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Publishing's diversity deficit

Claire Squires

CAMEO CUTS #2



CAMEo Cuts

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The second CAMEo Cuts examines questions around diversity within the UK's publishing industry. With a specific focus on BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) participation as publishers, authors, readers, or featuring within books, Claire Squires comments on how UK publishing presents a 'diversity deficit'. This diversity deficit, despite a raft of diversity initiatives, suggests systemic and institutionalised practices of implicit and explicit discrimination within the literary economy.



About the author

Claire Squires is Professor of Publishing Studies and Director of the Stirling Centre for International Publishing and Communication at the University of Stirling. She researches contemporary book cultures, including literary prizes, book festivals, and small nations publishing. Her publications include *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007), and she is co-Volume Editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge History of the Book Volume 7: The Twentieth Century and Beyond*.

Publishing's diversity deficit

Claire Squires

'Only so much shelf space to go around?'

Shortly after the turn of 2016 into 2017, a book review appeared in the Guardian which immediately caused heated debate within the publishing and writing community. The successful chicklit, children's, and sci-fi novelist Jenny Colgan (who is white, based in Scottish and declares herself as 'Irish/Italian Catholic') was reviewing *The Secret Lives of the Amir Sisters* by Nadiya Hussain (Colgan, 2017). Hussain is Muslim, of British Bangladeshi heritage, and was the winner of the BBC's *The Great British Bake Off* in 2015. As one commentator put it:

That an Asian Muslim woman in a headscarf can win a thoroughly British competition proves that 'Britishness' is a broader and more open concept than some would like us to think. It proves that whether you choose to wear a headscarf, a turban or a bowler hat, Britain is not limited by homogeneity but strengthened by diversity.

(Aly, 2015)

Building on the platform provided by her win, Hussain went on to be a judge for Bake Off's spin-off *Junior Bake Off*, as well as publishing cookery books for adults and children, appearing on TV's *Loose Women* and *The One Show*, and as a columnist for *The Times*, and even baking the Queen's 90th birthday cake (orange drizzle, apparently). She also made a deal to author a series of contemporary women's fiction books, the first of which appeared in January 2017.

Colgan's review was incendiary. Subtitled 'This warm-hearted family saga from the Great British Bake Off star will surely sell like hot cakes – but I wish celebrities wouldn't dominate the bookshelves', Colgan turned her review into a critique of celebrities-turned-'authors'. Hussain's book is co-written with Ayisha Malik (as acknowledged on the book's title page, if not the cover), herself the author of the novel *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated*. Malik's agent explicitly describes her as Hussain's ghostwriter, meaning her public position must have been contractually agreed.¹ Colgan's tone on the partnership is rather snide, writing that the book is 'perfectly competent, as well it should be, as the "helper" or "consultant" of whatever we're supposed to call them these days is the highly talented Ayisha Malik'. Indeed, Colgan stated that her disappointment is because she is a 'fan' of Nadiya's, but finds the intrusion of celebrity writers into the marketplace problematic. This might be a justifiable critique of recent trends of celebritisation in the literary marketplace. However, what caused consternation (apart from some rather under-nuanced descriptions of what the book delivered – 'I was hoping for insights into a culture I don't understand as well as I'd like') was the way in which Colgan framed her discussion, with a specific target of a British Muslim woman. Colgan started with a parallel description of a bookish child in the library in a small town, and then another child in a small-town kitchen. Both have dreams: books, and baking, respectively. But never the twain shall meet in Colgan's construction, and she asks (after acknowledging that celebrity authors are hardly new):

Does she really need to put her name to a novel, too, when there's only so much shelf space to go around? [...] In the end, I think the worst thing about this is that it feels greedy [...] Books are a zero sum game. If you're reading one, you can't be reading another. And this surefire seller, promoted at every literary festival you'll attend this year, just feels like yet another chance snatched away from that kid whose library is closing down.

Colgan's remark that there is 'only so much shelf space to go around' was particularly ill-judged, given its exclusionary implications. One tweet responded, 'Dear black, brown & all woc [Women of colour]. Please do take up as much space as possible, whether on screens or shelves or anywhere else.' (@SKbydesign, 2017) Colgan temporarily disabled her Twitter account, and some individuals leapt to her defence, while others, including the author Joanne Harris, made even more trenchant critique.²

Excluded from the shelf

The publishing industry has long wrestled with its diversity deficit, a fact to which the fall-out from Colgan's review draws attention. Shortly after the review, the CILIP Carnegie Medal announced its longlist of 20 titles in February 2017, none of which were by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME³) authors. The Carnegie, judged by librarians, is the most prestigious awards for children's books in the UK, but has never been awarded to a BAME author. Children's authors (both BAME and white) quickly decried the longlist, which had excluded submissions from authors including Malorie Blackman, Patrice Lawrence, and Kiran Millwood Hargrave. Alex Wheatle, the winner of last year's *Guardian's* children's fiction prize called the exclusions "'appalling'", and with

fellow writer of colour Sunny Singh, called for a boycott (Kean 2017a; 2017b).⁴ And it's not just prizes – the nominated titles for giveaways in the 2016 World Book Night did not include a single writer of colour. The Reading Agency, the charity that organises World Book Night, passed the blame onto publishers, implying that they did not submit writers of colour for consideration (Shukla, 2015; Shaffi, 2015).

In the face of such exclusions, Sunny Singh, with Nikesh Shukla (editor of the crowdfounded book *The Good Immigrant* (2016)) and Media Diversified set up the Jhalak Prize for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour in 2016. The text accompanying the announcement of the prize is instructive in its critique of the British literary economy's dealings with writers, and readers, of colour:

the prize exists, to celebrate the achievements of British writers of colour. That we live in a mono-cultural literary landscape has been proven time and again, with the Writing The Future report, commissioned by Spread The Word, the backlash following last year's all-white World Book Night booklist and frustrations echoed by writers of colour who feel that their work is often marginalised unless it fulfils a romantic fetishisation of their cultural heritage.

There is a business case for having more writers of colour on our bookshelves. According to Spread The Word's report, BAME communities represent £300 million's worth of disposable income. (Media Diversified, 2016)

The Diversity Deficit

This publication will return to the concept of 'romantic fetishisation' noted in the prize announcement. The prize would go on to be

challenged: by one of its longlisted authors who felt the award risked ‘alienating’ a wider (white) audience (Cowdrey, 2017), the limited number of titles available to be entered (Onwuemez, 2016), and by the right-wing Conservative MP Philip Davies, who accused the prize of discrimination and asked the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to investigate. The latter challenge was rejected, with the EHRC commenting that the prize was “satisfied that the prize constitutes lawful positive action” and that it is the type of action which the Commission supports and recommends.’ (Singh, 2017)

The positive discrimination need for the prize is evidenced by a series of reports on (the lack of) diversity in the publishing industry. These include *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace* (2015), mentioned as a rationale for the Jhalak Prize, as well as the earlier *In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Publishing Today* (2004). These reports refer to issues of diversity in terms of the publishing workforce (including its authors), in terms of content (i.e. its output), and in terms of readership (i.e. its potential consumers).

These reports provide sobering reading for an industry that might well perceive itself to be liberal-progressive and left-leaning.⁵ Yet in the 2004 *In Full Colour* report, and then again in the 2015 *Writing the Future* report, UK publishing was shown to be lacking in terms of workforce diversity, frequently stereotyping writers of colour, and potentially losing income from BAME consumers in the literary economy.

The 2004 report, as I noted in my article, ‘Too Much Rushdie, Not Enough Romance? The UK Publishing Industry and BME (Black Minority Ethnic) Readership’ (2012) revealed black or Asian respondents were only 13%

of the overall sample of the UK publishing industry workforce. This number was higher than the percentage in the UK population overall, but much less than the 30% BME population of London, as reported in the 2001 census (the 2011 census would lift this figure to 40% (Office for National Statistics, 2011)). The UK publishing industry is heavily centralised, with 80% of survey respondents working in London (Kean, 2004a). Moreover, as I commented in my article, “industry respondents themselves perceived that publishing had a homogenised white, middle-class and even Oxbridge-dominated workforce, one in which BME workers had “experiences of institutionalised racism, tokenism and insensitivity” (Kean 2004a; 2004b; 2005, p.36). The specific warning made by the report was that this homogenous workforce meant that publishing was not allowing itself access to a “share of the £32bn spending power of Britain’s minority ethnic communities” (Kean 2004b, p.5)’ (Squires, 2012, p.106).

As a result of this report, a raft of diversity initiatives were put into place led by Arts Council England (ACE). These included the establishment of DipNet, a support network for BMEs already in, or wishing to enter, the publishing industry; ACE-sponsored bursaries for BME interns at a number of publishing companies (by 2012 these bursaries were managed by Creative Access, an organisation under threat since December 2016 after having its Government funding axed (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2016)); and workshops for unpublished BME writers to meet with publishers (Kean 2005). A UK Publishing Equalities Charter, a collaboration between ACE, the Independent Publishers Guild (IPG), the Publishers Association (PA), Skillset and the Society of Young Publishers (SYP), was launched in 2014 by Equip, the successor

to DipNet (UK Publishing Equalities Charter Supplementary Information Q&A Consultation Phase II, 2010; Squires, 2012, pp.106-7; Spread the Word, 2015, pp.28-9).

And yet by the time the 2015 *Writing the Future* report came out, little seemed to have changed. The new report focused more on writers, and – unfortunately – did not replicate the same survey method as the 2004 report, gathering attitudinal responses rather than data based on census categories. Nonetheless, its sample of publishers and literary agents showed 56% believed publishing not to be ‘culturally diverse’ at all, and a further 28% showing it to be only ‘a little diverse’ (Spread the Word, p.24). Elsewhere, the 2013 Bookcareers.com salary reported over 93% of its respondents classifying themselves as white (a deterioration from the same survey’s 2008 figure of 90%).

The introduction to the 2015 report, reflecting on its 2004 predecessor, referred to its ‘disturbing evidence of institutional bias, a sense of exclusion wedded to recruitment methods that undermined diversity rather than promoted it.’ (p.2) The initiatives set up after 2004 had to combat with ‘10 years of turbulent change affecting the UK book industry [with...] a negative impact on attempts to become more diverse [...] traditional publishers have retrenched and become more conservative in their editorial and employment choices’ (p.2). The report singled out the unpaid internship as the biggest culprit, but also saw broader, systemic issues of cultural behaviours and employment practice (including low salaries from entry to middle management levels, with the Bookcareers.com salary survey reporting an average starting salary of £17,775 in 2013; alongside a rapidly increasing gap between starting salaries and overall average

salaries). Such systemic issues also affect other sorts of diversity within publishing, including socioeconomic status, educational background and geographies (with publishing very heavily based in London, employing the Oxbridge-educated middle classes). Publishing is numerically dominated by a female workforce (about 4:1), but men are paid c16% more than women, with a clear glass ceiling effect in place (Bookcareers.com, 2013).

A session at the 2015 London Book Fair focusing on the damning *Writing the Future* report, while reporting on some positive initiatives within some publishers and writers’ organisations, had an angry edge to it, with an insistence that the publishing industry put the issue to the top of its agenda again. In 2016, the PA and IPG published a guide to *Creating a Representative Publishing Industry*, with the PA and the London Book Fair jointly held a Building Inclusivity in Publishing conference in November that year, encouraging various different groups and individuals to make ‘pledges’ surrounding diversity. The PA also started to run an employment survey, although it has decided not to release publicly any figures (aggregated or otherwise) until future years, in order that they can make year-on-year comparisons.⁶

A series of research interviews I recently conducted with commissioning editors demonstrated an evident awareness of problems with diversity. Individuals were eager to tell me that they had not been Oxbridge students themselves, or that they had attended a state school. One response from a white female commissioning editor at a large publishing company in London when asked about workplace diversity, is indicative of its very restricted reach:

*It's really hard, embarrassing. I mean [...] I feel like I'm probably the most, one of the most diverse people because I went to a comprehensive school, and you think AH! When someone like me – that's ridiculous!*⁷

Another editor demonstrated what she perceived to be the issue in terms of more diversified workforce:

*there's a lot of discussion [...] about diversity in terms of ethnicity and class in publishing too and I think, yeah I hope that will [...] change in publishing. But [...] I guess ultimately publishers are businesses so there needs to be a commercial imperative to [...] implement those political changes too.*⁸

The second interviewee pinpointed the challenge for the publishing industry to diversify: although there is much discussion about the socio-political need for diversity, for most commercially-oriented companies this arguably will not happen at a greater level than tokenism and brand reputation unless there is a clear economic driver.

BAME audiences – or potential audiences – provides one rationale for diversifying content. Successive reports have identified an 'untapped market' of BAME readers (Tivnan, 2010), and also perceived a mismatch between the genres that surveys indicate that BAME readers like to read, and the provision of genres which reflect a fully diverse society. The *Getting Closer to the BME Bookmarket* report showed BME readers to prefer the same bestselling genres as the overall sample: crime and thrillers (Hicks and Hunt, 2008). Literary fiction and romance were equally popular among BME respondents, with BME readers liking romance more and literary fiction less than the overall sample. As such (and with all

the caveats that any readership survey should hold, including a homogenisation of BAME readership), the emphasis by the publishing industry on BAME *literary* authorship needs interrogating (Squires, 2012). The 2015 *Writing the Future* report's surveys with BAME writers demonstrated, among other things, the predominance of literary – rather than genre – novelists. Literary novels may have more prestige (the two most recent Man Booker Prize winners have been writers of colour: in 2015 the Marlon James and 2016 Paul Beatty⁹), but the more financially lucrative mass-market genres are less frequently authored by writers of colour. In other words, while the literary marketplace seems to have embraced literary writers of colour, crime and romance writers, and characters, are much rarer.¹⁰

There is no simple equation to be made between diversity of workforce (both commissioning editors and writers), diversity of content and diverse readerships. We read to see ourselves and our culture reflected, but also to find out about other experiences, cultures, places, and periods; BAME editors will not always want to commission writers of colour, for example; and both writers of colour and white writers will want to create characters and scenarios which are outside their own direct experience (although questions of cultural appropriation arise when white writers do so¹¹). But whereas white authors are published across genres, writers of colour have a much lesser access to range of genres; and find what they do write is all-too frequently met with a clichéd reception and stereotyped packaging.

Clichés of Colour

Such pigeonholing (into genres; and by the paratextual manifestations of book covers, cover blurbs and endorsements, and pitch

lines) relates back to the comments made in the Jhalak Prize announcement about the 'frustrations of writers of colour who feel that their work is often marginalised unless it fulfils a romantic fetishisation of their cultural heritage'. Graham Huggan's conceptualisation of such fetishisation is detailed in his monograph *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), alongside subsequent accounts from – among others – Sarah Brouillette in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007), my examination of the publishing histories of Arundhati Roy and Zadie Smith in *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007), Claire Chambers' work on the publishing of British Muslim writers (2010), and Corinne Fowler's study of black and Asian writing from Manchester (2013).

Most recently, Anamik Saha's article on 'The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production' (2016) argues that precise data from Nielsen BookScan's electronic point of sales tracking system produces what he terms 'racializing effects' via the 'rationalizing logic of capital'. He argues this first via the 'suspiciously similar' look of novels set in India compiled by Twitter user @varathas (2014). Like Chambers before him, Saha argues that cover design shows 'the orientalist ways in which South Asia continues to be presented in the west' (p.3) He furthers the argument by talking about how 'racialization, as a process is intertwined with the rationalized processes of industrial cultural production', defining rationalization as the 'standardized practices that cultural industries implement to deal with the inherent unpredictability of the market' (p.4). This 'branding logic of cultural production', he argues, is further intensified when writers of colour are repeatedly likened to other writers of colour in order for publishers to convey their marketing

messages, even if the textual content of their works might suggest other literary parallels, including with white writers (p.8). Saha argues that publishers then use Nielsen BookScan's data (from which they can see the sales of other companies' books) to check potential sales figures against the chosen writer-of-colour parallel, meaning that, as one of Saha's interviewees puts it "'people get compared and pigeonholed much more scientifically now'" (p.7). But if the choices made for comparison are 'racialized', it has a delimiting affect for new writers. As Saha concludes:

through rationalization strategies – identifying unique selling points, market research, data analysis, audience segmentation – the marketing process racializes the cultural commodity in a deeply reductive manner, framed [...] through the orientalist gaze of the dominant culture that in effect runs the media industries. The perverse effect is that the conflation of the producer's ethnic or racial identity with the commodity's brand identity can actually limit the appeal of these particularly cultural commodities. (p.11)

The 2015 *Writing the Future* report concluded by commenting that – in its ongoing institutionalised racism – 'the book industry risks becoming a 20th century throwback out of touch with a 21st century world' – that 21st century world being one both of cultural and racial diversity, but also in which rapid change has come to the literary economy through digital technologies (Ray Murray and Squires, 2013). Literature and writing now operate with a dual system of traditional, or 'legacy', publishing, and new business models (including crowdfunding), and a vast hinterland of self-publishing platforms. It is now entirely possible to sidestep the

traditional gatekeepers of publishing, although of course there are then issues of prestige and of how self-published authors are able to find routes through to an audience. But the wealth of self-publishing forums enable writers to become well versed with the use of metadata which will allow readers to find and read texts which the mainstream publishing industry might never have published, or have published in an entirely different way. There is a genuine risk here to traditional publishing, in terms of cultural diversity, but also from the companies that run self-publishing platforms,

notably Wattpad, and, through Kindle Direct Publishing, Amazon. Publishing risks writers, and readers, finding platforms which are more clearly open and welcoming of diversity. There is, therefore, a clear business *and* political need for the publishing industry to interrogate its institutional, organisational, and socio-cultural practices. Moreover, the critically nuanced thinking of academic researchers can, and should, underpin such interrogations of publishing's diversity deficit, in order to make sure there is enough space on the bookshelf for us all.

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Endnotes

¹ Malik's role as ghostwriter for Hussain is explicitly described as such on her agent's website, <http://www.petersfraserdunlop.com/clients/ayisha-malik/>.

² The novelist Joanne Harris' explanation on her blog of the problems with Colgan's review is particularly thoughtful, but ultimately condemns her: 'No-one's snatching anything. She's a high-profile, well-established white author, begrudging a Muslim woman "shelf space." And that sounds pretty greedy, coming from someone with 27 books already in print. In fact, it sounds not entirely unlike "foreigners stealing our jobs." or "get back in the kitchen." Not a great moment for Jenny (or indeed, for the Guardian).' (Harris, 2017).

³ This publication predominantly uses the designation BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic), apart from when quoting from earlier publications which use BME (Black and Minority Ethnic).

⁴ Kean's article (2017b) refers to a 2015 CILIP report which 'found that 96.7% library workers in the UK identify as white, almost 10% above the national workforce average in the UK Labour Force Survey' (CILIP, 2015).

⁵ Successive opinion polls run by the industry magazine *The Bookseller* show publishers to be supportive of the Lib Dems in the 2010s General Election, of Labour in 2015, and (very substantially) of Remain in the EU referendum (see, for example Bookseller news team, 2015).

⁶ Personal communication with Seoanaid MacLeod, Publishers Association, 20 February 2017.

⁷ Research interview with commissioning editor, January 2016.

⁸ Research interview with commissioning editor, January 2016.

⁹ Although neither writer is from the UK: James is Jamaican; Beatty from the USA.

¹⁰ The question of genre is interesting with regards to the case of Nadiya Hussain and Ayisha Malik, who are both writing commercial women's fiction: perhaps this was part of the issue for Colgan.

¹¹ The ethics of cultural appropriation have recently tested through comments by authors Lionel Shriver and Hal Niedzviecki. See Convery, 2016 and Lederman and Medley, 2017.



CAMEo Cuts

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