

The Literary London Journal

www.literarylondon.org



Tamim Sadikali, *Dear Infidel*, paperback, 200 pages, Hansib, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-906190-70-570-5; £17.99

Reviewed by

Michael Perfect
(Bilkent University, Turkey)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 12 Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015)

Set in West London on the day of Eid-al-Fitr 2004, Tamim Sadikali's debut novel explores political, religious, and interpersonal tensions within a British Pakistani family and, by extension, within early-twenty-first-century Britain more broadly. As with many novels that focus on family festivities, over the course of *Dear Infidel* its characters come to be increasingly fractured and at odds with each other; there are conflicts between brothers, cousins and spouses. While the family may be reunited for one day, by the end of that day there will be more *disunity* between them than ever before. The novel culminates in a heated argument between its main characters, and the subsequent death of one of them means that this argument can never be resolved.

Three generations of the family are present in the novel. The eldest is comprised of sisters Bilquis and Arwa and their respective husbands Husnain and Zakir, all of whom are first-generation Pakistani migrants to Britain. The next generation is made up of Zakir and Arwa's two sons Pasha and Imtiaz, Husnain and Bilquis's two sons Salman and Aadam, and Salman and Aadam's respective wives, Kahina and Nazneen. Finally, Salman and Kahina's two young children, Taimur and Aaliyah, are the first members of a new generation. The novel's focus is on the middle (one might say early-middle-aged) generation of the family and their feelings about their status as British Muslims in the wake of 9/11. Brothers Salman and Aadam resent the way in which they are perceived in Britain, feeling that all Muslims have been 'demonised' (164). In different ways, both are inclined to respond to the racism that they have encountered by disengaging from British society. While Aadam wants his (as yet unborn) children 'to grow up with different races, different religions' (163), he is not convinced that Britain is the best place for this. In the novel's short prologue it is revealed that the fallout from 9/11 has convinced Aadam that now may be the time to 'jump ship' (13); to the horror of his wife, he later reveals that he is

considering emigrating to Canada. Adam's brother Salman—the staunchest in his religious beliefs of any of the novel's characters—is even more pessimistic about twenty-first-century Britain, and seeks to isolate his family from non-Islamic influences. As well as planning to send his children to an Islamic school, he even refuses to watch a Bollywood film on account of the violence that Hindus are inflicting on Muslims in India. Moreover, Salman agrees with his brother that 'Our future isn't here [Britain]' (163), with the pronoun seeming to refer here to Muslims in general rather than to his immediate family (while Salman's wife, Kahina, is largely silent throughout the novel, it would seem that she more or less agrees with her husband). In contrast to Salman and Adam is their cousin Pasha, who believes Britain to be a tolerant, liberal and progressive nation, and is sympathetic towards those who are fearful and suspicious of Muslims. Believing himself to have a straightforward choice between two identities, 'Dirty paki or British' (165), Pasha unapologetically aspires towards the latter. While less overtly political than her male counterparts, Nazneen (Adam's wife) is sympathetic to some of Pasha's convictions, even if she is prouder of her ancestry than he is. Nazneen emphasises the importance of Muslims trying to 'contribute' to British society: 'All we can do is live our lives, work hard and try and contribute' (164). As well as sharing some of their political viewpoints, Nazneen and Pasha have both had relationships with white British non-Muslims: while Pasha has just broken up with his girlfriend Jenny, Nazneen is—despite having been married to Adam for two years—still preoccupied with the memory of her ex-boyfriend Martin, who contacts her on the day of Eid-al-Fitr. These relationships with white British non-Muslims function as a means of exploring Pasha and Nazneen's feelings about being 'between' two cultures. The final member of this middle generation of the family, Imtiaz, stands apart from the others. Despite being thirty-five years old, he is perceived by those around him—and, largely, perceives himself—as a kind of man-child who has failed to achieve anything in life, either personally or professionally. Imtiaz's dark secret is that he has been suffering for twenty years with a devouring, debilitating addiction to pornography.

Significantly, Sadikali sets *Dear Infidel* three years after the attacks of 9/11—the 'War on Terror' is thus well underway—but some eight months before those of 7/7. However, while the latter event is yet to occur, it is anticipated on numerous occasions. There is a general belief that the occurrence of some kind of terrorist attack on Britain is a matter of 'when and not if' (144, italics original), and in the course of an argument with Pasha, Salman refers—with rather more specificity—to 'possible bombings on the Underground' (158). Tellingly, a few pages later, Adam makes a prediction that takes the eventual occurrence of such an event as a given: 'But when these bombs go off on the Underground, we'll all be torched' (162). Indeed, the novel's characters seem to believe 7/7, or something very much like it, to be inevitable rather than simply 'possible'. Despite being set before 7/7, then, *Dear Infidel* is very much a novel about the attacks that occurred in London on that day. At the same time, it seeks to remind us that the arguments that are most commonly associated with that event—arguments about, for example, Britain's multicultural character, its role on the world stage, the nature of Islam, and the limits of liberalism—were already ongoing in Britain when fifty-two people were murdered and more than seven hundred injured on London's public transport. As such, the novel seems to

imply that Britain reached some kind of crisis point before, rather than because of, 7/7.

While *Dear Infidel* is keen to establish that arguments about identity, plurality, multiculturalism and so on were ongoing in Britain before July 2005, it might be said that the novel tries rather too hard to be comprehensive in documenting such arguments. The novel cites, for example, debates over all of the following (and more): the wearing of headscarves; honour killings; forced marriages; the merits of faith schools; freedom of religious expression; whether Islam is antithetical to feminism; some Muslims' 'mixed emotions' over 9/11; the military invasion of Iraq; collateral damage in Iraq; whether the West is responsible for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. While some of the above are only mentioned in passing, others are the subject of lengthy debates. It has to be said, though, that none of these issues is explored in any real depth. Rather, the arguments that the novel's characters put to each other—and, indeed, the arguments that they hear on television and radio debates—are, on the whole, reductive, simplistic, tired, and familiar. Having said that, perhaps this is exactly the point: today, more than a decade on from the novel's setting, debates in the mainstream British media tend not to be any more insightful or nuanced than they were in 2004. An uncharitable reading of *Dear Infidel* might complain that the novel fails to shed much real light on its central issues; a more generous reading would be that the novel diagnoses an ongoing failure to contest or reframe reductive dominant discourses about identity and multiculturalism in contemporary Britain.

While much of *Dear Infidel* is concerned with the political views of its middle generation of characters, somewhat oddly the novel focuses in greatest depth on the conflicted thoughts and desires of the two *least* political members of this generation: Imtiaz and Nazneen. Indeed, they are by some margin the two most interesting, convincing, and life-like characters in the novel. While Nazneen's nostalgic pining for ex-boyfriend Martin sometimes borders on the clichéd, her conflicted feelings towards her husband and their prospective future together are often well rendered. Imtiaz may be the outsider within his own family, but he is the probably the closest thing that *Dear Infidel* has to a protagonist. Sadikali's depiction of Imtiaz's obsession with pornography is not only convincing but also poignant and moving, and a novel that can derive pathos from addiction to porn is certainly doing something right. That Sadikali is more interested in Nazneen and Imtiaz than in other characters is further illustrated by the novel's narrative form; while most of *Dear Infidel* is written in the third person, occasional chapters in the second of the novel's three parts are narrated in the first person by these two characters (there is also one brief chapter narrated by Salman). These episodes written in the first person aren't as successfully realised as others, however, and it's not really clear what they are supposed to add to the novel; they don't really establish distinctive voices for the given characters, and there's nothing in them that couldn't have been conveyed through the third-person omniscient narration employed for the vast majority of the novel. At times it feels as if Sadikali toyed both with the idea of using third-person omniscient narration throughout and with using multiple first-person narratives throughout (as per Andrea Levy's *Small Island*), and ultimately opted for a kind of compromise between the two. While the novel benefits from having a fragmented structure and from exploring the

disparate experiences and points of views of its different characters, greater consistency in narrative form might have been beneficial.

Dear Infidel is, then, a slightly uneven debut novel; at times it showcases skill and even flair, but at others it falls slightly flat. Its ending, for example, is a little disappointing: late recollections from certain characters' childhoods don't particularly shed light on their personalities as adults nor on their falling out with each other, and the death of one of the main characters doesn't feel connected enough to the rest of the narrative to have real tragic resonance. All the same, in its focus on divisions within one British Pakistani family—and, in particular, the rhetoric of blame in which they are mired—*Dear Infidel* is a novel that exposes the myth of 'the British Muslim community' as a single, homogenous entity. For all of the issues over which they argue, the central question which divides the novel's characters turns out to be whether—and, if at all, in what ways—each of them self-identifies as 'British'. Tellingly, while Sadikali's characters are able to call on plenty of examples and arguments in order to bolster their various positions on this issue, their very obstinacy and refusal to listen to each other suggests that their identities are, in fact, as unresolved as their heated dispute. Accordingly, *Dear Infidel* suggests that while identity politics may be easy, identity itself never is.

Note on Contributor

Michael Perfect is Assistant Professor of English Literature at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He has also taught at the University of Cambridge, where he earned his PhD in 2011, and in London. His book *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014.

To Cite this Article

Michael Perfect, 'Review of: Tamim Sadikali, *Dear Infidel*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 12, Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015): 00–00. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/springautumn2015/perfect2.pdf>.