



# I Can't Think Straight

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## **I Can't Think Straight** Shamim Sarif

Tala, a London-based Palestinian, is preparing for her elaborate Middle Eastern wedding when she meets Leyla, a young British Indian woman who is dating her best friend.

Spirited Christian Tala and shy Muslim Leyla could not be more different from each other, but the attraction is immediate and goes deeper than friendship. As Tala's wedding day approaches, simmering tensions come to boiling point and the pressure mounts for Tala to be true to herself.

Moving between the vast enclaves of Middle Eastern high society and the stunning backdrop of London's West End, I Can't Think Straight explores the clashes between East and West, love and marriage, conventions and individuality, creating a humorous and tender story of unexpected love and unusual freedoms.

## **I Can't Think Straight Details**

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Author : Shamim Sarif

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# From Reader Review I Can't Think Straight for online ebook

## Pamela J. says

This is a truly enjoyable book that exceeds the expectations of lesbian romance and provides interesting and complex political, cultural and religious settings.

I Can't Think Straight is really two stories; that of Christian Palestinian Tala and that of Muslim Indian Leyla. The two women meet coincidentally and their off and on encounters keep tension alive while growing a meaningful connection and mutual affinity.

### **The L word . . .**

If you're looking for smut, this ain't it. It's the tale of a more tender and connected love relationship, and while it doesn't always feel 100 per cent real, it is sexy, and it's more solid than sordid.

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## K.J. Charles says

On the one hand I want to flail and scream about this book because I enjoyed it so much and on the other I want to shake whoever edited it.

It is BRILLIANT FUN. There's rich jetsetting Palestinian Tala in Amman, on her fourth engagement, and middle class British Indian Leyla who works in her dad's insurance company but wants to be a writer. They meet, they fall hard, both have to come to terms with their sexuality and also with the different cultural pressures.

It's an ensemble piece, where the heroines spend more time apart than together. There is a big and beautifully drawn cast: the girls' husbands-to-be (who are both *\*lovely\** and thus not plot drivers, satisfyingly--this is primarily a book about the ways women interact), their gaggle of sisters of varying personalities, and especially the mothers, who are a study in compare and contrast. Tala's mother in particular is a monstrous creation of pride and selfishness and her comeuppance is small but long led up to, and perfect.

It's hugely readable, fantastic storytelling, with a lovely soap-opera compulsive-reading quality and a lovely glow of hope. Also absolutely hilarious at points, I laughed out loud. Not subtle, perhaps, but with good if loudly made points about internalised homophobia and misogyny and cultural oppression (Tala's sister married to a domineering man, quietly starving herself)

And all of the above goes double because it is not entirely easy for the reader to follow the book. I have never seen headhopping like it in my life--there's paragraphs where we switch viewpoint three times!--and in the Kobo version at least there are no scene or line breaks, so you read a paragraph about Leyla in London, move to the next, and discover we're with Tala in Jordan a month later without any indication of a scene change. It is a huge testament to the book's intense readability that this didn't cause me to hurl it across the room.

I enjoyed it wildly ( if I shelve a book as 'soap' that is high praise), but an editor who understands why point of view matters and a decent ebook formatter would make a huge difference to the reading experience.

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## **Eve says**

4.5 stars

This was such a fluffy and pleasant read, with some unexpected depth at times! I loved most of the characters and I especially enjoyed Tala, as well as felt sorry for her. I didn't feel that Leyla was as developed, but I still liked her! Their sisters Zina and Yasmin were super enjoyable as well (Lamia...well, I feel sad for her but she also frustrated me a lot). I really liked that we got to know their families, because it added depth to the story. I also liked how the book had some discussions about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and religion, but they did not overpower the story. I do wish we'd gotten more on the religion aspect wrt Tala and Leyla, as they don't discuss it again after their first meeting.

Overall, very enjoyable, quick read!

There were also some amusing lines in the book that I appreciated. I'll put them under a cut, and unfortunately I don't have page numbers because I read it on Hoopla which SUCKS:

(view spoiler)

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## **Ashley Reid says**

I was really trying to like this because so many people recommended it to me. Unfortunately it lost my interest in the first chapter and didn't get it back throughout the book.

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## **Kurt says**

I've had a copy of this book forever and a friend mentioned the book and I was prodded a little to read it. My fear in the past would be that the book was just like the movie which I had seen a couple of times. The book is just like the movie almost reading like a screenplay. But that is not good or bad for anyone else.

First of all, wow. A lesbian relationship between an Indian Muslim and a Jordanian Christian. Luckily the two women are not that religious. I don't think any of the characters were really as they seemed more worried about appearances and worldly things. The two women come from wealth and distinction, far above the middle class, and I do believe the elite can rewrite the rules. Leila and Tala do not suffer from any privation and are successful in all they attempt to do.

Jordan. I don't know anything about Jordan as it's in the Middle East which, frankly, I have kind of written off. Sorry. So it was kind of interesting to read about these wealthy Jordanians as they discussed Israel and the Palestinian disaster. The thought processes of the husbands of the daughters were also of interest as they schemed for position and rank in the business world as well as within the family. The family had all daughters.

The mothers of the two women in love..... Really irritating. The love.... the opposite of slow burn. But all that said, this book was enjoyable to read and gave me the feeling I need to get out more and witness different cultures.

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### **Jacob Proffitt says**

I didn't realize as I read this that it's an older book recently re-released. Which explains some minor dissonance around phones (which are present but in a slightly-odd, late-aughts kind of way).

Anyway, this book suffers a little from its scope as the author takes on many viewpoints and head-hops with abandon. Which makes sense once you read in the afterword that the screenplay was written first and the author is a director? or something? Which isn't to say that it's poorly written, though I had to adjust a bit to the style. I was a little surprised to realize that it's not really a romance so much as a coming-of-age ala coming-out story. Indeed, the romance is given pretty short shrift with the two leads falling in love very quickly in that intense way that comes from youth coupled with the relief of finally finding someone compatible when you thought it was impossible.

Sarif packs a lot into this story, including two mothers who are various shades of horrible, several really nice boys who would be great romantic leads if this weren't a lesbian romance and some fathers who are clearly out of their depths but trying very hard to help and support daughters that they obviously love very much. Add some nuanced discussions of Middle-East politics, a surface treatment of major faith traditions, and a darkly bizarre maid servant and you have a kind of whacky but mostly engaging read that I put down and nearly didn't get back to because it's not really my wheelhouse.

So my personal rating for this is around 3, maybe 3½ stars that I'm going to keep at three because it's not really my thing. The romance is mostly background motivation and that's generally my entrée into a story.

**A note about Steamy:** There's a single, very brief, explicit sex scene and another that's elided completely. So almost no steam at all, but just barely enough for me to tag it as such. It makes sense that the sex wouldn't be any more important than the romance, though, so that's probably fitting.

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### **Miranda Schingledecker says**

Absolutely loved this book! I had watched the movie before reading it and I greatly appreciated the extra in depth look into the individual characters. This was a nice feel good story about love without all the extra unnecessary drama and over-sexed descriptions that usually go with it! The pages flew by!

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### **Bellish says**

Oh dear. We seem to have picked a far from great book for book club this month. It wasn't offensively bad, but the writing was inelegant and the story didn't really seem to have anything to say. The author also committed the cardinal sin of flitting from one character's head to another from one paragraph to the next: possibly my number one peeve in bad writing.

Seemed like it wouldn't make a bad film though, so perhaps it's worth tracking that down.

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## Nik says

This is a very, very, absolutely ridiculously biased rating. Another reviewer wrote, "But I have to ask myself, when I read queer stories, if I like it because it's a love story between two women or if it's because it's actually a good story." I absolutely liked this because it's a love story between two women. Two brown women. Two brown women played in the film by one of my favourite people-I-don't-actually-know and a friend of a friend. And I absolutely liked this book because I liked the film.

These are all not very good reasons for liking the book. I don't care. It's a simple, sweet love story. It's an entirely relatable coming-out story (albeit a bit on the fluffy side for many of us). I googly-eyes, heart-hands lurve it.

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## Ashley says

What a waste of potential. I was looking forward to this book, which seemed so well loved and hit so many of my wish list items for lesbian romance (most notably, diversity), but honestly even if I hadn't had high hopes for this book it still would have disappointed.

**The writing.** My god, the writing. I will give it to Sarif: I had a very well rounded sense of the setting, right down to the minute details of the pattern on the china and the irrelevant backstory of how the main character's chain-smoking mother came into possession of the 24-piece set from her dear frugal lithe auntie who never would have approved of the way beautiful Tala let her slightly-too-small shoe dangle off her immaculately pedicured foot when she crossed her enviable legs shyly. Then Leyla woke dreamily and exited the comfort of her room to quietly tiptoe down the stairs for breakfast, fastidiously avoiding the lone errant squeaking floorboard she had always avoided ever since she was a precocious adorable lean small child of 8 when she learned with erudite certainty that her mother found the raucous noise irredeemable.

You might think it's a joke, but the book had a ridiculous amount of adjectives and adverbs, and the scene transitions were all like this. New scenes and changes in point of view are not separated by a double space, just a new paragraph. It threw me every single time, and the point of view switches five times in a chapter without notice. Really amateur stuff, like maybe the editor gave up.

**The story & main characters.** Honestly, what story, what characters. I can't even muster a question mark. The book spent so much time on how overbearing and useless both characters' mothers are, the backstory of one of the sisters who disappears from the narrative about halfway through the book, how kind and progressive the main characters' prospective male partners are, etc, that you barely get to see anything develop between the two leads. The book even ends with a scene of Tala's mom and Hani the ex-partner, and the last line is that Hani smiles. Like, who? Why would I care? Ali, Leyla's ex, of course gets pushed into a sloppy will-they-or-won't-they with Leyla's sister (gross) but then stares longingly at Leyla as he drives away from her and Tala (ALSO GROSS). Can I tell you something about Tala? Um... she's apparently really forthright when you meet her. She... likes Leyla? And what about Leyla? Leyla is an emerging writer, of course, so famous, the best, the most famous, her writing is just taking off and so many people want to meet her. What else, what else... She's really into Tala? And they really like each other because they get along.

Boy do they get along those two, yup. And how does their relationship progress from that one time one of them went down on the other at the beginning of their friendship which started maybe a month ago? (view spoiler) No development on the main characters whatsoever.

**Nitpicking.** My main nitpicky issue seems to be one of the most celebrated moments in the story by fans of the book and the movie (which I have not seen): when Reema finally drinks the tea Rani has spat in. This whole spit sub-plot is a story people with servants tell themselves as part of a mythology where they abdicate their role in oppressing and exploiting the poor by pretending the poor have an equal amount of power in their relationship and can actually score daily victories over their oppressors when they don't like them. In reality, Rani is probably paid little, her children will never be able to move up in the world, and if she was caught spitting in her masters' food she would not be able to find similar work in the family's high society circle and her own family would struggle to survive. She is absolutely at their mercy, and her real-life counterparts are not done any favours by this cliché, which just stokes suspicion against the servant class and justifies a lot of abuse from their navel-gazing overlords.

**The mom thing.** Aren't moms the worst???? The dads in this story are so laid back and have no problem with their daughters' gayness. The moms are backwards as heck! Don't get me wrong--I love that a Muslim man can be shown to be supportive of his gay daughter, and that the two main Middle Eastern men seem to think it's no big deal either. That was good! Good! But both moms being overbearing ignorant old ladies was a bit tired. Everyone in this book seems to be born pro-gay or anti-gay and the anti-gay ones aren't given any room to get over it. Again, it comes down to nothing being properly developed in this trite little tale.

It's possible to be able to stand reading this book, if you don't care at all about form or a well told story (not to judge--many people don't give a lick about style and are happy to go along for a ramble if it's got lesbians in it. I'm glad they have so many options for entertainment in this world while I languish, increasingly bitter, as the world fails to live up to my standards). Maybe a queer Muslim teen will read this and fall in love with it, then learn it's been made into a movie, and then she'll return to the book in her mid-20s and think, "Omg I used to settle for this type of thing. I could totally write something better than this." And she will. That is the substantial power this book has, so I don't want to write it off completely. I'm just impatient for the better stories this thing might inspire.

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## angie says

Thoughts on a book so good I'll need more time to wrap up my thoughts...

I really, really like this book. It is not just well-written and thoughtful, gripping and genuine, *\_I Can't Think Straight\_* speaks to anyone who has ever felt pressured to be part of something because parents or society expect it, not because it is what you yourself truly want.

'But there was a reason why romance and passion were so suited to fiction; and to learn this lesson was a function of maturity...a growth away from the hotheadedness of youth.' A mother thinks this as she busily and self-importantly works on the finishing touches of her daughter's engagement party. She dismisses love as a reason for marriage or she would if she even gave one second of thought to her daughter's impending marriage as a personal thing and not THE event of the season.

"Maybe we expect too much," a daughter says to her new friend, in the beginning stages of questioning why she is not more happy to be in a relationship with a man she feels she's supposed to love, but not one she

does.

Shamim Sarif perfectly and painfully captures how smothering it can feel to do something out of family obligation and societal demands.

Understanding that life and love are not what they are in romantic comedies is one thing (some of us may even feel that movies ruined us for love) but looking at passionless marriage as "our lot in life" is something else entirely. No one should have to go through life like that.

Here's a passage about "silent yearnings" and emotions one confronts when self-denial is no longer an option:

"What they (her crushes) all had in common was that the attraction was usually hidden, forever unspoken and always unrequited...Not that this potential meltdown was a reason to lie to herself, she knew, but up until now, it had happened that all the women she had liked IN THAT WAY were unavailable, uninterested or entirely unconscious of the situation and this had largely removed from Leyla's shoulders the burden of deciding what to do in the event of an actual relationship... What she wanted, what she one day hoped for, was a simple mutual attraction."

I Can't Think Straight may be in large part about two nice, likable and realistic women eventually finding and falling in love with each other after years of not understanding why they each just couldn't fall in love with a "nice young man." But it's also about how being forced to follow the path that is deemed "moral" and "fitting" for a young woman can ultimately hurt every one in her life, especially the men they so desperately try to have romantic feelings for, but just end up hurting.

Shamim Sarif delivers an extremely touching, sincere, lovely, non-preachy, heartfelt story about love that is breathtaking and unforgettable.

I need more time and better words to give it the justice it deserves. Already, I've bought Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen*. Her lyrical prose will make you want to read everything she has written and hope that she is working on more! :)

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## **Jess says**

I actually did not know this was a book for the longest time. I had only heard of the film, which was directed by the author herself. I'm surprised this book is not more popular on lesbian book lists and recommended reads--it is funny, insightful, and a very classic love story. I'm guessing the movie eclipsed the book's popularity.

I chose to read this book at this time because it was the December pick for the Lesbian Book Club, though there hasn't been too much discussion yet.

It was very nice to read a lesbian romance that doesn't revolve around two white, non-religious women. This book is about modern women who are allowed to be independent and make their own decisions, but they still feel bound to the cultural pressures of their close-knit families. Both characters are London-based, with Tala born from a wealthy Christian-Palestinian family and Leyla from an Jewish-Indian background. There is



religious and cultural tension (Israel vs. Palestine disagreements among Tala's father and modern fiancé, her mother Reema's observation that Leyla's skin color is the same as their servants'), but it doesn't dominate the romantic narrative. Tala and Leyla disagree and argue about politics and religion, but in the end, their love transcends it, as all love stories should. We do get some of the now-tiresome coming-out/sexual awakening narrative (lots of "silents yearnings," etc.), but it isn't melodramatic. It is just as much a family drama as it is a romance, and it brings about that poignant feeling of being alone in a crowded room--Tala's brother-in-law is the only one besides her little sister who reaches out to her after she comes out, which immediately worries her and makes her think he has ulterior motives. She has a tight family, but not necessarily a loving one, which is heartbreaking.

There are some fantastic running jokes in this book, such as Reema's maid, Rani, spitting into her madam's drinks in an attempt to spite her, but then Reema never gets around to drinking the tainted beverages. It is definitely funny, but it does mean something--when Reema finally gets around to distractedly drinking her maid's spit-ridden tea, she's also finally (and unknowingly) swallowing the bitter pill of her daughter's sexuality that she's been avoiding for so many years. There's also some great lesbian humor (Leyla's sister to her ex-fiance on Leyla's coming-out: "*Listen, did you ever see the TV show, 'The L Word'?*" "*No, but did you ever consider not speaking in riddles?*").

I'm fond of Reema's characterization, but all characters are rich and well-written. I enjoy Lamia as well, Tala's younger sister who sees her own dull, traditional marriage and adherence to social mores as a victory against her confused older sister and rebellious older sister. She may be secure and married, but she's struggling just as much as Tala--she's training herself to feel and think a certain way, too. The character descriptions are brief and telling enough to come right from Jane Austen ("*it was only when [Reema] began talking at length that most people realized her limitation,*" "*'Have some papaya,' Reema advised as she lit a cigarette, 'it's anti-cancer.'*").

Leyla is a treat for any writer--her struggle to maintain a balance between reality and her preferred fiction is completely understandable. Why should she not prefer it? These women are struggling with not only their sexualities but with all the confusions involved in maintaining a rich inner life against the traditional desires of family.

The only thing I found lacking in this lovely novel is the actual *romance*. I believe it, and I love both the characters, but their romantic encounters dulled in comparison to the excellent side characters and singular conflicts of Tala and Leyla.

I'm a fan of Sarif's writing, and I will definitely seek out her other works as well as the film adaptations of her books. I hope we see much more of her in the future of lesbian lit.

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### **C. Mack says**

I would highly recommend - Addresses some interesting themes of sexuality, religion and culture without getting too deep that it overshadows the overall love story.

I've just completed this as an audio book and I was surprised to find I enjoyed it more than when I read it myself. It was superbly narrated and I thoroughly enjoyed this tge second time round.

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## **Kernan says**

This was the first ever lesfic that I read and I got it only because I had watched the movie and absolutely loved it. This book is one for the 're-read many times' pile. If read by itself, you may not understand all the intricacies. But the book beautifully complements the movie and covers certain scenes which were left behind in the movie. Some scenes which were missing in the book could be found in the movie. If I'd been reviewing the two together, I'd give them 15 stars. But separately, this would be a 4-star book. It may take two or three readings to appreciate this book on it's own and to find certain nuances. The romance is well done but what made this book different from most ff romances is the exploration of the cultural aspects of the conflict. It's a topic that is not often discussed by western authors in this genre.

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## **Nancy says**

### **Cross-posted at Outlaw Reviews and at Shelf Inflicted**

This was the perfect book to read while I was snowed in and work was closed.

Tala is a Palestinian living in London. She's very outgoing and forthright. After three engagements, her parents really hope this one will stick. Hani is a very nice guy and Tala loves him. Leyla is an Indian Muslim. She works at a job she's not passionate about, while her true love is writing. Other than a mutual attraction, Tala and Leyla have little in common. They both come from strict, traditional cultures that don't have a very positive view about homosexuality. Despite these difficulties, the two women eventually fall in love.

The romance happens a little fast, and the plot is rather predictable. Still, I gulped it down in one sitting and enjoyed this light and pleasant story. What I liked most about it is the glimpse into middle-eastern culture, the clash between traditional and western values, religious and class differences, and the interactions between lovers, friends, and family.

There was a large cast of interesting, well-developed secondary characters and other minor characters that could have been fleshed out a little more. I was especially curious about Tala's uncle, Ramzi, who was likely gay. It would have been so much easier on Tala if they were closer and opened up to each other about their sexuality. Another interesting minor character was Rani, Tala's mother's Indian housekeeper who occasionally spits in her coffee. I get that she probably resented the family's wealth, but I didn't understand her acrimony.

If you are looking for graphic sex scenes, look elsewhere. This is a thoughtful and humorous story about two young women who eventually find themselves and choose a different path. The ending made me smile.

Maybe I'll watch the film while the book is still fresh in my mind.

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