

Gustaf Crusensvärd

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School of Teacher Education

Kristianstad University

Lena Ahlin

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* – Fiction, Yet Relevant: The Plight of Bangladeshi
Women from a Fictive Perspective

Brick Lane is a novel about Muslim immigrant culture in London, most specifically that of Nazneen and her family. The novel depicts instances of great bravery and fear, oppression and the struggle for independence. It approaches several problematical topics in this day and age. At the forefront of these topics are oppression, immigration, segregation, racism and sexism. This essay will solely focus on the topics of sexism and the function of gender and oppression of women in the novel. I will then relate these instances to real world incidents in order to show how the novel's author, Monica Ali, in spite of her Western upbringing and perspective, has depicted several problematical cases of injustice in Muslim culture. While Ali has been highly criticized for her, supposedly, incorrect portrayal of Bangladeshis in London, the topics of the novel remain relevant in the larger scheme of Muslim society, as I will prove throughout this essay.

The essay will argue that the issues portrayed in the novel are authentic and relevant in their general application to Muslim culture, in spite of Monica Ali being brought up in the West and her fabricated characters. Through drawing parallels between Ali's fiction and known issues in Muslim culture, this essay will prove that Ali, regardless of how unrealistic her portrayals are, still depicts incidents of relevance to both Muslim society and Muslim women. The essay will furthermore argue that it is far more important to, in any way, address these issues rather than being overly concerned with how realistic the novel is. In order to accomplish this I will, in addition to drawing parallels between the novel and real world issues, compare Nazneen to her sister Hasina, and analyze what the novel's characters and their actions represent in a larger context.

Monica Ali, born in Dhaka in 1967, migrated to Great Britain at the early age of three to avoid the horrors of civil war. She is the child of a British mother and a Bangladeshi father, and was raised in England (Appleyard, par 5). It has therefore been questioned whether her portrayal of Muslim culture is accurate. More specifically it has been questioned whether Ali

has adequate experience of the culture to depict it realistically. The community she portrays in *Brick Lane* is narrow-minded and backwards – but is it an accurate representation of the community? This essay will claim that it does not matter. Anne Sofie Roald, in the preface of her book *Women in Islam: the Western Experience*, briefly discusses the impact of Islamic texts in the context of Muslim women. She summarizes the situation with the following phrase: “the function of a text is more important than the text itself” (xii). The quotation stems from a discussion primarily interested in the impact that Islamic texts have on the position of women in Muslim contexts (a context that has been deemed oppressive towards women). It is, however, possible to see how the quotation also remains true for texts associated with the liberation of women in the very same context. It is therefore necessary to examine the possible effect of *Brick Lane* and its fictional characters, instead of the realistic accuracy of the text. Therefore this essay will also investigate whether or not *Brick Lane* offers the West a chance to change its perception of Muslim women.

Since the very first Western representation of the East, the East has suffered from the genealogy and logic specific to the Western narrative; a narrative which has emerged from developments in “western representations of gender, of the self and of the foreign Other” (Kahf, 2)¹. The misrepresentation of Muslim culture in the West can be, partly, attributed to this narrative. The Western representation builds on “conventions of representing alien women (pagans, foreigners, Old Testament figures) which were already formed in Western texts before the advent of Islam” (Kahf, 4). It is because of the Western narrative and its representation of Muslim women that it is necessary to address the concept of reinvention of Muslim women in *Brick Lane* as one of the novel’s relevant aspects.

¹ In the second revised edition of Lawrence E. Cahoone’s book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology Expanded* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003) the use of ‘Othering’ is motivated by the following: “A phenomenon maintains its identity in semiotic systems only if other units are represented as foreign or “other” through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is privileged or favored while the other is deprivileged or devalued in some way” (11).

For example, Monica Ali has attempted to rectify the manner of Western representation that Muslim women so far have *suffered* from, or more specifically the colonial ‘Otherness’ that they have been subjugated by. The novel first and foremost humanizes the ‘Other’ and then proceeds to partially westernize it. This is done through the journey of assimilation depicted through the life of Nazneen and her family. The novel succeeds in doing so by facilitating an understanding of the ‘Other’ which proposes the realization of a fundamental equality between the women of the West and the East.

Consequently, this fundamental equality becomes evident when looking at the women in the novel. Hasina, Nazneen’s younger sister, serves as a representation of the stereotypical Muslim woman. In contrast, Nazneen is the sister who succeeds at reinventing herself, finally freeing herself from any and all dependency on men. Through the novel’s plot, it is possible to see how Nazneen develops towards becoming independent, while Hasina is continuously oppressed throughout. Even though Hasina tries, she never manages to break free from the hold of men. It could be stipulated that this phenomenon has to do with the physical locations of the two women, where these locales would then have different yet specific impacts on the sisters’ lives. Ali has contrasted the sisters’ lives and locations in order to refer to Bangladesh as a place where women are unable to flourish and evolve. London however, seems to offer the optimal conditions for a Bangladeshi immigrant woman to reshape her own future. While Hasina becomes more and more subjugated by men, Nazneen’s independence blossoms after the births of her daughters. Contrasting Nazneen in London to Hasina in Dhaka and their respective experiences allows Monica Ali to depict the very different, yet fundamentally equal, existences of the two sisters. Both of the sisters strive for independence, and to be free from the injustices and oppression of men in order to find happiness. Hasina’s path to independence is however much crueler than Nazneen’s.

Through the experiences of Hasina, who still remains in Bangladesh as an, at times, unmarried woman forced to take care of herself, Ali depicts the nasty nature of profit through oppression that is prevalent in Bangladesh. While exploitation for the purpose of profit is not a problem only restricted to women, but to children and men alike across the globe, it does however, in Bangladesh, mainly concern women and children. Working conditions are commonly a reflection of contemporary laws and the rights of workers. During the Industrial Revolution, Europe saw the passing of laws which, amongst other things, restricted the working hours of children and women, increased safety measures and above all stated the requirement for factory owners to obey the law, for example Britain's Factory Acts². Ali efficiently portrays the necessity for equivalent laws in Bangladesh. The manner in which Hasina's letters convey her situation while working at the garment factory discloses both the poor pay and the unfair treatment of workers, through the typical cases of misconduct by the supervisors and the unlawful firing of Hasina. In short, Hasina's work situation is one without rights.

In comparison, Nazneen's working habits are much better. She works free hours and receives a higher salary for less work while she works from her own home. While Nazneen is not 'employed' in the same manner that Hasina is, her situation of 'independent contracting' in London clearly contrasts Hasina's garment factory job in Dhaka through their different working conditions. Taj I. Hashmi, in *Women & Islam in Bangladesh : Beyond Subjection & Tyranny* (Palgrave, 1999) claims that the subjection and persecution of women in some Muslim countries are due to socio-economic factors, while Islam, as it is understood and practiced, accentuates women's suffering (ix). It does most certainly seem applicable to the

²The Factory Acts declare the right of the state to control the industrial organizations which depend upon the labor of women and children. Founded on the principle that, in the interests of the moral and physical well-being of the community, the labor of women and children should be restricted by law within reasonable limits. For more information, see Norma Landau's *Law, Crime & English Society: 1660-1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

situation of women's duress in Bangladesh to blame the society rather than the religion. Ali's depiction of the two sisters' different lives hints at this phenomenon as well.

For example: Nazneen, upon reading a letter from Hasina, realizes her sister's 'place' in the world. Nazneen defines her as, "[a] woman on her own in the city, without a husband, ... without protection" (Ali, 36), and this is precisely the role that Hasina represents through the majority of the novel; the role of the lone and therefore *unprotected* woman. Hasina's relationships with men are colored by cruelty and oppression. In her first marriage, she is physically abused. Hasina refuses to accept the paradox of having a husband who claims to love her, but at the same time beats her, and therefore she runs away to Dhaka: "In morning soon as husband go out for work I go away..." (Ali, 36). Having arrived in the big city, she is taken in by Mr. Chowdhury, who 'cares for' her, but eventually ends up raping her: "Then he take off trousers. I say nothing I do nothing and then it done" (Ali, 116). Hasina is eventually forced into prostitution after being fired from the garment factory where she works (incidentally the result of another man's actions). She is 'taken care of' by a pimp – Hussain: "Hussain still looking out for me. He the one making sure I get the money. If he not look out anyone take what they like and not pay..." (Ali, 119). Hussain, even though he does not physically harm Hasina, is another representation of the male who takes advantage of the inherently low worth of women in Bangladesh. This low value of women in Bangladesh is affirmed by Jamal Mohsin Islamel who states: "I am actually alive to the fact that the 'real' Bangladeshi society has been havoc for women; they are fettered; their rights are denied; and patriarchy and Islam have overwhelmed them" (Islamel, 31).

The foundation for Hasina's three abusive relationships can be found in Hasina's dependence on the men. Malek, Hasina's first husband, serves as her provider. Mr. Chowdhury accommodates Hasina with lodging. Hussain, finally, serves as Hasina's protector. The three men fulfill three different roles; roles that are all prevalent 'duties' of a

husband in Bangladeshi society. What is interesting is the manner in which these men, while performing their 'duties', all succeed in oppressing Hasina in the most fundamental ways.

On the other hand the male characters situated in London also represent forms of oppression, albeit less cruel, or, at times, they reflect reasons for oppression. Thus the same difference in location that contrasted the two sisters is also present in the case of the men. As Chanu's and Nazneen's marriage is the one marriage which is most extensively featured throughout the novel it was an excellent choice as the least abusive relationship. Chanu, for example, serves as a representative of how the perception of a man is dependent on the actions of his wife. Initially, before Nazneen has fully claimed her life as her own, she undertakes her chores in the household with a certain proficiency and regularity. Further along in the story, Chanu's physical appearance suffers as a result of Nazneen's growing independence. Through this correlation Chanu's declining appearance reflects his wife's autonomy; as she neglects her chores his toenails become long and his corns are not seen to. This deterioration is the physical portrayal of how a man is perceived in Bangladeshi society when his wife is more her own person than her husband's.

In addition Ali also depicts the negative aspect of the role of women in Bangladeshi society by drawing parallels between occurrences in the novel and commonly accepted negative aspects of other occurrences, such as the one portrayed in the following quotation. It is a depiction of what happens when Chanu refuses to help Nazneen find and bring Hasina to London: "All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within" (Ali, 40). When applying the sociological interpretation of *peasant* to 'her chores', it is possible to see that Ali likens the status of Bangladeshi women to that of the peasant class. The peasant class was inherently of low standing in society. The word also retains connotations of poverty, conservatism and defiance in the form of revolt, at the very least in English history. The fact that peasant

rebellion has been prevalent in British medieval history³, suggests an emphasis on the requirement of forceful liberation to rectify the situation of women in Bangladesh. As women (through Nazneen) are presented as peasants, it becomes important to address the relative standing of men (Chanu) in the quotation. Men are defined as kings within their domestic domains as is indicated by “in *his* princely kingdom” (my emphasis). The quotation shows that the house, in Bangladeshi culture, is the kingdom of the man; and that he rules it in the role of a sovereign.

In addition, the use of the adjective *small* takes the emphasis of revolt further by modifying the advocated insurrections in order to signify the need to avoid a conflict on a larger scale. *Design* is an act which should involve considerable research, thought, modeling, interactive adjustment and re-design; all of these actions form the function of an extensive process requiring regular adjustment after its implementation, not to mention prudent and extensive planning and research beforehand. *State* is a word with connotations of law and order, justice and equality; Ali’s choice of using it creates a conflict with the previously used terminology in the quotation. This conflict implies, through the contradictory connotations, that the relation between *state* and the inherently medieval tone of the quotation is immoral; that a class system does not fit into a state which is supposed to promote justice and equality.

Finally, the last word of the quotation, *within*, echoes the necessity for the ‘revolution’ to be carried out from within Bangladeshi society. The West has previously pressured the East to improve, amongst other things, the situation for women in Muslim countries. Ali proves, by her choice of wording, that she understands the necessity for reform from within. The 2003 Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi suggests the very same need for reform from within

³ Oppression and prevalent injustices, such as harsh taxation and poor living conditions were the main instigators of these revolts. For more information, see Charles Oman’s *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Batoche Books, 2001), or for a more general depiction see Peter Haidu’s *Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford University Press, 2004)

(Bennet, 149). As such Ali is also able to relate to and analyze the situation and provide theoretical solutions to it; the quotation also advocates the implementation of these solutions.

The domestic situation in the quotation discussed in the preceding paragraph correlates to the function of a feudal society, through one of its essential elements, Manorialism. In Manorialism, the power of a lord is supported by *obligatory* contributions of peasants under his dominion, in return for protection. Sharhzad Mojab makes the same connection between feudal ways of life and the Kurdish patriarchy which has been reproduced in Western countries by Muslim diasporans of diverse backgrounds (Moghissi, 123). It is important to realize that feudal societies were not democratic; a realization which further highlights the injustices to human rights that many Muslim women suffer on a daily basis under the guise “the will of Allah”.

As a ‘defender’ of the “will of Allah” the *salish*⁴ is one of the foremost villains in the plight of women’s rights in Bangladesh. Salish rulings have led to several deaths (both suicide and murder) of women (Hashmi, 96). It is postulated that the unlawful terrorization of women by the salish is an attempt to dissuade them from enlisting as workers in the garment industries and for non-governmental organizations⁵. This problem affects, primarily, very poor women, most often those without any affiliation to neither the garment industry nor any non-governmental organization (Hashmi, 97).

By extension, Ali also manages to incorporate the common result of this persecution of poor women – suicide. In 1993 it was estimated that about six thousand women committed suicide in Bangladesh (Hashmi, 97). By integrating this problem into the novel through the

⁴ Salish is an age-old traditional mode of arbitration in rural areas in Bangladesh. It has no legal status, and it is a body usually composed of village elders, influential persons, and the village clergy. More information can be found in Ali Riaz’s *God willing: the politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁵ Non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, are generally accepted to be organizations which have not been established by governments or agreements among governments.

suicide of Nazneen's and Hasina's mother and Hasina's memory in regard to the circumstances surrounding the event, Ali's writing, albeit briefly, touches upon the actuality of the anguish that Bangladeshi women suffer to the extent that they commit suicide.

The novel also offers explanations as to why women are oppressed in Bangladeshi culture. For example, several passages in the novel are concerned with the necessity for a man to have a wife, which is mainly related to their own existence as men. A quotation from when Chanu, early on in the novel, discusses his wife at the very beginning of their marriage attests to that necessity: "Any wife is better than no wife" (Ali, 10). Here Chanu comments on how Nazneen is not all he had hoped for, but that she is still better than no wife at all. In Muslim society, having a wife proves something about a man; it is directly related to his status. The need for men to have wives and the reason as to why it affects a man's status to have or not to have a wife can be seen in the following quotation, cited and translated by Anne Sofie Roald in her book *Women in Islam: the Western experience* (122):

Verily, the man and the woman, they are together one living entity.
The soul was the man but then it was divided into a second part;
the woman. The significance of this is that the life of one of them
without its other half, is a life which is not complete.

By the preceding quotation it is possible to apprehend the distinct connection between man and woman in Muslim culture. Separating the two concepts (man and woman) is not only unnatural but also contradictory to Islamic belief; as the Qur'an "portrays nature as operating in pairs, male and female, created as mates for each other" (Haddad et al, 83). The codependency which bonds the two sexes indirectly accounts for much of the possessive behavior inherent in the dominant sex – men. As a result of this behavior and the view expressed in the quotation, men generally attempt to practice 'control' over their wives as a means of self-preservation. This practice of control often manifests itself in the form of oppression, in the most general sense of its terminology. It is therefore plausible to assume

that some men are forced, by the nature of their culture, and perhaps even religion to control the women (wives, daughters, sisters) under their ‘protection’, as can be seen in the novel.

For example, Chanu strives to keep his wife indoors so as to not have her reflecting poorly on him: “If you go out, ten people will say ‘I saw her walking on the street.’ And I will look like a fool” (Ali, 27). Chanu, as a married man, is distinguished by Nazneen’s actions, or rather his own capability to *control* those actions. The quotation shows that the regard in which a man is held is dependent on the submissiveness of his wife, alternatively his own oppressiveness. This situation establishes a clear hierarchy within a marriage and between men and women in general.

Another correlation between men’s standing and the actions of their wives arises when a conversation between Nazneen and Mrs. Islam suggests that Jorina, a female acquaintance, has shamed herself and her husband by getting a job of her own: “She started work, and everyone said, ‘He cannot feed her.’ Even though he was working himself he was shamed ... So [she] has brought shame on them all” (Ali, 66). This situation leads to Jorina’s husband taking on lovers. Muslims traditionally consider adultery to be shameful and it is illegal in many countries. While shame would logically befall the person committing a sin (in this case adultery), in this quotation, it appears as if Jorina’s husband and his lovers are free of blame; While shame would logically befall the person committing a sin (in this case adultery), in this quotation, it appears as if Jorina’s husband and his lovers are free of blame; instead it is Jorina who has “brought shame on them all”. She therefore has to accept the consequences of her husband’s actions based on the premise that they were reactions to what *she* had done. The quotation is characterized by sexism; it suggests that a wife’s dependence on her husband and the husband’s status go hand in hand. As a wife becomes increasingly independent, her husband will become decreasingly masculine and honorable. This theory implies that subservience and oppression are regarded as female and male traits respectively. According to

this way of thinking, in order for a man to be sufficiently masculine, his wife also needs to be acceptably feminine (dependent on *him*). As Fatima Mernissi states, "[i]t is not by subjecting nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage" (Moghissi, 192).

In contrast, Nazneen, as a wife, becomes less and less associated with subjugation and oppression as the plot progresses, but through her early experiences it is still possible to identify the manner in which wives are seen, and therefore treated, in Bangladeshi society. The concept of waiting, under the definition of 'to serve the needs of' is depicted as a circle from which only wives are excluded. Nazneen, for the very first time, defies her husband in an attempt to break free from the isolation, on which her dependency on Chanu is formed, by going outside. As Nazneen gets lost and is overcome with dismay, she pictures the relation between a waiter and his wife; a relation which serves as a vivid reminder of her own place, as a wife, in society:

But now the waiters were at home asleep, or awake being waited on themselves by wives who only served and were not served in return except with board and lodging and the provision of children whom they also, naturally, waited upon (Ali, 34).

As if marriage is a manner in which trade is conducted, the wife receives food and shelter, or in other words protection as payment for her services. She does not, however, have her own needs seen to. When looking closer at the text, it is important to note that the words *now*, *home* and *asleep* all indicate rest, a break of serving and are all directed at the *man*. This rest is contrasted with the wife's obligated service to her family, which appears to be endless. The phrase 'wives who only served' hints at the notion of women's usefulness in Muslim culture. It is immediately followed by the phrase 'were not served in return', which echoes the aforementioned belief of the fundamental uselessness of a wife in any role other than that of a servant. Interestingly, one stipulated definition of lodging is 'a *temporary* residence' (my

emphasis). Its definition alludes to the upkeep women are forced to do in order to maintain their uncertain and flexible position in the household that their husbands have provided for them. The notion of service suggests that it is optional for a man to give his wife an abode; it also implies the possibility for that service to stop. Women are further devalued as the provision of children is also attributed to men here; and only bestowed upon women through the kindness of men. This claim creates a direct conflict between Nazneen's, at the time of the quotation, Eastern perception of women's role in society and the traditional view of women as the bringers of life.

In addition the novel also addresses the absence of 'women' as a concept, other than in the shape of wives. It is a phenomenon that can be seen throughout many instances in both this essay and sources quoted, and, although distressing, it is common and prevalent throughout Muslim culture. Wives are, if defined by the treatment of them, not individuals of worth but commodities to be discarded or traded away at the blink of an eye. This practice awards 'wife' with the connotation of a possession; as a result 'wife' rather than 'woman' is the prevalent wording in most Muslim texts.

In contrast to Nazneen's marriage, which lasts all up to the very end of the novel, there is Hasina, who also takes the role of a wife, albeit sporadically. After having run away from her first husband, she expresses the wish and hope that he will eventually divorce her after her disappearance. This is an interesting situation because the ability for men to divorce their wives in Bangladesh is notoriously simple in comparison to the wives' ability to initiate a divorce. Men were, traditionally, able to divorce their wives by uttering the simple phrase "I divorce thee" three times; this would instantaneously dissolve the marriage: "In Islam, men have the right for instant divorce" (Benn & Jawad, 32). The simplicity for a man to divorce his wife is accompanied by fears and, at times, terrible consequences for women in general, at least those living in the rural areas of Bangladesh, from which Nazneen and Hasina originate.

Even so, a point of view advocating ‘putting up with’ domestic violence arises in one of the many letters that Hasina sends to Nazneen; in which she refers to a conversation amongst her friends and herself. One of Hasina’s colleagues has just been, cruelly and excessively, beaten by her husband because she got a bonus in her salary as a result of becoming the employee of the month: ”Renu say, at least you have husband to give good beating at least you not alone” (Ali, 110). Renu, an older Muslim widow, represents the woman who has had to live much of her life without a husband. Her harsh life, as pictured when it is learnt that she only has two remaining teeth but eats anything (Ali, 106), seems to color her opinion on the matter of whether domestic abuse is an acceptable circumstance that women have to live with, or at the very least, weigh against being alone. The conversation implies, through the experiences of Renu and her comment, that being a lone woman in Bangladesh is, potentially, worse than suffering from abuse at the hands of one’s husband, which leads one to imagine what being a lone woman is really like in such a country.

But other than in the instance discussed in the former paragraph, abusive men are depicted as an entirely evil phenomenon in *Brick Lane*. For example in the very first letter Hasina sends to her sister, she desperately tries to make sense of her own domestic situation. She has, against her father’s wishes, married out of love. The husband turns out to be a violent man, who does not treat her as an equal: “Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like” (Ali, 12). The quotation suggests that a man’s kindness cannot balance the status that husbands and wives have in Bangladesh; nor that he, just because he is kind, should have to accept an insubordinate wife. Being kind to, or even respectful of, one’s wife is expressed to be optional. The theme of this quotation portrays the futile existence of a wife in comparison to that of her husband; the wife has no rights whatsoever, and is the husband’s to do with as he sees fit, *God* forbid that she says what she likes. The term “God forbid”, albeit colloquial, serves a very special use in this context; as hopefully signified by the

emphasis that is applied to ‘God’. The emphasis is used in order to communicate the use of this specific word in Muslim society. Women can be seen to employ ‘the will of Allah’ in an attempt to lessen their own mental suffering⁶. Men, coincidentally, employ the same phrase in order to justify their treatment of women, amongst other things, and moderate the potential repercussions in regard to their actions⁷. The use of references to God or Allah in *Brick Lane* is often that of preservation and its use commonly advocates continued oppression. The ‘will of Allah’, or in other words fate, originates from the religious concept of predestination⁸. Predestination is a concept which is present throughout much, but not the entirety, of the novel. The correlation between fate’s presence in the novel and Nazneen’s growing independence is one which has been cleverly moderated by Ali to create the understanding that the renouncement or disregard of fate is pivotal in attaining one’s independence and personal rights; at the very least when ‘fate’ serves an inherently oppressive function, which it does in *Brick Lane* and Monica Ali’s depiction of Bangladesh.

For example, a belief in predestination offers an impervious defense of one’s actions, or, potentially, justification of one’s sufferings. As Dalya Cohen-Mor explains, “[i]f people are not masters of their actions, then they can be neither morally nor legally responsible for them” (xvi). This line of thought addresses one of the reasons that injustice and oppression in many Muslim countries are allowed to endure – justification through religion, alternatively, belittling of the consequences of oppressive actions, through religion. Nazneen gradually but bravely abandons her faith in fate. Initially she rebels against it by taking her son, Raqib, to

⁶ “God has made His plans” (Ali, 96), “Do not despair of the mercy of God” (Ali, 121), “Allah always will give another chance” (Ali, 163).

⁷ “Adultery is destined by Allah” (Ali, 255), “As God is my witness...” (Ali, 280), “Allah would decide” (Ali, 287).

⁸ Predestination is a belief that God determined the fate of all living things at the time of the world’s creation. For more information on the role of predestination in Muslim culture, see Dalya Cohen-Mor’s *Matter of Fate: The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

the hospital when he falls ill. This action is one of the ways in which she contrasts her own mother, who left Nazneen to ‘her fate’ many years earlier. The narrator emphasizes this contrast by saying (about Nazneen): “Did she call piously for God to take what he would and leave her with nothing?” (Ali, 95). No, she does not. Instead she brings Raqib to the hospital. Here Ali shows how it is plainly irresponsible to leave such a thing up to ‘fate’. Nazneen therefore takes ‘fate’ in her own hands in an attempt to save her son from death. It is said that Raqib would have died had Nazneen not taken him to the hospital: “The doctors said it. It was no lie” (Ali, 95). Nazneen rebels against the very religious role of predestination in everyday life which is prevalent in Bangladesh. Rebelling against the concept of fate puts Nazneen’s life back into her own hands, and liberates her from one of the oppressive roles that religion can serve. Through the actions of Nazneen, it is possible that other Muslim women can find the strength to detach themselves from the very same belief that Nazneen’s mother encourages. It is important to address the need for detachment of such beliefs because religion, albeit a wonderful idea, can, and often has, served an oppressive role in many different contexts⁹. Monica Ali clearly does address this issue and it therefore serves as another topic presented in a manner which appears to be designed in order to correct a delusion that is commonly applied in Bangladeshi society.

By extension the conception that religion can justify the means of one’s actions can also be addressed in the context of forced marriages. These marriages are defended on the basis of safeguarding women’s ‘best interests’: “... we would prefer them to lose out in this world than to lose out in the Hereafter” (Benn & Jawad, 32). Ironically, it was, in the novel, quite possibly, the best thing that could have happened to Nazneen’s wellbeing that she was married to Chanu and sent away to London. Nazneen’s marriage was however not technically

⁹ The European Inquisitions (the Medieval, Spanish, Portuguese and Roman) serve as evident examples of such roles.

a *forced* marriage, as it is established that she consents to the arrangement prior to being sent away. Nevertheless, through introducing Nazneen's unwillingness to marry Chanu the issue of such marriages is addressed and consequently it is implied that this form of marriage should not be morally admissible in this day and age.

In contrast to all of the injustices and instances of oppression directed at women in the novel, Ali also makes references to the strength and determination of Bangladeshi women; not only, but most explicitly when Chanu, now living in Dhaka, sees Hasina and reflects upon how she seems to be doing. In a conversation with Nazneen he comments upon Hasina's appearance: "'She seemed...'" Chanu paused. 'Unbroken'" (Ali, 366). It becomes clear that after all of Hasina's experiences, she remains undaunted. The most important function of this quotation is Chanu's analysis of Hasina. Chanu, a representative of the male gender, proves that men are not necessarily ignorant of the oppression women are subjected to in society, or how much they suffer as a result. This claim is substantiated by the thought process indicated by the pause and Chanu's following conclusion; that Hasina is *unbroken* implies that it would be valid to assume that she would in fact be broken at this point, as a result of all the adversity she has suffered through. Chanu is genuinely surprised that Hasina, after so much misery, still retains the will to continue her search for happiness. Ali further addresses this issue a mere two pages later when it becomes evident to Nazneen that Hasina has run away with another man. Nazneen answers Chanu's question, why Hasina does "these things" (Ali, 367) with "'Because', ... 'she isn't going to give up'" (Ali, 367). As a woman, Hasina refuses to be forced down or tamed and thus, together with her sister, reflects the indomitable spirit of Bangladeshi women in their pursuit for independence.

While Nazneen's living situation has so far, in this essay, been associated with numerous real world issues concerning Muslim women, her physical displacement is perhaps the most obvious and one of the most relevant issues. Nazneen succeeds in adopting a semi-Western

perspective on life and comes to term with her independence. Not all Muslim immigrant women are as fortunate. This is a problem elaborated upon by Haleh Afshar et al. in *Muslim Diaspora*:

Women, who have been the bearers of nations, have been given the nationalities of their fathers and husbands, and when migrating have lost their birthrights to their homelands, only to acquire that of the male on whom they have been defined as a 'dependant' (Moghissi, 171).

This quotation indicates that the more likely outcome of *Brick Lane* would have been Nazneen's *lack* of assimilation. It is said that the primary identification of older-generation Pakistanis in Britain is with country or region of origin (Moghissi, 172). This means of identification presents an additional real world obstacle that the fictive Nazneen overcomes. With the very last line of the novel Monica Ali and Nazneen alike shows that assimilation is possible, and potentially preferred. Nazneen partakes in an activity which has represented female independence throughout the novel – ice skating – wearing a sari. The paradox devised by the combination of ice skating as a symbol of independence and the sari as an affiliate to the stereotypically oppressive hijab¹⁰ evaporates by the utterance, “[t]his is England . . . You can do whatever you like” (Ali, 369). Furthermore, the quotation substantiates the claim of a conflict between England and Bangladesh. “This is England” is used to state that this is *not* Bangladesh; you *can* do whatever you like. And as such Ali effectively directs the main degree of blame for oppression on the actual structures and role of society in Bangladesh, rather than on religion or the male gender.

The combination of Hasina's durable spirit and continued search for happiness and Nazneen's newly gained independence concludes the novel in a tone which signifies an

¹⁰ By no means do I claim that either the sari or the hijab are oppressive. I am merely stating that the hijab is stereotypically seen as such in the West. Falguni A. Sheth has, in an article called *The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and the Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism* fully elaborated on the history as well as the similarities and differences between the two pieces of clothing.

ending that is, although stereotypically unlikely, of an optimal outcome designed to defy the preconceptions of those who may deem it impossible. By making use of such an ending, Ali successfully reinvents her characters, and hands the voice, which has up until now been that of the narrator, to the Bangladeshi woman it represents. While the reinvention of Bangladeshi immigrant women may possibly be the most important function that the novel serves, *Brick Lane*, as I hope to have sufficiently shown this far, in spite of being fiction, also illustrates issues which should bear considerable weight in today's society. These issues must not go unaddressed.

Correspondingly, the instances from the novel chosen for this essay all represent issues that exist in the real world. By the parallels that have been drawn between these real world issues as they have been defined by secondary sources and the novel's fictional portrayals thereof, the severity of these issues has hopefully been clear. It is because of their severity and actuality that I argue that addressing them is of the utmost importance and that *Brick Lane*, as a fictional novel, can serve as an efficient tool in that venture in spite of its unrealistic portrayals. Remember, it is necessary to address and analyze problems in society, no matter in which form they are made apparent to us, fiction or not.

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