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A Post-Colonial Study of Fact and Fiction in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

The aim of this essay is to examine Monica Ali's literary interpretation of the Bengali immigrant community and where her interpretation reflects upon the actions of the protagonist Nazneen and the major antagonists, in Ali's widely acclaimed debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003). Several aspects of the characters both do and do not break Islamic and Bengali ethnic boundaries. The essay's main focus will be on the author's representations of character and scene constructions and eventual comparisons with the ethnic Bengali community outside of the fictional settings of the novel.

M.K. Chakrabarti's article, *Marketplace and Multiculturalism*, published in the Boston Review (December 2003/January 2004), compares *Brick Lane*'s modern-day drawing room scenes to the insular and limited world of the Jane Austen novels, with which he draws certain literary parallels. Nazneen, the central character, lives in an "isolated" and lonely world which is unaffected by the events outside of the Tower Hamlets in East London, where she resides and spends her days alone in a small rented council flat. It can be argued that perceptions pertaining to language and knowledge of language allow the user to widen his or her perspective. The lack of language can have several negative effects on how the user perceives the world. Arguably, Nazneen's language abilities do affect her capability to communicate outside of her own ethnic community: The reader is confronted with her inner-most thoughts on the subject of language: "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day" (Ali: 19). This quotation strengthens the argument that language is considered to be a basic tool for the successful assimilation and integration of immigrants in a new society. Ali establishes through Nazneen's thoughts that her absence of language is the main cause of her isolation. One can also argue that she fills her long, isolated and solitary days by reading the Holy Qur'an. At the onset of the novel religion is a surrogate for her lack of language, offering Nazneen comfort within the boundaries of her social isolation.

Ali correctly observes that Bangladeshi women do not attend prayers in the Mosque. Bengali tradition dictates that prayers in the Mosque are a restricted privilege for Bengali men. Religion is a private concern for Bengali women and the reading of the holy texts is not done in Arabic by

Bengali women. The Arabic version of the Qur'an is exclusively for men. Paradoxically Nazneen, through the common practice of rote learning, is able to recite some of the sutras in Arabic. She does not understand them, but finds the words and rhythm soothing. The Qur'an can be argued to represent knowledge and Ali wants the reader to be aware of the fact that Nazneen is an intelligent young woman with certain inclinations to strive for independence through knowledge in her new surroundings.

Whilst the “westernized” Chanu does not develop or gain depth, Nazneen does. The character development is a necessary part of the novel's literary construction. Although Ali's characters are clearly unusual within real Bengali social culture because they seem to follow their inclinations and needs, despite the fact that Bengali culture does not encourage its members to be unfaithful within marriage; divorce and separation are almost unheard of and the law does not generally allow the wife/ mother custody of the children when a marriage breaks down. However, in Brick lane Razia Abdul does take full responsibility for her family, and at the same time it is the son who seems to be the head of the family due to the father's absence. But there are some exceptions to be found within the Bengali community of Britain. Many Bangladeshi women do gain independence and develop within the Bengali feminist movement on the real Brick Lane (Lichtenstein: 214). Lichtenstein allows real Bengali women tell their own stories of the long and arduous journey to independence and respect within the Bengali community and the western society in which it is enveloped. This can also be observed in *Brick Lane*. The young British born Bangladeshi man, Karim, to whom Nazneen is physically attracted, persuades her to go to a protest meeting he has organized at the Tower Hamlets. She seems to feel the urge to create emotional and social ties outside of her marriage and her female circle of acquaintances (236-244). One could argue that Ali westernizes her protagonist's insights and experiences according to western feministic discourse in order for Nazneen to take charge of her destiny, grow and flourish within the confines of the fictional Brick Lane which is presented to the reader.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty are categorical in their criticism

of western feministic discourse. They argue that women of the Third World are portrayed as colonial stereotypes, to which western feminism has contributed, asserting western views on Asian and African women in post-colonial societies. Spivak and Mohanty have observed that Western Discourse needs to define the western female's own specific identity through comparisons of themselves with the image of the Third World woman. In what is considered the most adduced Post-colonial article on feministic studies and Colonial Discourse, *Under Western Eyes*¹, (1993), Mohanty endorses the fact that in Western Discourse women of the Third World are represented as being members of a homogenous group, sharing common traits according to western pre-conceived notions, which serve only to create a negative image of them. East and West can be compared to a Third World female mirror image seen through an occidental female perspective. It serves to lift and emphasize the qualities of westernized female traits, which the West consider equally desirable to Third world women (Eriksson et- ad: 23).

It is difficult, in the amount of space allocated to the essay, to discuss in detail parallels between Spivak/Mohanty's perceptions of female post-colonial discourse and how Monica Ali perceives it. One suggestion based on the arguments put forth in the essay, is that Ali is hybrid in her ethnic and cultural roots. Unlike Spivak and Mohanty she is a product of three different but still correlating societies; she is born in Pakistan, (Bangladesh did not exist in 1970), a former region of British India. She relies on secondary sources due to her absence of direct and personal memories of her short time in Pakistan; Ali is both Bangladeshi and British and as grown up in the country of the former colonists and therefore cannot be considered to be part of one or the other, East or West. She must be considered to be part of both worlds. It can be argued that a Third-world female might consider her to be westernized and, the Westernized woman might consider her to be in part oriental. Ali's multi-culturism can be traced to and, reflects upon the character development of Nazneen. Initially, Nazneen is a timid and observant housewife, eventually becoming an independent and strong individual. She manifests these cultural and ethnic traits in both Eastern and Western culture, not unlike her creator Ali.

What is more, Mohja Kahf, sheds some light on “westernized insights and experiences” in her provocative book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, (1999). She introduces the notion of, “a distinct narrative representing the Muslim woman’s abides² in western culture today” (1). The core-structure or framework of the narrative is central to western based discourse on Islam and the oppression of Muslim women within Islamic society. The narrative can vary and told in several different ways, but *most* are western narratives of on Muslim women are in fact contradictive, because they state that women accept that they are considered victims, but are certainly willing and able to escape the oppression exercised by Muslim men. *Brick Lane* does not suggest that the dress codes enforced onto Bangladeshi women are the main source of oppression. This essay argues that the nature of male Muslim dominance is shown through the psychological oppression on the part of Chanu on his wife and daughters and the physical oppression manifested by the violence against the antagonist, Razia. The Western Discourse the victimization of women is often symbolized through the use of the veil or the burqa and the segregation of women within Islamic society, which are believed to be comparative symbols of male Muslim oppression and female repression. Western notions of oppression contra repression are necessary components of Western Discourse in order to explain the Muslim woman in westernized terms, without considering the implications of deep-rooted eastern social, religious or cultural traditions.

Oppression and repression are vital and important to Western Discourse, but not necessarily or entirely true within the varying Muslim societies in the world today. These ideas stem from notions of how Islamic societies were founded, have developed and always seen to be the opposite, less worthy and have developed paradoxically within male dominated western society. The ideas of “othering” were popular during the nineteenth century and still gain momentum in the twenty-first century. Kahf goes on to say that eastern scholars are beginning to challenge Western views on Muslim women by contesting the realities of their lives through modern history and social science. She adds that literary research needs a different approach and method of study to enable an author to represent the true reality of Muslim women.

Monica Ali's main characters are created within the boundaries of Western Discourse. But at the same time she places the characters in a world created through and on the basis of her literary research and prior knowledge of Eastern culture. Kahf adds that westernized representations of the Muslim woman are based on and formed by Western literary conventions; Research on Bengali culture emerges from Western representations concerning the genealogical ancestry and argumentation of gender through self, us, them and others (Kahf: 2-3). Western representations can therefore be considered beneficial to the arguments of Post-Colonial Discourse by playing an important role in provoking discussions on the subject of "othering". Ali's academic- and social background puts emphasis on the fictional experiences of the protagonist, Nazneen, whilst still enforcing vestiges of truth surrounding Bengali cultural and social attitudes in the novel.

Ali's research and background give her the necessary tools to create a fictional reality in which the character's can interact. Obviously her background and education have and do influence her texts and ideas. But is this not true of *all* authors? Reality is undoubtedly the foundation to all fictional works and fictional works in turn influence the inexperienced author's choice of style and content of the novel. As a debut novelist Ali leans on the styles of both established female and male authors, for example Jane Austen.

This can be argued and supported by the observations made by Chakrabarti, who describes Nazneen's limited and closed world in the following manner: "a cloistered domestic drama, unperturbed by the outside world" (2). By this he means that much of the novel takes place within the Tower Hamlets and almost always in the living room or kitchen of the small rented flat shared by Chanu, Nazneen and their two daughters Shahana and Bibi. Global issues and life beyond Brick Lane are nothing more than images on the television and the internet: "The television was on. Chanu liked to keep it glowing in the evenings, like a fire in the corner of the room. Sometimes he went over and stirred it by pressing the buttons so that the light flared and changed colour" (Ali, 36). The clever use of similes allows the television to represent two different forms in two opposing cultures. It becomes a source of enlightenment and a surrogate for warmth, comfort and light. Two

very incompatible worlds meet in the corner of the tiny living-room. It represents notions of West meets East; modern versus old and the Third World adapting to the First World. The author's fictional connotations almost certainly conjure up notions of what is western and what is not and similarly who is developed and who is not. Clearly, they do not necessarily apply to real Bangladeshi views pertaining to development and westernization; such views are relative to each society and its social/religious translations of the term *culture and development*. Cultural isolation is one of main themes of *Brick Lane* and the author wants the reader to be aware of it at an early stage in the narrative. It can be argued that in chapter one Ali suggests to the reader that there are two types of cultural isolation to consider. She introduces her protagonist, Nazneen through her isolated struggle for survival soon after birth and the enforced isolation she must endure in the Tower Hamlets eighteen years later. Bengali culture dictates fate as the key factor to survival and her fate is to be isolated within the same culture in Britain (11-22).

The Jane Austen-like closed and isolated female existence, which Chakrabarti discusses, is best represented in the first visit of Mrs. Islam and the much younger Bengali woman, Razia Iqbal. The women call on the newly married Nazneen. They gossip about the suicide of a desperately unhappy Bengali woman residing in the Tower Hamlets. Nazneen plays the role of the silent observer. Razia says, "Spreading rumours is our national pastime... That's not to say that it is a good thing. Most of the time there's not a shred of truth in it" (Ali, 26). Ali implies that the lives of Bengali women are so dull and unexciting that they turn to gossip despite the fact they consider all of it to be untrue. Ali calls gossiping a national pastime which implies that *all* Bengalis gossip, not just Bengali women.

Annie Elise Geilman remarks in her ethnic study, *Connecting Ethnicity, Gender and Urban Space* (97/2005), lend support to the above statement. She writes that younger Bangladeshi women born in Britain or who have recently joined their husbands prefer to live outside of the more traditional Bengali areas where earlier generations of Bengali women were more ethnically dependent on the established Bangladeshi communities. It is argued that, "[W]omen avoid [ed]

moving to areas with many Bangladeshis because of gossip” (Geilman, 54). The purpose of this passage in the novel is to enforce the perspective that Mrs. Islam and Razia Iqbal are created in a more general ethnic mould in order to emphasize Nazneen’s opposing qualities. Monica Ali creates clear contrasts and comparisons between the three generations of Bengali women both serving to make Nazneen unique and the two women stereotypical. But despite the fact she creates this momentary contrast between the three women, she still is able to reconstruct Bengali Muslim women’s values and the ethnic traits of the close-knitted Bangladeshi Muslim community, to appear to be real to the reader in *her* literary creation of Brick Lane.

It can be argued that poetic license allows Ali to make sweeping generalizations about the Bengali community. But these generalizations may not necessarily be the author’s perceived attitudes and should never be considered to represent reality, as is also the case of the contents of the Jane Austen novels; they are historical fiction, not historical fact. Both Austen and Ali appear to relate to reality, but which in fact is *their* reality and only relates to *their* own ideas and notions of what they believe is real; notions which grow out of either academic and social experience or inexperience.

Monica Ali constructs her protagonist, Nazneen, according to her own westernized standards, upbringing and education which strongly reflect Ali’s roots in two cultures, but also reveals her limited knowledge of Bangladeshi rural culture. She uses Bengali expressions to strengthen *her* image of reality. Nazneen, like Ali, does not seem to fit into the traditional social and cultural patterns of Sylhetis. These are social and language based traditions which have followed the immigrant Bengali community from Bangladesh to Britain. Most of the women who belong to this social class have very little formal education and are expected to be obedient housewives. Sylhet is the area of Bangladesh from which most of the British Bengali immigrant population originates. Chanu indicates to his family in Bangladesh that Nazneen conforms to these principles and that he is very pleased with his new bride (Ali, 28). Ali then goes on to reconstruct the relationship between Nazneen and Chanu. This allows Nazneen to mentally and physically transform (or stagnate in the

case of Chanu).

It is during the first visit of Mrs. Islam and Razia that Nazneen reflects upon the fact that Chanu is openly condemning of his fellow immigrants, who adhere to what he believes to be basic primitive social culture. This gives Monica Ali the perfect opportunity to reveal one of Chanu's concerns, with which he associates the Bengali immigrant community in the Tower Hamlets. Although he is condemning toward other Bengalis he cannot avoid criticizing himself: "[to] the white person, [we] are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan... But these [white] people are uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition...I don't look down on them, but what can you do? [...] If a man...never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?" (Ali, 28). Ali establishes at an early stage in *Brick Lane* that Chanu is not as westernized as the reader first believes him to be. He talks only of men. He uses short one-word sentences and although he talks of others he refers to Bengalis as 'we'. This is a clear reference to 'we and them'. Anthropological references to monkeys can be associated with man's development according to Darwin's theory of evolution which circulated prior to the rise of British imperialism. Chanu condemningly refers to the Bangladeshi community as undeveloped and uses metaphors to compare their actions to apes following their primitive instincts. It can also be argued that Chanu uses the "white man's" generalizations without communicating his own views on racism. He considers himself not to be racist or harbour racist views; only the white man uses racism to gain status and position. He confirms the "other's" ordained place in society through white westernized perspectives.

The above mentioned quotation led to massive protests by the leaders of the Greater Sylheti Welfare Council (GSWCD), who expressed concerns over Monica Ali's description of the main male character Chanu. They felt that he reflected negatively upon real male members of the Bengali community on Brick Lane. The Guardian book review, *The outrage economy*, raised the question of why *Brick Lane* was found to be offensive to some Bangladeshi community leaders. It seems that Chanu's seething and abusive comments about Sylhetis and references to Bangladeshis being

monkeys offended them very deeply and worse, it was a woman who had written it. Muslim leaders within the Brick Lane Bangladeshi community found Monica Ali's references to Sylhetis to be very insulting and undermining (The Guardian: *The outrage economy* author unknown: 13/10/2007).

Despite these protests Monica Ali conclusively confirms that Chanu is a fictional character; his opinions are not hers. In an interview with journalist, Amanda Craig, in the Sunday Times (December 2003), Ali discusses these allegations of racism and is somewhat appalled by the GSWCD's reaction to the article published by the Guardian newspaper. The GSWCD said in a statement to the press that white people will believe that, "[all] Bengalis are uneducated and cannot read" (Craig: 2003). According to Ali this statement was "infantile" and maintains that they continue to confuse reality with fiction. They have obviously assumed that the comical traits of Chanu are borne of her private westernized opinions pertaining to Bengali male religious and social values and the result of Post-Colonial Discourse and the concept of "othering".

It can be argued that due to the GSWCD's reaction, some readers do find it difficult to separate fiction from fact. The reaction to *Brick Lane* seems to be the following; accept Monica Ali's creation as fact and assume that Chanu is an actual person with real opinions, which ultimately become the author's too. The problem is that Chanu does not exist outside the imagination of the author and the novel is only fiction, which closely associates itself with real places, ethnic problems and cultural norms. It could also be argued that Ali's references to real cultural ties and traditions on the fictional Brick Lane which cause confusion for the reader.

It can be argued that the confusion between fact and fiction in *Brick Lane*, confirms that Ali successfully creates her characters on two literary levels; as real Bengalis and as fictional characters, with which she attributes both western and oriental characteristics. This allows Ali to pre-determine the destiny and direction of the characters within the boundaries of the novel, and at the same time disregard reality. It is compatible to Jane Austen's writing technique of restricted or finite scope with only a limited number of place references, but with several colourful and intriguing characters necessary to the plot. Ali uses these techniques very successfully in the novel.

However, these two opposing notions of Brick Lane, reality versus non-reality can create confusion: The reader may be forced to question the author's reality, her reconstruction of Brick Lane and the immigrant Bengali community or accept her view as plausible to the plot and the outcome of the novel as a fictional work.

The plausibility of the plot enables Monica Ali's protagonist, Nazneen, to explore Brick Lane alone and outside of the Tower Hamlets on only one occasion. This is also a necessary construction/device employed by the author to push the characters and the story in the desired direction. Nazneen finds the strong urge to experience life outside of the flat and Chanu's controlling attitude toward her. It can be argued that Nazneen's isolation is a necessary device in order for her to begin the quest or the journey of development and independence. She must first escape the controlling forms of her monotone and constrictive life; her solitary adventure can be considered to be her first faltering steps toward self-discovery, which strongly contrasts with her isolated existence as it is depicted in the first half of the novel. Monica Ali cleverly introduces contrasting scenes where Nazneen's wings are mentally clipped by her husband, through his dominant attitude toward her. Clearly, Nazneen represents several female aspects within Bengali social, cultural and ethnic structures and Chanu's opposition to her going out alone are there to reflect the Bengali traditions pertaining to the reputation of the husband within the Bangladeshi community.

This statement can be supported in the following quotation; Chanu answers his wife's request to go out alone in the following manner: "‘Why should you go out?’ said Chanu. ‘If you go out, ten people will say, ‘I saw her walking on the street.’ And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?’ [...] “‘Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops.’ Chanu then pompously adds, ‘I don't stop you from doing anything ... if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons’ ” (Ali, 45). This enables Monica Ali to reveal Chanu's true character through the use of Muslim Bengali traditional attitudes of Parda. His

obsessive eastern views are disguised in westernized clichés and attitudes he has adopted over time, without actually believing or practicing them.

Chanu's attitude toward his wife and her need for learning is closely connected to Core Vreede-De Stuer discussion on education and the concept of *Parda*.⁴ She discusses and considers the opinions of Muslim male academics and enlarges on their male dominated discussions concerning the role of Parda in Muslim society. Vreede-De-Stuer refers to Zain-el-Abidin who writes in an essay (title unknown) that the isolation of women contradicts the actual position of the Muslim woman in Islamic societies, but he does not go so far as to criticize the Parda system. He maintains that the segregation of women from men, is beneficial to the culture and nature of Parda, whilst it is not considered a hindrance for a female wanting to broaden her mental horizons, in fact, he claims that isolation dictated by Parda is beneficial to the mental development of women in general (Vreede-De Stuer: 1968: 51). This can be seen in and is implied through Nazneen's reaction to Chanu's tedious lectures on *his* qualities versus the non-existing qualities of the "white underclass" is other than stereotypical. She secretly starts to watch ice-skating on television. It can be considered a distraction from the reality of her life: "[she became] whole and pure... The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory" (41). It can be argued that ice-skating represents freedom of thought, mind and body. She turns to a western tradition within the confines of eastern Parda culture.

In Santi Rozario's study of changes in Bengali traditions, *Purity and Communal Boundaries* (1992) the author also discusses Parda, female sexuality and how the perfect wife is considered to be. Monica Ali bases to some extent, her two central characters' ethnic identities on these ancient principles. Chanu telephones his relatives in Bangladesh and talks about his young wife's qualities in terms of ethnic Bengali bridal requirements. The reader is made aware of Nazneen's reaction to his comments (Ali: 22-23). Through Rozario's observations it can be argued that in some respects both Nazneen and Chanu represent the stereotypical Bengali married couple with genuine ethnic traits, in other respects they reveal facets of their personalities which are typically western, created

solely by the author of *Brick Lane*. (Rozario, 146-47 and Ali, 22-23). It is possible that some Bengali couples have adopted a more westernized life-style and attitudes.

In reality Bengali tradition and Western standards culturally and socially oppose each other. In the book they merge and create an antagonist who is able to change attitudes to suit his purpose. Chanu questions Nazneen's need for mental and physical contrasts and changes. He contradicts himself by saying that she can do as she wants because he is western and understands her request. In one way Chanu is like a chameleon changing colour to suit its environment. He changes his opinion, according to his own short-comings and fears. But he also needs to believe that he is the provider, the protector; her moral consciousness; the educator and only he alone can widen her horizons. The duality he displays indicates that he is concerned only with himself and the good Bengali reputation which conflicts with the patterns and habits of westernization he believes he has acquired during his fifteen years on Brick Lane.

Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (2003) supports this observation, by stating that Western discourse on the oriental woman, assumes that she never speaks for herself, either through emotions or history. It is the man, the husband, the brother or the father, who represents and gives her a voice but not an opinion (Said: 2003: 6). By wanting education the oriental woman demands to be heard. This statement supports the fact that Nazneen's desire to learn English is considered to be absurd by Chanu: "[He] puffed his cheeks and spat out the air out in a *fuff*. 'It will come. Don't worry about it. Where's the need any way'" (Ali: 37). Chanu does not listen to Nazneen, or consider her opinions and desires to be as or more important than his own. Ali paints his reaction vividly, using very strong words, which emphasizes his ridicule of Nazneen's suggestion. One can argue that he is implying that she will learn, but it will take time and she will only need to learn that which *he* assumes to be necessary for her development and growth within female ethnic Bengali boundaries.

One important aspect of this analysis is concerned with how much of Ali's literary observations are actually based on correct notions and facts. In her version of reality in *Brick Lane*,

Nazneen's initial contact with British and other immigrant cultures are through television and window observations in chapter one: "She looked down into the courtyard. The two boys exchanged mock punches..." (40). This is just one of several instances where she successfully uses a technique created by the film director, Arthur Hitchcock. Nazneen uses the window as she does the television. They are her window on the world where she silently observes life outside of the flat⁵. The essay argues that this technique serves to both heighten and emphasize Nazneen's isolation within the four-walled claustrophobic council flat she shares with her husband, who is depicted as pompous and almost Charles Dickens-like⁶. Chanu comes over to the reader as a comic caricature out of Punch Magazine⁷. In strong contrast Nazneen is subdued, almost boring in her role as the obedient housewife and mother. She does not and cannot answer his bombastic comments: "'No,' said Chanu. 'I don't have anything to fear from Wilkie. I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature. Can Wilkie quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy?'" Ali continues, "Nazneen, who feared her husband would begin one of his long quotations... He liked to quote in English and then give her a translation, phrase by phrase... Chanu came [to the kitchen to] talk[ed] some more. 'You see,' he said, a frequent opener..." (Ali, 37-38). Chanu is an actor forcing his undemanding, but bored audience backstage for a repeat performance embellished with false sentiments. He believes that the show must go on no matter what happens.

Nazneen escapes to the sanctity of the kitchen hoping to avoid more of Chanu's lectures and self-appraisal. Ali emphasizes the notion that Chanu's degree is important to his own self-belief that education is the only way for an immigrant to succeed in Britain. The above quotation supports the argument put forward. By using capital 'E' and 'L' in [degree of] English Literature they serves to give a deeper meaning to Chanu's belief that he will become something more than just another Bengali immigrant on Brick Lane. Chanu seems to represent the older notions of empire and is in fact a product of colonial influence through education and learning.

Edward Said considers the implications of higher academic studies in the former British colonies in his famous study of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) gives strength to the argument. He

discusses the notion of control over the colonized masses on one hand and the controlling form of empire and imperialism on the other. The impression given to the reader is that Monica Ali is influenced by Said's Post-Colonial Criticism. She is, herself, a product of higher academic education in Britain; born into the Bengali upper middle-class community and almost certainly more influenced by British western culture than by her Bengali roots⁸. Ali transfers the notion of colonized and colonizer into the comical antagonist Chanu. Chanu seems to embody some of the personality traits of her father and is forced to endure the same social discrimination that he experienced in Britain in the 1970s. Her father discovered, as Chanu, was forced to take menial work and accept a lower social status in British society despite his academic educational merits (Notable Biographies, 2007). The educational merits of individuals from the former colonies can be argued to be judged less worthy than those of an Englishman. Edward Said does shed some light on this problem, which also supports the argument of "we and them".

Edward Said observed that the English literature courses in the well-established universities in the former British colonies were orthodox and unchanged. Students dutifully read all the classic English authors (Austen, Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dickens and others). The problem was that they mastered English literature in the same way they would master the classics in Sanskrit and Arabic or Medieval Heraldry. The students were uncritical and fast in, "[An] odd confluence of rote learning" (Said: *Orientalism*, 369). English and Oriental literature converged like two opposing rivers. They merged together in the same direction, eventually becoming one; inseparable and indistinguishable from one another. The students from the former colonies were unable to distinguish between the ideas or notions of empire from the rote learning of more traditional eastern texts. This ultimately reflected in their disinterest in modern post-colonial literature written by native authors of the former colonies. Instead they preferred to use English literature in order to define themselves and became unable to define themselves through oriental literature and in oriental terms.

The language isolation to which Nazneen is exposed allows Ali to once again highlight

Chanu's caricature-like qualities. His habit of elaborating and expanding on his arguments with long quotations which are taken out of their context and translated into Bengali for the benefit of Nazneen, but are in reality only there to benefit his inflated notion of himself. Monica Ali does not allow Nazneen to challenge these views. She chooses to depict Nazneen as physically embodying mainstream wifely duties, whilst she mentally protests to the situation she finds herself forced into. She is Chanu's uncomplaining, passive and subservient audience.

In *The Quest for the Golden Hind* (2009), a study of Bangladeshi transient migrants overseas by Mizanur Rahman, discusses the illusionary transformative power of "bidesh" which basically means not local or foreign, the opposite to "desh", which means local or of Bengali origin. According to Rahman, international migration is considered a status symbol, associated with a code of honour. These two notions have become an integral part of Bengali culture and ultimately influence a whole nation's attitude toward migration. Young men are not considered 'manly' if they do not try to migrate. This is especially true of the male migrants who came to Great Britain in the 1980:s. Migration was considered to be the only chance to change one's destiny. The men who did not attempt to influence their fate were considered to be lazy and undesirable (Rahman: 179-180).

Ali's migrating male character, Chanu, seems to fit into the patterns of bidesh. He is very mobile throughout the entire story. In fact, he is the only character in the book that has any mobility outside of Brick Lane. The reader assumes that Chanu leaves Bangladesh in search of a new and prosperous life. Because Ali chooses not to inform the reader about Chanu's background, she keeps the focus of the story on Nazneen. The less the reader is allowed to know about the antagonists, the more believable the protagonist, Nazneen becomes. This is positive seen from the perspective of fiction and from Nazneen position as the main character. The story focuses almost entirely on the changes in her personality and situation through the experiences of the antagonists such as her husband Chanu.

Although Ali gives Chanu several realistic traits, some facets of his character and several of his reactions do not seem to be as realistic; he would in fact be a contradiction or an anomaly within

real Bengali society. He is solely created to complement the depth of Nazneen's complicated character and emphasize her struggle for independence. But one must also consider the possibility that Chanu is created as a contrast to Nazneen, because he is important to the outcome of the story. In creating Chanu, Ali creates a paradox on Brick Lane. This is by no means a shortcoming of the part of the author. It reveals Ali's literary qualities in her writing technique concerning the structure of the novel and the depth of her characters.

Whilst Nazneen considers everyone and everything in her surroundings, the author makes a conscious decision to make Chanu blind to his own shortcomings and arrogance. He is effectively blind to society; he looks without seeing; he listens without hearing and judges others without first considering his own faults and flaws. Nazneen embodies none of these traits, thus making her characters unreal on the authentic Brick Lane, but plausible in Ali's fictional creation of Brick Lane. To expand on this argument one must study the environment of the Tower Hamlets in the novel and the Tower Hamlets in reality.

Brick Lane in the novel is not meant to be considered to represent Brick Lane in reality for several reasons. It is a fictional construction based on the author's modified ideas and research. John Eade's research based on his doctoral thesis, at the Department of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck College, University of London, *The Politics of Community. The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (1989) gives true insight into the Tower Hamlets and the surrounding areas including Brick Lane. The Tower Hamlets was created in 1965. Three London Boroughs became one; Stepney, Poplar, Bethnal Green/Bow. All are considered to be historically working-class areas with high unemployment and several ethnic and religious groups residing in the area. In the 1980: s between eighty and ninety percent of the population in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets lived in GLC (the Greater London Council) rented accommodation (Eade, 20-21). Ali places her characters in the Tower Hamlets. The rented accommodation is of poor quality, which reflects reality. What is missing from Ali reconstruction in the novel is the fact that although the Bangladeshi community is one of the largest, it is not isolated from other ethnic minorities or

British influences. Brick Lane is in Spitalfields ward between Whitechapel Road and Liverpool Street (Eade, xi and xii). Ali's Brick Lane is isolated almost as if it was a separate place taken out of its factual context and the Hamlets appear to be a housing complex (Ali, 17-21). The reality of Brick Lane is more complex than Monica Ali's fictional Brick Lane. By limiting the geographical scope in the novel she is able to put more emphasis on the characters. *Brick Lane* is story about people not places. However, the real Brick Lane does not lack in interest and history.

It is the home of several ethnic/religious groups, which have come and gone during its long history and existence. The Mosque on Brick Lane bears witness to the long history of emigration and settlement. It was a Protestant chapel used by the French Huguenots as a place of worship in 1743. They sought refuge from religious persecution during the long reign of Louis XIV of France (reigned from 1643-1715). Jews forced to flee enforced poverty and the pogroms of Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century, created a Jewish quarter and the church was converted into a synagogue in 1897. More recently, the large numbers of Bangladeshis searching for a future in Britain after 1970 have also left their cultural and religious mark on Brick Lane. The synagogue became the place for Bengali Muslim worship, after being purchased by the Bangladeshi community in 1976. The inscription in Latin, over the door is a silent reminder of change and compromise: "*Umbra Sumus*" The very poignant citation translated into English means "We are Shadows" (Lichtenstein, 335). It clearly indicates that change and variation is an integral part of Brick Lane heritage and history.

Hugh Tinker, in his study, *The Banyan Tree: overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (1977), comments on the changing social, religious and ethnical identity of Brick Lane. He talks of the disruption and desperation of emigration; East London became a refuge for several immigrant groups. The above mentioned building symbolizes hope, destiny and fate over religious and ethnic boundaries. As one group moves on, others fill its place. The Church gains momentum through transition. God takes many forms within the four walls of the building. The inscription remains static, a silent by-stander who bears witness and reflects upon the changes and experiences

of immigrants searching for a future in London (Tinker: 168, Lichtenstein: 334-335). Every immigrant constructs and reconstructs him or herself in order to develop, survive and move on. This can be also true of Ali's characters in *Brick Lane*, but the reader must bear in mind that the characters are created to live their lives on the fictional Brick Lane, which is a static and isolated world throughout the entire novel and conceived out of necessity on the part of the author.

Chakrabarti implies that the closed and confined environment the author constructs around the young protagonist Nazneen is a reconstruction of Ali and not the reality which thousands of Bangladeshi women face every day on the real Brick Lane. It could be argued that Monica Ali's Bangladeshi community is purposely insulated and boxed in. As is mentioned earlier, the detachment of the characters from the real world means that Monica Ali does not need to consider the implications of reality and emerging global issues. Chakrabarti writes in the Boston Review that there is *no* immigrant community which would or could isolate itself from other immigrant impulses and British society which constantly forces itself upon its immigrant communities and adds that *all* people are affected by global issues. (Chakrabarti: 2003/04). This inevitably means that people in general are even forced to consider ethnical issues that affect all members within most multicultural societies. But in fictional works the author takes issue according to the plot and not reality as such.

Therefore, the hermetic isolation of the female Bengali community in the novel is a necessary construction in order for Nazneen to embark on her journey of development over two decades. It must seem believable to the reader. On one level Monica Ali's impressionistic reality may or may not reflect the Bangladeshi community of Great Britain, but on other levels she does give her reader the possibility to enter a closed world where Nazneen's life becomes representative of the average Bangladeshi immigrant woman. The reader can relate in a literary sense; that is through fictional text created and substantiated by factual details; consider the negativity of Nazneen's situation and how she finally decides to take charge of her life beyond cultural and ethnic social requirements and standards. The reader can relate to this through his or hers own or other's real life experiences.

Parda and marriage have been briefly touched upon earlier in the essay. Let us now consider Parda through Brick Lane's fictional heroine Nazneen and anti-hero Chanu. Nazneen it can be argued is a typical Bengali bride; he a typical Bengali man. They are the perfect Bengali couple according to Muslim Bengali traditions and culture. It can also be argued that they are not and are instead an illusion both emulating reality and fiction.

Monica Ali has successfully erased the barrier of real and unreal, allowing her Bangladeshi immigrants to live in a fictional grey-zone. Their age difference seems to reflect the real traditions according to Santi Rozario's description of Parda. She also adds that Bengali culture has changed since the beginning of the 1980: s especially the views on Parda. Monica Ali's fictional creation, Chanu, seems to reflect reality through his need for education and his early emigration to Britain. He wishes to be attractive on the marriage market in Bangladesh through his academic achievements and future prospects in Great Britain. Ali successfully emulates the reality of new social and economical values embraced by the male Bengali population, but allows Chanu to retain certain older cultural traits and religious attitudes toward the female Bengali population. It can be argued that cultural traits are equally import to Ali's fictional Bengali society and the factual society it may or not profess to represent.

In the novel Chanu believes himself to be modern and westernized, whilst still inflicting upon Nazneen more traditional and constrictive values. Nazneen seems to concur with ethnic reality in the first half of *Brick Lane*; Monica Ali then deconstructs her protagonist in the second half of the novel in order to reconstruct her as westernized and dependent, which gives plausibility to her choices and actions and allows Monica Ali as an author to manipulate reality which is reflected in the story. This actually gives the novel momentum; constantly changing in unchanged settings. She draws the reader into her reality of Brick Lane, not Brick Lane itself. Despite the fact that Nazneen seems to represent a real culture and ethnic community some elements of her character point to Monica Ali's limited references to Sylhetis culture and the use of language and dialects. Both Nazneen and Chanu tell their story through western eyes. Nazneen's isolation, dependence and need

for independence are interpretations borne out of Ali's multicultural and westernized background. This is equally true of Chanu's over comical and pompous characteristics, which indicate that Monica Ali seems to relate more to western culture and classic literature. The contrasting Bengali poetry and history does not seem to define Chanu as a person. It defines Bengali culture, which he forces on to his wife and British born daughters. Chanu is defined by his need to be accepted in two very different worlds- that of the westerner and the oriental.

Although Ali has contacts within the Bangladeshi community and relates to her father's struggle as a well educated Bengali man doing menial jobs in order to survive; she does, however, fall back on her academic background, referring to several of the literary greats, whilst finding the need to research and learn about real Bangladeshi culture through relatives and social observations on Brick Lane. Fiction and fact do cleverly emerge in the novel creating a literary grey-zone. This opens the door for the author to use poetic license and cultural generalizations in order to create an interesting story, which reaches out to many different categories of reader. However, problems concerning some of the experiences do arise in *Brick Lane*.

Concerns arise from the elopement of Nazneen's younger sister Hasina with a young Bangladeshi man in the beginning of the story and are an issue in the novel. The reader assumes that the father is angry but passively accepts his daughter's actions and goes on with life (Ali, 169). In reality the family's reaction would be completely different. Bengali rural social and religious culture is dictated through the Qur'an and the Sharia Laws. The first is the words and wisdom of Muhammad; the second are the religious laws translated by the Ulema or religious council. The Ulema would, in Hasina's case, declare a fatwa⁹ or religious ruling concerning her immoral actions. Generally women in Bangladesh do not share the same rights as men according to Bangladeshi religious laws based on the Islamic Sharia. She would have been forced to return to the village to face the consequences of her actions.

However, Ali deviates from reality in the novel according to her parent's experience. They married for love and against the wishes of her father's family. They left Pakistan during the civil

war in 1971. This was possible because her father was a member of the professional middle-class and her mother a British citizen (Notable Biographies: 2007) It would not have been possible if they were members of the lower Sylhetis class. Obviously Ali needs to create her own reality of Bangladeshi culture to be able to avert from it, because Hasina is an important antagonist who emulates Nazneen's growing desire to be free and make independent choices. Hasina's notion of love affects Nazneen and her choice to take a lover and experience real love.

It can be argued that the sisters' actions and lives are only plausible to the story. There are several scenes incorporated into the plot which allow them to meet and interact with Bengali men. By introducing Nazneen to peace work, Ali is able to create and development situations which allow Nazneen and Karim, the young Bengali man to meet and the opportunity for them to become lovers. Ali places them alone together in the flat on several occasions. At this point it is in order to emphasize that in reality a married Bangladeshi woman according to cultural and social structures would not or could not entertain a man (especially an unmarried man) in the private living space (Ali: 233-34, 242-44, and 342-44). In effect, Chanu's reaction to his spouse entertaining a man in their home is neither realistic nor plausible. If Nazneen is considered immoral just walking alone on the street, then Chanu would never allow her to meet another man in the flat without first being present.

Finally, it is in order to explore the reality of the relationship between Chanu and Nazneen and their two daughters. The girls are typically western, being born in Britain, without strong ethnic and religious ties to the Bengali community in Britain or Bangladesh. In the beginning Chanu consciously isolates the family from Bengali traditions, because he considers himself to be westernized. In the second half of *Brick Lane* he reverts back to patterns of Bengali tradition, which he then imposes upon the family. The girls are forced to learn a traditional Bengali poem, 'Golden Bengal', despite the fact that they know and speak very little Sylhet or Bengali: "This evening they were to recite the entire poem. Chanu was taking his family back home and Tagore [a Bengali poet] was the first step of the journey" (Ali: 79). Ali reveals a reality that many young Bengali female

immigrants must face in Great Britain. They are not and can never be their own mistresses; free will and choice are out of reach for most Bengali women and girls. The author depicts how rote learning enrages Shahana and subdues Bibi to silence. They put up a psychological barrier to protect themselves against their father's wishes. Like the younger daughter Bibi, Nazneen finds comfort in silence, whilst Shahana protests verbally to her father's decision to move back to Bangladesh. (Ali: 179-181). The reader becomes aware of the fact that the family has different definitions of home. Ali constructs these definitions in order for Nazneen to take an independent decision concerning the family's future. They seem to conform well to Ali's own family background. It is therefore debatable if Nazneen's choices thereafter are realistic ones.

In reality the large majority of Bengali women are unable to speak English or, have very limited knowledge of the English language (although there are exceptions). In *the Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, Adrian Blackledge published a research article, *Language, Literacy and Social Justice: The Experience of Bangladeshi Women in Birmingham* (1999). In the article he discusses the role of literacy and language in multicultural societies, calling them "gatekeepers" (Blackledge: 179), where one language becomes dominant over another and literacy, (the key to development in western society), dictates which role men and women play within a mixed ethnic society in the West. Bengali women, according to this four year study, have difficulty understanding and speaking English, some even have problems with Bengali, preferring to use the dialect, Sylhet with their children at home, whilst using Bengali outside of the home. Several of the eighteen women who were part of this study were wholly dependent on their husbands when communicating outside of the family; several of the women used their children to translate for them at teacher-parent meetings, the doctors or shopping outside of typical Bengali residential areas.

Nazneen seems to follow the language patterns which Blackledge discusses in great detail, but as a fictional character she chooses her own direction in life, despite her shortcomings concerning her poor knowledge of English. Nazneen's obvious language problems are consciously put into the

background by Ali, allowing the fictional level of the story to take form. The reality of her decision to remain in Britain with her daughter can be considered unrealistic. Family is sacred in Bengali society and divorce almost unknown. Ali's choice to let Nazneen and Chanu separate on amicable terms is therefore highly unlikely, but it could be argued that they are saving face by separation. In reality, Chanu would be most likely to demand custody of his two daughters. Bengali law is clear on this point and conflicts with British legislation. It seems that Ali's reflection over the fact that Chanu asks his wife to come on holiday with the girls and Nazneen's careful, hesitant answer to his request, actually does reflect some degree of reality in the situation (Ali:490). Ali's fictional changes of her main characters serve to make the story appeal to the reader, especially the female western or westernized reader.

It can therefore be argued that as a result of Ali's fictional character development, Chanu can only look back, unable to see forward, painfully aware of his shortcomings in English society. He wishes to redeem himself and restore his waning male pride. He believes that he can find it in Bangladesh. Nazneen grows and flourishes, perceiving the idea of returning to Bangladesh as something constrictive, frightening, feudal and foreign. She physically and mentally embraces western standards, whilst Chanu denies them and slowly stagnates. He finds his situation in Britain intolerable, almost unbearable. His position as father, husband, wage-earner and breadwinner is threatened by the society he believed was his future and which he never really became a part of.

A conclusion of this Post-Colonial study concerning fact and fiction in the novel *Brick Lane* is in order. Important to point out is that this *is* a fictional work. The characters do not exist outside of the author's imagination and the context of the novel. The fact that Monica Ali uses research and real-life settings makes the story plausible, almost real. Her clever use or adaptation of various writer-techniques link the novel to both the long tradition of European literary creativity and the Post-Colonial writings which are gaining ground in- and outside the boundaries of dominant and oppressive ideas and notions which flourished during the height of the British Empire.

Monica Ali takes up sensitive and factual issues pertaining to Bengali culture, Islam and Muslim women's right to determine their own future, through the use of fiction. The novel depicts a young woman's search for identity and purpose in life, strongly contrasting with the loss of identity and direction by her much older Bengali husband and, the search for lost ethnic and religious roots as seen through her lover, Karim. They are shadows, who meet momentarily in a fictional twilight zone, unable to resolve their differences in manner, attitudes and goals in life. Their destiny lies in the hands of the author and the imagination of the reader and is not to be confused with reality, as this book, in fact, often is.

It is true to say that the religious protests directed toward *Brick Lane* and its author clearly show that fiction can in fact lead to heated debate and discussion within multicultural societies. It is in fact authors such as Ali, who open the door to further inquiries pertaining to Bengali culture. It offers the reader the possibility to a deeper understanding and more tolerant view of cultures considered to be different according the principles of Western Colonial Discourse. But the reader should always keep in mind that author's do have and use their poetic license in order to create an interesting story. Novels like *Brick Lane* make us aware that there are other cultures and cultural issues about which we know very little or nothing and fiction can be the gateway to enlightenment. Unfortunately, it can sometimes close doors, which is the case pertaining to the criticism by the GSWCD directed toward the novel and its author. Fiction should empower the reader's imagination and the fuel the quest for literary experiences beyond reality, whilst still willing to learn the truth behind the fictional story. Novels are obviously translated and understood according to experience and inexperience; background and expectations representative of the individual reader. This is similarly true of *Brick Lane*. Every reader-experience is very personal and judged according to individual literary expectations.

Monica Ali's interpretation may or may not be the same or accepted interpretation of the Bengali community, but she defends her right as a fiction author to present the world as she sees fit and in line with her story. She utilizes western perceptions of eastern culture, carefully balancing

them between cultural realities which constrict and determine an individual's position within an ethnic or religious community and the unlimited possibilities fiction has to offer her reader. In this instance the multicultural settings of East London during a time span of almost thirty years.

Interestingly, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* remains unchanged and static. This is her version of reality, seen through a telescope with limited view; a necessity created to allow the characters to interact, develop, flourish or go to seed. Her characters adopt and adapt to westernization or suffer the consequences of not being able to acclimatize and succeed. The colonized individual either rejects or conforms to the values and demands of the former colonizer's world.

The main argument of this essay is to show that fiction dictates the fate and the actions of the protagonist Nazneen, as it does the major antagonists, Hasina, Chanu and Karim, whilst still maintaining some essence of reality by the use of factual settings and history, making the characters themselves and their individual fates more plausible to the reader. More importantly, it allows the reader (if the reader chooses to do so) to distinguish the author's reality of *Brick Lane* from the real *Brick Lane*. Ali's *Brick Lane* exists in a literary grey-zone of fact and fiction, where the characters of the novel follow their destinies and live their lives through the reader's imagination and not necessarily through the insights of the author.

End notes

¹ This information was taken from a Swedish anthology of English and French texts and articles, *Globaliseringens kulturer: Den postkoloniala paradoxen, rasismen och det mångkulturella samhället* (2005). Mohanty's article, *Under Western Eyes* was originally published in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*, printed by the Columbia University Press.

² Abides = Expectations

³ Parda is an accepted system and tradition of sexual and social control of the female Bengali population.

⁴ Cora Vreede-De Stuers, *Parda*, 1968 and Rozario, Santi, *Purity and Social Boundaries*, 1992: Rozario describes the perfect Muslim Bengali bride as in the following manner: "[A] desirable bride must be young (between 14 and 20), fair-complexioned, healthy (i.e. relatively plump), pure and hence dependent" (147). By pure, she is isolated within the home and in her isolation she is dependent on her husband.

⁵ *Rear Window* (1954) directed by Alfred Hitchcock, starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly.

⁶ Examples of antagonists to whom Charles Dickens gives caricature-like qualities in his novels are Uriah Heap and Mr McCorber in *David Copperfield*; Mr Bumble and Fagan in the novel, *Oliver Twist*. These characters embody qualities of exaggerated evil intent, pompous stupidity, callousness and arrogance.

⁷ *Punch Magazine* or *The London Charivari*, published between 1841 - 1992 and 1996 - 2002; *Punch Magazine* was famous for its satirical articles and comical caricatures, reflecting the real political and social events in the world. This information is taken from The National Encyclopedia, NE (Swedish version, 2009).

⁸ For more biographical information about Monica Ali: www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2007-A-Co/Ali-Monica.html#ixzz14lgACsnc.

⁹ "A fatwa is an opinion on a point of law rendered by a mufti in response to questions submitted to him by a private individual or a qadi" taken from *Fatwas against Women in Bangladesh*, Published by Women Living Under Muslim Laws – 1996, compiled by Marie-Aimee Helie Lucas and Harsh Kapoor.

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