

## **Yasmin Alibhai-Brown**

### **Journalist, author and activist**

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the journalist author and activist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. Over a 20-year career, Yasmin has written for the Independent, the Guardian, the Observer, the New York Times, the Evening Standard and TIME magazine now a part time professor of journalism at Middlesex University, she's also a weekly columnist for the i newspaper, the New European and the International Business Times. A self-confessed 'lefty liberal anti-racist feminist', Yasmin is the founding member of the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, and in 2017 she was a columnist of the year at the National Press Awards.

Yasmin, thank you for joining me.

Very nice to be here.

**So Yasmin, you have been called a 'lefty liberal anti-racist feminist Muslim'. How would you describe yourself?**

Exactly like that! It's really good. So absolutely, mum, cook, all of that can be added on but is who I am.

**I mean I've followed your career for many years of course, and I've known you for a while as well. You're an agitator and a disruptor in the best possible sense.**

Well, I think you're either born that way and therefore can't help it. I was looking at my old school reports and they said things like, "Very clever but breaks the rules." And I do think that in this country particularly, we need more people who are prepared to question and disrupt because there's a terrible pressure, even in my industry, you know, there's all this fancy talk of oh the media, the Fourth Estate, holds power to account. No it does not! Absolutely does not any more. There were, and have been, and still are, amazing journalists on the whole. We've become part of the system. And so yes, you know, I think whether you are as a journalist, and that's what I teach my students, that the way to stand out is not to do what is expected, but to do what is not expected of you. And that way you change expectations, and you change yourself.

**What do you think has contributed to this decline in the disruptive nature and the quality of journalism, then? Is it churnalism, the dependence on PR, fewer journalists in newsrooms? Is it the move to social media, clickbait and television news, that kind of thing? What's caused the malaise, and what can be done about it?**

It's a very good question. I've been thinking about it actually, I have just in the car been reading the most extraordinary piece of journalism I've read in the last five years. It was written for the Manchester Evening News and it was about the Manchester bomber. It was 35 pages of really deep investigation into this boy. The geopolitics, the family life, the community, the mosque, his internal life, his external life. This was not unusual once upon a time. Maybe not 35 pages, but we did have an extraordinary tradition, the Sunday Times in particular, but the Observer, all sorts of papers, doing proper investigative journalism. We don't do that any more because it's expensive, and a competition is high, and so they'd rather write about Beyoncé than write about something like this. So there's that, the cost thing. The second thing, and I think this is something I want to explore at some point, did some of the best journalism, pro and against, was in the Thatcher era. That was almost the last moment actually, because she roused such strong feelings on both sides that you got really brilliant journalism. Then we kind of entered a phase of consensual politics where the Labour Party became more right wing, and then Cameron who was a right winger but sort of sounded a bit soft and lefty, and the whole idea of consensual journalism, which depended on you having dinner with your politician friends in the evening –

**Or them denying access to you if you fell out with them.**

Yes. But more and more, it became so cosy. I mean, there are people who today are talked about as being great broadcasters, and I remember going to birthday parties of some of them and being appalled that three quarters of the guests were politicians. And if you're cavorting with them in that way, how on earth do you distance yourself from them?

**Yes, because there needs to be a distance and there needs to be a healthy tension, does there not?**

Yes. So I think it was interesting. We had some amazingly strong, disruptive, well-written and fair journalism until the 90s, and I think the descent has been since the 90s

**I think people have seemingly lost their ability to hold their attention span on anything these days. I mean, I can't watch a TV show without going on Twitter at the same time or going on the Internet Movie Database to find out what's going to happen. And it's the same with my newspapers, if I'm honest. When when I was in my late teens I would I would read the Sunday Times cover to cover, now I skim it on my app, and I do read it, but if it's a long article that puts me off. I know it shouldn't be like that, but there seems to be a confluence of several factors that have contributed to where we are.**

Well, I think this is where social media and Internet does come in, because it's like, you know, a million canapés. And if you eat too many canapés, you can't eat a proper meal, can you?

**But you don't feel satisfied either.**

No. But you gorge yourself on canapés. But I think the New European is a very good example that there is a hunger out there. Those articles in the New European are really quite long compared to what you get in most of the papers. And I think people are buying, and people are interested, and some of the magazines, you know, magazine journalism is standing up to the pressures, partly because it is keeping its nerve. So even the Sunday Times magazine for example, or any one of the newspaper magazine articles, you still you get 3,000 words to explore a subject, and they are hugely popular. So I think it is also trying to... for editors to take on this assumption. Young people, I think, do have this problem because they've grown up on the canapés, but they unless you can give something sustained attention, what will you do at university? What will you do with any number of subjects, whether it's science or the arts, if you have no capacity to read long pieces of books and sustain them and make sense of them or argue against them? I think culturally, we need to start thinking a little bit more about how do we train... I mean, too many parents kind of roll over and say, "Oh, Tom won't read." Well, make Tom read. You know, both my children hated it when I bullied them.

**But presumably thanked you for it later.**

Now, one is a barrister and he has to read a lot. My daughter is a medical engineer. Again, there's a lot of heavy reading involved. But it also then takes away public understanding. I mean, I am so upset about Brexit, I can't tell you. I'm so upset about it because how the under-educated were fooled, and they were fooled because they were under-educated about Europe. You know, what a terrible failure of our newspapers and magazines over that period. That they didn't tell. I mean, if they'd made an informed decision, that would have been fine – but they made uninformed decisions which are changing our history. I mean, I'm just at the moment finishing a column for the New European. Margaret Thatcher made a fantastic – I'm not a Thatcherite, I hated her – she made the most amazing speech in Bruges in 1992 – have a look at it – where she talked about how we in Britain are absolute Europeans, and then listed the history, you know, reminded people that Chaucer went to Bruges, and how William Caxton, the first printer of books, got his first book in English printed in Bruges. And all these examples about how European we are, you know? I wish Theresa May would educate herself and just read that speech, because what she said in the speech in Florence was an embarrassment when she said 'Europe is not part of our national story'. She is the most uninformed of the lot if she can stand up and say that. You know, our language our Protestantism, our Shakespeare! Shakespeare used Plutarch as his source. He based his plays in Rome and Venice and France, you know? Keats and Shelley said they couldn't have written their bones if they hadn't gone to Europe. What are these people talking about? And our population who was hoodwinked was only hoodwinked because they were so under-educated and uninformed. And I think that is a real crisis in public understanding.

**It's part of the problem that journalists are only giving the public what they want insofar as I read something in the Sunday Times a couple of days ago and it was all about how Boris and Philip Hammond and Theresa May and Amber Rudd were all going to fall out with one another, and who's up and who's down, and the actual substance of what they may or may not have disagreed on wasn't even part of the article. And I find myself indulging in the personalities and the gossip and the intrigue, and then at the end I thought to myself, actually these are incredibly important matters, none of which anyone has given any thought to – me or the journalist.**

Yes. And I think it's the petty gossipy stuff now that gets places. But you know, I write very serious columns most of the time, and interestingly, whether they hate me or love me they do read what I write. And you know, I don't make any concessions to populism, or you know, I don't write horribly convoluted sentences like some show-off journalists do. I write in transparent, easy to understand language. But I think people can absorb really important ideas and need to be treated with respect. But at the same time, not every opinion needs to be respected. I mean, when opinions come out of nothing but sheer prejudice or ignorance, you know, like today I tweeted, for example, I said, "The real story about Germany is that here was Merkel who gets her fourth term after taking in a million refugees. That is the story." I said it's ethical and courageous governance, okay? So some people got very excited about this and said, "Yeah, yeah, well, you know Germany has the resources, and the bigger story is the hard right." It's not the bigger story. For Angela Merkel to take such a big gamble and do what in my view is the right thing, I thought she would never get in. And fourth term is impossibly hard anyway. You know, that's when people start sucking up to voters and giving them what they want, and she didn't do that. And it's that kind of stuff that we need to be talking about. So all the tweets, and even the BBC reports, they've only focused on the hard right party. They haven't focused on what I think is the real story. And it should at least be part of the real story, but because the cowardice and the anti-refugee thing is now so embedded in our culture that not even the BBC dares to say, "Look, she did not suffer the way she might have. There are people who can understand refugees."

**But journalism itself seems to be coming under attack as never before. I mean, Laura Kuenssberg has had to have had bodyguards at the Labour Party conference. I remember very memorably, you know, I personally thought Nick Robinson's reporting of the of the Scottish devolution and referendum on independence was actually quite balanced, really. And that's what you want. But there were huge personal demonstrations against him; a lot of vitriol. You only have to look at Donald Trump, his whole raison d'être is you can't trust the fake news media. I mean, it seems journalism is being attacked from all sides.**

Yes. We have let ourselves down. And then I think the... I mean, I get the most horrendous abuse and threats and so on coming my way.

**Doesn't that upset you? I mean you are a human being, as well as a respected journalist.**

I don't read them, but I wrote my column on it last week, the IBT column, saying that for the first time in recent weeks I have started getting a bit paranoid. I've lost weight, I'm waking up... because there are always these big peaks and this peak came a few weeks ago in response to a tweet I sent, and I would still send it again today, you know, I'm not going to be threatened by these people. But the tweet was in response to something a right wing journalist had tweeted saying our education service is under terrible pressure because all these immigrant children speak too many languages. So I tweeted and said, "I am an immigrant. I speak four other languages. That actually makes me smarter than a little Englander." And that's what raised this latest surge, horrible surge. So it is not easy.

**I mean, obviously you should have the right and hats off to you for saying that, but is there a part of you that regrets doing it just because of the sheer administration time invested in dealing with it, or blocking them or whatever.**

I've got an automatic blocker, so I don't see it. I don't go to the notifications. I just don't. But other people do. And so whenever I am in public places they'll say, "Why do you put up with all of it?" and then my panic rises because I haven't seen them and they have, and I begin to worry. But you have to be quite determined and brave, and I'm not superwoman. Because it is horrible, it's scary. I talked about it on the BBC yesterday, because there was some – how shall I describe – naïve journalists, young journalists, saying, "I believe in absolute freedom of expression." And I said, "Ah-a. No you don't. Because you work for a newspaper, and your newspaper editor tells you what you may write and what you may not write. The law tells you what you can say and what you can say. You can't say you're an absolute freedom of speech. Because you're not."

**The Supreme Court in America dealt with this a couple of hundred years ago, didn't they, limits of free speech, shouting fire in a crowded theatre and so on.**

Yes, but even if it doesn't lead to action, you know, the famous may not be talked about in certain ways, so I said that's just a lie, you know, and words hurt. Words really hurt. I think it's the first time she'd thought about that.

**Presumably though you would want to retain the freedom to offend.**

I don't think I want to sit around offending people as a mission.

**You're right. That was probably the wrong word. Not for it's own sake of course, but that you would have the right to be robust in your criticism and the way that you express your view about certain things.**

Yes, and we all do it. And you know, that's fine.

**Obama once said, "We can disagree without being disagreeable." And I thought that was actually a really nice way of summing it up.**

And certainly, you know, as a Muslim, a liberal Muslim woman, I'm doing both things; I am attacking some of the worst elements in Muslim communities and I'm also very

alert to the racism directed at us all the time. So you pick up the hatreds from both sides. That's not what I'm talking about. I think disagreeing with respect and properly is absolutely part of the Democratic environment. I think though, there are too many people who think it's their job to go and offend, and Muslims are the ones they most want to offend. I remember a young journalist said to me once, "Do you know, the best way to make your name nowadays is to go around attacking Muslims."

**Disgraceful.**

"And that way it gets into the news."

**What, because you are supposedly courageous.**

Yes.

**It's a spectacle isn't it, of anything now.**

But it is the Muslim thing that gets... and also I think what say Diane Abbott goes through, Diane Abbott gets more abuse Twitter abuse than any other MP.

**I don't like Diane Abbott's politics, I've met her a few times, she's not anywhere near my favourite politicians list. She does not deserve anywhere near the criticism that she gets, because it's not criticism it's abuse – and she doesn't deserve that. She's an elected representative; she's earned the right to state her view. You know, I think it's disgraceful that they crowd out any what I would consider to be legitimate criticism of her and Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonald's policies. I don't agree with a lot of them but to single her out because she's a woman, she's black, she's opinionated – it's just disgraceful.**

You know, and a lot of women, especially in public life, begin to feel. "Is this worth it?"

**Can you blame them?**

No. No. But you know, I'm not a martyr. I mean, I have a really good time in my job. I love my job. I started really late in life doing this, you know, very late. I was 37.

**What did you do before?**

I used to teach in adult education, for years and years and years. Because I knew nobody in the journalistic world, it's a very nepotistic world. And then one morning I got up and said, "Right, I'm going to write a column and I'll see what happens." And it got published in the Guardian. That's how it started.

**Incredible. Did you just email them the column out of the blue?**

There was no email! Honestly. This is how it happened.

**Your writing must have been very, very good though, for an opinion editor to take something like that on spec. It must have self evidently been...**

Well, what happened was I did know one person who was at the Guardian, who used to come in and lecture to my students in Southwark Adult Education Institute, where I ran a department, and he used to tell them about how the media works, the British media, and you know, all of this. And it was a very nice man called Aidan White who then went on to become head of the International Federation of Journalists in Europe. So I rang him and said, "Aidan, I don't know at all whether this is any good." No mobile phones either, then. "Would you please look at it and tell me, because I've just written it." So he said, "Yes, all right, I'm going on holiday, meet me here and I'll see it." So he was on his way on holiday, and I went to see him, I showed it to him and he said, "Oh..."

**This is like a scene from a film!**

It was actually! And he said, "Okay, we'll send it. I'll send it to Brenda Polan," who was the editor of the women's pages on the Guardian. It wasn't anything to do about being a woman at all. And they published it. And so I started writing more and more, and six months later I left my job and I got a job on a wonderful magazine which unfortunately has gone, called New Society. I got a job in six months. I'm completely untrained. That's why I'm so like, feral, I think. Because I'm self-made.

**And probably all the better for not having been classically trained.**

No.

**I think you have been trained, it's just been...**

Life.

**Exactly.**

So that was extraordinary.

**How do you choose your topics? Because I was just reading some of your recent columns, you know, you wrote about revenge porn... do you kind of get up in the morning, read the papers and then react to something, or is there always a column about something that you've read that you think, "I'll write something about that in the next couple of months." How does it work?**

Well, it can't be a couple of months, we were living in such a fast world, so I read all the papers in the morning and have a couple of ideas. But I also liked this speech in Florence, there was this statement Mrs May made which has stayed with me and I just knew I had to write about it. So sometimes it incubates in my head, and actually it's better for it, you know? And then sometimes it's just very instinctive. I kind of feel, "I have to write on this."

**Do you have a settled view in your head and then write the column as the kind of codified version like a manifestation, or as the words flow, is that your thought process and then as the article concludes that's actually you concluding that as well?**

Yes, but nobody ever knows what I'm going to say.

**Including you? At the beginning?**

I know that I can have different views of different subjects. So what I don't think anybody ever expects of me is that, "Oh, she's on the left so she'll be very nice to Jeremy Corbyn," or as I've just said in this interview, you know, I think Margaret Thatcher made an extraordinary speech on Europe, which is so unexpected coming from somebody who detested her. So I do surprise myself sometimes, because I can't hold an ideological... I'll put it another way.

**You can respect your opponents while still opposing them.**

Yes, but I have no loyalties, that's the thing.

**But that gives you freedom because you have strong ethics, you know, you're not advocating law breaking or violence. It is the ultimate in being what is properly called free thought.**

Yes.

**Which is actually what you want from your columnists really, that you're reading, is you know, an opinion and musings unfettered by any dogma. Because I don't want to read your column and you basically say the same thing you said a year ago, rehashed and reworded, I quite like the fact that I never have a clue what you write about. And half the time I might disagree with you but I already respect you in advance and I am prepared to give you a fair hearing. I enjoy that, even if I sometimes put one of your columns down and think, "No, I don't agree with her on that."**

Have you stamped on them ever?

**No, I've never done that! But I've always felt refreshed for having read it. It forces me to put my own views under scrutiny.**

Well, this is why I think when I got the Columnist of the Year, I think they said, "She gets to the heart of the matter," and I think I have got a template. I do judge everything, including myself, with that template and it's a template of equality and human rights, and it's the same template for my mum and the Queen and everybody in between. So I believe profoundly in this template that there is a way of being human which is moral, ethical and consistent. So you will never find me being flippant in saying I love this one day, and another go against myself in that way. So using that template, it becomes possible to navigate these turbulent times. Right? So for example, if I say, "I think, as a feminist, as a passionate believer in equality, I can

not, I cannot, support the changes in Muslim families that I see now, which we never had in my family, where young girls are covered up.” I can’t accept that. I just think that is wrong because it says something about a young girl and a woman, and her presence in a public space which I cannot accept. Am I, as I am often accused, am I betraying my people? And I say to them, “I have no loyalties. I judge what a judge, because I fundamentally believe in the equality of women and females with males and that’s it.” Right?

**The difficulty of any argument is often that you will get feminists, or people who describe themselves as feminist, on either side of the argument. People say it’s the ultimate expression of feminism that a woman can wear a niqab or a hijab and then another feminists I’ve read have said that that’s a disgrace for even thinking it. So sometimes you end up none the wiser.**

Well, I’ve always said the test for me is, I think, you know, nice, kind white liberals often say to me, “But it’s a choice.” How do they know it’s a choice?

**Exactly. Well that’s the problem I have with it.**

How do you know it’s a choice? There are hijabs you can now buy for six-month-old babies in Shepherd’s Bush market. Is that baby making that choice? I have the same problems with Orthodox Jewish children being dressed and brought up the way they are, and they have the same problems with little Sikh boys whose identity is defined in the way it is by their parents in their communities. It’s fine – teach your children about your religion, I was taught about mine. But I was given a choice by my mother – my father was an atheist – my mother always said, “I’m not going to force you. You make up your own mind because if I force you, you know, God is not fooled by that. So when you feel you want to be a Muslim and pray, you will know and you can do it.” And that’s exactly what happened.

**How do you label yourself as a writer? Because when I think of a journalist I think of someone a trilby with the word PRESS popping out, you know, like in these kind of films and everything, reporting what’s happened, whereas you’re very much a columnist, an advocate, a polemicist. You’ve got an opinion and you’re arguing your case, but you’re not reporting the news as such. I mean, I know there’s many different shades of journalism, but how would you label your own journalism?**

Well I do write features, I do do proper features where I interview people.

**So sort of straight, traditional journalism.**

Yeah. Often quite long. I’ve just written one on... it’s 45 years since we Ugandan Asians arrived here this year, this autumn, and again it’s going to make quite a lot of people very cross, because I have challenged the idea that we were these wonderfully talented and indispensable people in Uganda, and in this horrible man called Idi Amin threw us out. That’s just not true. So I’ve written about how we too were at fault. How we were racist against black people, and still are. So when he threw us out, it was a deeply popular move because we did not change after

independence. The British had brought us to East Africa to be the middle class, to be the buffer between them and blacks. And okay, you can say blame the British, but you can only blame the British up to a point. After independence we should have wised up. The Asians of South Africa didn't behave like that. They identified with the liberation struggle, we did not. So I've said some of what happened to us, it's time for us to address our faults. It's not going to make people happy, is it? Interestingly enough, I interviewed some peers, Ugandan nation peers, a lot of people – black as well as Asian, because the black Ugandan's story has never been told – there are hundreds of thousands of exiles from Uganda whose families were tortured and killed. None of us were tortured or killed. We've kind of sucked up the attention. You can see why I'm controversial, can't you?

**I enjoy it! I think it's great.**

Anyway, so this one is coming up.

**A couple of quick questions spring to mind actually. In your writing, have you ever changed your mind? And have you ever changed other people's minds? Because I read your columns but I'm trying to think of the last time I actually changed my mind having read anyone's column. So it's not a slight on you; you know, I'll read David Aaronovitch and I'll agree with 80% of what he says and then I will have forgotten it the next day, which probably says more about me than him. But is there a certain joy in that in terms of the influence that you can have as a journalist?**

I don't think minds change instantly. I think what happens is you plant a seed, and then I bet you, you know, the next time a subject comes up which is related to a column, something about that column will influence the way you're thinking about it. It's germination.

**It's not a Damascene conversion.**

But I do know that, you know, I am a Republican.

**Me too. I think we basically agree on everything.**

I have written very strong pieces. I wrote recently about what the Royals did to Diana, you know, plucked when she was a damaged 17-year-old, arranged marriage she didn't, in the end, want – just like a bad Bollywood film, it was. I got so many letters saying, "You really made me think and I now see what happened to Diana." So sometimes you do really change people's minds. Because of PR machinery at the Palace has been so strong and so efficient, and for 20 years they kind of completely removed her, didn't they, from memory.

**I adore the BBC, but the one failing they have is their royal coverage is just totally unfettered, fawning, anything that the royals do. You know, if it was anyone else whatsoever it wouldn't even make the news, because Prince Harry has done something, it can be the third lead story on the Six O'Clock News.**

**I'm sure he's a very nice person, and I'm sure he wants to do a good job, but to me, you know, they do seem to be doing their PR.**

It's the nature of all royal correspondents. The papers are the same. They're fawning. And you know, if you have a defence correspondent, the defence correspondent gives you analysis, proper analysis.

**Yes. The defence secretary might have got this wrong. My readers.**

All royal correspondence are fawners, which is why they've created this aura, you know, and it does not help anybody at all. If we are a democracy, every body has to be scrutinised.

**We can't be a democracy if we are an unelected and unaccountable head of state. For me, it's that simple.**

Absolutely. Yes.

**I mean, I don't like Donald Trump, but at least the American people have the option to get rid of him in three years. And I hope they do.**

And you know, I'm often asked, "Who do you have, then?"

**Let the public decide.**

And I would say, "I can think of some really good names. Joanna Lumley would make a very good titular head."

**She'd be brilliant.**

David Attenborough, when he was a bit younger, would have made a wonderful president for us, wouldn't he? What an amazing character. This country is so talented. What, we can't find any talented people? Look at southern Ireland. They've had, you know, Mary Robinson, Trevor McDonald. There are many people who would be good presidents.

**I used to be on the local council in York for many years and we had a civil head of the council, the Lord Mayor, that was above the politics of the day, and then we had a council leader who was in the trenches and fighting everyone is his side and us as well. So it's about planting a seed, is it then? So have you ever changed your own mind?**

Yes. One year, I think, after the Iraq war, I was just so angry about this country's itch to go to war. This country itches always, every few years, to go to war.

**We just seem to have the urge to bomb people every so often for no reason.**

So I wrote... I said one year that I wouldn't wear a poppy that year because I think... they keep saying 'never again' but they don't mean it. And in a way it fetishises an

untruth. Right? So I wrote this rather fast and fiery piece, and I got approached by a group of veterans who took me out to tea. I had written this in the Standard where I was a columnist. And they sat me down, and they were lovely, lovely people. They were some Indian veterans, there were some white British veterans, and Caribbeans, and they talked to me and they said how it made them feel, what I wrote. And they really affected me. So the following week I wrote a column saying I was wrong.

**That must have taken courage as well.**

Well, if you're wrong, you're wrong. You just say it, you know? It doesn't bring you down.

**How were you wrong?**

That I did... I think they said the poppy isn't about them, it's about us. And I had identified the poppy with the government and government propaganda.

**I would identify with, you know, our trenches rather than the Germans for example, whoever the enemy du jour was.**

No, what they said was, "It's about us, the soldiers, and many of us, you know, what we went through is what the poppy is about. It's not about the government and government policy."

**It's about showing respect for our men and women in uniform and the sacrifices that they've gone through. I'll buy that.**

For them, yes. That they suffered. They suffered.

**I don't doubt that.**

And I thought, "Yes, you're right." It made me think again. Another time I had written – and this one I'm not sure I should have changed my mind after all – because of my own personal life. I am fairly intolerant of women who go off with other women's husbands. Having been through it myself. So I'm very tolerant, because I think for a feminist, the first thing is to care about other women, and females. So even if a man is going to be a rake, if women started saying no, you know, he wouldn't have that choice. So I have been – well, maybe it's unfair – but quite hard on mistresses and people having affairs and so on.

**But I have a problem with this. Because I've never, ever once mentioned the Dolly Parton song 'Jolene' in this podcast ever. But you know, she begs with her husband's mistress not to take her man. And you know, I've got no sympathy for the mistress but it surely is up to the bloke as to whether she wants to be with Dolly or Jolene.**

No, but as a sister... if we believe that women... we need to care about each other. Then I think it is important to say that maybe men will always do this, but if women started thinking about how it hurts other women. So anyway, I have consistently taken this view and I had some quite painful responses from mistresses saying, "Do you know what it's like that he's never with you at Christmas?" You know, you have to hide, you are the invisible person in his life. You know, one particular woman said, "I've been with him 20 years and he's been promising me every year that he's going to make the move."

**She should tell him to sling his hook and get someone who loves her properly.**

Women. Women! We women. And I started thinking, "Maybe I shouldn't do this."

**It's awful, isn't it, when you start criticising people on their emotional choices, because there's always the humanity element.**

I'm just giving examples of where you do have to question yourself and say, you know, maybe that wasn't good. Maybe that wasn't fair.

**Now ,you said you weren't invited on the BBC's political programmes during Brexit and the election because you were a 'feisty woman of colour'. I mean, did someone at the BBC tell you that?**

No, I'm assuming, because why would you? I write all these columns, and it's still going on. It's still going on, right? That this is not your subject. What am I, a brown-skinned outsider, still?

**But they would have any other equally impactful columnist on to talk about the general matters of the news of the day. Why not you?**

Yes. Exactly. You ask them. It's a question I do want to ask them. And I've had conversations with them and they say, "Oh, no, it's can't be, it can't be." Yes. So for every 50 requests I get from the media, not just the BBC but often the BBC, to come and talk about being a Muslim...

**But it's pigeonholing you.**

Yes. That's what I'm saying. That's why this award was really important, because it acknowledged that I am now a mainstream journalist.

**That can write about lots of matters.**

Yes. And I have to say, even after that, Sky News treats me with real respect as a political journalist; the BBC does not. And I don't know what to do about it.

**And yet because of the way the BBC is funded, you know, diversity is such an incredibly... and also having a plurality of different voices, you would have**

**thought that given that you are Muslim, feminist, a woman – these are all of the types of voices that they need to hear, more from... you're an incredibly well-respected journalist, you would seem to me to be the obvious choice. So is it just subconscious...**

Bias.

**... bias and racism?**

I tell you, the one programme that has been much more open to me is, surprisingly, Question Time.

**I've seen you on it quite a few times. Although I've stopped watching Question Time, for the good of my own mental health, frankly.**

But I have never felt that about Question Time. I felt, you know, they've called me up for the most difficult of programmes and had faith that I would deliver. I haven't had a call since Brexit, but at least I feel they've given me a chance. Newsnight? Any of the others? No. And I just think that there is so much unconscious bias still in the BBC, and they talk diversity but they don't even begin to understand it. Right? All these political programmes on Radio 4, you know, so many of them. Its just so clubby, you know, they'll be... and they're all brilliant journalists – David Aaronovitch, Anne McElvoy, Jonathan Freedland – these are the names that leap into their brains. And it's just not good enough really.

**Do you get on with them on a personal level? When you meet them at various functions are you in columnist mode or do you just talk about families and normal things? Because I meet some of my journalist friends who actually talk about the things that they still talk about on television, and then others they don't mention that at all, it's just more about their family and their friends and their Über being late or whatever. You know, normal people stuff.**

Well, I am just who I am. I don't have a persona of any kind. But I do sometimes do put it to them that they've got it wrong about this, that and the other, and actually to be fair to them, I was doing a very interesting panel discussion last week, and because I speak freely, I do speak freely, a lot of people from the industry came up and said, "Oh I'd really quite like to write that for me," or, "I haven't thought about this in that way, do you want to do something?" So I realised that actually sometimes it's just a kind of blindness and deafness, so when they actually hear the voice. They do see, you know, the capacity you might have, or that you're not part of the inner circle. And I said to them, "For me, the greatest thing I bring is I'm an insider-outsider. I will never be an insider, you know, because I am a migrant, I don't come from public school, I am not part of their profile."

**You're also a free thinker as well.**

Yes.

**So you are you are, in a sense, self-isolating in terms of your viewpoints, and rightly so, because that's the very thing that gives you the freedom to write unfettered of any particular prejudice or inherited worldview.**

And I think that some of the best journalists have their perspective, the insider-outsider, you know?

**Name them. Who do you respect?**

Who do I respect? For example, I really think Joan Smith is a very good columnist and writer, because she sees she's never seen herself as an insider, and you know, she did something remarkable. I edit some books for a series called Provocations, and she wrote a book for me actually arguing against the monarchy system, and she broke every confidence. Her partner previously was an MP, so she's going to palaces and have these conversations. And of course, the unwritten rule is you never report what you hear in Buckingham Palace at a private do. What did she do? She broke every rule. That's great. That's real courage. That's a free mind, I think. You know, I think Gary Young is one of the most amazing writers.

**He's been writing for many, many years, his column in The Guardian.**

Yes. So it's people like that.

**I remember when he was at Labour Students! That's how far back I go.**

Simon Jenkins I think, sometimes, he's an insider but he will surprise you sometimes.

**Sir Simon has sat in that very chair, and we interviewed him a while ago. A fascinating man. An independent mind, as you say.**

Yes.

**What's to be done, then? I mean, how can we solve this creeping anti-Islam sentiment, the kind of Brexit, Trump... it all seems to be heading in in many ways, on one viewing, in the wrong direction. Do you see your work as more urgent and necessary than ever now, to be one of the voices that has to stop this?**

I certainly don't know if I can stop it, but I certainly will never stop fighting these forces of darkness that have come... down on the world actually, from every corner. It's hard to be optimistic today about the world, but at the same time, although I'm not a Corbyn fan, I am very pleased that the last election, the 2017 election, you know, he proved the pollsters and all these pundits wrong.

**The Westminster establishment.**

Yes. And that May didn't get her way. I think that was a good moment in politics that he faced abominable prejudice from the press, and he still overcame that. So there

are little sparks. There is also a really good movement building up. Amina Lone, who is a local councillor, a number of Muslim women, who are now becoming bolder about taking on the regressive and oppressive Islam that is funded by Saudi Arabia. They never used to, but they're now deciding to take it on. Keeping silent is not an option, because we have to fight this thing.

**I don't know any of my friends or family that support selling Saudi Arabia any form of arms or weapons, and I don't understand why there isn't riots on the street about our government doing it. Because if even the government just say, "It's lots of money and it creates jobs," and that's the only defence that even they dare give.**

Yes, but they shouldn't be doing it.

**I agree.**

You know, they're punishing the boys, the 18-year-old boy who tried to bomb us, right, they'll punish him. They won't punish the people behind him and the people behind them and the people behind them who created this troubled young mind.

**Just to just to be clear, I don't think anything justifies terrorism of course, and it should rightly be condemned and pursued to the maximum extent of the law. Having said that, as you've said, the situation is multi-layered and complex. And I remember the government seemingly starting to engage with this with the Prevent strategy; at least that was trying to talk to young Muslim men in particular that were at risk of becoming radicalised, if you want to use that word, where they were trying to do that, because for me that's in their interest as well as ours.**

But Prevent is a bankrupt idea, really. It's not trusted, because it comes under security.

**Yes.**

So I've just raised, my next year's project is, I've just raised £40,000 and I'm about to hopefully get it up to about 55, and I am going to work with psychologists, psychotherapists, researchers, and the project is going to be called 'The Inner Lives of Troubled Young Muslims'. Because Prevent isn't that. And we're going to do this project under wellbeing. This boy in Manchester, this man in Manchester, was psychotic. He had been made into a young, psychotic child by his family upbringing. Okay? If people had intervened when he was 13, if people had known his mental condition earlier, he might have been... I don't know if he *would* have been, but he *might* have been saved.

**I would have preferred that we have the chance to have tried it.**

Yes. So I'm very excited that next year I'm going to do this project with researchers and psychotherapists.

**That could be a piece in the jigsaw to make us all safer.**

As I say, that you know, when there's a white mass killer like the Norwegian or in America or wherever, the first questions we ask, "What was his psychology?" "What was his relationship with his father?" The questions we ask with Muslim mass killers: "What mosque did he go to?" Or she go to. "What web site was he looking at?" So it's as if they are externally driven.

**There's a there's a scene in a cartoon show called Family Guy where an explosion takes place and the police stop Peter, the main protagonist, and they think he's done it, and he winds his car window down and they literally hold a colour swatch up against his skin. And the whiter is it says it 'mentally ill' and the browner it gets it moves to 'terrorism'. And they're clearly making a strong point there.**

(Laughs) Well, yes! And I think we need to... it's the well-being agenda. It is the well-being agenda. And I think, you know, that Germany's doing quite good work with this, finding out the analysis, you know? Getting a proper prognosis for what is going on, and trying to help young people, because there are so many things going on in their heads. And I think, you know, one of the outcomes of this study will be that really respected psychological experts will come up with a model of intervention model to work with troubled Muslim families, long before radicalisation.

**What should the media do differently then, in terms of being part of the solution to this problem rather than perpetuating all of these borderline racist stereotypes?**

I don't think the media is going to change. But I think... for example, I recently said to them, to some quite powerful people, you know, we talk about these 'grooming gangs' of Pakistani origin, most of them, well, all of them are Muslim. Not all paedophiles are Muslim, but certainly this gang operation which victimises young white girls has a racial and ethnic profile, religious profile, and can't deny that. And I'm not going to deny it. But I also said to them, "Have you ever thought..." – because I know this – "... that what they were doing on the outside to the white girls, how were they treating their own women indoors? Have you thought about that? How were they as husbands? How were they as fathers? Do you really think they were doing this to these white girls, and they were walking in with bunches of flowers for their wives?" And their eyes almost fell out of their sockets. Never thought about that.

**To be honest I never thought of it until you said it just then. I imagined they weren't model citizens for certain.**

No. What is happening indoors and what's happening outdoors, there are connections. So I've just written a piece for Mail on Sunday, which hopefully will come out soon, an opening piece where I did meet the wives of some jailed groomers.

**How does it work when you write for something like the Mail on Sunday? Geordie Greig's a good editor, he obviously gives you space to argue what you need to say, but there are also the standard criticisms of the Mail and The Mail on Sunday and the Mail Online, in particular. And I you know you're not here to defend the Mail, but how do you feel as a journalist when you get the exposure and the news print that the Mail on Sunday, but one presumes you don't agree with some of their editorial stances, including, some would say, quite anti-Muslim sometimes, particularly with the Daily Mail.**

I write for The Daily Mail. I write for The Mail on Sunday. I write for The Sunday Times. Their politics are not my politics. They respect me hugely for having the views I have, and writing with great integrity, which is the word they use. The Daily Mail will ring me at nine o'clock at night to check if I am happy with the headline. No other newspaper has ever done that to me!

**And no one here in this podcast has defended the Daily Mail for a long time!**

I'm not defending them! Well, you know, I'm saying I write for them, and they treat my work with respect. And for every article, and I don't write to a Daily Mail agenda ever, you know? And sometimes they will ask me to do something extraordinary, like I remember a few years ago they rang me and said, "Do you want to do a piece on how migrant children in schools really help lift standards, and should we bus white children from uneducated families to Asian homes to do their homework?"

**That's not a brief I would have expected the Mail to have given anyone!**

And I wrote it, and it went in. Now, imagine such a piece in the Mail.

**Incredible.**

So I disagree, and they know I disagree, and Mr Paul Dacre knows I disagree, with the way they talk about refugees and migrants and Muslims and 'lefties' – but at the same time they do respect my work. And I weigh very carefully what I write for them. Where we do have similar views is I have quite strong views on the family. And so, often it's those kinds of articles that they'll commission, and I'm quite happy to write about that. But I have never, ever been asked by them to write stuff that I did not believe.

**Well I assume of course, A) that you wouldn't, but B) It is to their credit that they didn't even ask you.**

No.

**Would you describe yourself as an optimistic person, and what reasons are there to be optimistic? I mean, there's been some very serious issues discussed during this podcast, it's been a very, very interesting conversation. But are there any reasons to be cheerful?**

The thing that keeps me going, and you know, why I wake up in the morning and want to live and love and cook and all that, is that I really do believe in the power of words. I really do believe in what I do, and I'm so lucky that I am still able to do it. So my optimism is a kind of, I suppose, willed optimism, that if we, who believe in a better world, can just keep at it, and I'll tell you why I am incredibly optimistic. I think the young are amazing. I love the younger generations. I love the fact that they understand why things are offensive. I love the fact that they care about each other and about not wanting to be racist and sexist. I love it that they were not for Brexit. I love it that they think about inequality. So yes, from that point of view, when we're all dead and gone and the oldies who ruined it for them, if we haven't had a third world war with Trump and Co...

**Rocket man.**

... the young will inherit – and that makes me so optimistic.

**Yasmin, I hugely enjoyed our conversation. Thank you ever so much.**

Thank you.