The Embodiment of Racism in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali
Readers of *Brick Lane* are likely to pay attention to the feminism shown in the story as it is a book about a woman from the third world emancipated from her fatalism. The female characters in the book are so outstanding that many academics take them as examples to support opinions related to feminism. John Marx uses *Brick Lane* to back up his point that women change in the process of globalization in his article *The Feminization of Globalization*. Alistair Cormack claims that *Brick Lane* “is particularly of interest as an examination of the double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own communities” (700). Sarah Brouillette points out that *Brick Lane* is a gentrification tale as Monica Ali depicts a portrayal of women liberating from traditional gender roles and being capable of supporting her daughters on her own (428).

However, Monica Ali has shown far more than the awakening third world woman in her book. *Brick Lane* has so many aspects revealed that it requires repeated readings to discover themes in the book, such as identity confusion, gender inequality, religious conflicts, racism and so on. This essay focuses on the topic of racism in *Brick Lane*. Though the author, Monica Ali, has spilled limited ink on the description of racism, the embodiment of racism *Brick Lane* reveals is much enough to be regarded as an independent topic to research. This essay tries to analyze three aspects of racism: colour, culture and religion. Before all of the respective analyses begin, the question of what racism is will be answered. Then evidence of the co-existing races in *Brick Lane* is to be given. After that, the analyses of the three aspects of racism are to be elaborated, and the influences of racism will be briefly mentioned in the end. Through the analyses of *Brick Lane*, it will be found that issues about class are hard to be ignored. But as the length of this essay is limited and the discussion of class issues is possibly demanding, class issue is not within the scope of this essay.

Then what is racism? According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, racism is “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences
produce an inherent superiority of a particular race”. The Anti-Defamation League defines racism as follows: “Racism is the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person’s social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics” (Anti-Defamation League). The Oxford English Dictionary gives racism the following definition: Racism is “a belief or ideology that all members of each racial group possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, especially to distinguish it as being either superior or inferior to another racial group or racial groups”. Racism has many different versions of definitions, but they all share one point, that is the racial inequality. Along with the clarification of the definition of racism, race needs to be defined as well. According to The Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies, race is “a term for the classification of human beings into physically, biologically and genetically distinct groups” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 198). Now we can have a look at Brick Lane, the setting of the novel.

The setting of Brick Lane is the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, a place in which most Bangladeshi immigrants are concentrated. However, Bangladeshis are not the only residents there. There are white people and black people living there or around. Nazneen has white neighbors: “In the flats immediately next door, there were white people” (Ali, 304). Moreover, Bangladeshis meet people from different races when they carry out daily chores. When they go to shops, “a group of African girls tried on shoes […] a white girl stood in front of a mirror turning this way and that” (Ali, 392-94). In such a multi-racial society, racial issues cannot be overlooked.

When Chanu talks about his plan to take his son back to Dhaka at Dr Azad’s home, he refers to Britain as a racist society. Here are his words:

‘I don’t need very much. Just enough for the Dhaka house and some left over for Ruku’s education. I don’t want him to rot here with all the skinheads and drunks. I don’t want him to grow up in this racist society. I don’t want him to talk back to his mother. I want him to respect his father.’ … ‘The only way is to take him back home.’ (Ali, 111)
No matter what makes Chanu think the place where he lives at the moment is a racist society, what cannot be denied is that the local residents think racial issues do exist in Brick Lane. It does not only exist there, it also brings so many effects that Chanu does not even want his son to grow up in this environment. He uses the word “rot” to indicate the influence it might exert on children. According to Chanu, Brick Lane is full of skinheads and drunks who fall into the category of Bad. In addition, children who grow up there are likely to lack due respect for their parents. Chanu is talking about racists in Britain, but he cannot help showing his bias against Britain. He thinks the only way to keep his son from “rotting” is to take him back to Bangladesh. In his opinion, Bangladesh is a safe place for his child, away from the skinheads and drunks, and a proper environment for his son to grow up with respect to parents. Being aware of the discrimination from the British, Bangladeshis have prejudice against the British as well. That is the bilateral racism between natives and immigrants.

In the book *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali does not talk about the racial issues specifically. But it can be detected through conversations and descriptions. Without knowledge of its culture and custom, one tends to judge a person by the appearance. When it comes to race, the skin colour of the people is quickly noticed. Speaking of color, Frantz Fanon makes a quotation from Sir Alan Burns’s *Colour Prejudice* while he is talking about the racial prejudice:

> It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated. (Fanon, 133)

Because “colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race”, racism often begins with colour. The white people tend to put Africa and India together, where people are darker-skinned than themselves. Without mentioning Bangladesh, Chanu is still sensitive to the idea of countries like India, which is often connected with his own country Bangladesh, being put
together with Africa. When he sees the leaflet from the *Lion Hearts*, he becomes indignant: “Putting Africa with India, all dark together” (Ali, 251). The Africans are black, but the Indians are not. Colour itself is not the criterion of inferiority or superiority, but the presumption of colour is. People impose feelings on skin-colour and categorize people according to skin-colour. To Chanu, the skin colour of people matters a lot. It is not an enjoyable idea for him to categorize Indians into the same group as Africans.

Working among the white people, Chanu has many opportunities to experience racism. Colour can be a barrier to further development in his career. He tells Nazneen about his thoughts of not getting his promotion, for which he has high expectations at first. Obviously, Nazneen accepts all his ideas of racial discrimination. She tells her friend, Razia: ‘My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem’ (Ali, 72). It is what Chanu has concluded about the racial issues from all his decades of working among the white people.

There are two interpretations of Chanu’s opinion. The first is that the reality is just like what Chanu has said. The white people are not willing to promote a non-white person because they are not of the same colour. For the white people, Bangladeshi people are inferior. The saying “it will take him longer than any white man” may be just another way to say that it is impossible for the Bangladeshi people to get a promotion if there is any white man waiting on the list. There must have been a number of signs showing prejudice in his working environment as Chanu reaches this conclusion of racism. However, the second interpretation is the opposite to the assumption about the working environment. They have shown no racial discrimination against Chanu. Chanu does not get the promotion because he is not qualified to get it. He talks about racial discrimination because he does not want to admit his professional
incompetence. Furthermore, Chanu himself has a sense of inferiority while working with his white colleagues. This is a symptom of self-doubt of the inferior people.

Here is another example from Chanu about the superiority and inferiority of races. The conservation takes place at the kitchen where Nazneen is doing dishes. Chanu talks to Nazneen:

‘You see,’ he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, ‘it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. That is why you get the phenomenon of the National Front. They can play on those fears to create racial tensions, and give these people a superiority complex. The middle classes are more secure, and therefore more relaxed.’ (Ali, 38)

There is no direct source in the book about the white people’s opinion of Chanu’s failure to get the promotion. But from Chanu’s indignation, it can be concluded that the racial tensions between the white people, the British more specifically, and the Bangladeshi do exist. It makes sense that the white people would not like the non-white people like Chanu to leave their “proper place”. They are supposed to be at the bottom of the pile and make the white people feel superior. As long as the non-whites are in their position, they feel secure. They are sure that they can never be overtaken by the non-whites because they have the inborn advantage—light skin, which the Bangladeshis like Chanu cannot have and will not have.

For the white people, there is no difference within the race once they feel that Bangladeshis are a race. That is one of the reasons why Chanu, an educated man, cannot be a success in Britain. He is treated like any other illiterate Bangladeshi person. Chanu has realized this:

‘And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.’ (Ali, 28)

To the white people, Bangladeshis are “dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan”. Then the whites think that Bangladeshis are not only a race, but also a “dirty” race. The
superiority of the white people is obvious here. The white people do not care if they have received education. Even if Bangladeshis are highly educated; they are still the illiterate peasants in the eyes of the whites. Pathetically, the white people are not the only ones who think they are superior. Bangladeshis think so as well. Having worked in the local government, Chanu has an insight into the British system and he knows about Britain’s colonization of Bangladesh. Knowing how the colonization is processing, Chanu criticizes people who have been colonized as if he is sure he is safe from implementations of colonialism. However, he is actually colonized by Britain.

Even though he is infuriated while speaking of the starvation of millions of people in his home country, he refers to the British as the rulers of Bangladesh: “While the crows and vultures stripped our bones, the British, our rulers, exported grain from the country” (Ali, 370). Chanu has resisted hard to the British colonization and he is proud of his own country’s history and tradition, but he is claiming that the British are their rulers. It is not the whites who force him to admit his inferiority, but Chanu himself looks down upon his countrymen, including himself, as a race of people ruled by another race. It is the racism indicated within the race of Bangladeshis.

The racial discrimination exists not only for Bangladeshi people by the white people, but also for the Africans by Bangladeshi people. Colour difference is so obvious that it is easy for people to tell if they are of the same race. Not as white as the British, the Bangladeshis feel they are inferior to the white people. In the same way, they are not as dark as Africans. They think they are superior to the black people, just as Frantz Fanon claims in the previously quoted passage: “The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour” (Fanon, 133). When Mrs. Islam takes Nazneen to see the doctor, there are Africans in the waiting room:

A large family of Africans, the colour of wet river stones with long, beautiful necks and small sloping eyes, fanned out on the front seats. The children sat
Facial expressions cannot show abilities. They show emotions. The description is to show that the African family is patient and they are prepared to wait for a long time. They have been used to waiting and they wait so much that they even could call it their profession. No shouting, no cursing, but instead “[t]he grown-ups were silent”. They do not complain about the long waiting. They accept it. It can be inferred that the Africans need to wait for many things. Now it is in hospital where the majority of the patients are brown people, neither white nor black. For the brown people, the Africans are inferior. In a community full of brown people, the black people should wait for the brown. It is the black people’s profession, or it could be called their obligation. It is just like the white man’s privilege over non-white people in promotion. If it was a family of whites waiting outside patiently, it would be strange. But people take it for granted that the Africans should give way to others and wait. That is the racism of Bangladeshi people against Africans.

Boastful of his education, Chanu would never lose the chance to give a lengthy speech to show his knowledge, even on the history of Africans. On the way to Dr Azad’s house with his wife and son, he gets his chance.

They caught the bus on the Mile End Road. The conductor was an African. ‘Look how fit he is,’ whispered Chanu. ‘So big. So strong. You see...’ He paused a while. Nazneen shrank in her seat. The baby looked around without comment. ‘They were bred for it. Slavery.’ He hissed the word, and the couple in the seats in front turned round. ‘That’s their ancestry,’ said Chanu, abandoning the whisper. The bus began to move, and the noise of the engine stopped him from addressing all the passengers. ‘Only the strong survived that. Only the strong ones were wanted; they fetched the highest price. Commerce and natural selection working hand in hand.’ (Ali, 99)

Now there is a doubt: does a conductor have to be strong and big? Or does an African conductor have to be strong and big? Or does it really matter to be strong or big if the conductor is not an African but a white person? The conductor on this bus happens to be a black man, so Chanu has his opportunity to make comments. No one is happy to hear that they were bred for slavery. Slavery is a dark history for Africans. It is polite to avoid invoking
the other person’s sadness and shame in a conversation or comment. However, Chanu does not care. He begins his talking and treats the conductor as a commodity to be chosen and the product of natural selection. The conductor and his ancestry have price tags. Chanu does not try to keep his voice down, but he tries to address his speech on the Africans to all the passengers on the bus. He must have felt he is superior because he does not have to be as polite as to his white boss and colleagues and his country men. He is superior to the black man. It seems to be widely accepted as Chanu has the chance to make such a bold speech in public. In the meantime, it seems the conductor has to be responsible for his blackness and his ancestry. It is just like what Fanon was irritated with:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships and, above all these, above all: ’Sho’ good eatin’.’ (Fanon, 129)

The African conductor here is no longer a person. He stands for a race, a race laden with the heavy burden of history. As a person and as a representative of a race at the same time, the conductor becomes the subject of other people’s topic. His blackness, along with the characteristics people could think of, is imposed with others’ comments. Besides, the conductor is also responsible for that if his commentators enjoy the judgement. “Sho’ good eatin’”. The commenters should not be let down. The black man seems have to make sure that the commentators have enjoyed themselves in the process of remarking his blackness.

Yet, it is not always right for the Bangladeshi to be in between the white and the black. Karim, the young radical, admits that to be a Bangladeshi is not enough: “If you wanted to be cool you had to be something else—a bit white, a bit black, a bit something” (Ali, 263). Sandwiched between the white and the black, some Bangladeshis feel awkward. They are not superior as the white people so they cannot enjoy privileges. But they feel they are not as low as the black in the society, so they will not do something that may degrade themselves. They are a race of people who are ignored by the society. If they want to be paid more attention,
they must have something special: becoming a boss as the white or being a rascal like the black. It is Karim’s opinion on the importance of skin colour to a person. No matter if they are white, black or Bangladeshis, they all have their positions in the world.

Less obvious than skin-colour, culture is a second element used as the embodiment of racism in Brick Lane. As Edward Said asserts, “culture also becomes one of the most powerful agents of resistance in post-colonial societies” (88), culture plays an important role in the colonial society. Fanon argues: “If culture is the combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man, it can be said that racism is indeed a cultural element” (19). To avoid being criticized as racists, people have disguised racism as culture.

Living with different values and traditions, people hold different opinions on the same matter. Even people living in the same continent with the same system of ideology act very differently, let alone ones who are from different continents. For Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain, life is not easy. Chanu describes this life as immigrant tragedy. He explains to Mrs. Azad:

‘I’m talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I’m talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one’s identity and heritage. I’m talking about children who don’t know what their identity is. I’m talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I’m talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one’s sanity while striving to achieve the best for one’s family. I’m talking—’ (Ali, 113)

According to Chanu, to be a non-western person living in a western society is hard. He mentions several points: value clashes, assimilation and alienation, identity confusion and racism. Bangladesh, an Asian country, has values quite different from the western one. The western values tend to be open while the Bangladeshi culture is more conservative. Having come to the new country, Bangladeshis have to tackle all the issues challenging their traditions. The conservative people come to the open country and witness a great number of
cultural phenomena which are not allowed in their home country. They are shocked. Then they begin to use their home standard to criticise the new country.

Chanu teaches his two daughters at home about Bangladeshi literature and songs and forces them to speak Bengali at home. Moreover, he emphasizes the importance of knowing the history of his country. Steven George Salaita cites Amilcar Cabral’s claim in his article Beyond orientalism and islamophobia 9/11, Anti-Arab Racism, and the Mythos of National Pride: “culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated” (265). This claim manifests that history is part of culture. Chanu, the educated man with a lot of certificates on the wall, is quite proud of the history of his home country. He is proud that Bangladesh could produce commodities that other countries were queuing to buy and that Bangladesh was wealthy, stable and educated. It is the past glory of Bangladesh that Chanu is proud of. Fortunately, Chanu has another evidence to enhance his sense of pride: Bangladesh is the world’s happiest nation on earth, which is not convincing to the rest of his family members.

As he takes pride in the history of his country, Chanu despises the British culture: ‘Because our own culture is so strong. And what is their culture? Television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball. That is the white working-class culture’ (Ali, 254). With prejudice against the British society, Chanu looks at the British culture in a negative way. At least, what the British could be proud of is not the past. They can put their pride in the present. It is this culture that is popular among Bangladeshi youth: Chanu’s daughters watch TV and Dr. Azad’s daughter goes to the pub.

Likewise, the British presents bad images of Bangladesh. They teach students the bad things ever happening to Bangladesh, in Chanu’s words: “All flood here and famine there and taking up collection tins” (Ali, 186). Shahana, the elder daughter who is born and bred in
London is deeply affected by this presentation. She even thinks that there is no toothbrush and toilet paper in Bangladesh and she strongly resists going back.

The culture resistance is not confined to Bangladeshis and the British. Bangladeshi people also resist other cultures. Here is Mrs Islam’s words to Razia about mingling with people of other nationalities at Nazneen’s home:

‘Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned,’ said Mrs Islam. ‘I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is.’ (Ali, 29)

For Bangladeshis, taking Mrs Islam as an example, mixing with other nationalities means they have to yield their own culture and absorb others’. But if Bengali culture is really as strong as Chanu says, Bangladeshis should not be worried about their loss of culture. It is inferred that mixing up with other cultures will not make one give up his or her own. As Frantz Fanon maintains that “[t]he object of racism is no longer the individual man but a certain form of existing” (20), what Bangladeshis worry is about the idea of mixing with others, especially for women going out. They have prejudices against other peoples of different origins. From Mr Islam’s words, it is evident that clothing is a signal of culture as well. Obviously burkha or purdah is the clothes embodying Bengali culture while cardigans and anoraks are indications of western culture. Wearing their traditional clothes is a way to uphold their culture. But it is interesting to notice that Mrs Islam thinks not wearing burkha is a sign to prove that she is not old-fashioned. That can be the evidence that Mrs Islam has racist ideas about the clothing of both her own country and other countries. It seems that Mrs Islam is not the only one who thinks in this way.

There are other examples of women’s clothing in Brick Lane. Razia is positive to British culture. She embraces British culture and dressing like the British is her first step. But she has to bear all the gossip about her new dressing style:
‘But I must wear it, from time to time. I hear what they are saying. Razia is a little touched. Crazy, crazy.’ She clucked a little and made some crooning noises. ‘“Razia is so English. She is getting like the Queen herself.” ’ (Ali, 229)

Trying to be more like the British, Razia tries on the Union Jack sweater and pants. She is still not close to being a British, but her Bangladeshi friends begin to be uncomfortable with it. They think Razia is crazy. Abandoning their sari and choosing the white people’s clothes is obviously not a smart choice in the eyes of Bangladeshis. The culture of women’s dressing does not allow them the freedom to change, even if they have the desire to wear other clothes than Saris. Nazneen tries on the clothes that she is sewing secretly several times. It can be inferred that she is not the only one. While the Bangladeshi women are jealous of Razia’s courage, they criticize her with satire. For Bangladeshi women, wearing sari is the indication of moral perception while wearing clothes in British style is a sign of moral deficiency. Racism prejudices Bangladeshis’ opinion of British dressing culture.

It is also interesting to notice that Chanu even regards his daughters’ clothes as a way to show his outrage to the prejudice against both the white people and his countrymen.

If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants.

If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts. (Ali, 265)

Dress code is a way to show the culture of one’s country. The Bangladeshi women are supposed to be well wrapped by their clothes, while skirts are often the choices of western girls. But when Lion Hearts leaflets points out the dress code of Bangladeshi women, Chanu cannot stand the disdainful attitude towards his country’s dressing culture. In order to show his outrage, he requires his daughters to dress exactly according to the Bangledeshi dress code. However, Chanu thinks that his own country’s standard of dress is ignorant although he does not allow his daughter to wear jeans like western youth. When he sees the well wrapped girls, he cannot put up with the idea of ignorance. Being annoyed by the white people’s prejudice
against the Bangladeshi dress code, Chanu uses his daughters’ way of dressing as a method to rebel. It is Chanu’s racist idea on dressing cultures of his country and Britain.

As for Bangladeshi people’s attitude towards women going out, there are more examples in the book as well. Bengali values do not allow women to appear in public alone. If not necessary, they are not supposed to step out of their house. In the first few months, Nazneen spends all day in the house cooking and cleaning. But her husband still remembers to lecture to her on the consequences if she goes out:

>*She did not often go out. ‘Why should you go out?’ said Chanu. ‘If you go out, ten people will say, “I saw her walking on the street.” And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don’t mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?’* (Ali, 45)

Without doing anything strange, women will be the topic of gossip just because they are walking on the street. In addition, it will bring shame to their husbands. People will think that if women go out, then it is a failure of the men in their home and the men will be the laughing stock. It is the Bangladeshi’s idea that women are obligatory to stay at home. Although Chanu does not admit he is against this value, he does not like Nazneen to go out either. He says he does not want to be like a fool. However, he does think women have no reason to go out. He tells Nazneen “I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want, you only have to ask” (Ali, 45). Chanu thinks Nazneen does not miss anything in Bangladesh but, in his words, broadens her horizons.

That is Bangladeshi people’s attitudes towards women going out. Englishmen do not think in the same way. Nazneen remembers that “Razia always said, if you go out to shop, go to Sainsbury’s. English people don’t look at you twice. But if you go to our shops, the Bengali men will make things up about you” (Ali, 59). For an Englishman, it is normal for women to go out, hanging around. They do not pay extra attention to a Bengali woman and wonder what she is doing. Maybe they even do not notice the fact that a Bengali woman is walking on the street. But the Bengali men react in another way. Based on the fact that a Bengali woman who
is supposed to stay inside is walking on the street, they can make up bad things about her. Simply because a woman is going out, people invent a whole story of her falling. Thus, the woman is regarded as a disgrace.

Women in Bangladesh are not allowed to do many things. In addition to going out and changing dress, work is another affair prejudiced by Bangladeshi people. In the first months in London, Nazneen hears a dialogue between Mrs. Islam and Razia, the first two people she meets at her new home. The two friends are talking about another Bangladeshi woman Jorina and her work:

‘Going out to work?’ Razia said to Mrs Islam. ‘What has happened to Jorina’s husband?’

‘Nothing has happened to Jorina’s husband,’ said Mrs Islam. …

‘Her husband is still working,’ said Razia, as if she were the provider of the information.

‘The husband is working but still she cannot fill her stomach. In Bangladesh one salary can feed twelve, but Jorina cannot fill her stomach.’ (Ali, 29)

Just like women are not allowed to go out, women are not allowed to work in Bangladesh and they bring this tradition to London as well. When Jorina goes to work, others are wondering what happens to her husband. They think it is the only situation in which women have to work. When Mrs Islam tells Razia that nothing has happened to Jorina’s husband and he is still working, it seems hard for Razia to absorb this information. She repeats it again so she can ensure herself of what she has heard. About the salary’s capacity to fill stomachs, Mrs Islam’s words can be interpreted in two ways. First, Mrs Islam says it in an ironic way. She does not mean the salary is not enough for Jorina’s husband to raise his family. She criticizes Jorina indirectly for her dissatisfaction with being a housewife staying at home. It shows her disapprobation of Jorina. But in the second possible interpretation, Mrs Islam’s words are projecting that London is not as good as Bangladesh because the salary here is not enough for a man to feed his family. This is the women’s opinion.
As a man, Chanu gives his opinion when Nazneen tells him that she can get a job: ‘Some of these uneducated ones, they say that if the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them. Lucky for you I am an educated man’’ (Ali, 184). Here Chanu certifies again that Bangladeshi women are not encouraged to work and people have prejudice against working women. Although Chanu says that he accepts his wife is working because he is an educated man, he is not comfortable with this idea. After airing his opinion, “he fell into a deep reverie and said nothing further” (Ali, 184). Allowing himself more time to think over his wife’s work, Chanu does not give long lectures as he always does.

Cultural racism is not as obvious as racism on skin colour. However, we should notice the author Monica Ali’s background. She is only half Bangladeshi, and she grew up in England without any intimate experience of Bangladeshi community (Chakrabarti, Boston Review). Therefore, she is mostly exposed to British culture. While she presents Bangladeshi culture, it is easy for her to depict it from a British perspective. Thus, it is inevitable that British racism towards Bangladeshis is involved to certain extent.

In addition to colour and culture, racism is also embodied in religion. Most Bangladeshis are Muslims while Christianity is the main religion for the white people in London. With continuing disagreements with each other, Muslims and Christians do not hold high opinions of the other religion. Especially for Muslims, they are living in a country where Christians are dominant. They feel they are persecuted sometimes. The following is what Nazneen hears when she goes to collect her daughter: “Jorina said that police had been to the mosque and questioned the imam for two hours. No one had any idea why, although many predicted trouble and everyone doubted that a church had ever been treated with such flagrant disrespect” (Ali, 206). For Muslims, the mosque is their sacred place just like the church is the Christians’. These places are not allowed secular harassments. However, police have set foot in the Muslims’ sacred place. Moreover, the imam, the leader of Islam, has been
questioned by police for two hours. In the Muslims’ eyes, this is “flagrant disrespect”. While
they are experiencing these insults, Muslims are wondering if a church has ever received the
same treatment. This is the local society’s racism towards Islam.

The setting of *Brick Lane* is the community of many Bangladeshis. Javaid Rehman
suggests that “Muslim communities have also retained the ghettoization syndrome: […] 40
percent of those [Muslims] with Bangladeshi origins are concentrated in a single London
borough—the London Borough of Tower Hamlets” (846). In this environment where
Bangladeshis have equal influence to the local citizens, the natives feel threatened. They
begin to attack Islamic relative conservatism. In the book, the most salient attacks are written
in the leaflets, which are dispersed by the Christian group Lion Hearts against Bengal Tigers to
attack Muslims:

The Lion Hearts made the opening salvo:

HANDS OFF OUR BREASTS!

The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far. A Page 3 calendar
and poster have been removed from the walls of our community hall.

How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting
our daughters for wearing short skirts?

Do not tolerate it! Write to the council! This is England! (Ali, 257)

Christians feel that their community is being Islamificed by Muslims. A calendar and poster
has been removed by Muslims. Christians cannot stand the Islamic culture penetrating into
their life. They feel it is time to fight. The leaflet above is calling for Christians to take actions
and stop the Islamification of the community. They claim “[t]his is England”. England should
protect its own religious culture. Their community should be Christian. That means women
are free to be unveiled and girls are free to wear short skirts. To point against Lion Hearts’
accusation, Bengal Tigers proclaim that showing women’s body parts in public is degrading
women. They warn Christians to “keep your breasts to yourself” (Ali, 258). The two religious
groups have their own advocacy and protest each other’s. It is an exemplification of the two
groups’ mutual racism towards each other’s religion.

The conflict has been stepped up since the September 11\textsuperscript{th} event happened. This incident
took place in America. But the non-Islamic people in London direct their anger at the people
who are of the same religion as the terrorists—Muslims. They are not tolerant of each other.
They criticize and even fight against each other. The white people have their group named
Lion Hearts to oppose the Islamic people. Later, the Islamic people found the group named
Bengal Tigers to fight back.

They regard people of the other religion as a group not as an individual. When they see a
person of the other religion, they act as if the person they see is the representation of the
whole religion and they rebuke the person as if it is the person who has done all of these
things that they cannot tolerate, even though the person may be an innocent one who just goes
to the Mosque regularly. Some Muslims have to bear others’ aggressive behavior. This is
some ordinary Muslims’ experiences after the September 11\textsuperscript{th} event Ali describes in the novel
\textit{Brick Lane}:

\begin{quote}
A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the
dogwood Estate. Sorupa’s daughter was the first, but not the only one.
Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off.
Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on. (Ali, 368)
\end{quote}

Easy to be recognized by clothes, Muslims are the bearer of the public’s indignation. An
ordinary student is insulted. Even a Muslim who is trying hard to blend into the local
environment like Razia is spat on. In spite of what Razia is wearing, she is recognized as a
Muslim and she is regarded as the symbol of Islam which is provocative enough to motivate
them to do something to show their emotion. They know these people have nothing to do with
the incident, but their religion seems to represent that they could have the intention to blow
down the skyscrapers in America or some other buildings that may be in Britain. The others
think that the Muslims are not as shocked as they are and they believe that all the Muslims are
happy and proud to see what their brothers have done to the world. In the non-Muslims’ eyes, Muslim is the synonym of terrorism. They will no longer care if the terrorists are really Muslims. They do not care if the terrorist attack has something to do with the religion. They just ignore that the terrorists happen to be Muslims. They already have racist ideas against Muslims.

However, the racism is not unilateral. Karim, the young Islamic radical, tries to overturn the possible fact of Islamic terrorists:

Karim picked up the chair. ‘A devout Muslim, right, willing to sacrifice himself for his religion. Does he go to bars and watch naked girls and drink alcohol? What kind of Muslim takes his Qur’an into a bar? And leaves it there? These stories are made up by idiots. People who don’t know nothing about Islam. Maybe a Christian carries his Bible round like a pack of cigarettes. He don’t know how a Qur’an is treated.’ (Ali, 382)

Karim does not want to accept the fact that the terrorists are Muslims, so he tries to convince himself by explaining the doubtful points of the terrorists’ identities in September 11\textsuperscript{th}. He is a Muslim. He knows more about the religion than others. He knows politics, so he displays his doubts on the evidence proving the terrorists to be Muslims. It seems rational to overturn the version of who the terrorists are. However, he cannot help expressing the racial opinion against Christianity. He proves a possibility that the terrorists are not Muslims. In the meantime, he drags Christians into the quagmire. He respects his religious doctrine Qur’an. But he does not know that Christians treat the Bible with the same respect, too. With religious prejudice, Karim claims that Christians are not devout as much as Muslims to their religions.

If the above examples are not explicit enough to show the religious aspect of racism, the contents on the leaflets which are used as a battle field by both of the religious groups Lion Hearts and Bengal Tigers can give readers a direct glimpse of the discrimination. On one of the Lion Hearts’ leaflets dispensed to the community, Chanu finds something outrageous.

Chanu read, ‘Should we be forced to put up with this? When the truth is that it is a religion of hate and intolerance. When Muslim extremists are planning to turn Britain into an Islamic Republic, using a combination of immigration, high birth rate and conversion. On and on, this rubbish.’ (Ali, 251)
On the leaflet, the Lion Hearts directly claims Islam is “a religion of hate and intolerance”. They also accuse Muslims of converting Britain. Out of repellence to Muslims, the white people reproach them for all the ways they have acted. Thus, the Muslims are labeled with immigration, high birth rate and conversion. Firstly, the white people think Muslims are immigrants from other less developed countries, like India, Bangladesh and some African countries. In a more extreme way, the white people may think that all the immigrants from Bangladesh are Muslims and it is impossible for a white person to be a Muslim. For the white people, Muslims are extremists. They hold negative opinions of them. They believe the Muslims can do terrible things to whomever they resent. However, that some of the Muslims have organized some radical activities does not mean the entire Muslims act in a radical way. The bad impression of Muslims is over generalized by the white people. Secondly, the white people regard high birth rate as one of the characteristics of Muslims. So when the councilor comes to Nazneen’s flat after the riot with a reporter and a photographer, he is disappointed when Nazneen tells him she has only two children. The councilor must have been prepared to attest that the high birth rate of Bangladeshis is one of the causes leading to riots in the community. They cannot put the prejudice aside and despise their high birth rate. Furthermore, the white people think Muslims are good at brainwashing. In their opinion, Muslims are propagating their religious ideas to absorb others into their group. Christians worry that their society is facing conversion. But they feel overwhelmed by Islam simply because they live in the community in which Bangladeshi Muslims are concentrated. Racism leads them to be extreme.

Just as the discussion about the conflicts between Bangladeshi and local communities among Bengal Tigers goes in one gathering: ‘They don’t say race, they say culture, religion’ (Ali, 241), racism has extended to different aspects of life. Skin-colour is less used to identify racism as it is easy to be detected. The less concrete conception and values like culture and
religion are likely to be adopted by racists to discriminate against others. However, no matter how racism is shown, on skin colour, on culture or on religion, it has victims. Chanu cannot stand the racial prejudice any more. He has to abandon his British Dream and goes back to his country even failing to bring his family with him. Lost in the dominant culture in Britain, Tariq, Razia’s son, resorts to drugs. Seen as accomplices of terrorists in September 11th, Muslims have to change their dress tradition to avoid attacks: “Some of the parents were telling their daughters to leave their headscarves at home” (Ali, 376). Finally, it turns into violence which causes instability to the society and brings concerns to local residents.

Colour prejudice, culture clashes, and religious intolerance embody racism in varying degrees in the book Brick Lane. This essay just gives some evidence of the existence of racism and the possible relations between racism and the three aspects. It proves that Brick Lane is not only a good book to illustrate feminism, but also a fitting novel to discuss racism. Racism causes some social problems like instability and insecurity, but it is a consequence of certain factors as well. This essay has not touched upon its reasons. Further research can be carried out on this aspect as politicians are eager to find some solutions to alleviate tensions brought about by racism.
Works Cited


