Chapter Two
“Mini-Bengal” in London: Monica Ali’s Brick Lane

Even before the writing of Monica Ali’s debut novel Brick Lane was complete, there was a lot of excitement over this first comprehensive fictional portrayal of the Bangladeshi community in Britain likely to reach a worldwide audience. Ali was vaunted by her prospective publisher Doubleday who had signed her up after having seen only five chapters of the book’s first draft. This faith in her skill as a novelist was reiterated when she became the first unpublished author to be included in Granta’s decadal list of “Twenty Best Young British Novelists,” and that too on the basis of her manuscript. Earlier lists had included writers like Rushdie in 1983 and Hanif Kureishi in 1993. Even before publication, a chapter from her book appeared in the volume that Granta devoted to top twenty novelists and advance copies were put on sale at pre-launch readings. Rave reviews of Brick Lane appeared in weekend magazines and the author was interviewed on TV. The book was launched with much fanfare at Terrace Bar on the eponymous street – Brick Lane – in the heart of London’s Banglatown on June 2, 2003, and in New York in September. Prizes were showered on the book, hailing the author’s wry cartography of an as yet literarily little-visible community in multicultural London. Brick Lane then was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and the Guardian First Book Award in 2003. In the same year, it won the W.H. Smith People’s Choice Award and the British Book Award for Newcomer of the Year. The success of her debut book launch has been compared to that of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind, Zadie Smith’s White Teeth or Joseph Heller’s Catch-22. In short, the book and its author became a darling of the publishing industry. The Granta Editor Ian Jack commended the book specifically for bringing news from Banglatown, an area crowded historically by multiple ethnic minorities, one of the latest immigrant arrivals being from Bangladesh.

1 Qtd. in Haq, Kaiser. Rev. of Brick Lane. Daily Star (Dhaka) 31 May 2003: 5.
One reason for the instant celebrity status of this novel and its author was their news-value to the ethnographically curious Britons about the colourful Bangladeshi population inhabiting Banglatown. As Kaiser Haq puts it in his review of the novel: “Is it a case of the British cultural establishment creating an icon to represent the sizeable Bangladeshi community here?”

Monica Ali is an insider-outsider to the Bangladeshi community in Britain, having been born to an English mother and a Bangladeshi father in Dhaka on 7 February 1967. Due to the war for freedom in 1971 in what was then East Pakistan, her mother took both Ali and her brother to Britain, Monica then only a child of three and a half year old. In a peculiar case of linguistic/emotional rebellion, she apparently lost the Bengali language, though she was conversant in it when they had boarded the plane for London from Dhaka. As she says in an interview:

I was, apparently, an early talker and fluent in Bengali by the time we boarded the plane. My mother was worried that if the attendants at the airport or on the aeroplane heard us (the children) speaking in Bengali, they would keep us in Dhaka and not allow us to leave ... I still knew Bengali when my father arrived but it was not long before I was beginning to ‘rebel’ against Bengali. Perhaps I resented my father for ‘leaving’ us. I don’t know. Nor do I know the exact point when the language was gone. There was certainly a span of years during which I understood but would not answer.

Monica Ali grew up in a northern mill town called Bolton, close to Manchester. Educated at Bolton Girls’ School and then at Wadham College, Oxford, she was always anxious to fit in among her white friends. However, being the child of a mixed marriage, she was not always a comfortable insider in either community and matured into an astute observer, an apt precursor to her writing career: “Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things but rather in the shadow of a doorway is a good place from

---

3 Haq, Kaiser. Rev. of Brick Lane. op. cit.
which to observe." After graduating from Oxford University, she worked in publishing, and then moved into design and branding, before finally becoming a freelancer in copywriting and branding projects and a part-time writer of short stories online in some writers’ groups. Then happened her debut novel. In the list of her favourite readings, she is cautiously intercontinental, specifically mentioning that subcontinental literature is one of her many areas of interest and hybridity for her does not exclusively boil down to subcontinental diasporic experience or literature:

I am interested in Indian literature and history, but I don’t necessarily feel any special relationship. I’d read Nadine Gordimer with as much interest … I am also interested in many different areas of literature that tap into the ‘cross-cultural’ experience but don’t originate from the subcontinent. Chang Rae Lee, for instance, writing about Japanese/Korean Americans …

Half-Bangladeshi by birth and Briton, even global, in every other sense, can Monica Ali authentically represent the Bangladeshi community in London? Neither a resident of Brick Lane nor belonging to any other close-knit Asian community during her childhood/adulthood, does she have the right to speak of/for the Bangladeshi diaspora? In spite of frantic media attempts, she always resisted ghettoisation or an explicit identification with the community, as is evident from her choice of interviewers or from the overtly European theme and locale of her second novel, Alentejo Blue (2006). When one does an on-line search for interviews of Monica Ali, one comes across interviewers like Sylvia Brownrigg from the Believer Magazine, Bryan Appleyard from The Sunday Times, David Boratov from Voices Unabridged, Mick Brown from the Writers’ Guild Blog, Alden Mudge from Book Page. Just one apparently Asian name – that of Neela Sakaria from Bookwire – features in the jostle of ostensibly White European names. And then there runs an article titled “Colour Blind” by Maya Jaggi who recounts an intellectual apartheid in which she was denied an interview on behalf of the Guardian Weekend Magazine with Monica Ali by her publisher Doubleday for no better reason than the colour of Jaggi’s skin:

5 Ibid.  
6 Ibid.
Last week I tried to set up an interview with the Next Big Thing in British fiction, only to hit a genteel, 21st-century colour bar that raised some fundamental questions about publishing, marketing and the media, the role of black and Asian journalists, and literature and power ... After some hedging, Ali’s publicist rang Weekend’s editor to say that, while Doubleday would like to grant the Guardian first interview, it would rather the paper sent a different journalist ... They are symptomatic of a publishing industry that remains, to borrow Greg Dyke’s phrase, “hideously white” ... how ironic that those anxious to safeguard authors from pigeonholing should do precisely that to someone else. I’m sure Monica Ali would agree that all those who write want to be judged on their work, not their race or their “niche” – and that goes for journalists as much as novelists. 

Ali focuses her fictional gaze on the Bengali community in Britain. Ali’s tacit complicity with the white publishing industry and refusal to belong to the ghetto make her an automatic suspect, at least in terms of authentic representation, to the diasporic Bangladeshi community in London. Thus, while Monica Ali had become the blue-eyed girl of the London literary circle, she drew blunt disapproval from a section of the community which she claimed to represent in her novel. A ten-page letter from a Bangladeshi complained that the book needed corrections, that Bangladeshi were not all poor, some had big houses with swimming-pools, and also, they were not all uneducated, unsophisticated. Both the book and its movie adaptation by Ruby Films in 2006 had led to protests in Brick Lane. So much so, that Ruby Films had to abandon their initial plans of shooting the exterior scenes of the film in Brick Lane itself, and shot their footage elsewhere. Angry protestors chanted slogans like “Community, community, Bangladeshi community” and “Monica’s book, full of lies.” For them, the book, and possibly the film-adaptation too, were full of lies, slander and cynicism about this ethnic minority. Many, particularly the Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council, resisted the character Chanu’s stereotyping of most diasporic Bangladeshias as uneducated Sylhetis

---


9 Ibid.
who had jumped their ships and landed in London with lice in their hair. The protests attracted so much media attention and thrilled expectations of a repeat show of the sensationalism surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* that a Royal Gala screening of the film, scheduled on 29 October 2007 as part of the London Film Festival, had to be scrapped. Prince Charles was unable to make it, citing both the controversy surrounding the film and his busy schedule. The cause of the campaign was also taken up by the well known Australia-born British academic Germaine Greer who thought that *Brick Lane* had become a “defining caricature” for all Bangladeshi Muslims.

Is *Brick Lane* a mere distortion, having cartoons as its characters, authored by a lady who has no right to represent, being remote as she is from the reality of Brick Lane? The authenticity debate is an old and recurrent one, and has not spared even the latest Indian Man Booker prize winner Aravind Adiga’s debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008). Its depiction of a filthy, greedy and poverty-stricken life in the Bihari hinterland – where women wait behind doors and pounce on their men “like wildcats on a slab of flesh” as they return home after months of hard labour with some money in their pockets – has been criticised by novelist-critics like Amitava Kumar, who accuse it of being “curiously inauthentic,” “a novel from one more outsider, presenting cynical anthropologies to an audience that is not Indian.” Charges against Monica Ali are proximal.

As for Ali herself, she has treated the Brick Lane protests as belonging to an “economy of outrage” which trades exclusively on emotions/feelings, and which is meant to whip up media frenzy and curb the author’s freedom of expression. She has no anxiety of authenticity and disowns licensing authorities. The “authenticity game,” according to her, would lead nowhere. For then, memoirs and autobiographies would be

---

10 When the novel was published it upset many in the Bangladeshi community who considered it as an outright insult to them. The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, representing a large group of Bangladeshis in Britain, wrote to the book’s publishers Random House arguing that the book was ‘shameful.’ The Council complained that the book treated Bangladeshis as ‘economic migrants’ and portrayed them as ignorant. For example, the character Chanu’s comments about the Bangladeshis of Brick Lane as: ‘uneducated; illiterate; close-minded; without ambition’ was cited as offensive. See Hussain, Yasmin. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005. 92.
14 Ibid.
the only valid genres and white actors like Christopher Simpson would never get to play the role of Karim, the protagonist Nazneen’s lover, in the film adaptation of *Brick Lane*, which he does. As she says, issues of authenticity could lead to bizarre conclusions:

When he [Simpson] auditioned, however, he also had to wait an age before being cast, this time because he was up against the filmmaker’s desire to find someone from the Brick Lane area, someone, in other words, a bit more like Karim. We had a little conversation about the authenticity game. “But I’m an actor,” he said, justifiably bemused. Part Irish, part Rwandan, part Greek, he’d be waiting perhaps forever for an authentic role to come up. 

I will engage with these right-to-write and authenticity issues in this chapter devoted to explore in detail images of Bengalis both in Bangladesh and abroad in *Brick Lane*.

Many subcontinental/Indian writings in English, as G.J.V. Prasad has contended, are automatically cases in translation, since these writers often employ various narrative strategies e.g. minoritisation of language in order to translate different local realities into English and make their works read like translations. 16 Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* is in this sense a translated text, since it renders into English majorly Bengali conversations between characters like Chanu, Nazneen and Hasina as well as nostalgic fragments of Tagore and *Baul* songs and Bengali proverbs, e.g. “a blind uncle is better than no uncle” or “a finger blown up to the size of a banana tree” (72). 17 Indeed, the book was originally called “Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers,” a literal translation of a Bengali idiom used to denote unthinkable distances in fairytales, implying the gap between here and there, between the mythical home of memories back in Bangladesh and London: “A title that alludes more generally to the distance between Sylhet and England; the decision to give it a snappier, more happening, less accurate title is the publisher’s.” 18 *Brick Lane* is a narrow, half a mile long, innocuous lane in East London, known for its distinct character.

---

15 Ibid.
17 The corresponding Bengali versions are “nai mamar cheye kana mama bhalo” and “angul phule kalagachh.”
of being a mini-Bengal right in the heart of London where the Bengali diasporic population, predominantly Bangladeshi Muslims live. According to a reliable national census of 2001 around three lac Bangladeshis live in the UK, one fourth of which is to be found in Tower Hamlets where Brick Lane is located.19 With the title Brick Lane, the focus shifts more to a representation of an exotic minority in London than any tenuous reference to an umbilical cord back home.

Translation has permeated non-linguistic aspects of the text as well, such as innumerable references by Chanu to Bengali culture and history, ranging from the painter Jainul Abedin to the pre-colonial state of Bengali weaving industry to the syncretic religious traditions of Bengal, or vignettes from the “real” context back home, as reflected in letters of Hasina. Taking the cue from Salman Rushdie who referred to British Indians as “translated men,”20 we can look at Monica Ali herself as a translated woman, “translation” etymologically signifying “to carry across.” Ali had undertaken the journey across “seven seas and thirteen rivers” in her childhood, validating thereby the spatial metaphor in the etymology. Besides, she had to literally translate herself from her first-learned language Bengali which she claims to have quickly lost on coming to England.

Little wonder, then, that Brick Lane has had several translations. Possibly, in an attempt to underplay her brown skin as a dominant signifier, Monica Ali had authorised translations of her text into fourteen languages, all of them European, as she reveals in her 2003 Interview to Kaiser Haq cited above. And then there is the film version directed by Sarah Gavron – this one being her debut feature film as well – which has a majorly non-Bangladeshi cast in leading characters, obverse to the almost all-ethnic cast in the novel. Tannishtha Chatterjee, one of India’s well-known art-house actors, played Nazneen by

19 David Garbin illustrates, “Bangladeshis in Britain are a largely young population, heavily concentrated in London’s inner boroughs and experience a range of socio-economic problems. According to the most reliable national enumeration - the decennial census - in 2001, 283,063 Bangladeshis lived in the UK, i.e. 0.5 per cent of total population. 54 per cent of the Bangladeshi population lived in the Greater London area and a high proportion of these London inhabitants were located within the inner boroughs. Indeed, the ‘heartland’ of the London Bangladeshi community is to be found in Tower Hamlets, which contained 65,553 Bangladeshi residents or 22.8 per cent of the UK Bangladeshi population ... The majority of the Bangladeshis in the UK originates from several thanas (administrative sub-districts) in the north-eastern district of Sylhet.” See his essay, “An Overview of Religious and Political Dynamics among the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Britain.” See Sociology of Diaspora: A Reader. Vol. 2. Eds. Ajaya Kumar Sahoo and Brij Maharaj. Jaipur: Rawat, 2007. 718-28. 718-19.

20 See Prasad. 41.
learning to speak English with a London-Bangladeshi accent; Christopher Simpson played Karim while Satish Kaushik, a successful Indian film-director and comic actor, had the role of Chanu. Authenticity-games are indeed intriguing, for none questioned the casting of Chatterjee or Kaushik in the film; their brownness could pass them off as "authentic" Bangladeshis. The choice of cast in the film questions the authenticity/constructedness of all identities - national, religious or ethnic - an interesting response to a core issue in the text. Monica Ali recommends it as "a feel-good movie - an examination of love in all its different guises. In content, it is in no way controversial or political. Or, rather, it is political only in one very particular way: the story is told from the point of view of a marginalized voice."\(^{21}\) And the official synopsis of the film also declaims its innocence, maybe a little too loudly: "Set in multicultural Britain, Brick Lane is a truly contemporary story of love, cultural difference, and, ultimately, the strength of the human spirit."\(^{22}\)

But the film, as a review by Coco Forsythe suggests,\(^{23}\) paints a rather gloomy picture of an over cramped locality and sinister mindsets like Mrs. Islam's in and around Brick Lane, a bleak silhouette to Nazneen's blossoming love for Karim. It does not look like a very flattering representation of the Bangladeshi Muslim community in London in general and this is perhaps what the protesters had resented, both in the film and the book. Ali has been criticised for her supposed lack of cultural literacy, skin-deep understanding of parental affection in a Bengali household and demeaning representation of eastern scholarship. She touches upon factors underlying the radicalising of Muslim youths, i.e. the neo-colonialist injustice in the Muslim world. Her narrative also brings in the issues of British colonialist presence and the attendant injustices in the Indian subcontinent through Chanu's intermittent historical references. But all these are overshadowed by the fact that these are voiced by Chanu and Karim who themselves are satirically treated by the author which marks them as unreliable reference points.

Katy Gardner - who had visited Bangladesh in the 1980s for her research focussed on the conduct and mentality of the Sylheti Bangladeshis (who constitute a major chunk of Bengali migrant population in London) - observes in her article "Desh-Bidesh: Sylheti

---

Images of Home and Away” that by following native costumes and customs and manners the diasporic Bengalis in Britain remain a part of home, “an extension of the desh”; and thus desh is in a sense imported in bidesh.24 Food produced in desh is closely linked to notions of belonging and identity. Most such families consume rice from Bangladesh or India along with betel nut, spices and a wide variety of Bengali vegetables.25 They seemingly face contradictory sets of ideals and perceptions, but, after all, since desh is inherently social, it can be recreated anywhere, albeit in a modified form, so long as members of the social group are present. According to Gardner, though still it is bidesh to which Bengalis aspire, most do not want to lose contact with desh and some eventually wish to return physically.26

Gardner found that although in UK the Bangladeshi community tends to be portrayed in terms of problems and poverty,27 in Sylhet they are usually considered rich and perceived as successful. This is partly the result of relative standards of living and expectation; to landless villagers in Bangladesh, anyone living in Britain is prosperous. London is constantly discussed and eulogised. There, it is believed, no problems exist:

Over and over again I heard how the UK is clean, peaceful and wealthy; a place without fighting and poverty. It is source of plenty and of security. Although the wealth of Britain is admired, it is not, however British society to which people aspire. Western culture is not seen as desirable, but as amoral and heathen. Many people believe the West to be plagued by sexual immorality, alcoholism, divorce and a lack of familial duty and authority. Villagers who idealise Britain, and wish to go there, are not hoping to join British society, but that of British-based Bengalis … this does not mean that British Bengalis themselves aim at what has been termed as ‘encapsulation’, or lack interest in ‘assimilation’. The views above are those of villagers who have never been outside Sylhet, and who are balancing a belief in a non-Islamic and non-Bengali society as tremendously powerful, with their faith and pride in Islam, and in Bengali culture.28

25 Ibid. 11.
26 Ibid. 9.
27 Gardner cites the Home Affairs Committee Report to the House of Commons, 1986-87. Ibid. 3
28 Gardner. 9. Italics mine.
Possibly tired of the baggage of having to supply ‘news’ from this particular overlooked community and keen to resist ghettoisation and the status of pampered instant icon as an ethnic writer, Monica Ali chose a startlingly different theme for her next novel, *Alentejo Blue*. The book is a loosely interwoven collection of stories set in the fictional village of Mamarrosa, in and around an apparently unspoiled rural region of Portugal called Alentejo, where Ali and her husband once spent their summer holidays. The “blue” of the book’s title refers to the vibrant blue paint residents use to outline the doors and windows of their whitewashed farmhouses. As Ali reveals in an interview to Alden Mudge, “The driving impulse of *Alentejo Blue* was the place itself. I soon realized that I would have to develop some kind of choral range in order to give voice to the character of that place.”

The book is about a locale which shatters and weaves dreams together. Ali inhabits a surprising range of characters and their multiple perspectives — characters like the beautiful young Teresa eager to visit the world beyond the village, an old woman, the café owner Vasco, the ex-patriot Potts family, several English tourists, a young unsure couple engaged to be married and a blocked writer. In writing across the gender, age and insider/outside divide, Ali “felt that I was flexing a sort of writing muscle.”

*Alentejo Blue* in no way repeated the fairy-tale run of the best-selling *Brick Lane*. In spite of her almost apologetic alibi for choosing this rather unexpected subject — that she could not resist the theme which kept visiting her though she had originally planned to write a completely different book set in London and in the north of England — she could not please her reviewers. The *Washington Post Book Review* brands it as a “spare, unrelentingly depressing story” while Liesl Schillinger wryly comments, “In *Alentejo Blue*, Ali’s characters are trapped in their own heads. To let them loose into the dusty streets of Mamarrosa to act and interact, rather than silently stew, would be liberation for them — and perhaps for their author.”

---

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Interestingly, Brick Lane and Alentejo Blue are not as far apart as they seem. Both centre around two different locales inhabited by myriad characters and nurture the notion that even a common geography does not necessarily foster a common identity. However, responses to the two books are markedly different. The cold shoulder given to Alentejo Blue could be an example of the authenticity-game turned on its head. Monica Ali perhaps could never become an insider to the ‘white’ landscape of Alentejo and thus did not own the license to make them her subject. Her status as an ethnic icon – an image so hyped by the white media – automatically curbs her creative freedom of representation and confines her to ghettos. By reversing the anthropological gaze in Alentejo Blue, she has violated the rules of the game and has hence been temporarily ignored. Possibly it is in Asia/Africa and their diasporic communities where the West wants to locate its depression at present, as Aravind Adiga of The White Tiger fame would testify. It might be in no mood to suffer a sad and claustrophobic Alentejo from Monica Ali.

Coming to the plot of Brick Lane, much of the novel happens in the head of its protagonist Nazneen who has been tutored by her mother to accept and not intervene with fate – “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne” (11). Beginning in 1967 in the Mymensingh district of East Pakistan, which five years later would become Bangladesh, the novel tells the rags-to-rags-trade story of Nazneen, a poorly educated young girl of eighteen who is married off to Chanu, an overweight pompous man twenty years older and with the “face of a frog” (12). He transplants her to a dismal housing-estate in Tower Hamlets in London’s East End where he has been living for some time. His dreams and obsession with degrees and books only deepen his disillusion with London and its racial discriminations. The husband and wife struggle to provide for their two daughters and their only son dies in infancy. Nazneen stays at home, has few friends other than the delightfully mischievous Razia and is locked into a chafingly dull existence until, in the sixteenth year of her coming to London, she falls in love with a sweatshop-owner’s nephew, Karim. Their intense affair takes place against a background of increasing fundamentalisms around and post 9/11, which Karim himself tries to stoke up. The affair initiates a transformation in Nazneen’s life since she finally has to take control, and she chooses to take a decision and stays back in London with her two daughters Shahana and Bibi, while Chanu undertakes the long-awaited journey back home.
Nazneen, in all these years, retains a connection back home through letters from her ill-starred younger sister Hasina. Strikingly good-looking and willful, Hasina elopes with her beau. But the following years bring her misfortune more grievous than any in London. The romance fades rapidly, the husband turns out to be a wife-beater and Hasina runs away to Dhaka to join the vast army of garment-workers. The perils of a pretty sweatshop-worker in Dhaka are graphically illustrated: Hasina is slandered, sacked and sexually exploited. She eventually becomes a domestic help and the last we hear of her is that she has eloped with the cook.

Across chronology and cartography, Brick Lane has a wide range. However, it is not quite as pioneering a presentation of London-based Bangladeshis or residents of Brick Lane, as it has been made out to be by the white publishing industry. We have, among other texts on the topic, Syed Manzurul Islam’s The Mapmakers of Spitalfields (1997) – a collection of short stories, full of wit and fantasy about Brothero-Man, an early “ship-jumper” who has now become an invisible surveyor of the city. Farrukh Dhondy, later to become commissioning editor of ethnic programmes for Channel 4, also wrote a series of sardonic books aimed at Bengali young adults – East End at your Feet (1976) and Come to Mecca (1978). The only exclusivity Brick Lane can possibly claim is that it is the first to focus on the lives of women in Tower Hamlets. Nor is Ali the lone celebrity of Bangladeshi diasporic writing in English, with at least two significant compatriots:

Adib Khan, whose debut novel Seasonal Adjustments (1994) won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best First Book, and Syed Manzurul Islam, who has followed up his collection of stories The Mapmakers of Spitalfields (1997) with a novel, Burrow (2004). But these three writers demarcate a fairly extensive fictional terrain and highlight both the traits it shares with the rest of the subcontinental literary diaspora as well as its peculiarly Bangladeshi qualities. 34

The representation of Bangladesh in Adib Khan’s text, as we have discussed elsewhere, is rather bleak. It is more of a dystopic background plagued by inequity and poverty which justifies the protagonist Iqbal Chaudhary’s decision to become a migrant.

The myth of an idyllic home back at his ancestral village of Shopnoganj could not survive what Kaiser Haque calls “triple alienation: first from his native land, next from his adopted homeland [Australia], and finally from what the former has become during the years he has been away … Chaudhary, however, can only see Bangladesh in terms of prefabricated generalizations, stereotypes, caricatures.”

Manzurul Islam’s The Mapmakers of Spitalfields being based on Banglatown is, on the other hand, a nearer cousin of Brick Lane. So is his Burrow, which deals at length with the marginal community of Bangladesh “ship-jumpers,” bauls and spiritualists who inhabit Banglatown. Most have come to Britain to escape hunger: the delineation of Banglatown is ultimately premised on the assumption that in Bangladesh things are too bad to permit one to lead a normal life; the pressures of life in a hostile environment abroad are preferable to the problems in the mother country.

Both Seasonal Adjustments and Burrow are based on an apparent resolution of the home/diaspora crisis – the fairy-tale “home” of Bangladesh is rejected either in favour of an immigrant status or with an alternative, tightly-knit, newly discovered home in Banglatown. Brick Lane has a more complex approach to the issue. Here, characters nurture different ideas about home and imaginary homelands and the text has no one stance to offer. Unlike the other two novels, Brick Lane does not quite write off the country, and till its open-ended finale, depicts resolute attempts to cope with the chaos.

Besides Hasina, there is Chanu, back in Bangladesh, while Nazneen stays back in Brick Lane with their daughters. The girls are sure that their father will soon tire of Bangladesh and return, but meanwhile there is talk of a family holiday in the old country.

As for the research behind the text, Ali claims to have been moved by the Bangladeshi academic Naila Kabeer’s book of case-studies about Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London, “disparate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment.” She had also gone through the chore of interactions with drug addicts and youth workers, people at a women’s centre and so on

---

35 Ibid.
at Banglatown. In addition to the research, Brick Lane, being the author's debut novel, has its share of autobiographical touches. Nazneen shares her birth year and ancestral village Gouripur with Monica Ali. The most unlikely parallel is that between the protagonist and Ali's British mother who had made the same bewildered journey of utter dislocation many years back – only in the reverse direction – when she married her Bangladeshi father Hatem Ali. For her, home was England, and Bangladesh was the site of social and linguistic estrangement: “Why did I write about Nazneen? I think, but I cannot be sure, that the source was my mother, who is white and grew up in England. She made the opposite journey to Nazneen’s, moving to Bangladesh to marry, knowing little of the culture and religion, speaking not a word of the language. When I was a child she often told me about that experience of utter social and cultural dislocation.”

When Ali’s mother returned with her kids to London during the Independence War that raged in the then East Pakistan, a second alienation awaited her. Her old home had grown distant – “Home, you see, was not as she dreamed it.”

Again, as Ali recalls in her essay “The Outrage Economy,” there is a lot of herself in Shahana, Nazneen’s rebellious teenage daughter whose irreverence does not spare her father Chanu’s nostalgia. Ali says that her experience of the conflict between first and second-generation immigrants inspired her to write the novel. Inter-generational conflicts in the diaspora, as iconised by Shahana, remain a core issue in Brick Lane. Coming to inter-generational conflicts, a mild caricature of the older generation and its sentimental clinging to the image of Golden Bengal can not be far behind. There seem to be some unmentioned parallels between Chanu’s attitude and her father’s, to whom she dedicates the book with delicious notoriety:

From there he [Ali’s father] finally got permission to join his wife in the UK. It was a temporary situation. When things got sorted out, we would go back. His children settled into school, we stopped speaking to him in Bengali and then we

38“I was drawing on my own childhood, not in a way that was particularly autobiographical in my straightforward way, but it was there” – Ali says about her own presence in the book in “Monica Ali with Diran Adebayo” (2004). Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk. Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: Routledge, 2004. 340-351. 346.
stopped even understanding. The new status quo was accepted. There was no plan, after that, to “go home.” Sounding philosophical, my father would say: “I just got stuck here, that’s all.” And home, because it could never be reached, became mythical: Tagore’s Golden Bengal, a teasing counterpoint to our drab northern Milltown lives.\(^{41}\)

Her father’s stories about village life – particularly the anecdote of Makku Pagla and his famously patched umbrella – colour the text.

Poverty, unemployment and socio-economic deprivation dominate the social fabric of Ali’s Bangladeshi society in Tower Hamlets. The way the younger Bangladeshis in Brick Lane respond to this hostility and social deprivation is to spend more time outside their homes. In her attempts to depict the realities of contemporary experience of Bangladeshi youth, Ali draws upon the familiar image of the Asian gang thriving on violence, drug abuse and crime, and this is set against a backdrop of cultural conflict, generational confusion and religious fundamentalism/Islamophobia in the wake of September 11. Racial prejudice and discrimination are illustrated through frenzied leafleting by the far right groups in Tower Hamlets. The park situated near the estate on Whitechapel Road is named after Altab Ali who was murdered in a racist attack by three men in nearby Adler Street.\(^{42}\) The characters talk about the backlash they experienced post September 11: Nazneen recounts that her neighbour’s daughter “had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her union jack sweatshirt and it was spat on” (328). The narrative however portrays a community that struggles to assert their rights for equality and social dignity, but ultimately proves incapable of self-defence, evidenced in the concluding “riot” scenes where the Bengal Tiger’s demonstration degenerates into fights between young Bangladeshi men.

The novel shows “the formation of a Bangladeshi space,”\(^{43}\) the ways in which Bengali social networks are generated and sustained in Britain.\(^{44}\) Brick Lane is described as clustered with shops, travel agencies, cafés, restaurants, garment factories, voluntary organisations and the London Great Mosque. Curry houses, sari shops, dress factories,
and food shops “stacked with kebabs, tandoori chicken, bhazis, puris, trays of rice and vegetables, milky sweets, sugar-shined ladoos, the faintly sparkling jelabees”(398) are described alongside the “Sylhet Cash and Carry, the international cheap call centre”(391). Red and gold saris are hanging on the washing line, and the road signs “screwed to the brick work was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues beneath were Bengali” (13). Brick Lane thus becomes a “holding area, a temporary zone” for immigrants who have not yet fully settled in England, whose lives are defined by the past.45 It appears as though the estate represents a mid point between Bangladesh and UK.46 The individuals operate through their social contacts and relationships within the community, through visits to each other, and by offering services of assistance. Even the young men on the streets, despite their image of deviance, are contained within the respectable roles, as when Nazneen “passed a group of young Bangla men on the path, they parted and bowed with mock formality” (117). Nazneen’s world is initially defined by her female Bangladeshi neighbours, whose lives and perceptions of the world are spun through deep channels of gossip and rumour; and this social networking is vital in sailing these women through many constraints they undergo almost routinely – overcrowding at home, racism in the wider community, financial and patriarchal pressures etc.

However, “petty class and status snobberies” dominate these diasporic social networks in Brick Lane.47 The minority educated elite among the British Bangladeshi community tend to distance themselves from the “ignorant” section of fellow Bangladeshis. Chanu believes that his master’s degree from the University of Dhaka marks him out as educated and middle class; he looks down upon the majority of Bangladeshis in Britain who are from Sylhet and who, for him, belong to the uneducated, working class. Nazneen socialises with some such Bangladeshi neighbours, much to Chanu’s displeasure. Ali thus presents a community that is at odds with itself;48 even the community’s attempt to create solidarity through an illusory Islamic brotherhood proves unsuccessful, and results in a shambles as the men resort to squabbling between themselves.

45 Sandhu. op.cit
46 Hussain. op.cit. 102.
47 Ibid. 98
48 Ibid. 103.
"Going Home Syndrome," as Dr. Azad – an unlikely friend of Chanu in Brick Lane – calls the diasporic, often never-materialised urge to return to the roots, is a much-explored theme of the book. But then “home” is an intriguing, even elusive, concept. Often it is a lonely escape to an alternative reality from a defeated present, sometimes a bundle of betraying memories and longings, sometimes a wholly imagined idyllic hub and very rarely, a practically existing cartographic space ready for return. As Monica Ali comments: “Many of the characters of Brick Lane nurture their dreams of home, even (or perhaps specially) the young radical [Karim] who was born in this country and has never even visited Bangladesh.”49 Stories heard from her parents seep through Ali’s memory of the “home” she had left in Bangladesh as a child: “I was so young when I left that my memories are at most small fragments and I’m not even sure if they are really ‘remembered’ or if I have constructed them out of stories I’ve heard from a young age, visualizing the word-pictures painted for me by my parents.”50 Home, then, is an irretrievably hybrid concept, as much for the author as for the characters of Brick Lane. Let us look at how Dr. Azad defines the “Going Home Syndrome”:

This is another disease that afflicts us … I call it Going Home Syndrome … I used to think all the time of going back … Every year I thought, “Maybe this year.” And I’d go for a visit, buy some more land, see relatives and friends and make up my mind to return for good. But something would always happen. A flood, a tornado that just missed the building, a power cut, some mind-numbing piece of petty bureaucracy … And I’d think, “Well, maybe not this year.” And now, I don’t know. I just don’t know. (24-5)

Chanu, however, has all the reasons for going back home. Home for him symbolises many things: an uncorrupted sanctuary for his daughters, a proud and autonomous history and culture defying colonial dictates and curricula and, above all, a site that would grant him his due dignity and position, this time without mixing him up with ignorant Sylhetis – a common humiliation in London. As in everything, he loudly resolves, “I don’t plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back

50 Ali. Interview with Kaiser Haq. op. cit.
before they get spoiled" (24). And as long as this dream does not materialise, he compensates with creating a semblance of ‘home’ in his London flat. He lectures his reluctant, even rebellious daughters on Bengali history, pre-colonial industry and culture, forces them to memorise Tagore’s songs, introduces them to the painter Jainul Abedin and his paintings of the Bengal famine of 1942-43 precipitated by colonial exploitation, and makes them sing Nazrulgeeti when Dr. Azad visits their house, in proud declaration of domestic order and sanctity. Chanu despairs over the perpetuation of the derogatory image of Bangladesh in British society; he is sad and angry about what his children are being taught about Bangladesh: “all she knows is about flood and famine. Whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her” (151).

In his unmistakable anglophilic streak and simultaneous longing for an autonomous Bengali culture, Chanu however epitomises the ambivalent mindset of educated middle class Bengalis. With a degree in English Literature from Dhaka University which he holds to be “one of the best in the world” (29), Chanu knows his Brontes, Thackeray, Shakespeare and Hume quite well and feels he has nothing to fear about promotion from his less-educated colleague Wilkie. This is in his less-seasoned earlier years of marriage to Nazneen, when he had not yet borne the full brunt of white racial discrimination. As he has a fuller taste of the deep-rooted apartheid in London, his longing for home grows more intense. Since he is a man of books and plans to build a mobile Bengali library some day, his construction of this home is largely discursive and book-based, rather than deriving from any direct memory. Unable to realise the plan of the library, he prepares his daughters for the journey back home through Tagore’s song about Golden Bengal, incidentally the national anthem of Bangladesh – “Chanu was taking the family back home and Tagore was the first step of the journey”(145). Shahana and Bibi’s disinterested and joyless singing does not discourage him. The impossibly beautiful Bengal evoked in the song is the image of desire for home that he has to offer to his daughters:

In autumn, o mother mine
In the full-blossomed paddy fields,
I have seen spread all over- sweet smiles!
Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what an affection
And what a tenderness. (146)
The translation renders the tenderness for Golden Bengal in a slightly exaggerated and parodic tone, a tone that flavours Shahana and the author’s responses to Chanu’s lengthy speeches, his attempt to infuse pride for Bengali culture in his daughters and frequent bouts of temper at inevitable failure:

If you have a history, you see, you have a pride. The whole world was going to Bengal to do trade. Sixteenth century and seventeenth century. Dhaka was the home of textiles. Who invented all this muslin and damask and every damn thing? It was us. All the Dutch and Portuguese and French and British queuing up to buy ... During the eighteenth century ... this part of the country was wealthy. It was stable. It was educated. It provided — we provided — one third of the revenues of Britain’s Indian Empire. (151-53)

Chanu regrets the loss of a sense of history and in his Anglophilia, quotes from Warren Hastings to prove his point. It is ironic since Chanu is apparently anti-colonial and openly professes his ideology: “You see, I myself have struggled for a long time. But now I am simply taking money out. Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost forever to India. That is how I am playing them at their own game now” (204).

Chanu projects the British as the destroyer of the Bengali textile industry. He aims to design an alternative curriculum for his children – focusing on the glory of Muslim and Bengali traditions – which is oriented towards “home” and challenges blind Eurocentric representations in the standard British syllabus. He tries to woo his daughters to an inviting picture of Bangladesh through visuals on a website, e.g. flowers of and seasons in Bengal with their distinctive traits and colours. He believes in the syncretic religious traditions of Bengal and refuses to send his daughters to the local madrasa: “Bengal was Hindu long before it was Muslim, and before that Buddhist, and that was after the first Hindu period. We are only Muslims because of the Moguls. Don’t forget” (161).

Unfortunately, Shahana is unabashedly bored by him, and throughout the novel Chanu features as a harmless caricature, who has nothing but his grandiose plans/lectures to flaunt. None take him seriously for, in spite of his knowledge and degrees, he is shown as a frustrated “taxi man” serving what he calls “ignorant types” (176). Convinced of
British racism that sours all dreams of integration, Chanu decides to return home and land a teaching job there, though he later settles for the more modest project of a soap-business in Dhaka. He zeroes in on Bangladesh — declared by professors at the London School of Economics to be the happiest nation in the world — as the snug answer to all confusions: "But when we're back home, we don't need to think about these things. Back home we'll really know what's what" (388). Finally, sponsored by Dr. Azad, Chanu's Going-Home-Syndrome is translated into reality. When he has to choose between his family and this mythicised home, he chooses the latter. "I can't stay," he says (400). Chanu and Nazneen break up a home in order to reclaim their respective homelands. And from Bangladesh, where things had not remained unchanged, Chanu keeps sending censored word-maps of his new home through letters to Nazneen in England.

Chanu's account of Bengal and its history and his allegations against British colonial exploitation are all fact-based. Yet his nostalgia and pride about home are ridiculed, at best tolerated by both Shahana and the author. Most of the praises about Bangladesh are mouthed through "the frog-faced" Chanu (12), a character which invites irreverence and such laurels therefore cannot be taken seriously. This narrative strategy problematises her politics of representation. Monica Ali seems decided to discard the memory-drenched golden image of home back in Bangladesh and is partial towards London as the site of self-discovery, particularly for women. Ali's men dream of returning but not the women, especially of the second generation, who fail to appreciate the adherence to the ethnic cultural mores by the parents and opt for acculturation as the mode of integration into their immediate society. Karim, Nazneen's lover and a keen player in radical Islamist politics, has never visited Bangladesh and must know it only through visual stereotypes. He surfs the net in order to explore the fantasised home:

'What are you looking at?'
'Day in the life of a typical Bangladeshi village.'
She got up and looked over his shoulder at a picture of a bullock cart and driver, both animal and man jutting bones like rude gestures.
'When was the last time you went there?'
'N-no,' he said, and his stammer grew worse than ever. 'Never been there.' (287)
Nazneen cannot help pitying Karim; Bangladesh, much like the global Muslim ummah he lectures on, is only his imaginary homeland. Slowly she realises that she too is only an idea of home for Karim – “his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother” (380), an unspoilt iconic girl from a Bangladeshi village which he could never manage to visit.

Unlike the men of this novel, women pine less for the “home” in Bangladesh, which for them is more often memory and reality than a fantastic or discursive space. Hasina’s letters, for example, written from Dhaka are an ironic dystopic antithesis to Chanu’s dreams. Written in bizarre pidgin English, which is possibly meant to be a translated version of ungrammatical but energetic Bengali, they present Bangladesh as a state in anomie and chaos. There hartal-s are frequent, university students rally for the right to cheat, corruption is all-pervasive, politicians hire goons to win elections, men are lynched on the street which leaves Hasina wondering: “Sister what is happen to police and court and thing? In England could such thing happen like this?” (221).

As for the women back home, suffering is routine, especially for the poor. Hasina’s life, revealed by her letters, “is a pedestrian (that is to say, unexceptional) tale of outrageous misfortune.” Monju, her friend, dies from an acid-attack by her husband’s family because she refuses to give up her son for child-traffic to India, while Hasina’s mistress Lovely tries to decide which NGO project is equipped with the best title to help. Here NGOs are fashion statements for the elite, and aid hardly trickles down to those who are in need. Hasina’s letters go a long way to dispel the idea that Bangladesh is still rural and paradisal. It is urban, violent, grossly iniquitous and locked into the global capitalist system – Britney Spears is painted on a baby-taxi among a jostle of the regular peacock, tiger, elephant, filmstar, Taj Mahal or mosque, and “Pantene Head and Shoulders hair contests” are held at the capital’s Sheraton Winter Garden. Hasina’s letters are the one real contact with the actual geographical “home” in Brick Lane but the contact alienates.

The letters bring back to Nazneen memories of Hasina and their childhood spent together in Gouripur but it is a memory tinged with the wisdom of reality and the present: “And she drifted off to where she wanted to be, in Gouripur tracing letters in the dirt with

a stick while Hasina danced around her on six-year-old feet. In Gouripur, in her dreams, she was always a girl and Hasina was always six ... but by now she knew that where she wanted to go was not a different place but a different time” (35).

For her, home is Gouripur frozen at a particular time. It does not necessarily correspond to the cartographic reality of Bangladesh. From the beginning, she is wary about returning, even to Gouripur; when she thought about Gouripur now, she thought about inconvenience: “To live without a flushing toilet, to abandon her two sinks ... to make a fire for the oven instead of turning a knob – would these be trades worth making?” (63). Gouripur is snug memory which soothes her in crisis – the jasmine that grew close to the wall, the chickens scratching in the hot earth, the sunlight warming her cheeks, the six seasons, the whiff of rice – and a repository of anecdotes, some of which she hands down to her children, e.g. the story of Mumtaz Auntie and the good jinni who obeyed her commands, and some of which are forbidden, e.g. the story of the exorcism of her own mother. When Chanu resolves to go home, she at first agrees with apprehension but finally decides to stay back. Through a long and cautious journey, England has become her adopted home. She can never return to the home locked in her memories and as for Bangladesh, it is now an alien land to which she cannot risk yet another dislocation: “Dhaka would be a disaster. Shahan would never forgive her. Chanu would be finished. It was not even going home. She had never been there. Hasina was in Dhaka but the city of her letters was an ugly place, full of dangers” (356). Razia, Nazneen’s friend, has given up her sari in favour of trousers and tries to mesh into the English way of life by getting a job and UK citizenship, while her husband has tried to establish an identity away from Brick Lane by funding the bricks for a new mosque at his home in a village. Razia has chosen to make England her home: “Tell me this ... If everything back home is so damn wonderful, what are all these crazy people doing queuing up for visa?” (357).

Nazneen’s daughters are less confused on this issue than their mother – home for them is neither fantasy nor memory. It is England. Shahana declares flatly, “I’m from London” (245). Bengal is a cultural baggage of their parents, particularly Chanu, which they are unwilling to share:
Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them ... When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of the nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home. (147)

Bibi and Shahana could not be taken home. For them, Bangladesh defines nightmares to be eternally avoided. It is an impossible place where girls get married off in no time, are locked up in little smelly rooms and made to weave carpets, where one brushes with a daaton (neem twig) and not a toothbrush and has to do without toilet paper. In order to escape the ordeal of going back, Shahana even flees home.

How real is the dystopic reality of Bangladesh presented in Brick Lane? Being a second generation immigrant herself, Ali seems biased to the viewpoint of Shahana, defiant in her “tight jeans, lipstick and shampoo-using ways.” The tension due to differential perspectives between first and second generation immigrants is a major theme of the novel. According to Afrin Zeenat: “Ali seems to be espousing the emergence of a new generation of people who will accept the challenges of acculturation ... [Through Shahana] Monica Ali very successfully brings out the plight of a second-generation immigrant who cannot accept her parents’ home as her home since her home is different from theirs.” Shahana is an icon of second-generation resistance, but others feature too, depicting attitudes and evils that characterise the generation (those born and bred there constitute approximately half of the Bengali immigrant community). Jorina’s boy is an alcoholic and Razia’s son Tariq is a drug-addict. Nazneen’s estate is full of youngsters on heroin. As Dr. Azad says, “It’s really quite alarming that the rate of heroin abuse in our community should have exploded” (204). There are instances of gangsterism among the youth in the estate as well, as when Nazneen sees unknown boys in gangs of four and five “who carried an air of violence with them, like a sort of breeding, good or bad, without ever displaying it” (302). And then there is the hot debate over the stabbing of a boy due to a fight between two gangs with a history of rivalry, although many in Brick Lane

dismissed it as a story cooked by the white press to give Bangladeshis a bad name, just as
they would dismiss the novel as a figment of evil imagination. However, the televised riot
of Bangladeshi youngsters setting cars alight in Oldham could not be rejected: “There
were pictures of hooded young men, scarves wrapped Intifada-style around their faces,
 hurling stones, furious with the cars that they set alight” (228).

This refers to the routine of riots and gang-wars among the youth of Brick Lane,
which by tradition is a temporary interzone for the marginal communities of immigrants
to London, e.g. Irish builders, Huguenot refugees, East European Jews, Iraqi Kurds and
Bangladeshis and is “one of the few notionally central places in the capital still home to a
sizable non-white population.” Tower Hamlets has been dubbed by some as the heroin
capital of England which festers with budding gangsters: these kid-warriors may not have
much, but they have always had their estates. Nowadays, as they roam around, treating
Brick Lane and its surrounding streets as military zones to be occupied and fortified,
territories worth annexing, anxiety and resentment are in the air.

Racial tension with the whites was a regular feature of the locality in the 1980’s,
sometimes leading to gory encounters and retaliations:

Younger Bangladeshis ... joined gangs and hung around on estates, developing a
sense of territory. The hostility and social deprivation they faced ... meant they
didn’t feel as if they were ‘British Asians’, an identity they associated with
Hindus and Sikhs, who were beginning to be seen as success stories, model
minorities. Instead, some ... turned to religion. Fanned by local mullahs and
maulvis, their anger ... mirroring the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh itself,
turned them into more ardent Muslims than their parents had ever been ... How
strange then that this novel, part of it set in 1985, has so little to say about the
campaign of violence and intimidation which marked the lives of almost every
Bangladeshi ... who lived in and around Brick Lane.

53 Sandhu. op. cit.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid. Italics mine.
Only Karim makes a stray reference to such racist campaigns in the novel. He is a second-generation immigrant keen on becoming an Islamic scholar and on politically organising the Brick Lane community along religious lines. He founds an apparently radical group called “Bengal Tigers” which would resist white racist attacks and centre on the Islamic identity of the Bangladeshi diaspora, though open to all Muslims. He finds his identity, dignity and even home in the global ummah, though he wears jeans, stammers in Bengali and is almost a prototype of the Bengali youth who aggressively try to adopt British customs. With a salaat alert on his mobile, he is irretrievably hybridised in spite of the desperate bid for a purely Islamic identity through his post 9/11 dress-makeover of punjabi-pyjama and skullcap. The purity cannot be found in London, though he chooses to decide between Bangladesh and the caravan in order to live his fantasy.

If anarchy and its obverse, i.e. fundamentalist Puritanism, are one streak among the second-generation males in Brick Lane, then there are others who are comfortable with hybridity and even celebrate it, e.g. the young man who suggests that “Bengal Tigers” would be a good name for his band. As Saugata Bhaduri identifies: “What is interesting about these bands is that they, rather than returning to some original authentic Bengali source of music, privilege hybrid forms, while weaving through these a strong assertion of one’s diasporic identity.”

The women of this generation are even more ready to acculturate, as the fusion fashions of Shahana in her tight or baggy-style jeans would testify. She and her friend Nishi are resolved not to become victims of the first generation’s Going Home Syndrome which for them spells doom: “Nishi’s sister, who was sixteen years old, had gone for a ‘holiday’ in Sylhet and returned six months later with a husband and swelling belly. Nishi, strong on forward-planning skills, was taking evasive action: she was going on a holiday of her own and she would return when she was twenty-five. At that ancient age the danger of marriage was over” (390).

---

Unlike the boys who are often gangsters, alcoholics or religious radicals, the girls are relatively better assimilated in the London society. Shahana and Razia's daughter Shefali are doing quite well in studies. Women across both generations are often reluctant to leave London, which brings us to another related contentious issue of the novel, the retentiveness versus assimilation debate where opinion is divided across generations.

Chanu, the first-generation male immigrant, is all for retention of a pure culture, identity and heritage, so much so that he prefers to leave England for the Golden Bengal of Tagore's songs, viewing Bangladesh as a safer place for his girls to grow up. For him, "to be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (91), caught in a clash between cultures and generations. Dr. Azad reciprocates Chanu's emotions and is miserable at his failure to retain such a pure cultural space at home. In an empathetic gesture, he finally organises and finances Chanu's trip back home. Mrs. Islam, the daunting matriarch of the Brick Lane community, speaks along similar lines when she warns Nazneen against cultural contact in multicultural London: "But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is" (22).

Certainly, all first-generation women in the Bangladeshi diasporic community do not think along these lines. Razia plainly asks Nazneen, "Ask him [Chanu] this, then. Is it better than our own country, or is it worse? If it is worse, then why is he here? If it is better, why does he complain?" (58) At the very end of the novel, she ecstatically proclaims the beauty of England in its hybridity and opportunities, in the reality of Nazneen ice-skating in a sari, impossible back home: "This is England. You can do whatever you like" (413).

Mrs. Azad is yet another devout supporter of assimilation, reconciled to the idea that their next generation would be more westernised and has brought up her daughter in a way reflecting her ideals. She is not dismayed by the fact that her daughter enjoys more personal freedom than she could ever dream of in her youth: "Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with the white girls and I'm just one of them ... The [English] society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That is the tragedy" (93).
Monica Ali espouses the need to assimilate, acculturate and discourages exclusivist adherence to a particular religious/ethnic identity. This is evident in the way characters apprehensive of hybridity/assimilation – whom Zeenat calls “traditionalists” – are finally ridiculed, e.g. Chanu and the helpless Dr. Azad, or vilified, e.g. Mrs. Islam. As against ghettoisation, myopic nationalism and identity assertion, the novel upholds the exuberance of immigration through Razia, Shahana and crucially, through the protagonist Nazneen who finally decides to stay back and participate in a female garment entrepreneurship initiated by Razia. It is a long journey, from the two English words “sorry” and “thank you” with which she came equipped to England, to her dancing to Lulu’s “shout” and breaking open the cocoon of the cramped flat at Tower Hamlets in order to discover London for herself. She has finally come home, the author seems to suggest, to both liberty and London. Women of both generations are more willing to carve out their identity in British-Bangladeshi terms. As Kaiser Haq observes: “It reveals a significant fact about expatriate Bangladeshis: the men dream of return, but not the women, who even as second-class citizens enjoy rights denied them in the mother country.”

By highlighting the novel’s focus on gender and race as two key aspects of Bengali immigrant experience, Yasmin Hussain elaborates on how Ali explores the changing gender identities in the first generation through Nazneen and Razia and the next generation through Nazneen’s daughters, in particular Shahana. In her initial days in London, Nazneen appears to conform to the legacy of passive stoicism, to the teachings of her mother that it is a woman’s role to accept her suffering with indifference. Accordingly, she seemingly accepts the miserable existence “fate” has bestowed upon her in a London council flat. She behaves exactly as she would in Bangladesh, conforming to the expected roles as prescribed through generations. She sees others around her changing, yet she is initially dismissive of this. She notices Mrs. Azad’s ability to change her outward appearances, and to let her daughter wear skirts even shorter than hers and to indulge, without any attempt to hide it, the daughter’s request for money to spend in the pub. It frustrates Mrs. Azad that “Some spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the

57 Zeenat. op. cit. 140.
kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English. They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons” (93). Razia too – in her smart sweatshirts emblazoned with a Union Jack and in her refusal to wear a sari anymore, because it forces her to take “little bird steps” (77) – is loud, vibrant and confident. As a step towards liberty, and improvement of her condition in society as opposed to being reconciled to her fate like many other women on the estate, Razia attends English language classes. The more she learns the language, the more English she becomes.

Rebellion is inevitable from Nazneen too, who comes to realise finally that “she was not the girl from the village anymore” (320) and says, “I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one” (337). The author narrativises with great empathy Nazneen’s temporary passivity as well as her gradual metamorphosis that ranges from the personal, private space where Nazneen and her children starts washing their hair in shampoo rather than Fairy Liquid, to her venturing into the public space, unaccompanied by Chanu, by attending meetings of a group of young activists who are trying to defend their culture from the bigotry and attacks in the wake of September 11. In those public gatherings she meets women from the younger generation who are verbally expressive despite their traditional attire. All this affects her sense of identity leading to a fostering of her defiance. She calls into question her relationship with Chanu and thus her life in Britain. While a marriage like hers might have easily worked in Bangladesh, it stifles Nazneen in England as her daughters get older.

In the novel the construction of new ethnic hybrid identities with particular reference to the second generation characters is part of a more general debate about British Bengalis and their sense of belonging. Being born in Britain, Nazneen’s children’s acceptance of its culture is more spontaneous and enthusiastic; the culture of their country of origin, naturally, remains distant for them. Shahana and her sister participate more actively in the wider social order than their parents. As Mrs. Azad says, “we live in a Western society … our children will act more and more like westerners” (93). On the other hand, Chanu, unable to fulfill his dreams for his own life in Britain, wants his daughters to maintain the Bangladeshi culture, the one in which he feels

---

59 Hussain. op. cit. 99.
comfortable. Their lack of interest in Bangladesh, its customs and rituals, only frustrates him. Bibi however is meek and pliable, whilst the older daughter, Shahana is fierce and full of her own will, and her father's coercion and physical abuse make her rebel even more. She embodies "the classic Westernized rebellious South Asian youth engaging in a potent tug-of-war with her overbearing father." The arguments between Shahana and her father dominate the latter part of the novel.

Within the Bangladeshi circle into which Chanu and his wife have been socialised, certain gendered norms are adhered to which are contradicted by the dominant liberal culture in Britain. Chanu, for instance, disapproves of his daughters' wearing of tight jeans and the derogatory way Shahana chats back to him. Shahana refuses to oblige the dictates of the past, the tradition; she is embarrassed by the "primitiveness" of her parents' ethnicity and threatens to run away. Significantly, it is through the children that Ali's work illustrates the changing Bengali femininities. It is the children who most vividly question and redefine their own roles, rather than slipping into what is prescribed for them; they are mobile in linguistic, religious and cultural terms. Interestingly, Bibi is more effective as a cultural navigator; she is able to "switch codes as appropriate." To avoid the conflict, she feigns to listen to her father and adheres to the image he wishes to see of her as a young woman. While Bibi could switch smoothly from one cultural and linguistic code to the other, her sister frequently fails and becomes entangled in conflicts.

As I have already suggested, Ali's novel could be looked at as a collective bildungsroman of many of the expatriate Bangladeshi women who tinker with their limited personal space in order to achieve a certain degree of self-empowerment. The traditional South Asian patriarchy proliferates in diaspora as well. The status of women and the position of patriarchy in the diasporic Bangladeshi community as well as at home is yet another central concern of the book. In Brick Lane, Amina is regularly battered by her husband and Razia's husband would "slaughter her like a lamb" if she takes up a sewing job, since it shatters his traditional role as the bread-earner (101). She can finally take up a job only after the husband dies. However, she learns English even during his lifetime in a bid to equip herself for assimilation into London life. Jorina's sewing-job is

---

60 Ibid. 107.
61 Ibid. 108.
62 Ibid. 108.
severely criticised by her community. Hanufa is ostracised because it is discovered that she has been attending a massage course. The community, according to Brick Lane, is not kind to women who somehow transgress the pre-scripted role of the ideal obedient Bengali Muslim wife.

Chanu was least threatened by the prospect of a wife who could cross this threshold when he had married Nazneen, an unspoilt, young, hard-working girl from the village: “You know when I married your mother I thought I was getting a simple girl from the village and she would give me no trouble” (156). Chanu tries to determine his wife’s friend-circle, but in vain. He pretends to the vanity and liberalism of the generous patriarch: “I don’t stop you from doing anything. I am westernised now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man” (35). There is a latent rivalry between Chanu and Dr. Azad in this respect. In relation to Dr. Azad who cannot “control” his wife and daughter, Chanu is apparently successful in containing his family and retaining domestic decorum, where members of the household show obedience to the patriarch. But at the end of the day he is only a shabby patriarch with no real control, routinely ignored by his daughters, and a comic study in the line of V.S. Naipaul’s Mr. Biswas.

From a cultivated invisibility and resigned fatalism to economic autonomy and self-assertion is a long journey for Nazneen. The characters who spur her on to this path of self-discovery are primarily Karim and Shahana. As I have discussed above, Nazneen had come to her husband’s flat as a young bride; she was infused with notions of a patriarchal society and, at first, unquestioningly submitted to his will. For over the first two hundred pages of the book, apart from the few introductory pages in Bangladesh, Nazneen does not leave Brick Lane and speaks little. But London itself enters her secure ghetto through the televised destruction of the World Trade Centre, in the form of racist leaflets and certainly through Karim. Karim at first seems to be the polar opposite of Chanu, in his confidence, organising ability, action-oriented approach and physical fitness. Nazneen is fascinated by his seeming to know his place and role in the world. Besides, she already begins to doubt Chanu’s utopic reconstruction of home since Hasina’s letters project a very different picture. And when Chanu proclaims Bangladesh
to be the happiest nation of the world, she quietly asserts, “It may be written down. But I do not believe it” (290).

Gradually, Nazneen begins to question the identity thrust on her by her culture and the expectations of both her husband and lover. Post 9/11, Karim begins to closely resemble Chanu in his immaturity and love for discursivity – “The more he talked, the less sure he seemed” (339). They finally break up when she realises that she symbolises for Karim the patriarchal myth of the unspoilt village-girl, an ideal which she cannot live. And she refuses him, though with infinite tenderness, for they have made each other up – he was for her a desperately sought antithesis of Chanu, she an idea of himself that he found in her. Though, as Razia cheekily puts it, her being in love in “the English style” (358) has set off Nazneen on the route to assimilation, her extramarital affair is possibly not the destination in the process. Afrin Zeenat states: “In a very symbolic way, this adventure into forbidden territory stands for her coming to terms with the dominant culture. Nazneen’s acculturation reaches its culmination in an extramarital affair.”

I think the culmination lies not in the outcome of the affair, for Nazneen carves for herself a third space without either husband or lover in the comforting company of her daughters and an exclusively female-run garment enterprise comprising the women who have “transgressed,” like Jorina, Hanufa and of course Razia. It rather lies in her realisation that she cannot go back with Chanu, in her self-confidence to live alone with her daughters and celebrate life, while earning for herself, her daughters and sister by designing fusion fashions for the enterprise. Through self-articulation, she finally rejects the white racism that makes her invisible as well as a pre-scripted socio-religious identity into which both her husband and lover shove her. Her ice-skating at the end is a metaphor for an ambience that helps translate dreams into reality: “London offers more possibilities to her in terms of establishing a separate identity as a woman which would get trampled if she returned home. Hence she strives to form a cultural identity which will be an amalgam of both the cultures that she has experienced.”

63 Zeenat. op. cit. 141. Italics mine.
64 Ibid. 142.
Dhaka, in contrast to the snug female matrix controlling an entrepreneurship in London and combining leisure and work, is represented as slandering its women who work in the male-owned garment factories. Women back home, as Hasina’s letters suggest, are in a dismal state. Patriarchy rules strong. Hasina wanted the protection of a home and had to become an unhoused prostitute and domestic cook; Monju has acid poured on her by her husband’s family. Nazneen’s mother Rupban who had taught them the values of patriarchy – resignation and unquestioning suffering – commits suicide when she cannot bear her husband’s promiscuity. Shehnaz’s husband had abandoned her and she had to become a *jatra*-girl and prostitute. Aleya’s husband discourages her from going to work in the garment factory and insists on her wearing burkha. He beats her up on false suspicion the day she gets a sari as bonus for her work. There are mullahs who brand garment girls as sex-workers and play religious messages with loudspeaker forbidding men and women to work together (their standards of morality are however dubious, for they remain silent about the country’s playboy President’s amorous exploits). Upper-class, glamorous puppets like Lovely are hypocritical, liberalised only in their fashion-statements. The only possible means available for defiance and liberation for women from this oppressive, closed society seems to be by faking possession by an evil jinni and avenging oneself, as did Nazneen’s mother, or by pretending that one has a pet jinni to command and thereby pose to power, as did her aunt Mumtaz. The portrait of Bangladeshi women, both at home and abroad, in *Brick Lane* is too bleak to be true. The society has been shown as mindlessly traditional, zealous on retaining its religious and ethnic identity, and cruel and conservative on its women. The author’s bias towards London and hybridity is overt. Such a monochromatically depressing picture may have led many Bangladeshis to protest and question the authenticity of representation.

According to Yasmin Hussain, the social reality of the novel appears to be more reflective of Britain of the 1970s rather than the early twenty-first century. She finds it difficult to comprehend the conclusion as a contemporary image, despite the fact that the novel attempts to convey changes between the 1970s and the 1990s. For Hussain, the

---

65 Ibid. 108-109.
novel ends "unrealistically" with Nazneen dancing to Lulu's shout. She also points out, quite emphatically, weaknesses in Ali's characterisation and cultural representation:

Even though the novel's marketing strength is its focus on Bangladeshi women, the characterization of the female characters is weak, and they are overloaded with stereotypes ... the novel is rather weak in conveying the atmosphere and experience of Bangladeshi culture from 'within' ... Ali describes the locations quite well, but they could easily be the perception of a tourist. Critically there are no community events and activities, except for the acrimonious and embarrassing defence group meetings which Nazneen attends in a local hall. She does not attend any weddings or funerals, nor are there any significant religious festivals such as Eid marked in the narrative. Such events and festivals are central to the reaffirmation of Muslim South Asian culture in the diaspora. Moreover they are the kind of collective rituals that provide the settings for critically important events in peoples’ lives. It is as if the community is only represented 'internally' from within the characters and through moral regulation in informal and private interactions.

Brick Lane has been accused of reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes of cultural otherness. Michael Perfect argues that Ali employs stereotypes as aesthetic counterpoints in order to further emphasise her protagonist's final integration into contemporary British society. According to him, the character of Hasina – whose letters from Bangladesh are reproduced in the narrative – propagates "stereotypical notions of the oppression of women in postcolonial Islamic societies." Her letters recount a life of such singular unending misery that it is difficult to see her as anything more than a "symbol of subjugation." Defying her parents to enter a "love marriage," she is rejected by her family, abused by a succession of men and forced into prostitution; even when it appears that she has found sanctuary as a maid in a wealthy household, she is still unable to escape violence and oppression. The horror described by her sister contributes to

66 Ibid. 109.
67 Ibid. 109. Italics mine.
69 Ibid 112.
70 Ibid. 111.
Nazeen’s decision not to return to Bangladesh, not to be simply “left to her fate,” a condition of passive stoicism so glorified by her family in Bangladesh earlier in the novel, and finally to assume responsibility for the conclusion of her own.

That Ali so obviously bases Hasina – her general and more specific circumstances, as well as her attitudes and beliefs – on the testimonies recorded in Naila Kabeer’s The Power to Choose is perhaps indicative of an attempt to make her an “authentic” character, to show that women like Hasina do really exist.\textsuperscript{71} Many of the women in Dhaka’s garment factories that Kabeer quotes embody increasing wealth, autonomy and agency. Ali, however, seems to appropriate only the more desolate of the testimonies recorded by Kabeer, and modify them to make them even bleaker. As in passages quoted below, for example, we shall see, how Ali changes one worker’s assertion that men and women do not mix there:

A worker quoted by Naila Kabeer: “It doesn’t matter whether there are men or women in the factory if you think of them as your brother and sister.”\textsuperscript{72}

Ali’s Hasina: “Men and women keep separate here. No men doing machining ... So you see how it is and when we must speak it is as brother and sister.” (125)

Here, then, Ali seems to portray Dhaka as more repressive than do the testimonies in Kabeer’s study. Many of the London-based women interviewed in Kabeer’s research speak of physical abuse, racism, isolation and extreme financial struggle, but if Nazneen’s narrative has any root in these testimonies at all, it is only in the most fortunate and positive of them. Moreover in the final stages of the novel, Ali seems to take particular delight in having Nazneen transcend other people’s stereotypical notions of her; she certainly demonstrates that she is not the “simple” Bengali wife and mother that Karim believes her to be.

While Kabeer draws attention to the exploitative conditions which Bangladeshi women in both London and Dhaka have been exposed to by the garment industry, she nevertheless finds in the emergence of the garment factories in Dhaka a narrative of

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. 118.
\textsuperscript{72} Kabeer. op. cit. 97.
ongoing social and economic emancipation; she takes the “home-based piecework” carried out in London as being symptomatic of ongoing social and economic exclusion.\footnote{Perfect. op. cit. 118.} In Kabeer’s account, it is the women in Dhaka rather than London who experience an increase in personal agency, in their “power to choose.” Crucially, Ali’s novel, as I have indicated above, seems to invert rather than replicate this finding. During the course of Brick Lane, Hasina becomes increasingly powerless and socially excluded, while Nazneen undergoes such a powerful emancipation that she is finally “startled by her own agency” (11). While Hasina is abandoned by a succession of men, Nazneen chooses to leave both Karim and Chanu. Hasina is eventually excluded from the garment factories; the route to greater personal autonomy which, at least in Kabeer’s account, they offer is refused to her. For Nazneen, on the contrary, the London garment industry proves to be an opportunity for emancipation and independence: she becomes a business partner with Razia and even starts designing, as well as making, the clothing, thereby assuming a creative role in their new enterprise.

So, Ali’s novel draws inspiration from Kabeer’s study in that both celebrate “the power to choose,” and yet Ali straightforwardly and conclusively denies Hasina this power, and grants it to Nazneen. Indeed, Hasina is such a stereotypical representation of defeat and naivety, because this forms a counterpoint to – and so serves to further emphasise and to render extraordinary – Nazneen’s narrative of emancipation and enlightenment. By the end of the novel, Nazneen has not only discovered a new-found agency, as I have said above, but, she has also achieved both self-awareness and an understanding of the society around her, and has begun to forge an economic and social as well as a familial role for herself. Contrary to Chanu’s fears, Nazneen does not lose her identity in multicultural London but rather discovers it, with the novel celebrating the adaptability both of its immigrant protagonist as well as that of the multicultural metropolis.

Thus, according to Perfect, what is perhaps most interesting about Brick Lane is the degree to which it is prepared to employ stereotypes in counterpoint to its narrative of
empowerment; the degree to which it “prioritizes the celebration of multiculturalism over
the destabilization of the stereotypical.”

In one of her essays Ali recalls: “In an audience recently at the Bengali World
Literature Centre in the East End, a woman invited me to take a test. ‘How can you know
what it is like to be a Bengali mother,’ she protested, ‘when you don’t even speak our
language?’” This links up the issue of authenticity with the language issue in the book.
Most of the conversations happen in Bengali among the characters, but the novel is in
English. We return then to the issue of translation and Monica Ali’s intimacy with the
language. In most of her interviews Ali claims to have lost the language. And then in
“Where I’m Coming From,” she concedes that her Bengali is now limited to a few tourist
phrase type enquiries, a few nursery rhymes or song fragments and a quite extensive
culinary vocabulary. But the title of the essay “Where I’m Coming From” is in itself a literal
translation of a Bengali syntax. The author may not be as ignorant of the Bengali language
as she claims. In Brick Lane, there are several examples of the minoritisation of language, as
in the translation of Bengali proverbs e.g. “the local yogi doesn’t get alms” (90), or in the
imagery Nazneen uses to capture her experience when she talks about “the machines”
keeping her son alive in hospital “like a mahout calms an angry elephant” (101) or when
Chanu expresses his disapproval of his British colleague: “The jackfruit is still on the tree,
but already he is oiling his moustache” (28), or when Razia talks about the hypocritical
nature of her own community: “All sinking drinking water” (105). Further, there
are untranslated exclamations like “ish!” in the text as well as lines from Lalan Fakir’s songs
used in the exorcism ritual at home, first in Bengali and then rendered into English.

The novel is written in English which, at times, projects itself as a translation.
However the characters write and speak different kinds of Bengali/English. These multiple
linguistic inflections are retained in the text in order to locate each character to a particular
socio-linguistic background. The Bengali dialogue is mostly signified by English with a
south Asian slant e.g. when Chanu says, “All the clever-clever girls are not worth one hair

74 Ibid. 119.
76 The corresponding Bengali is “Ami Jekhan Theke Ashchhi.”
77 The lines are “Ke Katha koyre, dekha deyna/ Ke Katha koyre, dekha deyna/ Nore chore, hater kachhe” (Brick
Lane 333).
on her head" (170). Nazneen speaks mostly Bengali, but there are times when she speaks to Karim in English, the language of empowerment for her in which she finally counters a white policeman. Karim is comfortable in English and stammers in Bengali. Nazneen’s daughters regularly switch languages. In her interview with Kaiser Haq, Monica Ali gives us a peek into how she has dealt with representing multiple linguistic registers:

Within the speech patterns I’ve sometimes chosen to give a ‘subcontinental’ inflection for dramatic purposes ... I also wanted to indicate when Nazneen (the protagonist) attempted English without necessarily adding ‘she said, in English’ at each point ... There was also an issue I only became aware of when my editor read the first draft — when a Bengali youth (Karim) was speaking in slang she’d necessarily assume it was a speech in English, forgetting that every language in the world has its own slang. With a few minor adjustments we overcame this.78

But the major technical problem Monica Ali faces is in rendering Hasina’s voice through her letters from Dhaka. The English of the letters has caused much confusion among literary critics. While she does comment on how unlikely it is that Hasina would be able to speak or write English at all — as well as the further improbability that even if she could, she would choose to use it in letters to her sister, a fellow native speaker of Bengali — Michela Canepari Labib takes the language and idiom of the letters as “a problem of verisimilitude rather than as an indication of their having been translated from Bengali.”79 Somewhat more helpfully, Alistaire Cormack observes the ambiguity of the issue: “without any account by the narrator, it is hard to know exactly what we are reading — whether the letters represent inept attempts at English or are a free translation from illiterate Bengali.”80 Hasina, as I understand, writes in Bengali, and that too in an uneducated, grammatically incorrect but energetic variant. Kaiser Haq says: “As Hasina has even less education than her sister, she is supposed to write imperfect Bengali, which is impossible for Monica Ali to imagine and translate. At her editor’s suggestion she circumvented the problem by devising a bizarre pidgin that demands of the reader an

78 Ali. Interview with Kaiser Haq. op. cit.
effort to willingly suspend disbelief.”

If the reader can overcome the comic dimension of the odd idiom – e.g. when Hasina says “Love marriage maybe is better call something else than love, in real marriage it grow slow slow. Habit. Sit together.” (124) – the letters are an unending macabre account of suffering by a survivor. The language used is in stark contrast to the plain and more convincing English used in Naila Kabeer’s source-text, The Power to Choose, which simply renders interviews with Dhaka-based garment-workers originally conducted in Bangla. Monica Ali defends her choice of Hasina’s idiom: “With Hasina’s letters the challenge was to convey her character and essence without becoming bogged down in the problems of ‘logic’... A ‘straight’ translation however did not give me the voice I desired and I experimented with a more ‘pidgin’ English style in order to put her closer to the reader’s heart.”

Besides such pious intentions, Ali could also have tried to exoticise Hasina’s letters – and the site they come from – as well as her own position as the perpetual outsider and stranger to Bengali by resorting to such a curious idiom.

This brings us back to the question of identity of the Bangladeshi diasporic community which is so crucial to the novel. Saugata Bhaduri identifies four major registers of identity for this community:

The **nationalist plane**, where the London Bangladeshi wants to carve a space for himself or herself as a British Bengali; the **religious plane**, where the Bangladeshi immigrant tries to mesh himself or herself with other Muslims – Arabs, Africans, etc. – into a global Islamist identity; the **ethnic plane**, wherein the Bangladeshi tries to unite with Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans to forge a regional South Asian identity; and a **hybrid plane**, where the diasporic Bengali takes recourse to new media of articulation and positions himself or herself into a fluid, syncretic and trans-regional matrix of identity assertion.

Of the four planes, the **nationalist** and the **hybrid** ones have been already explored in the course of this chapter. The novel also mentions that “Indian” restaurants along Brick

---

81 Haq. Rev. of Brick Lane. op. cit.
82 Ali. Interview with Kaiser Haq. op. cit.
83 Bhaduri. op. cit. Italics mine.
Lane, some of them exhibiting Hindu gods and goddesses in order to attract colonially nostalgic British customers (373), are owned by Bangladeshis, thus representing markers of the *ethnic* subcontinental identity that the Bangladeshi diaspora wants to hold on to.

The only register that remains to be discussed is the *religious* identity of the community, especially in the post 9/11 context – another core concern of *Brick Lane*. This identity involves tensed negotiations between a Bengali diasporic cultural space and the global Muslim religious space of the ummah. Around and after 9/11, Karim and his friends – the Bengal Tigers – are up in arms against the Islamophobe “Lion Hearts” who fear cultural adulteration and invasion, but *Brick Lane* finally underscores the futility of such divisive politics. Ali’s mode of doing this is mostly satirical. As Sandhu observes:

Karim’s group imports an elderly Spiritual Leader who, Nazneen observes ‘is wearing open-toed sandals with a white plastic flower on the heel strap: women’s shoes.’ He’s dim, and always hungry: ‘The little conference on sharia did not interfere with his consumption of a very large, lavishly glazed pastry.’ Later we see Karim getting heated up about a March Against The March Against The Mullahs. The factionalism and hypocrisy of religious groups is a worthy target.  

Ironically, it is the second-generation immigrants who foreground their global Islamic identity rather than the local Bengali one. Already distant from home and initially a soft target for the white racists, the religious identity has helped them in self-assertion and in restoring their dignity and courage to resist attacks. Karim stumbles in Bengali but does not falter in his prayers. As he says: “It’s a world-wide struggle, man. Everywhere they are trying to do us down. We have to fight back. It’s time to fight back” (200). “Bengal Tigers” was also founded with the aim of fighting back the “Lion Hearts” and their racist leaflets, but soon the pamphlet war reaches bizarre levels. “Lion Hearts,” for example, titled a poster as “HANDS OFF OUR BREASTS!” to which the “Bengal Tigers” retorted “KEEP YOUR BREASTS TO YOURSELF” (213).

Karim has a clearly chalked out political agenda for the group: “We are for Muslim rights and culture. We’re into protecting our local ummah and supporting the

84 Sandhu. op. cit.
global ummah” (198). The person satirically dubbed the Questioner has an even more polemical stance urging his audience to direct action against the atrocities perpetrated on Muslims worldwide. He is more global in his focus than Karim and distributes leaflets on behalf of the “Bengal Tigers” moaning the shaheeds in Chechnya. He even prefers the organisation to be free of women and persistently ignores the presence of burkha-clad girls in the meeting. Fortunately, this is not the only face of Islam, even within the organisation. The black man and the musician in the meetings are all for hybridity. Instead of attacks and counter-attacks, the black man suggests that the black and white should all mix up and dance. The musician suggests that the rhythm should be bhangle – a fusion of bhangra, ragas and jungle (237). Even the apparent ideological divide between the Questioner and Karim – about the degree of blend of extremism and moderation in the Bengal Tigers’ projected action – finally boils down to a painfully evident ego-conflict, beginning Nazneen’s disillusionment with Karim.

The 9/11 trauma has been represented as an outcome of the tired and absurd bitterness that characterised the relations between Bengal Tigers and Lion Hearts, only on a bigger scale. To Karim’s convinced analysis that the event was a white conspiracy in order to victimise Muslims, Nazneen could only think that no one benefited, questioning thereby all such imagined divisions guarded with fanatic zeal. The other character who is outraged by such religious radicalism is Chanu, the first-generation immigrant who remembers home and its syncretic, typically Bengali, religious traditions. Secular at heart, education seems to be his religion, according to Nazneen, who had never seen him praying or with the Quran. Dismayed at the radical leaflets slipped in by Bengal Tigers, Chanu yells: “Do they want to set flame to the whole place? Do they want us all to die shaheed?” (227).

The differences between Karim and Chanu in their attitude to religion and Islam are not just the gap between first and second-generation immigrants or that between pining for the home in Bangladesh and imagining one in the global ummah. The two approaches, as Saugata Bhaduri critiques, comprise “two conflicting claims towards defining the identity of the community ... two imagined worlds, two sets of ‘bricks,’ either of which one may like or dislike, but neither of which one can ignore.”85 The

85 Bhaduri. op. cit.
tendency represented by Chanu tries to negotiate identity from the perspective of British-Bangladeshi nationalism, whereas Karim belongs to the section of the diaspora which desires to assimilate itself into a global Islamist framework.

In love with her liminal position in both the Bangladeshi and British communities, Ali defends her right to write about homeland, precisely because she does not belong to it:

I could set lines of enquiry about my book into two broad camps. "Tell us about them," is one ... The other reaction is rather different. What gives you the right to write about "us" when you are clearly one of "them" ... But the "two camp" split in my case brings me back to the idea of the periphery. How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, my answer is I can write about it, because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and Bengali father means never being an insider. 86

"Spreading rumours is our national pastime" (20), says Razia in Brick Lane. Clearly Monica Ali did not care much about the rumour-fuelled protests by a section of diasporic Bengalis. Without the anthropological value which one automatically associates with minority representations in the West, the authenticity question would not have been so recurrent or important. Like any other author, Ali has the right to speak of any subaltern of her choice. But maybe her dystopic vision of both native and diasporic Bangladeshis could be hybridised with some optimism, and her utopic rendering of the turn of events 87 when Nazneen finally recognises her identity as a British Bengali a little more tempered.

86 Ali. "Where I'm Coming From." op. cit.
87 Towards the end of the novel, the Questioner wants to found a non-religious political organisation, based on local politics; Dogwood Estate on which Nazneen lives establishes a youth club; a Tower Hamlets task force is set to report on Youth Deprivation and Social Cohesion; and there is the garment enterprise.