire for a home that does not yet fully exist but that she is in the process of making through her relationships, her writing and her ongoing process of negotiating the multiple identity demands placed upon her.

The sense of “home” as a place that is made rather than found is one of the more affirmative themes of this novel, a constructive dimension of diaspora identity. Sofia’s friendships, especially with her non-Muslim co-workers and her Muslim friends in the dating world, are a sort of makeshift “community of belonging” that transcends the traditional boundaries of ethnic and religious identity. Such friendships cannot solve the internal paradoxes of her diasporic status, but they create a space in which those paradoxes can be lived out to a greater or less extent with comfort and even joy.

Robin Cohen (1997) identifies several diaspora types — victim, imperial, labor, trade, and cultural — each with distinct characteristics. The South Asian diaspora in Britain is a mixture of labor diaspora, defined as the post-war migration, during which Britain recruited workers from the Commonwealth of India; and what Cohen labels a “cultural diaspora,” in which the dispersed community has a strong sense of a collective cultural identity by sharing religious practices, cultural institutions, and transnational connections. Sofia lives in this composite diasporic space, her identity forged not just by the economic history of the South Asian migration to Britain, but also by the cultural politics of Muslim identity in the present day.

The politics of diaspora belonging are also inflected by questions of generation. The sociological literature on second and third generations of British South Asians has illustrated that the identities of successive generations are different (Anwar, 1998; Modood et al., 1997). The primary challenge for the second generation – Sofia’s generation is negotiation between the cultural world of the parents (which is linked to origin, tradition and ethnic community) and the cultural world of the dominant society. But what is

interesting about Sofia is that the dichotomy of tradition and modernity doesn't quite encapsulate the real complexity of her dilemma. Her Islamic faith is not just a traditional one that she has inherited from her parents, but a contemporary one that she chose. Her relationship with the British secular is not just a process of modernity, but a negotiation that is sometimes difficult and disorientating, a negotiation that includes and excludes her, that is not on her own terms but that situates her within British society.

In this regard, Nira Yuval-Davis' (1997) notion of "transversal politics" of diasporic feminism is apt: a politics that works toward solidarities that would not erase the differences between various social locations. Sofia's identity conflicts do not result in picking one identity or another, but rather she lives through all of them, and the productive tension between identities is a way to see oneself and to critique. This is, in the end, a political act, albeit one that isn't necessarily according to the usual rules of the game of minority politics or feminist action.

Conclusion: The Comic Third Space and the Politics of Representation

This article has argued that *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* is a major and complex addition to the British diaspora literature, dramatizing the theoretical interactions that have been identified as defining the second generation in diaspora studies through its comic narrative form and the complex subjectivity of its protagonist. The article has demonstrated how, in close analysis of the novel's treatment of British, Pakistani, and Islamic identity, gendered surveillance and community pressure, comedic voice and linguistic hybridity, and its place in the tradition of British South Asian fiction, Malik's text refuses the simplifications of both the assimilationist and essentialist account of diasporic identity, thereby insisting on the productive, painful, and often comic complexity of the third space.

The theoretical approaches used here – Bhabha's third space, Hall's cultural identity-as-becoming, Brah's diaspora space and homing desire, Ahmed's stranger-making, and Gilroy's analysis of racial exclusion – have been mutually illuminating in relation to Malik's text, and they have helped to draw out different aspects of Sofia's identity crisis, thereby adding to a more complex overall picture of the novel's political and cultural work.

The novel's use of comedy as a narrative strategy for managing identity incoherence is perhaps its most formally distinctive contribution to the genre. By refusing to treat Sofia's predicament with the earnest gravity that might be expected of a text dealing with questions of identity, belonging, and religious identity, Malik insists on the full range of emotional and experiential truth available to her protagonist: the frustration and joy, the alienation and the belonging, the exhaustion and the resilience. The tonal complexity is a political statement: one that refuses to let the minority-subject be defined by suffering or struggle alone—and one that insists she is entitled to all human comedy.

There are wider implications in this analysis which can also be seen in the discussions surrounding the representation of Muslim women in modern-day British culture. Malik's novel is a return to the basic critical task of undermining the easy representability of Muslim women as either the victims of religious oppression or as a threat to secular liberalism. Complex, funny, intelligent and morally serious, Sofia Khan is no victim and no threat; she's a woman trying to make a life that fits all the dimensions of her identity.

Future critical work in this field should continue developing the intersectional analysis of gender, religion and diaspora that this article has initiated, focusing on how Islamic femininity is constructed and contested in the literature of British South Asia, and how diaspora writers such as Malik innovate in formal aspects of their writing to give adequate literary representation to the complexity of their experience. British Muslim women's writing is a developing area that is both growing in scale and showing exciting diversity; critical frameworks are needed more than ever and are also being productively developed.

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