

Abstract: The research focuses on studying the positions of Bangladeshi immigrant Al-Mustansiriyah University

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The Status of Bangladeshi Immigrant Women and the Consequences of the Attacks of 9/11 in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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مستخلص

يركز البحث على دراسة دور المهاجرات البنغلاديشيات في رواية الكاتبة البريطانية مونكا علي المعنونة بـ *Brick Lane*. تصور الرواية لأول مرة الحياة الداخلية للمهاجرات البنغلاديشيات في لندن، وتلقي الضوء على معاناتهن كمجموعة مهمشة من خلال اعطاء البطلة (نازنين) صوتاً تعكس به هذه المعاناة. تتشابك الأحداث مع الهجوم الإرهابي في الحادي عشر من سبتمبر وتداعياته على حياة الأقلية البنغلاديشية والمسلمة في ذلك الحين وما تلاها. كذلك تتابع الرواية تطور نازنين من كونها امرأة مهمشة إلى امرأة مستقلة.

women in the novel of British novelist Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*(2003). The novel reveals for the first time the interior lives of Bangladeshi immigrant women. It sheds light on their suffering as a marginalized group through giving voice to Nazneen, the main character in the novel. The events are interwoven with the effects of the terrorist attack of 9\ 11 and its consequences on the lives of the Bangladeshi and Muslim communities at that time. The novel follows Nazneen's development from being a marginalized into self- independent woman.

The Status of Bangladeshi Immigrant Women and the Consequences of the Attacks of 9/11 in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Monica Ali: A Biographical Sketch

There's so much to worry about: poverty, climate change, pollution, the arms industry, the oppression of women, over-population... the list is long. I think one of the biggest worries is that the problems can seem so overwhelming that people disengage and switch off, as if there's nothing that can be done. But no problem is totally intractable if the political will is there. So I think that's the challenge – to keep engaging people to make their personal contribution, and not see it as too small to count. (Davis, "Monica Ali: An Interview")

Monica Ali was born in October 1967 to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother. Ali studied politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford University. She drifted into marketing for two small publishing houses, and then worked at a design and branding agency. Somehow, writing was always idling at the edge of her thoughts: "On and off I've had an idea that it would be a nice thing to be a writer, which is quite a different thing from having the urge to write. That came quite late and so did the confidence," she says (quoted in Lane, "Ali's in Wonderland").

In an interview in 2011, Ali put feminism at the center of her interests. She questioned the status of women after a century of struggle for justice:

This year is the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. Since 1911 we've come an awfully long way. But why, in 2011, are women performing 66 per cent of the world's work, producing 50 per cent of the world's food, and yet only earning 10

per cent of world's income and owning one per cent of the world's property?
(Davis,1)

Ali condemns the commodification of women by using such feminist concepts as women empowerment and individual freedom. She stated:

When I started at senior school we had a woman Prime Minister, the Sex Discrimination Act had already been passed, and it seemed that the need to fight for equality would be over by the time I had a daughter of my own. But when I walk around with my daughter, who's 10, she sees billboards of virtually naked women and she asks me, 'Why has that woman got no clothes on, mum?' And then she answers her own question – 'It's to sell, isn't it?' And she's right, of course. But it's also the wholesale sexualization of the culture, and it's been dressed up in terms of female empowerment and individual freedom, and I think it's very hard to be a little girl growing up to see and make sense of that for yourself.

In order to dramatize her feminist attitude, Ali made women at the center of her novels. Women characters like Nazneen in *Brick Lane* (2003), Teresa and her mother in *Alentejo Blue* (2006), Lena in *In the Kitchen* (2009), or even Princess Diana in *Untold Story* (2011) are samples of how women are struggling against socio-political powers, which force them to accommodate themselves to a life they are not satisfied of, but sometimes they reconstruct it if they have a suitable opportunity.

Ali's first novel *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize, the George Orwell Prize for political writing and the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize. In the same year she was named by Granta magazine as one of twenty "Best of Young British Novelists." She was celebrated along with such novelists as Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru, as "one of an exciting group of young writers giving voice to the new multi-ethnic, multicultural Great Britain" (Mudge, "An Interview with Monica Ali").

Ali is considered the first to write about Bangladeshi women immigrants. *Brick Lane* is a study of the exploitation and displacement of immigrants in general, and immigrant women, in particular, who migrated to Britain for economic reasons in the postwar era. It maps especially the social trajectories of immigrant women in Britain and reveal the political nature of mores and communities that shape a woman's destiny wherever she may live.

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali succeeds to transcend the stigma of race in order to tackle socio-political issues experienced by the marginalized or what Gayatri Spivak calls "the subaltern" in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Spivak uses the term to refer to anyone who is subordinate in rank, status, or importance and who could be any member of a group that because of their class, gender, race or cultural background has little access to the agencies of representation and power within any given society (Bently 84). Problematical topics like immigration, poverty, segregation, racism, above all the role played by patriarchy in shaping the lives of women are essential issues discussed by the text. According to Spivak, women from marginalized cultures suffer double persecution: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (28 my italics). Alistair Cormack emphasizes this point in her discussion of Ali's *Brick Lane*: "*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). This kind of double subjugation makes immigrant women in general, and Ali's characters double powerless in the political arena of her novel.

Brick Lane

The world of *Brick Lane* is populated by those far removed from the machinations of power and wealth, people whose lives are shaped by the policies of world organizations but who have little or no chance to respond and be heard outside of a riot-or the spectacle of a terrorist attack. (Lopez 527)

In *Brick Lane*, the socio-political problems including the perils of patriarchy, poverty, racism, and increasing radical Islamism are central to the lives of the Bangladeshi and Muslim immigrants living in London and throughout Britain in the period between 1985-2002, the actual duration of the novel. Monica Ali portrays perhaps for the first time the interior lives of the Bangladeshi community from a woman's point of view, which remained hidden and invisible to the rest of London. She wrote *Brick Lane* in periods of acute political anxiety around ethnic and religious particularism. Two important events are depicted in the novel: The race riots swept over British cities after racial tensions in the northern parts of England where South Asian Muslims clashed with white inhabitants (Pathack 5), and the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center which heightened ethnic xenophobia in 2001. "9/11 was a catalyst of old fears which was now a renewed and enhanced prejudice which scrutinized Muslims as well as their ethnic backgrounds"(Allen 1).

Brick Lane gives a picture of the consequences of the above mentioned political activities on the lives of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in Brick Lane, an area to the east of London, and especially on the major woman character, Nazneen. The novel's importance stems from the fact that it has "a dual significance, depending on whether it is considered from a Bangladeshi or British perspective" (Haq 21-22). Though it was celebrated by the literary circles in London as the first novel to deal with the Bangladeshi community in Britain, Ali's *Brick Lane* established a kind of socio-political controversy among a large group of Bangladeshis inside and outside Britain. The novel had upset many in the Bangladeshi community in Britain. They believed that it "portrayed Bangladeshis...as backward, uneducated and unsophisticated, and that this amounted to a despicable insult" (Lea and Lewis 1).

The novel and the film adaptation, which won a British drama film award in 2007, were protested against by petitions, letters and demonstrations by the Bangladeshis who believed both the novel and the film "promulgated stereotypes of Sylhetis." (Sylhet is a region in Bangladesh where most British immigrant Bangladesh population come from). These people formed 95% of Britain's Bangladeshi community. The novel has been claimed by its opponents to have "reinforced pro-racist, anti-social stereotypes and of containing a most explicit, politically calculated violation of the human rights of the community" (Lea and Lewis 1). The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, which represents a large number of Bangladeshis in Britain, has criticized the book for portraying them simply as money-making and ignorant migrants (quoted in Akhter 98). It was particularly insulted by Chanu's (the husband of the protagonist) offensive observations on Bangladeshis: at one point he describes them as peasants, illiterate, uneducated, close minded and without ambition Sylhetis who had jumped their ships and landed in London, "possessing only the lice on their heads" (*BL* 26). These protests "attracted so much media attention and thrilled expectations of a repeat show of sensationalism surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*" (ibid 99).

According to Yasmin Hussain, *Brick Lane* is limited in conveying the interior atmosphere and experience of Bangladeshi culture. She believes that no community events and activities are portrayed, except the outrageous defense group meetings which Nazneen is invited to in a

local hall. Nazneen does not attend any wedding or funeral, nor there are any religious festivals like the two Eids which are central to the assertion of Muslim south Asian culture in the diaspora manifested in the novel (quoted in Akhter 105). Like the Bangladeshi people, Hussain overlooks the fact that the novel after all is not a historical documentation of the real life of Bangladeshis, but only a fictional construction which tries to unleash or give a substance to the hidden interiors of the lives of these people, and especially women.

Ali criticized the Brick Lane protests of her novel as belonging to an "economy of outrage," which depended completely on emotions, and which was meant to rouse media rage to limit the author's freedom of expression. She claimed to have no anxiety of authenticity, and she disowned licensing authorities. The "authenticity game," according to her, could lead to bizarre conclusions. She added: "for then memoirs and autobiographies would be the only genres to be written" ("Economy of Outrage").

Ali rejected what Kobena Mercer and others have called the "burden of representation"(61) which is associated especially with the writers of different ethnic origins. This concept has been used to refer to the expectations of representatively placed by the audience on ethnic minority writers, according to which they are expected to represent through their writing their communities' concerns in such a way that any deviation from this political act results in a lack of interest on the part of readers and critics (Batista-Rodríguez 2). She did not like to be labeled according to the color of her skin, she hated the fact: "that when I speak, my brown skin is the dominant signifier" ("Where I am Coming From"). She asserted her right to be free in expressing her ideas regardless of color or ethnic background. Hiddleston explains Ali's position as a writer:

Her [Ali's] assumption of an easy position in the peripheral shadows of the text suggests that she wants to efface herself behind the different discourses she puts into play. She has no determined argument, no personal hold upon work, but uses the space of fiction to exhibit and perform a series of culturally and rhetorically figures. Furthermore, in effacing herself in this way, Ali is placing the reader in an active position and forcing her[sic] to reflect on her own desires in relation to the text, her desire for knowledge and insight, and her search for political or cultural critique. (71)

Chandra Talpade Mohanty believes that "being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unfair and unjust effects on women depending on our... marginality and/or privilege" (3). Seemingly agreeing with Mohanty's statement, Ali makes the events of her novel filter through the consciousness of her major female character, Nazneen, whose arranged marriage at the age of eighteen to the forty- years- old Chanu, brings her from the wide dirt tracks and rice fields of rural Bangladesh to a secluded view of dead grass, broken paving stones and net curtains in Tower Hamlets, London. Ali emphasizes the importance of depicting life through the eyes of the subaltern, Nazneen. She asserted the political nature of choosing Nazneen to narrate her story:

It is political only in one very particular way: the story is told from the point of view of a marginalised voice. Accepting that voice can be every bit as rich and nuanced, individual and interesting as any other is profoundly political in a society which too often measures its minorities in banner headlines. ("The Economy of Outrage")

Nazneen lives and observes the tragic suffering of herself and her other Bangladeshi counterparts against neo-colonialism with its particularized economic exploitation and the patriarchy that is firmly entrenched in religious and social traditions.

For the background information of *Brick Lane* and because she does not have a firsthand experience of Bangladeshi community in Britain or in Bangladesh, Ali claimed to have been moved by the Bangladeshi academic Naila Kabeer's book *The Power to Choose* (2000), which depicts case-studies of Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London. She also tried to interact with drug addicts and youth workers, people at a women's center Banglatown (Akhter 102).

Brick Lane has its autobiographical features: "I was drawing on my childhood, not in a way that was particularly autobiographical in my straightforward way, but it was there" (quoted in Adebayo 346). Ali's protagonist, Nazneen shares with her creator her birth year and the ancestral village of Gouripur. There is a lot of herself in Shahana, Nazneen's eldest daughter, as Ali herself admitted in her essay "The Economy of Outrage." She claimed that the conflict between first and second generation immigrants has inspired her to write the novel: "*Brick Lane* is in many ways a typical first novel, drawing on concerns and ideas that shaped my childhood. For instance, there's a lot of me in Shahana, the rebellious teenage daughter, and maybe a bit of her still left in me" ("Economy of Outrage"). The stories told by her father about the village life- particularly of Makku Pagla and his famous umbrella color her novel too (Akhter 103).

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. White and black people are living there or around too. Nazneen has white neighbors: "In the flats immediately next door, there were white people" (*BL* 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." In such a multi-racial society, racial issues cannot be overlooked most notably in terms of the continuum of political and social discontent with which Nazneen becomes familiar.

Nazneen is depicted at the beginning of the novel simply as a fatalist woman, who believes that: "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne" (*BL* 11). Living in London, she knows only three words in English "sorry and thank you" (*BL* 11). She is chosen primarily by her husband because "she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that...a girl from the village totally unspoilt" (*BL* 17). *Brick Lane* becomes for Nazneen a feminized space, inhabited by her and the other women living at Tower Hamlets. Their discontent is associated with their gender; Nazneen and other women battle within similar social constraints, which are, in the main, patriarchal, and encounter parallel discourtesies that inform their dialectic as women. She feels that "she was trapped in this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity" (*BL* 61).

For many months after her arrival in London, Nazneen could not go out because Chanu thinks that people will begin to have bad impression about her: "Why should you go out...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" (*BL* 35). Though he keeps telling her that he has become intellectually westernized, Chanu's duality is shown through his adherence to his native cultural conventions which contradict

the avowed western notions he claims to have acquired during the fifteen years of living in Brick Lane.

For Chanu, Britain is morally and socially corrupt, determined by its weaknesses like poverty and racism, rather than by its strengths. George Lamming writes, "England was the country of expectation," but the immigrants quickly experienced both disillusionment and, as Fred D'Aguiar termed it, a sense of 'unbelonging' as they were caught between a community left behind and a new community which didn't accept them (quoted in Sandapen 19). Ali describes Chanu's dilemma by the words of Dr. Azad, Chanu's friend who after listening to Chanu's complaints defines the latter's problem as "Going home Syndrome" (BL 24) connected to Bangladeshi men. Like many Bangladeshis, though Chanu has lived in Britain for a long time, he is yearning to go back to his native country after, collecting enough money to live decently there. However, experience proves that he can never collect that money because he is never promoted in his work due to racism. The novel never shows the point of view of British people to confirm or refute Chanu's claims. But one of his statements is of a great value, because it could summarize the fear of otherness; he states:

It is the white under- class people... who are most afraid of people like me. ...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 proper our 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. (BL 29)

Suffering from racism and lack of recognition at work and to confirm his patriarchal position at least at home, Chanu treats Nazneen as other. Her gaze remains that of the other for him and the rest of the Bangladeshi community. He does not encourage her to speak or act. Instead, he promotes and appreciates silence in her (for long years she has never complained; he proudly compliments her muteness). However, to compensate this muteness, Nazneen is depicted to have interior monologues. She is also portrayed as being passive within conversations with Chanu and others especially the conversations between him and Dr. Azad (23-27, 89-93) about his longing to go back to Bangladesh. The only time she comments, her remark is sarcastically dismissed by her husband as "my wife is just settling in here" (BL 24). Within her new surroundings, these exchanges increase Nazneen's self-doubt or self-denigration. When she expresses her wish to learn to *speak* English, Chanu's reaction is "he puffed his cheeks and spat out the air out in a fuff. 'It will come. Don't worry about it. where is the need anyway?'" (BL 28). To emphasize Chanu's patriarchal attitude in the same scene, Ali ironically shows him reading his *English* book while Nazneen watches *silently* the TV screen without comprehending what people might say there.

To compensate her muteness, Nazneen secretly starts to watch ice-skating on television. It can be considered a distraction from the reality of her life: "[she became] whole and pure... The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory" (BL 41). It can be argued that ice-skating represents a fantasy world where Nazneen can escape her confined life. Ice-skating does not require verbal exchange (she could not pronounce the word any way), the thing Nazneen lacks at the moment but it exposes her for the first time to the idea of how one could control not only one's body but one's destiny as well. Here we have a subtle telling passage that describes a man and a woman dedicated to the act of skating. It is a harmonious act and an exceedingly moving picture:

A man in a very tight suit... and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena. The people in the audience clapped their hands together and then stopped. By some magic they all stopped exactly the same time. The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot...on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until she would surly fall but didn't. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (BL 27-8)

For Nazneen, this experience becomes a liberating one which sets to leave a permanent and lasting influence on her personality. So, the urge to be free persists in Nazneen, despite her secluded life.

Seeing other Bangladeshi women struggling with poverty, violence and uncontrolled and sometimes addicted children (like the case of the son of her friend, Razia) and though dissatisfied, Nazneen accepts her position because at least, her husband is a hard worker and he does not beat her like other husbands (BL 83). Hussain comments on Nazneen's passivity: "What is unusual in the characterization of Nazneen is the lack of excitement, expectation and new desires as an immigrant...She fulfills her role as a wife as though she were in Bangladesh and becomes the dutiful wife and mother" (95). It can be argued that Nazneen's behavior comes in accordance with her belief of "what could not be changed must be borne" (BL 11). At the same time, Nazneen seems to follow the tactics of "making do," suggested by Michel De Ceteau which makes the powerless immigrant create "a space in which [s/]he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of language. Without leaving the place where [s/]he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for [her], [s/]he establishes within it a degree of... creativity" (quoted in Al- Azawi 158). Though inwardly dissatisfied, Nazneen tries to adapt herself to her life.

Nazneen can observe the predicaments of Bangladeshi women in London and compare them to those of home. These women are depicted through suicides, arranged marriages, violence, polygamy and prostitution. Women in the Bangladeshi closed society in London as portrayed in the novel are not allowed to work, and are judged according to whether they are demure enough in terms of their clothes and behavior. They have to handle sexism brought from Bangladesh. Though the Bangladeshis who have settled in this part of London are living in a small enclave within the English community, the Bangladeshi rules are still valid. Any step is taken by these women to enhance their financial or personal advancement is faced with social abuse. Razia, Nazneen's friend, is threatened of slaughter by her husband because she confesses her wish of having a job (BL 114) though they cannot live a decent life because the husband sends most of his money back home. Jorina, another woman is depicted by Mrs. Islam, a neighbor, as bringing shame to her family because she decides to have a job (BL 78). Amina, another acquaintance, is abused by her husband. According to Razia "he has another wife that he forgot to mention for the past eleven years" (BL 57).

It is important here to look more closely at Ali' s rendering of Nazneen's immutable space, the British social "Tower Hamlets," which is essential to a better understanding of the political as well as social machinations that constructed that space and established its social efficacy. To Nazneen, the gendered, racialized representative of Bangladeshi migrated women, the English inner city, in this case Tower Hamlets, becomes her cultural space and

consequently her political environment. Nazneen, the other, becomes symbolic. Her poor condition symbolizes what the state has decided to be appropriate for Bangladeshi immigrants. Her physical space also symbolizes what the migrant's immediate and preceding communities consider appropriate. If the small shabby flat is Nazneen's space of confinement for many months after her arrival at Brick Lane, the window and the TV have become her only connections with, the yet undiscovered world.

Upset with the bad news of her sister's condition back in Bangladesh, Nazneen determines to explore Brick Lane alone and outside of Tower Hamlets (*BL* 42-48). This is a necessary construction device, as Margaret Wallace Nilsson argues, employed by the author to push the character and the story in the desired direction. Nazneen proves to have a strong urge to experience life outside the flat and Chanu's controlling attitude toward her (*BL* 11). It can be argued that Nazneen's isolation is a necessary device in order to begin the quest or the journey of development and independence. She must first escape the controlling forms of her monotonous and constrictive life. Her solitary adventure could be considered as her first wavering step toward self-discovery, which strongly contrasts with her isolated existence as it is depicted earlier in the novel. Criticizing Ali's depiction of the seclusion of Nazneen, Chakrabarti implies that the closed and confined environment the author builds around the young protagonist Nazneen is only an imaginative construction of Ali and not the reality which thousands of Bangladeshi women face every day on the real Brick Lane (1). This of course does not refute the fact that thousands of Bangladeshi immigrant women are denied the chance to learn and to participate on equal terms with their men counterparts in improving their lives due to socio-political reasons which they have already inherited from their original Bangladeshi communities.

After Nazneen's first solitary adventure in Brick Lane, there is nothing in the novel to indicate that she may take any other serious step forward. She seems to accept her position especially after the birth of her first son and his ensuing death at an early age. For the fifteen years, thematically dividing the first part and the second part of the novel, Nazneen's life is filtered through the letters of her sister, Hasina. From these letters, the reader knows that Nazneen has got two daughters and she is still struggling with Chanu's inability to settle down and his increasing discontent with the British establishment and its attitudes towards immigrants.

Hasina is a background character. She never appears in person in the novel but only revealed by her letters. Ali's creation of the character of Hasina is to shed light on the situation and life of poor Bangladeshi women at home and to compare between their conditions as natives and as immigrants. To evade the restrictive and poor life at her home, Hasina elopes to get married, she discovers after a while that her husband is an abuser, he beats her. At the same time, he treats her as a commodity, a beautiful model to gratify his own sense of beauty, but when Hasina fails to satisfy his pleasure he becomes angry at her:

You know my husband tell me this. First moment he see me it the perfect moment in his whole and entire life. This is how he say. In his whole and entire life. He like to live it again and he planning to make it come again as an actual fact. He have me sit in bed and put my hair in certain way over one shoulder. Sheet is smooth at one end and crumple at other. ..I hold head too tight or too loose. It hard for him not to get angry he trying to make something perfect. (*BL* 143,)

The syntactic errors in the above passage are intended to punctuate the social and intellectual status of the character of Hasina. At the same time, the italicized letters of Hasina (*BL*, 220-222) substantiate a technical device that isolates for the reader's inspection something that is

meant to reinforce a sense of realism. Because Hasina fails to stand for the ideal her husband imagines her to be, and because he fails to revive the "perfect moment" in his life, he continues to abuse her. The patriarchy of Bangladeshi men is clearly shown by poor Hasina. She believes that it is always a woman's own fault when she utters something she is not allowed to, and for that reason a woman is beaten by a man (BL 19). Hasina represents the victimized woman, who justifies the abuse of her victimizer as a right, thus she denies herself the opportunity to fight back. She later writes to Nazneen, "I do my best but I am only a woman" (BL 163). To escape abuse, Hasina deserts her husband to lead a difficult life as a worker in a garment factory in Dhaka only to be dismissed to find herself working as a prostitute for a while. She ends finally working as a maid to a respectable family.

Hasina becomes an eye witness to the atrocities practiced against other women in Bangladesh. She tells Nazneen about her friend Monju who is in hospital because her husband and his siblings pour acid on her and her son as she refuses to let them sell the baby. The novelist tries to shed light on this horrible violation of human rights in a country stamped by poverty where such violations are usually unspoken of.

In addition, Hasina's letters become Nazneen's only connection with home, a home which turns unbearable to Nazneen. As she gets more information from Hasina, Nazneen becomes more determined to adjust herself to life in Brick Lane. Jane Hiddleston comments on the importance of Hasina's letters to Nazneen:

Ali draws our attention to the ongoing entrenchment of popular misconceptions in both countries, and to the role of prejudice in reinforcing patterns of inequality and oppression. She sets out to depict the mistreatment of Bangladeshi women, but also displays prevalent assumptions concerning their ability to understand and express their position. (63)

Hoping to help Hasina in her desperate life, Nazneen finds the opportunity when she herself begins to work in piecework. To help improving their distracting financial situation, Nazneen works to compensate Chanu's inability to settle in one job. She is brought a sewing machine by Chanu to work at home. Later on, she discovers that Chanu has borrowed the money with interest from Mrs. Islam to bring the sewing machine and a computer for himself. She discovers also that he has not paid his debts. As a result, Nazneen has to work hard to pay these debts and at the same time to keep a little to send for Hasina.

It is having a job that opens new horizons for Nazneen on the road of personal and economic independence. Work does not enable her to solve her family's economic problems, but gives her the opportunity to know much about the problems of her own community and the discontentment on the part of young men and women, the thing she could not comprehend previously as a result of her isolation. Her relationship with Karim, the middleman between her and the garment factory opens up the realm of the public, which was concealed at her. Francois Kral comments on the importance of Karim's character in Nazneen's life, stating that as a middleman, Karim becomes an intermediary between her and the garment factory; he works "symbolically, as a go-between, linking her claustrophobic domestic setting with the outside world" (68).

In *Brick Lane*, Ali alludes to the race riots in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham, which were coincidental with the disturbances in Tower Hamlets of Brick Lane from April to July 2001 (Tungur, 565). She depicts these riots by the portrayal of the character of Karim, and his angry young women and men. Historically, there were increasing attacks set by white youths against south Asian youths, women, children, and

property. Immigrants were considered by these racists "a threat to British jobs, competition for decent housing and a drain on education and health services" (Marsden). These attacks culminated in rioting and fighting between South Asian young men and police. Marsden puts the blame on "the provocations by various fascist groups... endemic poverty and social deprivation, the endorsement of racist sentiments by both Conservative and Labor parties, as well as the mass media, and the repressive actions and inflammatory statements of the police" (1). Paul Harris and Martin Bright agree with Marsden on the causes of these riots as they claim that Asians were "gripped by poverty and unemployment, pushed into segregated, failing schools and fearful of police force they see as hostile" (1). Arun Kundnani also mentions that segregation in housing and education have led to widespread frustration and discontentment among the young Bangladeshis and "the rage of young Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of the second and third generations, deprived of futures, hemmed in on all sides of racism" (1) and as a result cities were burned for days. However, Kundnani connects the main impulse in the race riots of the Asian youth to their different mentality:

by the 1990s, a new generation of young Asians was coming of age in the northern cities, born and bred in Britain, and unwilling to accept the second-class status foisted on their elders. When racists came to their street looking for fight, they would meet with violence... [Bangladeshi] Young men are disillusioned by the immigrant experiences of their parents, who struggled in a country that was at times hostile to their presence and at best sadly inept to help with their transition to English life.(1-2)

Alfred J. Lopez describes *Brick Lane* as a post- global one, which means any novel written and affected by 9/11. Lopez ascribes the political tensions that grow in the novel to the failure of globalization to satisfy the needs of those who are at the bottoms of it (510). These "disadvantaged workers," Sassen Saskia states, "are women, immigrants, and people of color, whose political sense of self and whose identities are not necessarily embedded in the "nation" or in the "national community" (xxi). As the novel covers the years between 1985- 2002, it almost covers the heyday of globalization and its declared aims of bringing prosperity to everybody. Though the above mentioned groups were living in big capital cities, they did not really belong to them. They remained marginalized struggling with their poverty; not only to remain poor, but to be threatened by the aftermath of globalization: the 9/11 events. Lopez maintains that the delineation of the novel of the way that distant political and economic events have an influence on the lives of its immigrant characters, culminating in its protagonists' responses to life after the attack of 9/11, offers arguably the best fictional representation yet of how that catastrophic event, and the inception of the post-global generally, are having an impact on the lives of those on the bottom (515).

Ali sheds light on the aftermath of the race riots of 2001 by introducing Nazneen to some Bangladeshis, who are influenced by them. Aided by Karim, Nazneen attends the meetings held by these young men who are agitated and infuriated by the racist gangs in the neighborhood and by the racist discriminatory practices in British society. They find an organization called "The Bengal Tigers." In these meetings, they are depicted as trying to negotiate their situation in reaction to a racist group of whites called "the Lion Hearts." These meetings introduce Nazneen to political activism which begins as a democratic negotiation of prejudice and racism to turn into radical Islamism. The increasingly provocative leaflets between The Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts that have furious titles like "Multicultural Murder" and "March against the Mullahs" appear regularly in *Tower Hamlets*. The Bengal Tigers respond with pamphlets of their own (*BL* 212, 224-5). The textual confrontation escalates into mutual announcements of simultaneously planned demonstrations (*BL* 235-7).

One important leaflet sheds more light on the growing extremism among the young Bangladeshi activists:

A reminder to give to Allah for our brothers who gave up their lives shaheed to defend their brothers...We give thanks for Farook Zaman who died in the Daba Yurt operations in Chechnya, February 2000. He lived most of his life as unbeliever until he repented and devoted himself to jihad. (BL 225)

Nazneen captures the gradual change in the tone and dress of the participants in the meetings. English dress for men and hijab for women turn into Panjabi- Pyjama for men and Purkha for women. Karim, for example, gives up his jeans and sneakers and starts wearing traditional Panjabi clothes. At the end, some of these young men turn into radicals, who cannot accept the presence of women in their meetings. Though Nazneen herself observes the debates among the members of this group, the encounter with them opens her eyes to the atrocities done to Muslims all over the world. So, for the first time Nazneen's consciousness opens to issues larger than her immediate existence. She sheds tears to know of the misery of other poor people who suffer because of the effects of politics like in Egypt, Iraq and Palestine (BL 216, 227, 230). Though she herself does not become an activist, this experience widens her horizons and initiates her self-confidence and empowers her to take her final decision of controlling her fate: " *I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one*" (BL 337)

Ali in *Brick Lane* tries to unravel western myths associating Islam with irrational fanaticism by depicting Karim and his group as individuals with real problems to be solved. As Islam begins to be associated with terrorism, and widespread ignorance gives rise to popular images of a fixed set of beliefs, promoting oppression and violence over those of freedom and equality, Ali sets to challenge these misconceived stereotyped images to present young people who are angry not because they are mythically fanatic and incomprehensively hateful of the West, but as being desperately reacting to their uneven position in society (Hiddleston 66).

By reflecting the socio-political tensions in Brick Lane, Ali prepares the reader to the 9/11 attacks. As Nazneen and Chanu watch the event through a TV screen, Ali documents the event through fiction and at the same time shows the impact of media and how the event affects the perceptions of the people :

The television shows a tall building against a blue sky...A thick bundle of black smoke is hanging outside the tower. It looks too heavy to hang there. An airplane comes in slow motion from the corner of the screen. It appears to be flying at the level of the buildings....(BL 303)

Ali also portrays the horror of Muslims represented by Nazneen and Chanu in the novel while witnessing the disastrous event:

Now they see smoke: a pillar of smoke, collapsing. Nazneen and Chanu rise. They stay on their feet as they watch it a second, a third time. The image is at once mesmerizing and impenetrable; the more it plays the more obscure it becomes until Nazneen feels she must shake herself out of a trance. Chanu limbers up his shoulders, holds his arms and circles them. He blows hard. He says nothing. (BL 304)

Chanu's comments that "The world has gone mad" and "This is the beginning of madness" (BL 303) show the historical impact of such an event worldwide, that nothing will be ever the same. To show the role played by media on the formation of political conceptions, E. Poole notes "commentators... continue to argue that the events of 11 September signal a kind

of rapture, that the world has changed irrevocably and that a new world order must be established in the aftermath." He adds "at a global level, the media have played a role in constructing this idea in the psychic imagination" (1). Though the event happens far away, it finds its resonances in Brick Lane. Racial attacks follow the event. This is how the event affects the lives of ordinary people:

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. (BL 305)

These political events have changed the future of the major characters of *Brick Lane*. As a result of these events, Chanu panicks, takes his final decision of going back to Bangladesh, despite the apparent objection of the members of his family (BL 179-181). Though Nazneen is hesitant at the beginning to tell Chanu of her inclination to stay in London, she takes a last minute decision to stay in the company of her daughters. Karim, who fails in uniting his political organization, has disappeared only to be visualized by Nazneen as being "in a mountain cave, surrounded by men in turbans wielding machine-guns" (BL 407).

For a moment, Nazneen thinks that she may lose her daughter Shahana in the riots because of the latter's unwillingness to go to Bangladesh. Revolting against her father's decision to take them to Bangladesh, Shahana escapes. Nazneen desperately goes to search for her in the midst of riots resulting from the Bangladeshi protest march against the demonstration of the Islamophobic "Lion Hearts" immediately after 9/11. The attempt exposes Nazneen to violence, extremism and to total chaos:

Missiles rained across the road. Empty bottles, full cans, a brick, a chair, a winged stick. Bottle smashed at Nazneen's feet. She decided to run again. But which way. Towards the Shalimar and the source of the missiles? Or back up the road to take shelter? She turned round and back and round and suddenly she was not sure which way the café was. She recognized nothing...(BL 395)

Shahana's revolt against the surrender of her father coincides with the revolt of young Bangladeshi people against racism and marginalization. Shahana's action makes Nazneen more determined to protect her children in the face of prejudice, discrimination and more importantly from Chanu's attempt to expose them to an unknown environment where nothing is certain. Instead of escaping her reality, Nazneen chooses to stay and adapt herself to her new life.

Unlike men like Chanu and Razia's husband, who have dreamt of returning to the "Golden Bengal" of Tagore's songs considering it, ironically, as safer for their children to grow up, young generation like Karim and Shahana cannot silently complain about or leave their status in their society; on the contrary, they rebel against the prevalent racist and discriminatory practices, cultural, traditional and familial pressures, and economic problems on their ways. Karim and his friends for example are enraged by the Islamophobic "Lion Hearts," who fear the increasing influence of immigrant Muslims. As this step can be a corrective one towards political and social recognition and justice, Ali seems to warn that neglecting these problems may lead these young men and women to extremism, the thing which might have led to the bombings that shook London on 7 July 2005, and the afterwards terrorist attacks.

Nazneen's relationship with Karim does not only make her aware of the injustice done to other people, but in a way it enables her to see the injustice done to herself. As he talks with her about marriage after she has supposedly obtained divorce from Chanu, she recognizes that he is not much different from Chanu himself. Asking him why he chooses her as a wife, though she is older than him, he replies that she is not like other Bangladeshi girls living in Britain who are either westernized like her daughter, Shaheena, or "religious girls...[who] think they know best because they've been off to all these summer camps for Muslim sisters" (BL 320). Both types are strong headed and they can argue. It seems that he likes her simply because she does not "argue." At this moment, Nazneen recollects Chanu's words in the early days of her marriage when she asks him why he chooses her as a wife, and his answer is "An unspoilt girl, from the village. All things considered, I am satisfied" (BL 17). She discovers that to accept Karim means replacing one kind of oppression by another which means doing injustice to herself. Despite their apparent differences, the two men remain patriarchal and they prefer a traditionally submissive rather than a modern strong woman.

Nazneen is subjugated and predictably muted by the perseverance of Chanu, the abject personification of confused masculinity. Chanu's self-determination as a second-class citizen specifies her own meager options and is stultifying. Nazneen's response is to be an independent mother with two girls, a seemingly impossible juxtaposition, but one that enables her to turn the mutable space into a feminized one which becomes Ali's main solution to Nazneen and other women in the novel. She stops herself from falling even deeper into depression by taking stock of her responsibilities and reasserting herself through a more vital appropriation of speech and utterance. She has to confront the two men in her life (Chanu and Karim) if she wants to assert her independence.

Brick Lane finally dismisses the politics of fight (associated with Karim) or flight (associated with Chanu) and promotes the tendency embraced by Nazneen which tries "to negotiate identity from the perspective of the British-Bangladeshi nationalism" (Akhter 105). Nazneen has a choice after all and finds it in the feminized space of the garment factory, where she begins to work and earn her living to support her family after Chanu's return to Bangladesh. She quits the low-paid piecework or working in sweetshops that have seemed her only local work options. She and other Bangladeshi women establish a garment co-operative supplying the Brick Lane boutique "Fusion Fashion," which sells updated versions of Salwaar kameez (a Pakistani dress) (BL 402-404).

Akhter believes that the novel can be looked at as "a collective bildungsroman of many expatriate Bangladeshi women who tinker with their limited personal space to achieve a certain degree of self-empowerment" (105). The last scene in the novel depicting Nazneen going with her daughters and her friend Razia skating emphasizes the fact of her independence. Meanwhile, Nazneen insists on not changing her sari while skating. Commenting on this scene, A. Cormack writes "Nazneen has confronted her oppression within the discourses of gender, race, and religion and won herself an independent space" (706). Margaret Nilsson Wallace argues that Monica Ali deconstructs her protagonist in the second half of the novel in order to reconstruct her as westernized and dependent, which gives plausibility to her choices and actions (20). It can be argued that there is nothing, especially at the end of the novel, to indicate that Nazneen has become westernized or fully integrated into the western culture, the emphasis on using her *sari* while skating in the last scene in the novel shows Nazneen's choice of keeping what is best for her in both cultures.

Socio-political issues are present in *Brick Lane* and they determine the future of the characters. Ali wants to present the process of Nazneen's empowerment from a passive into

an active participant in her own life and the life of her family in general. Nazneen's exposure to public life opens her eyes to the hardships she may confront, but, at the same time, to the choices she can make.

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