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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (Black Swan, London 2004 [First published by Doubleday, London, 2003]), Pp. 496,  
Price: UK £ 7.99

Monica Ali's literary debut *Brick Lane* greeted almost unanimously unreserved, buoyant reception in the western literary arena before it was even published. Monetary proceeds started to come to Ali when her novel was in the gestation period of its creative process. It was 'fast-tracked' to the forefront of literary world with such a catholic hype and feverish enthusiasm that, speaking ill of it would have definitely risked being sidelined. Published authors might have gone through an unenviable period of unease and apprehension, when *Granta* and Man Booker Prize had to dig down into the underworld of the unpublished novel to total their literary awards shortlists. Unlike many authors, Monica Ali would not have to wait for ages to get through her novel to the screen; a production company has already snatched it for film. But given the content and the predetermined message of *Brick Lane*, and the volleys of tributes it has received, we must put it in context and take these entire hasty accolades with a pinch of salt. An objective analysis of the novel would show that, the rave reviews of *Brick Lane* in the western media have been directed more to a 'perceived' literary trend than to the quantity of literary merits inherent in Ali's cliché-ridden and programmatically concluded novel.

*Brick Lane* is a story about Nazneen and about her journey to Britain and to her supposed freedom. Nazneen is married off by her parents to Chanu, a Bangladeshi immigrant in Britain; but her sister Hasina escapes an arranged marriage, elopes with Malek and finally ends up as 'a factory worker, a prostitute, and a maid'. In the metropolitan city of London, Nazneen happens to fall in love with Karim, a supposedly 'God-conscious' Islamic militant, commits adultery and ends up as a single parent.

One oft-repeated feature of *Brick Lane* that has been emphasised in many positive reviews is its *newness*. It has been marked as 'a new voice in modern fiction,' 'a new and potentially rich seam in mainstream British fiction'; and its 'subject matter' has been celebrated as 'novel, or new, to the white majority'. But how new is this 'new'? The frail myth of Ali's newness will readily be shattered by a glance at the long narcissistic tradition of western literary orientalism that represents a painted picture of Afro-Asian societies. Homogenisation of Arab Islamic world, demonisation of Islam, essentialisation of Muslim population can be anything but new. A quick look at the Victorian travel accounts and the writings of orientalist like Richard Burton, Edward Lane and Rider Haggard would dismiss the claim of novelty in Ali's subject matter. *Brick Lane* rather figures very low down on the endless lists of orientalist literary productions by western writers. All these ovations of newness appear to be directed to rescue Ali from being 'tied to a dying past' of literary orientalism. A similar subject matter in her second novel would mean Ali's desperate attempt to revive the outmoded literary orientalism in the neo-colonialist world order.

Monica Ali's mixed-race profile and hybrid credential seem to have been contributing to the extravagance of *Brick Lane*'s media publicity. Her father Hatem Ali came to England for studies in the mid 60s and met her mother Joyce at a dance party. After their marriage, the couple moved to Bangladesh and their daughter Monica was 'born in Dhaka' in 1967. When civil war broke out in Bangladesh in 1971, the family managed to slip through back to England. That was virtually the end of Ali's contact with the Bangla language, Bangladeshi society and culture. In England, her mother's country of origin, she was brought up in the same way as a girl of her mother's culture. Having been brought up by her English mother and married to an Englishman (Simon), Ali's contact with the Bangladeshi community in Britain has been scant. Ali's grasp of the Bangla language is, to use her own words, 'limited now to some tourist-phrase-type inquiries, a few nursery rhymes or song fragments and a quite extensive culinary vocabulary'. But in the media publicity her born-in-Dhaka image and her British-Asian-writer logo have been obsessively highlighted. And this has conferred the identity of 'a [representative] writer from a minority' and the badge of 'native informant' on Ali, as it hypothetically gave her literary narrative a colouring of 'authenticity'. The way her supposed 'Asian' identity has been appropriated indicates that the western media have been carefully strategic to distance themselves from Ali's politics of representation and stigmatization of the Bangladeshi Muslim society.



But the writer's identity politics is itself problematic. Oliver Schreiner (1855-1920) was born in Basutoland, South Africa; Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in Bombay, India; and Albert Camus (1913-1960) in Mondovi, Algeria. Monica Ali's four-year stay in Bangladesh is not even worth comparing with the extensive span of time these three European writers spent in their countries of birth. Despite that, Schreiner and Kipling remain British writers and Camus a French writer; but surprisingly Ali hangs around with her identity of Bangladeshi immigrant writer! Another example is Hanif Kureishi (1954-) with a Pakistani father (Rafiushan) and an English mother (Audrey). Although Kureishi has spent his entire life in Britain and 'could only speak English', an ethnic identity is forced upon him to authenticate the tirades he concocts about Pakistani community in Britain. Monica Ali's identity politics follows the same pattern.

Culture is a complex phenomenon replete with many customs, norms and mores. Only a person wrapped-up in it can truly fathom its dynamics. Unless a godsend miracle, Ali's first four-year infancy stay in Bangladesh was not enough to earn her any amount of 'minute observations' or 'insight' of Bangladeshi culture. In every society, many customary norms prevail that do not require 'further explanation', as Anita Desai puts it, 'It is the custom ....it must continue to be so.' Ali's treatment of 'midwifery' and 'fate' in a different social setting is a clear example of her lack of cultural literacy. And her cultural misrepresentation is conspicuous by her treatment of 'arranged marriage' and of the status of women in a Muslim social space. A careful study of the cohesive social fabric of Bangladeshi culture will dispel the fantasy of happiness in love-driven marriage of individual choice, and the saga of misery in 'an unhappy arranged marriage'. I am not trying to defend women's condition in Bangladesh or to disabuse the reader of the problems of marital life a woman has to face. Women's suffering has one form in the East, and different one in the West. Despite the presence of a strong feminist movement in the West, women's subjugation is far from being ended. My contention here revolves around Ali's cultural caricaturing.

It requires more than four-year early childhood stay in Bangladesh to appreciate the depth of a Bangladeshi father's parental affection to his daughter. It may also need to have a different father than the one who met his would-be wife in a dance party (readers may understand the distinction between a Bangladeshi

man's going to a dance party and a European's doing so). A caring father and a loving daughter of Bangladeshi culture should know how it would feel like reading Ali's indictment of cruelty on the former: 'He [Nazneen's father] just wanted to be get rid of me [Nazneen], she thought. He wanted me to go far away, so that I would not be any trouble to him. He did not care who took me off his hands.' Monica Ali's skin-deep understanding of arranged marriage prompts her to make this indiscreet verdict about the fatherly concern and the filial trust in a given society.

Ali's portrayal of Karim, Nazneen's illicit lover, serves the novelist multiple purposes. Firstly he is 'a militant Islamic youth' who, being 'more God-conscious than' Chanu, keeps 'Salaat alert' to remind him of the prayer times. He is also the leader of the supposed Islamic radical organisation 'The Bengal Tigers'. Being a taxi-driver, Nazneen's husband Chanu remains on the street most of the time. Karim as the middleman visits frequently to Nazneen for giving and collecting sewing work from her. A love relationship happens between Karim and Nazneen; Monica Ali's 'God-conscious' Karim commits adultery with her religious Nazneen. Monica Ali's mocking representation of the loaded Islamic term 'taqwa' (God-consciousness) misses the wide ramifications of its huge bearing upon the formation of a constructive civil society. Many western readers may pass over the fact that a true 'God-conscious' never posits themselves in an intimate private ambience that may lead to adultery. But, following the orientalist literary tradition, what Ali tries to drive home cannot be overlooked. By uniting the 'God-conscious' Karim and the religious Nazneen in the house of the Muslim Chanu, Ali presents a microcosm of Muslim social space, and portrays it as full of insidious sexual indulgences. Such titillating depiction of Muslim society is rampant in the orientalist literature like *A Tale of the Harem* (1828) by Thomas Hood and *The Romance of the Harem* (1839) by Julia Purdue. Following the same orientalist trend, Ali represents Muslim faith as shaky, which can be forgotten about for momentary sexual pleasure.

Apart from stigmatising Islam, Ali's portrayal of Karim acts towards enriching her catalogue of superiority of western culture. Interestingly Ali does not provide us with any hint of Karim's genealogy. But we know he has never been to Bangladesh; he speaks English, wears 'jeans and white shirt, a thin gold chain at his neck'. If we subtract his Muslim identity, he is out and out an attractive western hero. To present Karim as a modern western man, Ali makes



him wear 'a thin gold chain at his neck' without knowing the fact that her God-conscious Karim should not do so, as wearing gold is not permitted for Muslim men. It takes us back to the period of c19th manifest orientalism when fanciful representation of Muslim social space was in vogue. Muslim men were depicted as repulsive in the sight of Muslim women, who were described as lusty and on the lookout for western heroes to satisfy their supposed irresistible sexual desire. Depiction of Muslim woman in C. Meredith Jones' "The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste" (1942) reads, 'She seems to have no other objective in life than to fall in love at first sight . . . with a Christian knight whom she will eventually marry and for whom she is eager to relinquish her religion.' Ali could portray Karim as a secular character; but his double identity as 'western' and 'Muslim' helps the novelist demean a culture and vilify the Islamic faith. Ali cannot materialise her representation of the myth of saving brown women from brown men through the character portrayal of Karim. But half way through the novel, she introduces 'Brother Andrew' who saves 'falling' women in Bangladesh; and this makes up for what Ali misses in her representation of Karim.

Ali's portrayal of the Bangladeshi Chanu as an old, ugly, stinking 'oriental' man with a frog-like 'puffy face' who 'ate noisily and quickly', and of Karim as smart and charming young man is directed to inferiorise eastern men and to galvanise supposed western superiority over the eastern culture. Thus Monica Ali follows the time-worn orientalist trend by portraying the 'oriental' Chanu as incapable to meet the sexual and emotional demands of the dallying Nazneen, who finds her proper match in an England-born young, gallant, energetic young man.

Monica Ali's Chanu is not an ordinary Bangladeshi immigrant. He has 'a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature.' Despite a big list of his failures, compared with the Bangladeshi generality, Chanu is 'A Prince Among Peasants'. Monica Ali leaves no stone unturned to present Chanu as a lackadaisical 'oriental' scholar who needs his daughters' help 'to turn the pages for [him]'. Along with being a graduate from the best university of Bangladesh, Chanu does not have any dearth of yearning for knowledge. Actually his love for learning is one element for bridging his friendship with Dr Azad. Although Chanu's 'sitting room crawled with... books' and he 'read too much', he cannot take off his racial traits. His education and scholarship 'did him no good.' Such

demeaning representation of eastern scholarship is not new, as we know about comparing the entire bulk of eastern scholarship with just one bookshelf of western knowledge. Not only the scholarship of Chanu is a subject of Ali's mockery, the entire student population of Bangladesh have been portrayed as 'thug[s]' who rally 'for right to cheat'. Through the window of Chanu's love for Bangladeshi litterateurs, Ali does not spare even 'Tagore' and 'Kazi Nazrul Islam' for her target of mockery. Chanu's daughter Shahana, with whom lies the novelist's sympathy, finds everything her father cherishes 'bor-ing'.

It is true that through the voices of the 'militants' of 'The Bengal Tigers', Monica Ali presents 'the underlying factors' behind the radicalising of Muslim youths i.e. the neo-colonialist injustices in the Muslim world. She also touches upon the issues of British colonialist presence and of the attendant injustices in Indian subcontinent through Chanu's intermittent historical references. But all these are overshadowed by the fact that these 'are voiced by' some 'unsavory caricature[s]' like Chanu and Karim who themselves are satirically treated by the author.

A compliant, registered by the Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council that represents '500,000 Bangladeshi people' in Britain, against Monica Ali's caricaturing of Bangladeshi people was left behind and dismissed on the plea of 'the distinction between fiction and fact'. But ironically the publicity moguls of *Brick Lane* do not seem to seize it as a pure 'fiction' without a parallel ground reality; they rather 'certainly feel more informed about' Bangladeshi people living in Britain and feel indebted to Ali for familiarising them with 'a life and culture' they knew 'so little about'. Eulogizing *Brick Lane* for opening up 'a world' and for making western readers 'understand' the 'contours' of a culture on the one hand, and defending its cultural misrepresentation on the pretext of 'fiction' on the other, just constitutes a palpable double standard in the politics of manoeuvring and appropriating this neo-colonialist novel. It is true that Monica Ali has enjoyed massive media hype and homage as well as a strong media defence. But for the Bangladeshi people, it would be difficult to 'pardon' Ali for the image damage she has done to them, as it has been difficult for the 'inhabitants' of Indian subcontinent to 'pardon' Kipling for 'his uncritical worship of the old British Raj' and for his 'lack of interest in Indians as normal human beings.'

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