

THE PARADOX OF THE ‘MUSLIM BRITISH NATIONAL’ IN MONICA ALI’S *BRICK LANE*

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ABSTRACT

The multicultural identity of England has defined a new threatening ‘Other’. The animosity towards Afro-Caribbean/Indian insurgence dating from the 1930’s and 50’s onwards has been further complicated by post-millennium ‘Islamophobia’. Within this volatile context Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) offers a troubling insight pertinently anticipating not only the nature of this slowly brewing antagonism, but finding its source in the formerly subdued and suburban Muslim ‘shopkeeping’ contingent. Sifting through the prevailing dark enigma surrounding the Islamic issue, *Brick Lane* demystifies by exposing its inherent human context. This new facet of British culture is decried not in terms of US goaded global rhetoric, as an abstract and alien ‘Evil’, but a situation of social dislocation and intolerance: the sinister unknown as the novel perceives it is, ironically, not the threat of an Islamic revolution in London, but the release of bitter resentment and frustration that the postcolonial power has crassly fostered in its own back garden. Yet, the issue of postcolonial subjugation is surprisingly incidental to the novel. The greater emphasis is on the individual’s act of self-verification: here *Brick Lane* specifies the complexities of the Islamic identity both as a belief system and as social regulation: while the former is not confronted on any ideological or political level; the latter is criticized for limiting the autonomous social individual through moral constraints that are rigorously applied externally and consequently deeply internalized. Addressing the argument almost exclusively in terms of women, race becomes an issue of subjugation with frustration being the catalyst to both – the Muslim it seems is most dangerous to her self. Hence, contrary to belief the British Muslim is the only figure in the dispute forced to deal with the complexities and ‘personal’ dangers of Islam.

ÖZET

İngiltere’nin çok-kültürlü kimliği yeni ve tehlikeli bir ‘öteki’ keşfetmiş bulunmakta. Karayip Adaları ve Hindistan’dan İngiltere’ye 1930’lar ve 50’lerde göç eden azınlıklara duyulan nefrete, milenyum-sonrasında ‘İslamofobi’nin eklenmesiyle, bu kimlik daha da karmaşık bir hal almıştır. Patlamaya gebe bu ortama, Monica Ali’nin *Brick Lane* (2003) adlı romanı kıskırtıcı bir söylemle, gelişmekte olan karşıt nefretin doğasını irdeler ve direncin kaynağını geçmişte munis ve sessiz kalan Müslüman ‘esnaf’ kesiminde bulur. *Brick Lane*, İslam’ı kuşatan ‘karanlık bilinmez’ söylemini aşarak, insani boyutlarıyla açıklığa kavuşturur. İngiliz kültüründe yeniden tanımlanan Müslüman zümre, böylece Amerika’nın teşvik ettiği söylem doğrultusunda, beşeriyetten uzak, soyut bir ‘kötülük’ ile değerlendirilmektense, toplumsal kopukluğu yaşamış ve tahammülsüzlüğe maruz kalmış bir kesim olarak tanımlanır. Romanın ironiyle öne sürdüğü olası tehlike, Londra’nın her an maruz kalabileceği bir İslami ihtilal değil, eski sömürgeci gücün sebebiyet verdiği ve Müslüman azınlık tarafından o ana dek bastırılmış hayal kırıklığı ve engellenmişliğin, şimdi sömürgeci ülkenin kendi ‘güvenlikli bölgesinde’ ifade ediliyor olması. *Brick Lane*, ‘sömürgecilik-sonrası’ kuramı biçimsel olarak önemsemeyip, kişisel varoluş çabası olarak irdelemekte: bunun nedeni romanın İslam kimliğini bir inanç sistemi olduğu ölçüde, aynı zamanda sosyal yönetim biçimi olarak da belirlemesinden kaynaklanıyor. *Brick Lane*, İslam’ın ideolojik veya siyasi boyutuyla birebir yüzleşme de, bireye İslam adına dayatılan, özerk kimliğini din kisvesi altında keyfi ve politik amaçlı kurullarla sınırlayan ve bu dayatmaların daha sonra içselleştirilmiş bir davranış biçimine getiren yapıyı eleştirmekte. Konuya neredeyse salt kadın açısından yaklaşıldığı için ırk çatışması kişinin birebir ezilmesi ve bu olay karşısında duyduğu çaresizlik ve kızgınlık olarak betimlenmekte. Bu kadın-sorunsalı eğretilmesinin açılımı gayet net: sözde tehlike unsuru olan Müslüman, dayatılan din/sosyal dogmaların bir ürünü olarak zararı kendine olan bir kadın imgesidir: yaygın Batı söylemine karşı, İslam’ın karmaşasına ve kişisel tehlikelerine maruz tek kişi, çözümsüz bir aitlik arayışında olan Müslüman İngiliz’in ta kendisi.

The post-colonial issue is surprisingly incidental to *Brick Lane* (2003). The novel explores the Islamic identity, on one level as a belief system, which it assigns to the realm of private prerogative, but more so as rigorously enforced therefore deeply internalized theocratic regulation, hence, self-subjection and the effort to bring about self-verification is the central concern. Post-colonial subjugation is implicit to the novel, so inconspicuously inherent that demonstration would be superficial. Focus is on the congenitally subservient, the social subaltern prey to all sorts of bigotry and sexism. Addressing the

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argument almost exclusively in terms of women, plot and narrative demonstrate pronounced feminist concerns, yet even this becomes a subtext to the essential of ipseity: social subjugation extending race, gender and creed, creating estrangement and becoming catalyst to conflict and further discrimination. Through the female contingent, *Brick Lane* demystifies social constraint: women depicted as victim and unwilling accessory to subjection, allude in turn to the greater question of universal opseity and contribute to the definition of the 'British Multicultural Identity': the issue of 'citizenship' and ethnic identity not as continuity of postcolonial disunity, but from a fresh, consolatory and constructive perspective. Finally it emerges, that contrary to western bellicose anxiety, the British Muslim is the only figure in the race dispute forced to deal with the complexities and 'personal' dangers of Islam.

The opposition of fate and freewill mark journey's beginning and end for Nazneen. It is Rupban, her mother, who decides not to take the prematurely born Nazneen to hospital, claiming it "must not waste any energy fighting against Fate." (BL 9) Fate is a no-fail system: if the baby dies that is her fate but having survived, it is her fate again. Rupban's "tearful stoicism" (BL 10) is applauded by the gathered women, her pious willingness to wait five days for the baby to realise its allotted destiny, rather than sell her jewellery to fund the trip to hospital, being recognised as sign of profound faith. The scene represents the horrific possibilities that self-interested misinterpretation of a theological precept can bring about, the banal atrocity that sheer ignorance of basic principles, can and do generate is a danger open to all prescribed dogma. The scene is especially poignant since women are demonstratively both victim and perpetuator of arbitrary social dogma. Nazneen's education, her given perspective on life, is at the hands of a mother wholly entrenched, not in Islamic philosophy but in here say, the rhetoric of a male dominated theocratic order, so that when:

Rupban advised her to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her, Nazneen listened with her head tilted back and her cheeks slack with equanimity. (BL 11)

The physical inertia expressed in the passive upward tilt of Nazneen's face heavenward, the very flaccid abandon of her flesh, reveals job done, lesson learnt, the unsurpassable bastion of God verified inertia complete:

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was *mantra*, *fettle* and *challenge*. (BL 11)

Mantra, fettle and challenge: that which she repeats; her state of being; her aim to be; hence, her past, her present, her future, respectively. The controlling mechanism of 'fate' is not Islamic dogma, but the social reinterpretation of 'Muslim': for example, the Islamic convention of a divinely pre-ordained order being translated into abnegation of responsibility – hence the fundamentalism, one would anticipate from a novel centring on the Asian community, intriguingly lies not in theological doctrine, but its social misinterpretation. Blind adherence to fate is Nazneen's ingrained social and psychological point of departure and signifies her native Muslim roots; 'freewill' is the western 'self-determination' that she achieves at the end of the novel.

Nazneen's journey to self-empowerment is provoked by detachment from her native background nevertheless the novel insistently maintains that she leaves behind her 'social' Islamic identity rather than her faith. While belief is respectfully conceded and terrorist activity gravely acknowledged, exaggerated 'revolution' scenarios are satirically denounced. Islamic fundamentalism is a distant phenomenon in the novel, not unlike Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* where humour reduces to absurdity the very notion of 'home-grown' Islamic fundamentalism:

...the "Cricklewood branch of the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. The Headmaster frowned. "K.E.V.I.N.?" "They are aware they have an acronym problem," explained Irie. (WT 301)

The placid inanity of Cricklewood coupled with the comparative exoticism of 'Islamic Nation' positively defuses the later to innocuity, while the KEVIN acronym deals the killing blow. A less brazen humour pervades *Brick Lane*'s portrayal of a similarly pretentious meeting of young English-born Asians calling themselves the 'Bengal Tigers': girls in headscarves and boys in Nike fleeces plan their possible engagement in a pan-Islamic over-throw by arguing whether to join with global jihad. The scene is openly facetious, paradoxically not, however, from the standpoint of those alienated from the English culture

they are born into, a culture that rejects them as alien and drives them to seek alternative havens that welcome and invest them with a 'divine' motivation no less.¹ Monica Ali impresses on us the catalytic affect of 'Muslim British National' as an empty signifier that holds no sense of belonging, acceptance or a shared common purpose. Following Nazneen's attendance of one such 'revolutionary' meeting, when the most crassly memorable event is her observation of the elderly Spiritual Leader "wearing open-toed sandals with a white plastic flower on the heel strap: women's shoes" (BL 200); and the only revolutionary is Nazneen herself, a married woman, gazing with adoration at Karim, her future lover. The horrific televised images of 9/11, that she watches with husband Chanu, seem profoundly distant to the comparative guilt-ridden immediacy of an adulterous liaison and the immediate reality of Tower Hamlets, busy dealing with more intimate conflict.

The novel acknowledges that 9/11 has stirred British Muslims to a painful reckoning of their ethnic identity. Nevertheless, it makes the point that the causative factor is not this event, nor is it the threat of fundamentalist overthrow, or indeed the jingoistic ravings of distant war mongers, rather that the Islamic community in Britain has always existed on tenterhooks, it is a community that has never integrated to its adoptive Nation, hence, it seems not an unnatural tendency that given the barrage of 'Muslimophobic' rhetoric it should readily withdraw and isolate itself in native values. The definition of racism has also changed, the "new cultural racism" is an attitude based on the so-called natural preference for one's own cultural group and the insistence that this leads inevitably to violent incompatibility between coexisting cultural entities. The singularly detrimental supposition of 'cultural racism' (Modood 28) is the manner in which segregationist propaganda being legitimised to an ostensible truth of 'human nature'. Hence, the novel implies that the act of insularity and retreat forced onto the Asian community is not a consequence of inevitable belligerence between the English and Pakistani peoples, but the final straw in terms of race relations.

¹ Ed Husain is an Asian British national who became seriously entrenched in the Islamic fundamentalist groups of London. Initially coerced as a school boy, his affiliations continued for many years when he felt that having entered the realm as the Muslim Council of Britain and the East London Mosque, he felt for the first time that he had found his identity, defining himself not as British or Asian but a Muslim, for the first time in his life he felt that *he belonged*. (Husain)

Within this volatile context *Brick Lane* offers a provoking insight that pertinently anticipates the nature of such a slow brewing antagonism and prophetically divines its source in the formerly subdued suburban 'shopkeeping' contingent. The devastating London bombings of July 2005 (2 years after the novel was written) were actualised by British-born Asian youths who had no police records and came from conscientious middle-class families. Sifting through the prevailing dark enigma surrounding the Islamic issue, it is this conundrum that the novel demystifies by exposing its inherent human context, where political or religious affiliations are a consequence rather than a trigger to conflict. Hence, this new facet of British culture, this alien 'Other', is decried by the novel, not as an abstract 'Evil', but a situation of social alienation and intolerance: the sinister unknown, is, ironically, not the threat of an Islamic revolution in London, but the release of bitter resentment and frustration that the postcolonial power has inadvertently fostered in its own back garden and leaves smouldering beneath a blanket solution of superficial 'Muslim British National' citizenship.

Shifting from the 'displaced female' to 'ethnic identity' and from there to the question of identity itself, Ali considers the vulnerability of idiosyncratic individualism to regimented institutional formula. For instance the title of 'Muslim British National' represents a concept of 'citizenship' that designates a mandatory and inflexible set of defining specifications: each part of the title declares named 'semblances' that forcibly deflect from the actual idiosyncratic 'identity' of the individual, it is ironically trying to define. I delineate between 'semblance' and 'identity', since the disparity specifies the paradoxical values in question: while 'identity' is taken to mean the condition of being oneself, 'semblance' is its deformation, it is the comparative spectral insinuation of identity, a doctrinaire formulation. Hence, by nature of the mandatory qualities attached to each term, the emergent phrase 'The Muslim British National' is a paradox of openly conflicting terms that cannot co-exist, let alone have coherency. For as long as Muslim denotes "inflexible, demanding... fanatical and aggressive" of "a profoundly alien culture" and a "culturally primitive and backwards peoples" (Modood 16, 37, 28) within a context of British Nationalism, considered white and predominantly Christian, then quite simply the 'outsider' is merely and literally going to be 'whitewashed' into superficial assimilation. Indeed just how homogenous a race as genetically diverse as the contemporary British identity, founded on a genetic stratum of Teutonic, Germanic, Nordic and French influence, actually is, or ever has been is a

constant insinuation. All peripheral issues in *Brick Lane* – racism, identity, postcolonial citizenship, naturalisation, urban isolation and so on, pivot around misconceived political *semblance* usurping private *identity*, whether the subject be Muslim or British.

The novel does not define the reason for national and international unrest simply as either *post-colonialist* 'Muslimophobia' or *Islamic fundamentalism*, but identifies it as being innate to the nature of both societies. If the novel charges ethnic minority communities and postcolonial Eastern society with chauvinism and rabid fundamentalism, it then proceeds to exemplify colonialist Western society with detachment and inveterate racism, so that the emergent picture reveals it is "necessary to critique tyrannical forces in both west and non-west, to recognise them as twinned and to pronounce a plague on both their houses."²

Sometimes a dichotomy exists between Pakistan and Britain, for example the plot is so structured in regard to fate and freewill, that east marks the subjugated background from which Nazneen journeys to define herself in the West. The animosity this has excited towards the novel from eastern/Islamic commentators is not surprising since the assertion of such a dichotomy implies that autonomous individualism, tolerance and freedom are exclusively synonymous with western ideas. However, this initial imbalance is progressively balanced by a fine juxtaposing of the two locations, with western fundamentalist monopoly on freedom being absolved by an intriguing sense of paradox.

The western counterpart to eastern apathy and inertia exists in the Tattoo Lady, significantly the only white English character. Perversely distinguished by Chanu as "Hell's Angel", this redresser of equilibrium is a large, anonymous, middle-aged woman, covered in tattoos, continually smoking and drinking, 'on show' within the confines of the 'window display' of her Tower Hamlets flat. As fellow inmate of urban alienation, a social cripple, the tattoo lady is Nazneen's alter ego. When Nazneen is moved by the detriment of her mundane reality to stand by her high-rise window and contemplate suicide, the intimacy of the moment is shared by the Tattoo Lady "rais[ing] a can to her lips" in sympathetic affinity (BL 31): as Nazneen is dogged by Hamlet-like indecisiveness, just so the Tattoo Lady raises the can to her lips once more and

² A statement describing Salman Rushdie's "uncompromising ethical vision" as a formerly radical author. (Gopal)

similarly self-pacifies with alcohol. The tattoo's she bears are indication of rebellion, humiliated now by obesity and old-age, two sufficiently daunting private issues further complicated by uniquely western vitriol social prejudice, she is rendered pathetically immobile.

The corresponding descriptions of Pakistan and Tower Hamlets respectively are another pronounced deviation from the customary antithesis of eastern poverty stricken exoticism versus Western systemisation and order. To ascribe a token 'wild beauty' to the East Pakistan location would largely be a regurgitation of the fallacy of preconceiving Eastern to be uniformly cabalistic, an impenetrable enigma beyond the understanding of the western observer; such clichéd recondite principles while implying charm also belies a sense of 'otherness' that is extraneous and incompatible, indeed even conflicting with, western experience. By the same token a similar sense of estrangement and disunion would be generated by the Eastern observer were he to erroneously to interpret a Western metropolis with like superficiality as 'exciting and rich' – it would be none representative and singularly reductive. When Nazneen momentarily scans her homeland, the emotive subjectivity is clear in the ascribed organic splendour of "[she] looked across the fields, glittering green and gold in the brief evening light." It belongs to personal experience and has integrity as such. Perhaps wishing to defer any association with cliché the edge is taken off the 'prettiness', first an ominous fragility looms as conspicuously in the stated brevity of the momentary image and not least of all in the prophetic fall and rise of the eagle; second, Nazneen's perception of nature's beauty is further debunked by becoming a premonition of her future distress:

There was a hut in the middle of the paddy. It looked wrong, sliding down at one side, trying to hide. The tornado that had flattened half the neighbouring village had selected this hut to be saved, but had relocated it. In the village they were still burying their dead and looking for bodies. Dark spots moved through the far fields. Men doing whatever they could in this world. (BL 12)

The saved, but relocated hut, so fallible and inferior an object within the greater scheme of things seems not an unjustifiable metaphor for Nazneen herself. This 'personal' metaphor is imperceptibly knit to "men" doing what ever they could within the general extent of "this world" thereby expands seemingly alien 'third world misery' to universally 'common' principles of humanity: a uniquely eastern experience of life translated to western

understanding via imagery that is conducive to sympathetic and empathetic association. Much later in the novel Nazneen is consumed by the images of people leaping out of the burning towers of 9/11: "A small figure leaning out and he cannot be saved. Another figure jumps and at that moment it seems to Nazneen that hope and despair are nothing against the world and what it holds and what it holds for you." (BL 305) she demonstrates sympathetic identification through a dream induced recollection of figures "Men, doing whatever they could in this world." Shared emotions this time translate western experience to eastern understanding. Subjective experience, true to postmodern ethics of integrity, the novel urges, is the only specification of 'difference' between peoples, all other variance is arbitrarily imposed.

The two cultures sit paradoxically cheek by jowl, east and west inextricably linked through mutual disrespect and disregard for the 'person', that part of the individual expending beyond 'citizenship': each isolated individual retreats into their own reality each is a victim regardless of creed or nation. Hence for the Tattoo lady it is sitting by the sidelines "...tipping forward to drop ash in her bowl, tipping back to slug from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window." Hers is a one sided interaction with the world, a refusal to be concealed:

Every time Nazneen saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment. Such a state was sought by the sadhus who walked in rags through the Muslim villages, indifferent to the kindness of strangers, the unkind sun. (BL 13)

Nazneen's comparison with the Hindu 'Sadhu', a practitioner of yoga who has given up worldly goals and dedicated themselves to achieving liberation through meditation and the contemplation of God, is a non-Islamic link that reiterates the Tattoo Lady's status of 'Other' to Nazneen, while at the same time acknowledging a kindred spirit. This likeness is the novel's metaphor for the paradox of the 'Muslim British National', namely the situation of being a 'conspicuous retreat': conspicuous because they inhabit the social arena, retreat because they do not partake of that association. As when Nazneen gets lost in Brick Lane, disorientated, she sees all but seems to all quite invisible: "...they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she new that He existed) but unless she did something, wave a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her." Recognition when it comes is characterised by pity and

a genuine inability to understand: "The woman looked up and saw Nazneen staring. She smiled, like she was smiling at someone who had tried and totally failed to grasp the situation." Tellingly it is precisely at this moment that mis-interpreted by the English woman she compounds the situation by admitting self mis-interpretation too and reverts to the security of her faith: "No longer invisible, Nazneen walked faster ... It occurred to her that she had, without meaning to, compared herself to God. This thought distressed her so much ... she recited in her head her favourite suras." (BL 45)

For Nazneen faith is a retreat from life's traumas of life. Newly arrived in London she is isolation and wholly pensive: "seeking refuge from Satan" as she interprets her frustration, she "selected a page at random [from the Qur'an] and began to read". (BL 14) The section that happens to fall open states: "To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you... to fear God..." in these few words, Nazneen is ironically presented with the antidote to hearsay interpretation and dogmatic half-truths, simply in the phrase "fear God", she realises is representation of the only authority to which she need adhere:

The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased. Even Dr Azad was nothing as to God. To God belonged all that the heavens and the earth contain. She said it over a few times, aloud. She was composed. Nothing could bother her. (BL 14)

In this, the novel's most pronounced validation of the Qur'an as the only directive of Islam, when the indiscriminate nature of the selection insinuates certitude of the entire text and coupled with Nazneen's own interpretation, momentarily at least, removes all manipulative authority from over her. This acquiescence of Islam is a precarious one, since a similar sensation is derived chanting the memorized Arabic when "she did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her" (BL 15) and Ali acknowledges the zealotry to which it seems naturally pray. Indeed, the original Arabic text is completely objectified and exists in Nazneen's mind as a mysterious and unknowable object in its own right, certainly it holds precedence over the Bengali translation. Faith for Nazneen is a place of safety and calm, or as Samad in *White Teeth* calls it "Key item in an emergency situation: spiritual support", (WT 222) unfortunately it is also abdication of responsibility. When the onus is on her to decide and actively seek, it becomes a place of inertia and escape. Having held and recited from the Qur'an, albeit without understanding

it, her relaxed meditative state extends to a languid recollection of home and childhood. Wallowing in the euphoric as opposed to rational contemplation logically extends to present dire fanatical possibilities. (Abbas 141)

The novel suggests that perhaps this is the danger to which Muslims fall pray – literalism; to read into the principle of complete devotion to the word of God, the implication that one need not even understand what that word maybe. The consequence is reliance on second-hand subjective interpretation, where theoretically no such intermediary exists. The first word of the Qur'an is 'ikra', meaning read, investigate. Islam bids absolute devotion but to that which is first understood, the Qur'an is a text, written simply and concisely, it is didactic and functional as opposed to poetical hence it does not readily suggest ambiguity. The dark comedy of Nazneen not only referring to God as "He"³, but confusedly assigning the Arabic language too, identifies God as a man of Arab nationality: it is an understandable mistake but one which means to demonstrate the all too easy and pernicious assignment of political power centres.

With the absence of Islamic influence in Britain, the pressure upon women to conform is lifted and they flourish in a climate of comparative liberty; the effect on men is the exact opposite since the West has its own exploitative and segregational agenda as exemplified by the Tattoo Lady. Hence, men as naturalised British Nationals are without exception a sorry lot. Contrary to women, the Muslim men are endorsed by the Islamic social order as patriarchal superiors beyond reproach. Unfortunately the moment they step onto British shores they become extraneous and forfeiting all claim to predominance, become subject to the rigorous criticism of the subjugated class: *faith* becomes a liability; former *wealth and education* become comparatively worthless; precedence even within the *family* is a tenuous thing; while overexertion to

³ "Nazneen stared at the glass showcase stuffed with pottery animals, china figures and plastic fruits. Each one had to be dusted. She wondered how the dust got in and where it came from. All of it belonged to God. She wondered what He wanted with clay tigers, trinkets and dust." (15) Nazneen is over powered, rendered rather claustrophobic in fact by the sheer amount of furniture and objects in Chanu's flat. She associates materialism with the patriarchal He – Chanu her husband who has amassed all this 'wealth', her father who would approve of so 'wealthy' a son-in-law, and God who is ultimate owner of all things. This chain of logic then leads her to ponder the question what would God want with all this useless junk. Hence, not only is she voicing the confused association between theocratic patriarchal authority, reducing its worth, but also generating links between Islamic here say, material wealth and the acquisition of power.

maintain community links are frowned upon and considered testimony to disunity.

Chanu has respect in Pakistan as an education man of substance, but in Britain he is fighting a losing battle: he commands no respect and becomes much of a joke; his "English Degree from Dhaka" carries no weight; and his 'property' is a mishmash of useless junk; aware of having lost out to his English counterpart 'who goes to the pub with the boss', he substantiates his defeat with dreams of "building a house in Dhaka"; when finally his dubious position as head of the household is challenged, he leaves Britain alone. Dr. Azad, seems more successfully entrenched in British life as a practicing GP, like Chanu his position is not complicated by any strong adherence to his faith, the figure of Dr. Azad as 'pillar of society' is a miserable fallacy. The incident of his abject humiliation at the hands of his anglicized, mini-skirted, beer swilling wife reveals an Asian man feeling himself socially emasculated:

The doctor gripped his seat. His feet and knees pressed together. His helmet-hair held a circle of light. He would never let go of the chair. It was the only thing holding him up...

Mrs Azad yawned. 'Oh yes, my husband is a very refined man. He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him. But he has come a long way. Haven't you, my sweet?'

He comes to our flat to get away from her, thought Nazneen.

'Yes,' said the doctor. His shirt collar had swallowed his neck. (BL 91,92)

Razia's unnamed husband stands for the individual who staunchly resists all compromise, to the extent that he simply cannot survive; as Nazneen defines it "the rage...it killed him." (BL 114) Razia confides in Nazneen that "He is Dead ...Killed by falling cows... and the mosque not even built: (BL 114) it is a succinctly 'absurd' epitaph to a man who with equal terseness disengages from wife, offspring and host nation: such a grouping suggests the unnaturalness of his neurotic disassociation.

Exploitation comes from within the Asian community as it does from outside of it, so that women like Nazneen, Razia, Mrs Islam and Mrs Azad find a compromised liberty denied them in Pakistan. But there is a sense of impoverishment, a sense of 'having paid the price' and made sacrifices. Razia has sacrificed her femininity to rid herself of residual weakness, replacing it with masculine clothes and demeanour which lends her an air of street-wise nonchalance; she keeps purdah (Islamic segregation of the sexes) by

transforming and then *transporting* herself from female to male camp, maintaining independence without undermining Islamic propriety and therefore her place within her community. Mrs Islam, though she has been in Britain for 30 years, staunchly maintains Islamic propriety, she sacrifices personal comfort but uses it as the perfect front to her clandestine operations as a grotesquely Dickensian moneylender, "I am not old-fashioned" she reasons, "I don't wear burkha.⁴ I keep purdah⁵ in my mind, which is the most important thing." (BL 22) She maintains her Asian identity with mercenary intent because it makes her a viable figure in a community ready to fall into her professional clutches. There are many versions of the Muslim British National, who is to say which is acceptable and which is not. It is perhaps as Mrs Azad explains a problematic of change:

'They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That,' she said stabbing the air, is the tragedy.' (BL 93)

A willing to change is the necessity of 'fitting in' but the nature and extent of that change is the crux, ironically illustrated by Mrs Azad's tawdry attempt at 'Britishness'.

The women, freed to varying degrees from Islamic 'propriety', make their own way in life. Nazneen, separated from Chanu, remains in England to stand on her own feet. Initially change comes with the devastating loss of her infant son, already separated from her father by marriage, the detachment from Karim and Chanu are deliberate and completely her own choice. Interestingly this separation from 'the male' is neither inspired nor characterised by animosity; it represents a necessary divide from the patriarchal authority of 'He', as such it is a path to self-realisation that is "neither nihilistic nor self-centred"⁶ but a process of maturation that is inevitable like organic growth. As part of her fruition into British National identity - as opposed to compromised and assimilation - Nazneen's faith is purged and renewed, hers is a private affinity

⁴ A Loose fitting outer garment to hide the curves of the female form.

⁵ Islamic segregation of men and women.

⁶ "In the liberated West, of course, we've long known that women have other opinions: Madame Bovary can choke on poison, Edna Pontellier can walk into the sea, Thelma and Louise can drive off that cliff. How ironic that a young Muslim woman from Bangladesh should find a path that's neither nihilistic nor self-centred." (Charles)

with her God, not a political standpoint. Indeed, her changed attitude to her faith is a gauge by which to measure journey's end from fate to freewill.

From now on when she prayed it would be in a different, better way. She realized with some amazement that, while she had knelt, while she had prostrated herself and recited the words, she had never fully engaged in them. In prayer she sought to stupefy herself like a drunk with a bottle, like a fly against a lantern. This was not the correct way to pray. It was not the correct way to read the suras. It was not the correct way to live. (BL 107)

Another gauge of Nazneen's development is her almost spiritual affinity to ice-skating. If continued assertion and renewal of her faith is one side of her identity, then the symbolism of active social life inherent to the ice-skating metaphor is the other.

The sexual frankness of the tightly fitting costumes, the precarious position of hurtling along ice on thin metal blades and the accompanying theatricality of music and lighting invigorate her to define the whole scene as a romantic liaison between woman and man, woman and life. Identifying with the female skater she projects her own feelings and for a moment the text resounds with the realisation of Nazneen's dormant intensity of feeling: "There was a close up of the woman... Her chest pumped up and down as if her heart would shoot out and she smiled pure, gold joy. She must be terrified, thought Nazneen, because such things cannot be held, and must be lost." (BL 29) The innate pessimism surrounding happiness is as a later section of the plot discloses, from Nazneen's experience of preparing the dead for burial, not only her mother body but the constant flux of dead bodies in her village needing similar service, this coupled with ingrained fatalism has taught her to expect death and to hold little expectation of life. Nazneen's initial absorption in "ice e-skating" escalates to sheer enthralment, when she feels herself to be a whole and complete person, a state of euphoria her limited experience associates with something akin to spiritual fulfilment:

For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory. (32)

Finally, at the end of the novel, Nazneen is taken on a surprise trip to a skating-rink, the moment is one that signifies her journey's end: The ice gleams and glints in front of her eyes like a semi-precious jewel, an accolade for all her strife to date: "The criss-cross patterns of a thousand scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath." (BL 412) The surface of the ice symbolises altering circumstances and corresponds to the ongoing problematic of active life, beneath which lies values sublime and elemental: the stoic unfaltering reliability of the spiritual complimenting the liberal and liberating 'life force' of the material. A woman swoops past on the ice, Nazneen notes that the artifice of sequins has been replaced by sturdy jeans and from the dangerously tenuous one leg the skater transfers to two and firmly grounded now flies passed. As Nazneen gets on the ice she has arrived, the metaphoric implication of constant jeopardy becoming all the more relevant. Momentarily stumped Nazneen states "But you can't skate in a sari." Razia's answer is to give her free reign – "This is England you can do whatever you like." In the end that is perhaps all that the host nation is obliged to provide – an environment conducive to the possibility of change. Ali refuses to confine her women to given values, whether religious or social convention she allows them to find the power and dignity they need to survive and flourish. All the men have fallen crashing to the wayside, but even Hasina has survived against the odds and remains, in Chanu's words, "unbroken". (BL 409) This is the novel's model for citizenship.

The struggle for identity is not limited to the disenfranchised immigrant, hence the chief issue of *Brick Lane* is not 'post-colonialism', but 'multiculturalism': the point being that while post-colonialism implies confrontational opposition of East and West, multiculturalism makes allies of the two sides and implies integration and common motive. It is this later definition that motivates Monica Ali in what becomes a quest to *non-define* or show how *indefinable* the multicultural individual is, by the presentation of untold diversity and emotional complexity that simply cannot be 'contained within' a bureaucratically defined title of citizenship. Hence, the permanently misrepresentative imbalance of 'Muslim British National' is demonstrated to be the indefinable ill-defined.

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