Islam and Women: The Two Foes Reconciled

in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane

by

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Chapter One: Introduction

I was introduced to Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* in the spring term of 2006, as the novel was included in the course curriculum of ‘Colonial and Postcolonial Literature’ at the University of Oslo. What made me curious and motivated was simply this: how would a writer born in the same country as Taslima Nasreen, who grew up and lives in a Western country, imagine and write about the Bangladeshi community, or women, in London? What does her fiction tell about Islam in relation to women? Reading the novel was interesting, in the same way Harriet Lane describes it in a review: ‘the sort of book you race through greedily, dreading the last page’.¹ I relished starting to read and continued turning the pages. And with Nasreen’s constant insistence that she ‘will not be silenced’ by the Islamists echoing in my mind, I turned the pages cautiously and critically. Imagine being in the position of enjoying the aesthetic features of a text, the gripping lines and the meanings behind them, the language that articulates the complex ideas of the novel, and preparing yourself to perform a critique. Reading *Brick Lane* is both exhilarating and demanding.

I first wrote a proposal entitled ‘The Conditions of Bangladeshi Women’s Lives Shown in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*’. Then I wrote another article about fate’s role in nurturing Nazneen, the protagonist, and how women live in postcolonial Bangladesh.² To elaborate on these ideas, I decided to write my thesis about the issues of women in *Brick Lane*. This thesis will examine how Bangladeshi women are presented in the novel, focusing on women issues introduced through the novel’s protagonist. The thesis pays particular attention to this character through whom we become acquainted with other characters, both male and female, and the issues they present. This thesis analyzes the women’s issues in the novel, and it will also make a criticism of Ali’s presentation of these issues.

¹ See Harriet Lane’s review under the name ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’ at [http://observer.guardian.co.uk/bookgroup/story/0,13699,991601,00.html](http://observer.guardian.co.uk/bookgroup/story/0,13699,991601,00.html) (accessed 02.05.2006)
² The proposal was submitted to the faculty as a term paper for the course ‘Writing a Thesis’ and the second article was the answer to the exam question of the ‘Colonial and Postcolonial Literature’ course, both for spring term 2006. Some ideas of the thesis spring from these two articles.
The characters and themes in *Brick Lane* are under the shadow of ‘ethnic identity’, which Monica Ali was keen to explore. The author’s background has affected how her ideas are shaped in this novel. Because Ali is a new author, not much has been written about her biography. Even though there are some interviews and reviews in which fragmentary points are made, Kaisar Haq’s presentation of Ali and her book is the best available reference. According to Haq,

Monica Ali was born in Dhaka on 7 February 1967 to an English mother, Joyce Ali, and a Bangladeshi father, Hatem Ali, who worked as a technocrat. In the mid 1960s Hatem Ali was a student in the north of England, where he met Joyce, who hailed from the industrial town of Preston, at a dance. […] He married Joyce, who had followed him to Dhaka [which] was then the provincial capital of East Pakistan, but in 1971 it was to become the capital of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, created after a nine-month war of independence. […] Monica and her elder brother, Robin (later a professor of genetics at University College, London), lived like other middle-class Bengali children until political cataclysm brought about the family’s emigration. The outbreak of the war on 25 March 1971 prompted Ali’s father to send his wife and two children to safety in England.³

In her essay ‘Where I’m Coming From’, Ali tells us the story of what happened on one of the nights:

I was three years old. My brother was five. Next door to our apartment building in Tejgoan was an orphanage, and in the grounds was an orchard. It was a big mango tree that would save us. We slept with our parents on the balcony, fully dressed, my father with a roll of banknotes in his sock. The week before, my father had been summoned, along with 15 of his colleagues, to a meeting at the Dhaka university campus. ‘Don’t go’, said my mother. Eleven men went to the meeting. None came back. The streets belonged to the tanks: the Shermans, Pattons and Chafees of the Pakistani Army. Only the dead, piled in roadside ditches, could share the streets with impunity. If the nock came, my father would climb over the balcony rail on to that big mango tree. My mother would hand him his son and daughter, and we would go then in silence among the orphans.⁴

Ali also recalls that their start at England was uneasy or ‘was not welcoming’:

In London there was no one to meet us. My mother carried us across London on the buses and then got on a train to Manchester. She had no money left. My grandfather, who met us at the station, paid the guard. My grandmother was waiting at home. She was very concerned, she said, about how my mother intended to pay back the fare. My father escaped from East Pakistan, over the border to India. From there he 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 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 mill town lives.

The family having settled in Bolton, Ali’s father was ‘unable to find work commensurate with his skills, [he] took menial jobs until going into business for himself, running a knick-knack shop [with Joyce], selling trinkets and porcelain figures. […] Much later Hatem did a history degree and began teaching at the Open University, while Joyce became a counselor’. 6

To know more about Ali’s childhood background, we may refer what the Telegraph website adds:

Not only was money scarce but Ali’s upbringing seems to have been marked by a series of family skirmishes, rooted in cultural allegiance and dislocation. […] Racism was a fact of life in 1970s in a northern mill town- Ali would walk home past National Front sings- but to have her grandparents talking about ‘us’ and ‘them’ was particularly painful. 7

After finishing school, Ali ‘entered Wadham College of Oxford University, earning a degree in “Modern Greats” (philosophy, politics, and economics) in 1988. She worked in the marketing department of two small publishing houses and then at a design and branding agency’. 8 Ali is married to Simon Terrance, a management consultant. They have two children, Felix and Shumi (daughter) and they live in London. Another point to

5 'Where I’m Coming From’
7 Ibid
8 Haq, p. 21
be added is that ‘Ali herself has not returned to her birthplace since [they immigrated]. Shortly before the publication of Brick Lane, she applied for a visa and was declined’.9

It seems that Ali remained in an in-between position when they came to Britain. She describes her childhood, which of course affected her, thus:

Worrying about belonging, how to fit in, is part of childhood, but it was definitely heightened for me, I think. Knowing how to behave one moment if I was going to my father’s Bengali friends, and how to behave in a completely different context and situation. I was always an outsider, always standing outside, observing and trying to figure things out.10

Although she sees herself from ‘outside’, at the same time Ali seemingly remained attached or clung to her Bangladeshi heritage. She is deeply affected by her past and what she calls ‘my inherited memory, my internalized folklore that tells me that life is hanged by a thread’.11

Ali first started writing short stories and ‘participated in on-line workshops in which she submitted her stories for criticism’.12 Lane finds that ‘writing was always idling at the edge of her [Ali’s] thoughts: “On and off I’ve had an idea that it would be a nice thing to be a writer, which is quite a different thing to having the urge to write. That came quite late. And so did the confidence”’.13 Haq says that

Ali thought of writing an historical novel[…], but she abandoned the plan after some time. The idea of Brick Lane came to her when, as an editor for the publishing house Verso, she worked on the manuscript of The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka (2000), a study on garment workers by Naila Kabeer, a Bangladeshi sociologist teaching at Sussex University.14

Brick Lane, Ali’s first novel, appeared in 2003. Unusually, the novel was included in Granta’s list of the Best Young British Novelists when it was still a manuscript. It also won some other prizes, including

the 2003 W. H. Smith People’s Choice Award and was short listed that year for the British Book Awards Literary Fiction Award, the Guardian

9 Telegraph website
10 Ibid
11 ‘Where I’m Coming From’
12 Haq, p.21
13 Lane, ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’
14 Haq, p.21
First Book Award, and, the most importantly, the Man Booker Prize in fiction. Ali was also named the 2004 British Book Award Newcomer of the Year. In the United States, Brick Lane was named one of the best books of 2003 by The New York Times and was short-listed for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Art Seidenbaum Award for a first work of fiction, given by The Los Angeles Times.\(^\text{15}\)

Concerning the book, Ali remarks:

> My book does not trace my family history. It is not concerned with all that. And yet there is something there: difficult to define, but demanding — in my eyes, at least — recognition. […] I cannot draw any clear parallels with my family history. But I can feel the reverberations. It is not so much a question of what inspired me. The issue is one of resonance.\(^\text{16}\)

In an interview with New Books Magazine after writing her second novel, Alentejo Blue (2006), Ali describes Brick Lane as ‘a classic first novel [which] was born out of [her] experience from childhood onwards, much more than maybe apparent perhaps, and the themes of intergenerational and cultural conflicts. It was born after a long gestation period and drew upon all of that’.\(^\text{17}\) Concerning the fame she acquired after her debut, Ali says ‘perhaps if I’d been getting this attention 10 years ago when my idea of myself was much more hazy and contingent…I spent most of my twenties wondering who I was. But now my identity is so bound up in my family, really.’\(^\text{18}\) It seems to me that Brick Lane is still a part of that haziness since it calls for an ethnic identity.

A complex field of study, postcolonialism has sparked off many debates including sociological, political, theoretical and/or literary works. Critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin note that these debates tend to remain unresolved. In their significant glossary, Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray define postcolonial literature as ‘a body of literature written by authors with roots in countries that were once colonies established by European nations’.\(^\text{19}\) Murfin and Ray elaborate:

> Postcolonial literature includes works by authors with cultural roots in South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and other places in which colonial

\(^{15}\) Haq, p.20

\(^{16}\) ‘Where I’m Coming From’


\(^{18}\) Quoted from Lane’s ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’

independence movements arose and colonized peoples achieved autonomy in the past hundred years. [...] In practice, most of the works currently studied by scholars of postcolonial literature and by postcolonial theorists are written in English; that is, they are addressed, either implicitly or explicitly, to an international audience of English speakers rather than to a national or regional audience that speaks a non-European language.20

According to this general definition, Brick Lane is a part of postcolonial literature which suggests cultural, social, historical, and to a small extent political issues rooted in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi immigrants in London.

In his book Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction, Robert J. C. Young gives us his view of postcolonialism. He claims that

The sympathies and interests of postcolonialism are thus focused on those at the margins of society, those whose cultural identity has been dislocated or left uncertain by forces of global capitalism—refugees, migrants who have moved from the countryside to the impoverished edges of the society, migrants who struggle in the first world for a better life while working at the lowest levels of those societies.21

In Brick Lane ‘sympathies’ and ‘interests’ are focused primarily on Hasina, a girl who elopes and then settles in Dhaka where she lives penniless and suffers from poverty. Hasina also presents the lives of women around her having the same situation. The other Bangladeshi characters living in London suggest the second part of what Young claims. More importantly, Brick Lane ‘begins from a fundamentally tricontinental, third-world, subaltern perspective and its priorities always remain there’. 22

As Brick Lane is a postcolonial text possessed of a postcolonial aesthetics, we need to use aspects of postcolonial theory, which according to Murfin and Ray, ‘refers to a field of intellectual inquiry that explores and interrogates the situation of colonized peoples both during and after colonization’23. Andrew Smith says that ‘postcolonial literary theory takes the modern global migrant as its own self-portrait’.24 This is the case

20 Ibid, p. 357
22 Young, p. 114
23 Murfin and Ray, p. 356
with *Brick Lane* as it is the story of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi villager, who is married off to a man twice her age, and comes to live in London. She keeps in touch with her sister by writing letters. The novel is rich in issues which are introduced to us through its protagonist. The book is, Lane notes in her review, ‘focusing on a cross-section of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, a community all but invisible to the rest of London’. It describes the mentioned community, but it is also about women issues within that community and in the postcolonial situation of Bangladesh. This thesis will discuss how these issues are introduced and presented to us. As I will show in the following chapters, the issues suggested in the book are victims to the origin of ethnicity. Comparing *Brick Lane* to Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, James Procter describes the novel’s popularity to be ‘undeniably bound up with issues of race and ethnicity’. This is one discernible feature of the novel, beside other postcolonial characteristics. Having said this, one would agree with Procter who positions the text ‘within a racialized genealogy that the novel(s) seem both to disavow and to flirt with’.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an influential postcolonial theorist, who suggests a feminist vision. Spivak, as Murfin and Ray affirm,

has highlighted the ways in which factors such as gender and class complicate our understanding of colonial and postcolonial situations. In essays such as ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), Spivak challenges postcolonial theory to address the silencing of women and other subaltern subjects not only by and in colonial discourses but also in postcolonial responses to those discourses.

In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Spivak claims that ‘if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’. The problem with this analysis is that it prioritizes the history of the subaltern. To me, however, all subdivisions (whether of race or gender) are

25 Lane, ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’
27 Ibid. Procter claims this about both *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth*.
28 Murfin and Ray, p. 357
subsumed under the class division of society. Nevertheless, the thesis will attend to some aspects of postcolonial feminism.

Another feature of the novel is its language. *Brick Lane* is an attempt to deconstruct what is called the ‘normative standards’ of English, as the language of ‘Empire’. Postcolonial theory (and accordingly literature) ‘has also been influenced by poststructuralist approaches including deconstruction, though it diverges from poststructuralism in its attention to history and politics’.  

History and politics, therefore, are main elements in which both postcolonial theory and literature are involved. These two elements have also a considerable position in Marxist criticism, not to mention the role of ideology.

This thesis makes use of elements of Marxist theory. There are different approaches to ‘Marxism’ and Marxist literary criticism. Trotsky, Lukács, Althusser, and Gramsci are important Marxist critics, though there are differences in the ways they examined literary works. Murfin and Ray state that ‘Marx and Engels seldom thought of aesthetic matters as being distinct and independent from politics, economics, and history’.  

Because of the scope of this thesis, theoretical issues will be mostly dealt with from a historical and political angle. The ideological concern of the novel implicitly ‘reflects’ some political connotations. To examine and criticize some related aspects in *Brick Lane*, I shall rely on some prominent notions of Marx and Engels, as well as Terry Eagleton’s method expounded in his book *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976).

Although *Brick Lane* is not a historical novel, Ali herself affirmed that there are reverberations from her family life in it. Her family life, and the ‘balcony scene’ she mentions, are a part of the history of Bangladesh. History is a significant feature to which postcolonialism pays much attention. The novel keeps affirming the importance of ethnic origin and relates it to its particular history. It suggests women’s issues within this frame. Hasina’s letters to Nazneen reveal many women’s issues from the last two decades of twentieth and the dawn of twenty-first centuries in Bangladesh. The novel deals generally with history with a view to ethnic heritage. Though ‘colonization’ and ‘decolonization’ are a part of humanity’s ‘history’, I do not have a ‘postcolonial’ viewpoint of history.

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30 Murfin and Ray, p. 359  
31 Ibid, p. 246
History is not the history of nations or ethnic groups, who came first, or whose history is oldest; it is the product of class conflicts, as Marx and Engels put it. But the aim of my thesis is not to ascertain what the origin of history is. The aim is partly to argue that this fictional work does not ‘reflect’ history as it is, not least as far as women’s problems and issues are concerned. In order to examine this question, I rely on a Marxist approach to reading the novel. As Terry Eagleton claims, ‘the originality of Marxist criticism, then, lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself’. The element of history is important for me in dealing with Brick Lane. Its importance lies in two points.

Firstly, Brick Lane is written in an epoch in which capitalism fully controls the whole of society and which is certainly a specific historical era that comprises class struggle and political events. Secondly, the recent history of Bangladesh, as far as women’s issues are concerned, does not consist just of the oppression of women and their problems, but also their struggle. This part of ‘history’ is not ‘reflected’ in the novel. Asserting that ‘the materialist theory of history denies that art can in itself change the course of history; but it insists that art can be an active element in such changes’, as Eagleton affirms, I would say that the novel is not that ‘active element’. However, this is not to say that Ali was supposed to be capable of changing the history of Bangladeshi women’s lives in the UK (or maybe in Bangladesh)—though that could have been possible. Looking at her as a ‘living historical human subject’, I would argue that she could have had a positive role or at least she could have made an attempt, like Taslima Nasreen, to advocate more progressive and anti-Islam standpoints.

According to Eagleton, in order to obtain a ‘complete understanding’ of a text we need to look at many factors including ‘the author’s class position, ideological forms and their relation to literary forms, “spirituality” and philosophy, techniques of literary production, [and] aesthetic theory’. As far as the ‘ideological forms’ are concerned, it needs to be said that the novel is written in the ‘multicultural UK’ where a great deal of respect is shown to ‘their culture’. And what is taken for granted in ‘their culture’ is that

32 Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London and New York, Routledge Classics, 2006), p.3
33 Eagleton applies these factors to an analysis of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ to show the relation between base and superstructure. For his analysis of the mentioned work, see his Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 14
religion is an inseparable part of that culture. Ideologically speaking, this problem has created a confusing ambiguity, and even turmoil, to the extent that one will unavoidably be a ‘defender’ if one does not appear to be an ‘attacker’. Criticizing the European vision of Islam, Edward Said is implicitly ‘defending’ Islam: ‘The European encounter with the Orient, and specifically with Islam, strengthened this system of representing the Orient and […] turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded’. 34 According to this analysis, the vision of Islam needs reshaping. It suggests that Islam is not to be seen as the outsider which ‘threatens’ the West. Brick Lane is attempting to take the same path; in other words, to give another image of Islam, at least as a relief to the ‘tired spirits’. This, to me, contradicts what religion generally is, ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature’, to put it in Marx’s words.

As to the literary techniques and aesthetics, there is an amusing blend of comedy and tragedy in the novel. There are many episodes full of pathos that make me grieve with the characters. At the same time, and swiftly following such episodes, Chanu’s funny speeches or some other comic ones by other characters change our grief-stricken atmosphere into giggles and laughter. This impressive technique, coupled with the details about the characters and their feelings, is absorbing. The technique, the language, the Pidgin English Ali uses in Hasina’s letters and elsewhere in the text, romantic descriptions and generally the form of the novel stun and fascinate. The form and structure of this novel are products of postcolonial literature by a middle-class author, who has written this text under an ambiguous ideological condition that shapes her ‘searching for identity’ and her outlook on life.

This thesis will attempt to analyze the novel, and it is therefore text-oriented. Analyzing the issues of women in this narrative, I will rely on some aspects of narrative theory, mostly as presented in Jakob Lothe’s Narrative in Fiction and Film. Lothe says that ‘narrative theory is primarily understood as a tool for analysis and interpretation—a necessary aid to a better understanding of narrative texts through close reading’. 35 I will

use this ‘tool’ to interpret the text. I will also try to examine the meanings behind the words and/or discourses in the story. Some speeches of the characters will be examined to show how they are related to the main themes, especially concerning women and their problems, and how they are related to Islam. The search for meaning is an important critical concern of this thesis since it will examine how the women are victims of ethnic heritage and, most importantly, the religion included in that heritage. Beside its attempt to present the theme of Bangladeshi women being victims of patriarchal values and assumptions even in London, the novel suggests a remote ‘unrealistic’ ‘solution’ for the women issues.

As part of my analysis, I actively quote from the book: these passages provide a basis for a close reading of the text. However, the thesis is not a formalist study, nor does it attempt to apply the New Critical approach, which looks at a text ‘as if it were a self-contained, self-referential object’. Studying the form of the novel is correlated to postcolonial theories. Nevertheless, the thesis is not only analytical; but it attempts to provide a Marxist reading of Brick Lane. Interdisciplinary theoretical aspects therefore need to be applied.

Reading the book, the themes make one ask several questions. Concerning the women’s issues, we can ask: why should women live like that, in the way the novel reflects, or presents, the dilemma of Bangladeshi women? Should there not be another way suggested to liberate them? Regarding the relation between Islam and the oppression of women, what would a life devoid of Islam or any other religion be like? Some verses from the Koran are cited in the novel. What does that suggest and what does Ali want to tell by including them? Does she want to decorate Islam? The novel rhetorically implies that ‘we’ exist and that ‘we’ are no more ‘others’ because ‘we’ have ‘our own culture’. Thus, it disregards the fact that adhering to one’s ‘own culture’ paves the way for the survival of keeping the ‘third world’ women as ‘outsiders’ in London on the pretext of multiculturalism. Another related issue is: why should our lives be preordained by fate? Is not there a realm for free will? This thesis will deal with these issues in particular to try to find out how the novel suggests the issues and answers these questions.

36 Murfin and Ray, p. 293
In my thesis, a good deal of attention will be paid to Islam. The thesis will question the way *Brick Lane* presents Islam. In reality, many women like Nazneen escape from Bangladesh and other countries dominated by Islam. However, they are still oppressed by Islam and their free voices are muffled even in the very heart of Europe, ‘the cradles of democracy’. One significant critical concern of this thesis is to examine the link between Islam and the oppression of women. By discussing this issue, the thesis will make it clear that the novel is trying to give another image of Islam, showing it as ‘friendly’ and ‘lovely’. In actual fact Islam is irreconcilable with the human values of women, their freedom and will. *Brick Lane* tries to show this upsidedown. Trying to ‘tell’ about Bangladeshi women and their problems, and how they are related to Islam, seems problematic for Ali, who herself affirms that ‘standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the shadow of the doorway, is a good place from which to observe’.  

37 Her position as an observer seems to be the core of her problematic suggestion about the issue.

I will structure my thesis in four chapters. Generally, the novel is narrated by a third- person omniscient narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator presents that Nazneen tells stories and different episodes from her perspective, including her reading of some of Hasina’s letters. The letters present Hasina’s life and the women around her. Chapter two will concern the situation of women in Bangladesh as first shown in a very short section at the beginning of the novel. Later on, this is presented in those letters along with Nazneen’s recollection of her birth, her mother’s life, Rupban, and her aunt, Mumtaz. I argue that the vision about women pictured in *Brick Lane* is unconstructive and dubious. Oppressing women, denying their rights, marrying them off, like Nazneen, secluding them and divesting them of their will are actually parts of Bangladeshi society. However, there are many who oppose those conditions. Chapter two will discuss how the novel is biased against the bright part of Bangladeshi society and women’s struggles.

Chapter three will discuss Islam and its role in oppressing women. As mentioned already, many points about Islam and Koran verses need to be quoted in relation to the novel. On the one hand, good issues are broached in the novel such as the position of

37 ‘Where I’m Coming From’
women, polygamy, and divorce among others. On the other hand, nothing is mentioned about women’s reactions to those issues or to the Koran regulations that impose them. We need to ask: what does Ali want to suggest by bringing in these verses from the Koran? What does she tell the readers? The women presented in the novel rely on Islamic laws and instructions. Islam is one of the sources of women’s segregation. But how can it then be a good regulation for life? I would argue that this complexity is not resolved in the novel.

Chapter four will draw the reader’s attention to the continuity of that oppression. *Brick Lane* presents a number of women’s issues, and yet this time not in Bangladesh but in the UK. In the Bangladeshi community, beating women and children still occurs. Polygamy and considering women to be second-class citizens, alongside with seclusion, are still feasible in the London setting of the novel. I argue that the continuation of the same situation for women, because of their ethnicity, is a part of the authority’s policy under the name of ‘multiculturalism’. This policy or principle respects such backward thoughts or cultures by justifying them as being ‘their culture’. This strategy opposes the universal rights of women and considers them to be a ‘minority’, granting them only minor rights. I will illustrate this point by giving examples from *Brick Lane*. I do not think that the novel shows this notion intelligently; nor does it suggest a challenge from women.

After long years of endurance, and at the climax of the novel, traces of being released from fate seem to appear in Nazneen’s life. Chapter five of this thesis will attend to this issue and criticize it. The positive point is that Nazneen approaches her freedom when she starts to work through which she falls in love with a typical, ‘fundamental’, Muslim boy, Karim. She becomes acquainted with an Islamic organization and she starts to go to the mosque. Chapter five will argue that there could be, and there surely is, another environment that would help Nazneen restore her will, and gain the strength to approach her freedom rather than relying on Islam or going to mosque, or worst of all, getting involved in an Islamic institution. Nazneen’s ‘freedom’ is crippled by Islam and Islamic values, whereas there could have been another prospect provided such as getting involved in a woman’s liberation organization. If it is true that ‘this is England. You can
do whatever you like’ (492), why could not there be another circumstance or choice for Nazneen and the other women? This is not suggested in Brick Lane. I argue that a convincing defiance or protest is not shown in the novel. Each point mentioned in this introduction will be elaborated on in the following chapters.
Chapter Two: the condition of Bangladeshi women presented in Brick Lane

‘[…] To divorce the literary work from the writer as “living historical human subject” is to “enthusue over the miracle-working power of the pen”. Once the work is severed from the author’s historical situation, it is bound to appear miraculous and unmotivated.’38

This chapter analyzes the situation of Bangladeshi women as it is presented in Brick Lane. At the same time, I will relate this issue to a number of postcolonial theories, and also include some criticism based on the Marxist vision. Terry Eagleton suggests that the aim of Marxist criticism ‘[…] is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its form, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history’.39 According to Eagleton, one cannot simply judge a literary work by scrutinizing its content while ignoring its form. This helps us understand and discuss the technique Ali uses in her novel to present her female characters.

To analyze the situation of the female characters, I rely on aspects of narrative theory, which Lothe calls ‘a tool for analysis and interpretation’ in his book Narrative in Fiction and Film. In my estimation, it is important to use postcolonial theories, as the novel itself is considered to be as a postcolonial literary text. Quotations from Brick Lane will therefore be assessed on the basis of these theories. Later, I will use a Marxist approach to criticize the ‘fictional world’ created for the female characters. I will try to examine how the female characters in the novel live, and also show their social milieu. In doing so, I aim to show that only one side of their lives is actually represented. Different

38 Marx’s notion about literary works is quoted from Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 64
39 Ibid, p.3
issues about women and various problems are presented, but no exit has been shown in the novel. This chapter criticizes this aspect of the novel.

In the introduction to his book, Lothe writes that ‘a narrative presents a chain of events which is situated in time and space’.\(^{40}\) *Brick Lane* presents such a chain of events which is related by a third-person omniscient narrator. The first event presented to us is the birth of Nazneen. The setting for this section of the novel—a village in Mymensingh district in Bangladesh in 1967 (East Pakistan until 1971)—is significant since it highlights the culture in a rural area at the time: how a woman gives birth to Nazneen, and how the latter is brought up not to defy fate.\(^{41}\) Here it is necessary to mention the characters of Rupban, Nazneen’s mother, and Banesa, the midwife. During Nazneen’s birth, we are informed that there is no doctor and no facility available to help the mother in labour; there is only the midwife, Banesa, who ‘claimed to be one hundred and twenty years old’.\(^{42}\) Ali makes her narrator comment ironically that Banesa ‘had made this claim consistently for the past decade or so’ (12). Nonetheless, this description leaves us with the impression that Banesa is older than she claims to be. This is linked to the subsequent metaphor that characterizes Banesa: ‘Since no one in the village remembered her birth, and since Banesa was more desiccated than an old coconut, no one dared to dispute it’ (12). This is why no one dared to question her saying that Nazneen ‘will not take even one breath’ (12). Having borne Nazneen for seven months, Rupban says that she ‘thought it was indigestion’ (13), a notion that Nazneen reiterates to her friend Razia later: ‘Amma didn’t make a single sound when I was born’ (71).

In this section, Ali characterizes Rupban as one ‘who was famous for crying’. This ‘direct definition’\(^{43}\) produces a cultural notion of a character who has a wretched life and depends only on crying, and that she ‘put(s) those things that had occurred to her aside’ (11). She has only to pay attention to the guests who are expected to come to their house. This early episode in the novel takes us to a fictional world in which women are fettered, sometimes by culture and sometimes by the system which runs society. The first

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\(^{40}\) Lothe, p. 3
\(^{41}\) I will return to fate in connection with Nazneen’s life in chapter five.
\(^{42}\) Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004) p. 15. Subsequent quotations are from this edition. They are referred to by page numbers.
\(^{43}\) Lothe, p. 81
presentation represents the culture in a rural area of Bangladesh and paints a picture for the novel’s readers worldwide. In fact, this shows Ali’s talent in particular. By virtue of this episode of the novel, she depicts a place she has not seen since childhood. Rupban and Nazneen’s aunt, Mumtaz, are not fully introduced in this section. Nevertheless, I shall comment on them now, quoting from the episodes in which Nazneen recalls the two of them, or quoting from some of Hasina’s letters in the later chapters of the novel.

Rupban is that ‘patient woman’ (15) who ‘always wipe(s) away her tears with those words: “Just wait and see, that is all we can do”’ (46). Although she is constantly suffering, she keeps silent and simply expresses her suffering by shedding tears. When Nazneen recalls the incident in which Makku Pagla died (the man died in a well), the narrator gives us another description of Rupban’s very emotional and sympathetic attitude: ‘in the evening, Amma was still crying. Her nose was red, her eyes raw. Sometimes she made a sharp call, like a frightened monkey. She put her hand up to cover her mouth because she was ashamed of her teeth, which were shaped like melon seeds’ (79). There is a blend of the comic and tragic here: the simile, melon seeds, relieves our concern about the agonizing death of the man. Soon after that, we are introduced to another aspect of Rupban. She does not only cry for the man, but also for herself because Hamid leaves her and does not ‘come back for three days’ although he describes her as ‘a saint […] comes from a family of saints’ (80). The description given by Hamid tells us that Rupban is ‘a saint’, in his point of view, because she is an obedient wife.

At the beginning of the book, we are told in a mysterious manner about the death of Rupban: ‘Mumtaz found her, leaning low over the sacks of rice in the store hut, staked through the heart by a spear. “She had fallen, said Mumtaz, “and the spear was the only thing holding her up. It looked […] It looked as if she was still falling!”’ (46). During the funeral Mumtaz, seemingly hiding something, tries to send Nazneen away, “‘Go and play’, Mumtaz said. “I’ll bring you in to see her when I have finished’” (136). Nazneen stays to observe the dead body and she is ‘displeased with something’ (137). She does not understand that reaction, and the question remains unresolved for her why ‘after a mourning period, Abba took another wife. She appeared suddenly out of nowhere and Abba said, “This is your new mother”’ (46). In one of her letters, Hasina hints at the relation between Nazneen and Hasina’s father and mother: ‘He go to other women. He
want to take other wife but she give threat to kill own self” (156). Rupban’s death remains mysterious until Hasina’s last letter reveals that it was suicide:

[…] At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take only one forbidden. Forgive me sister I must tell you now this secret so long held inside me…She take spear and test on the finger. She take another and put it back. And third one she take before is happy. Then she move the rice sacks she grunt a bit but she never look around. […] (434-435)

So the mother, who kept silent suffering, died groaning noiselessly.

The novel’s major emphasis is on Nazneen and Hasina. I am not going to deal at length with the character of Nazneen, the protagonist, or her qualities at this time since chapter five is devoted exclusively to her. Here I shall restrict myself to making some general comments about her. Nazneen’s stillbirth is like a symbol of her endurance and stoicism throughout the novel. She is reared not to ‘waste any energy fighting against Fate’ (14). Ali characterizes her as ‘a comically solemn child’, and Nazneen has ‘no complaints or regrets’; she will ‘tell everything to God’ (15). She is married off to Chanu, who is twice her age. Only a small part at the outset of the novel is about her first stages of life. Later, when living in Tower Hamlets, she recalls her life and a part of her mother’s life. Through Nazneen, the reader is acquainted with the other female characters. One of them is Hasina whom we are introduced to ‘through a series of letters’.44 The language of the letters drew the attention of many readers and reviewers.

I disagree with Sukhdev Sandhu, a reviewer of the novel, who claims that ‘Hasina’s letters also highlight what is perhaps the major weakness of Brick Lane’.45 I think that the language Ali used in these letters is very evocative. Through these letters, Ali shifts the narrative from the third-person perspective to the first. The letters introduce Hasina and the issues she articulates. It is a productive technique through which we can get to know Hasina, ascertain her level of education and understand better her personality. In addition, the letters grant us insight into the conditions of the working class, and not least the oppression of Bangladeshi women, which is a part of this

44 ‘Where I’m Coming From’
dynamic. I agree with Jane Hiddleston who claims that ‘[…] the style of the letters emphasizes Hasina’s naivety and vulnerability, and seems on one level to reinforce prevalent assumptions regarding the relentless subordination of women in postcolonial Islamic societies.’\textsuperscript{46} The language of the letters implies that Hasina is not well educated and that she is acquiescent, as Hiddleston puts it.

Unlike Nazneen, Hasina ‘listen(s) to no one’ (16) and follows her desire for a ‘free’ life. She elopes with Malek, ‘the nephew of the saw-mill owner’ (16). In her first letter, Hasina pretends to be happy but also scared: ‘I so happy now I almost scared … God not putting me on earth only to suffer … Even we have nothing I happy. We have love. Love is happiness’ (25). But in the same letter we sense how she is supposed to be an obedient wife: ‘I do not let my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say. Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat’ (25). In another letter, we realize that she considers herself ‘not good wife’ (47). Soon after that, we know that Hasina runs away from her husband because he beats her (58). Hasina’s attitude to herself, surely from her own perspective, discloses the relationship between men and women and unveils how the former is superior to the latter. The examples I have examined show that women are strongly submitted to patriarchal values under the postcolonial condition.

The narrator’s words, describing Nazneen’s status, show a strong emotional link between Nazneen with her sister: ‘she was cold, she was tired, she was in pain, she was hungry and she was lost. She had got herself lost because Hasina was lost’ (58). The few other lines that follow are narrated from Nazneen’s perspective: ‘Hasina was in Dhaka. A woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without a family, without friends, without protection’ (58). The narrator goes on to tell us that Hasina ‘had not the least idea about the danger she was in’, that Nazneen ‘hoped that Mr Chowdhury [the landlord] would look out for her’, and that Chanu thinks ‘a man with property will be respectable…she will be under his protection’ (69-70). But these are only the beginnings

\textsuperscript{46} This is quoted from Jane Hiddleston, ‘Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane’, published in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature; vol.40 (2005), p.62. The article is available at http://jcl.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/40/1/57.pdf (accessed 09.01.2007)
of her misfortune and a more calamitous life is waiting to come. The giant of a capitalist
city is waiting to devour Hasina’s life. Let us now examine how she lives in Dhaka.

The whole chapter seven of the novel, which tells stories about distressed and
suffering women, contains Hasina’s letters from 1988 to 2001. In her first letters, we see
that Hasina considers Mr Chowdhury to be her father, ‘He is father to me’ (146), and he
himself pretends to be a father, “Am I not father to you? [...] Then why you do not call
me father?” (154). There are rumours going round that Hasina may be having a
relationship with Mr Chowdhury. Her friend Shahnaz tells her, “everyone know about
the landlord” [...] “You getting cheap rent or what?” (159). She deludes herself and
thinks that Abdul loves her: ‘he walk me home and [...] looking out for me… Abdul in
actual fact love me. If it possible we marry’ (160). A few months later, Hasina admits
that he simply deceived and exploited her. As a result, she is sacked from the garment
factory:

Shahnaz did try and warn me. We waiting for gates to get unlocked and
she say ‘Do you remember what I tell you about Abdul?’ [...] Manager
putting down his papers and say ‘You know why you are here.’ Yes say
Abdul. I say as well I know I there for the sack. ‘You have behave in lewd
manner. You have show no regard for reputation of the factory. I am not
running a brothel. Do I look like brothel keeper to you?’ [...] Then he stand
up. Go out. You are finished in garment business [...] But I have to ask.
What it is I did? ‘The boy admit to all’ he say. (161-162)

This passage tells us that Hasina is vulnerable. This confirms, I believe, her own attitude
to herself: ‘God not putting me on earth only to suffer’. It is only then that her condition
deteriorates. We see how Mr Chowdhury exploits Hasina’s poor financial state: ‘[...] He
ask to comb hair. I did and I massage feet. [...] Evening time I cook the meal and I serve’
(162,164). In addition, the ‘respectable’ man rapes her later: ‘He put lamp down and he
starting to take off shirt. [...] Then he take off trousers. I say nothing I do nothing and
then it done. [...] He ask me to rub feet and I do it. He tell me not to cry and I stop. He
ask if it he who taking care of me and I say yes it him’ (165-166). Hasina describes her
state thus:

This is what happen and afterward I cry. All the time I thinking my life
cursed. God have given me life but he has curse it. He put rocks in my
path thorns under feet snakes over head. Which way I turn any way it is
dark. He never light it. If I drink water it turn to mud eat food poison me. I
stretch out my hand it burn and by my side wither. This is what He plan for me. This is how I thinking. [...] I pray God forgive me. [...] Everything has happen is because of me. I take my own husband. I leave him. I go to factory. I let Abdul walk with me. I the one living here without paying. (166)

This shows how confused the young, suffering woman is. It is as if she were saying it was not good for her to choose her husband freely and she regrets that, and it would have been better for her to wait for fate rather than ‘fighting against’ it.

Another social phenomenon I will examine is prostitution. Being jobless and penniless, Hasina resorts to prostitution. Now the role of another man, Hussain, comes to play a part in the tragic scenes of Hasina’s life. Hasina writes: ‘he give me some goat milk. And he make little cabinet for me. I keep soap and comb and pen in it…In night he come to my room. I do not send away… Hussain give me sari some ribbons and pretty box with pearl lid. His friend Ali also giving presents’ (168). After about a year of silence, Hasina begins to write again and confesses how she has descended into prostitution as the only recourse:

They put me out from the factory for untrue reason and due to they put me out the reason have come now actual truth… Hussain still looking out for me. He the one making sure I get the money. If he not look out anyone take what they like and not pay… Eight ten month past Hussain stop the jute mill job. He have other girl over near Borobazar and two other who go around for work. These he call floating girl. Government office are good for floating girl. Big hotel also good but girls must be younger… Best price for girls eleven twelve. (169)

If this passage reveals the miserable condition of Hasina herself, it also illustrates the condition of women in general and shows how some working class women are obliged to sell their bodies. That is why Hasina tells us in another letter eight months later that she longs to go back to their village: ‘City smell different smell of men and cars. I like to smell the village again’ (170). She expresses her discontent in this manner. It is a feministic expression. She has escaped from a man; another man has raped her; and men around her misuse her. This naïve character is ignorant of a system which has turned her life into hell.

Another phase seems to begin; bad consequences are yet to come. One of the customers, Ahmed, proposes to Hasina. Hussain encourages her to marry him and he
says, “‘My liver is gone I cannot last much longer. Who will protect you if not him?’” (171). This is an irony through which Ali shows how the exploiter is pretending to be favourable towards Hasina; the pimp has now become a protector. Although Hasina degrades herself, ‘I am a low woman. I am nothing’ (171), she accepts the proposal. She still naively deludes herself about the new husband: ‘Always he watching me with love. If I move he move. If I go to wash he follow. And he keeps hand on me. Like he thinking I going to vanish if he stops touching. This is kind of devotion’ (172). As Jane Hiddleston explains, we soon ‘witness her husband’s search for perfection in his wife and Hasina’s apparent, uncomprehending acquiescence’:

My husband is please with me. I am good housekeeper… You know my husband tell me this. First moment he see me it the perfect moment in his whole and entire life. This is how he say. In his whole and entire life. He like to live it again and he planning to make it come again as an actual fact. He have me sit in bed and put my hair in certain way over one shoulder. Sheet is smooth at one end and crumple at other. I must tilt my face so or so. But light is never right. I hold head too tight or too loose. It hard for him not to get angry he trying to make something perfect. Sometimes he say my face have change and he tell me to change it back but I soothe and he is quiet again. (175-176)

We understand from this passage that the husband knows she is not ‘perfect’ to him. At the same time, Hasina tells us that she is not going to be as ‘perfect’ as he wishes her to be. Consequently, we are told about another failure: ‘Is what is call bad patch for the marriage… He say things not in good order any more… He say I put curse on him and that is why we marry. He say how his family going to take daughter-in-law like me?’ (176). She writes to Nazneen to say she has left him, ‘I do not have address for you to reach me’ (176). This highlights that Hasina is unyielding and is always searching for ‘light’, as she calls it. Her last letter, in chapter seven of the novel, comes after five years stating that she has now found employment at a house as a maid serving a lady, called Lovely, her husband and their two children. From this episode on, her life seems to calm down for a period. Then, finally, she elopes with Zaid, Lovely’s cook.

I have stated that Hasina’s letters present some other cases or issues. Now, I shall point out the condition of the other women as presented in the letters: the lives of Aleya,
Renu, and Monju provide evidence of the harshness Bangladeshi women face. Aleya is an unhappy, oppressed woman who works, has five children, and a non-progressive husband: ‘Money she make she send her boys to school. Husband make problem for her but Aleya thinking of children only and not the husband… He buy burhka for her and every day walking with her to factory. Evening there he is wait at gate’ (150). A later scene shows us her husband brutally beating her because of jealousy:

Aleyas husband give beating. Last month gone she best worker in factory and get bonus. They give a sari and for this sari she take beating. Foot come all big like marrow and little finger broken. Bending over her stomach give trouble… The husband say he will beat twice each day until she tell the name of the man. (156-157)

Renu is a forlorn woman whose luck is no better than the others: ‘Oldest of us is Renu a widow. She was marry at fifteen to old man who die within three months. She go back to father short time he throw out. All the life she has work but she the one who do not wish for this’ (151). She has run dry of hope and views her life and herself pessimistically, wishing she had never lived: “‘My life! My life! Over fifteen. Might as well be Hindu. His grave was enough for two. Why I did not jump in?”…She say no one to protect me. I must go here and there always alone’ (151). Besides this tragedy, there is a wonderfully comic speech, “‘Who will marry these bones?” She wave her arms but no bones showing is bracelets from wrist to elbow’ (151). Loneliness makes her envy Aleya whose husband beats her: ‘Renu say at least you have husband to give good beating at least you not alone’ (157). Paradoxically, this shows how miserable these women are. Hasina does not inform us about Renu but we are made known with the fact that Aleya was obliged to hide herself in a burkha. Shahnaz’s case remains ambiguous. We do not know whether she was raped or has been a prostitute:

After long time I start to think of factory again. I go there… I see Shahnaz… She expect a child… I thinking I see Aleya but one burkha looking like another. No husband come for her. Renu I have not see… Shahnaz wearing too much cosmetic. I never did see with so much cosmetic before.’ (169)

Monju, another character, represents another problem that faces women: brutal and violent acid attack:
[...] I see is Monju. I know by right eye alone. Left eye is narrow and stuff come out. Cheek and mouth is melt and ear have gone like dog chew it… Mouth cavity shrinking from which she cannot shout cry or talk aloud… It is her husband who have done this with his brother and sister. Brother and sister hold tight and husband pour acid over her face and body… (269-270)

As a result, Monju dies, leaving a son behind — the boy whose father had poured acid on when he was seven days old (333).

I have examined the condition of the female characters and the issues they represent. I will now give a brief idea about the characters’ type. Although somewhat dated, E.M. Forster’s distinction between ‘round’ and ‘flat’ characters is still useful. To Forster, a ‘round’ character is one ‘who develops and changes, who may surprise us, and whose actions we cannot predict’. Conversely, a ‘flat’ character ‘does not develop, and […] therefore appears more as a type’. Applying this distinction to Hasina, I would say that she is a ‘flat’ character. We see no changes in her personality, or in her life. And the characters around her are also ‘flat’. All of them, including Hasina, start out ‘flat’ and remain ‘flat’. All are bewildered women, finding no way to escape their dilemma and having no support from anywhere. They are stereotypes of many women living in Bangladesh. The question here is whether there are only oppressed women whose voices are muffled.

Besides the miserable conditions of the women in postcolonial Bangladesh, as shown in the letters, some cultural ideals are also presented. Shahnaz once tells Hasina, ‘If you wear bright colour they say you asking them to look’ (152). Rumours spread that Hasina is having a relationship with her landlord or Abdul. She is treated rudely by her colleagues and Renu tells her, ‘[…] never mind these girls they just think they ripe fruit. Dont want to go near a bad one because they know how quick quick they going rotten their own selves. She meaning me to be the bad one’ (159). This shows that women like Hasina are regarded as ‘fallen women’. In such surroundings, women do not seem to have a voice. We can link this to Deepika Bahri’s claim:

Fields such as women studies and postcolonial studies have arisen in part in response to the absence or unavailability of the perspectives of women,

48 Lothe, p. 80
racial minorities, and marginalized culture or communities in historical accounts or literary annals. This lack of representation is paralleled in the political, economic, and legal spheres. Those ‘other’ to the dominant discourse have no voice or say in their portrayal; they are consigned to be “spoken for” by those who command the authority and means to speak… Representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or a ‘fiction’) and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves.49

Women like Hasina and the others I have mentioned need to be ‘represented’. Brick Lane endeavours to usurp the space of those marginalized women who are ‘incapable of representing themselves’. This point can be also applied to Hiddleston’s suggestion that Ali ‘wants to illuminate a set of lives that have frequently been forgotten and set aside, and the novel clearly seeks to uncover subjectivities that have so far been deprived of a public voice’.50 Thus, in my view, Ali’s fiction can be seen as ‘that voice’; yet only one part of the voice.

Another postcolonial indication can be applied to the language of Hasina’s letters, and in fact to the whole novel. Let us consider what Stephen Slemon suggests:

[…] A second principle of theorizing post-colonial texts is the principle of reading for ‘resistance’. Such a practice is so ubiquitous in post-colonial criticism as to make a general description of it impossible, but one of the most sustained engagement with the concept is advanced by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their influential The Empire Writes Back. They begin with the proposition that ‘language is a medium of power’: this means, they argue, that post-colonial literary language has to ‘seize the language of the [imperial] centre and [replace] it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place’. This, they suggest, happens first by an abrogation or refusal of the normative standards of the imperial culture – the standards of ‘correct’ grammar, syntax, and pronunciation, for example – and then by an ‘appropriation’ of the colonizer’s language, appropriately adapted, to the cultural and political ends of the colonized.51

I mentioned above how the language of the letters is connected to Hasina’s personality and naïvety. One more point needs to be made about the language. An English reader

50 Hiddleston, p.59
might consider it to be the broken English, as some readers have suggested, and discount the cultural and social aspects and the political and economic issues implied in each letter narrated by Hasina. The letters appear to be beyond ‘the normative standards of the imperial culture’. On the one hand, they may be looked upon as a refutation of ‘those imperial standards’. On the other hand, they denote that the erstwhile colonized peoples express themselves, or represent themselves, in this ‘kind’ of language.

It will be useful to look at the meaning of some Bangla words, first in Hasina’s letters and then in the novel generally, and I will try to explain what they suggest. I am indebted to Kevin Patrick Mahoney for the meaning of some of these words and the allusions in *Brick Lane*.

The Bangla words are: *hkartal* (147): ‘a strike or industrial dispute’. This refers to the workers’ strikes at that time. *Bauls* (163):

> Are members of a religious order who sing mystical songs about the love between an individual and a personal god that lives within them. This is a Bengali tradition that has inspired many local writers, such as Rabindranath Tagore, especially since Bauls have a reputation for being quite unorthodox in performance and in the composition of the lyrics for their songs. (Mahoney)

This may refer to a cultural tradition and Hasina’s search for love and a better life. *Bangabandhu* (336) ‘means “friend of Bengal”, a title reserved for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the independence movement during the war of liberation from Pakistan. Until his assassination in 1975, he was the premier of Bangladesh’. Each of these words are linked either to a cultural or political ‘reality’.

Mr Chowdhury says, ‘Ershad! You Goonda!’ (148) and this alludes to ‘Hussein Muhammad Ershad, president of Bangladesh from 1983-1990. A “goonda” is a “hooligan” or “rascal”.’ On the same page this is linked to corruption and bribing, referring to the political and social situation of Bangladesh in era of Ershad. In my view, by activating and using this technique, Ali is applying a postcolonial theory. For, as Robert Young writes,

> postcolonial theory is designed to undo the ideological heritage of colonialism not only in the decolonized countries, but also in the west

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itself. Once the process of political decolonization has taken place, then a
cultural decolonization must follow: decolonize the west, deconstruct it.\textsuperscript{53}

As we have seen, not only the letters serve this postcolonial notion, but the Bangla words
introduced in the novel are also used for the same purpose. The letters flout the norms of
Standard English and the Bangla words intrude in the novel and indicate Pidgin English,
thus suggesting that this is ‘another culture’, which also has ‘its own power’.

In her essay ‘Where I’m Coming From’, Ali admits that her Bengali ‘is limited
now to some tourist-phrase-type inquiries, a few nursery rhymes or song fragments and a
quite extensive culinary vocabulary’. Concerning the language of the letters, and of the
novel generally, I would say that Ali has introduced this ‘limited vocabulary’ as a weak
attempt to deconstruct or abrogate the imperial cultures. In this way, she locates her text
in a ‘postcolonial’ position, i.e. she is attempting to deconstruct the ideological heritage
of colonialism.

It seems that Ali wants to focus on the cultural arena of ‘them’. The narrator, who
implicitly appears to be Ali in some places, does not seem to be a part of the ‘fictional’
Bangladesh. The concept of ‘implied author’ is useful here. According to Lothe, the
implied author is ‘practically a synonym for the ideological value system that the text,
indirectly and by combining all its recourses, presents and represents’.\textsuperscript{54} Rhetorically, Ali
is looking on from the ‘outside’ or from a position in which she is affirming as on the
‘periphery’.\textsuperscript{55} Here, I must admit that I do not agree with the woman who told Ali: ‘“How
can you know what it is like to be a Bengali mother when you don’t even speak our
language?”\textsuperscript{56} I do not want to claim that because Ali is one of ‘them’ (non-
Bangladeshis), she cannot write about ‘us’ (Bangladeshis). Rather, my point is that it is as
if she is looking at the issue of women peripherally, positioning them on the fringe of the
‘real’ conflict. Only misery is shown and only the oppression of women is stated; there is
no ‘resistance’ to those troubles and there is no woman portrayed as transgressor.

Do only ‘Hasinas’, ‘Renus’ and ‘Monjus’ inhabit Bangladesh? Mrs Lovely
suggests charity works for the women. Are the charity projects suggested good

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{54} Lothe, p. 19
\textsuperscript{55} ‘Where I’m Coming From’
\textsuperscript{56} Ali stated this woman’s speeches in her essay ‘Where I’m Coming From’
\end{flushright}
‘solutions’ to all those problems? Is there no other way or remedy? This is like giving painkillers to women whose bodies have deep wounds. The fictional world of Brick Lane is unfair to the ‘real struggle’ of women. Lothe’s claim about characters is convincing: ‘[…] the drawing of characters is based more on conventions than on unambiguous “historical” references to “real” people. This does not mean that fictional characters cannot be related to historical persons or to experiences from the reader’s own life.’ The characters drawn in Brick Lane are only ‘helpless, distressed, bewildered’ ones; no one presents or represents disobedience. In this sense, the novel suggests passivity. I am actually alive to the fact that the ‘real’ Bangladeshi society has been havoc for women; they are fettered; their rights are denied; and patriarchy and Islam have overwhelmed them. Nevertheless, this is only one part or one side of society. Against any oppression, there should be protest and dissent.

Eagleton elegantly explains Marx and Engels’s conception of the partisanship of the author:

[…] overt political commitment in fiction is unnecessary (not, of course, unacceptable) because truly realist writing itself dramatizes the significant forces of social life, breaking beyond both the photographically observable and the imposed rhetoric of a ‘political solution’… The author need not foist his own political views on his work because, if he reveals [the emphasis is mine] the real and potential forces objectively [original emphasis] at work in a situation, he is already in that sense partisan. Partisanship, that is to say, is inherent in reality itself; it emerges in a method of treating social reality rather than in a subjective attitude towards it.  

To link this notion to the novel, I would like to add one point to my previous comments. Women’s issues are social and political and writing about this phenomenon, whether in a work of fiction or wherever it may be, does not only imply telling the ‘factual’ things. Readers require the ‘facts’ behind the facts to be shown. One thus needs to try to be objective when treating such a phenomenon. Offering a ‘political solution’ is not necessarily required from Brick Lane. However, it is essential to ‘dramatize the

57 Lothe, p. 76
58 Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 44
significant forces of social life’. The question I would like to ask is whether Ali has done so.

In my view, Ali has not revealed ‘the real and potential forces objectively’. Having been a ‘living historical human subject’, it is anticipated that Ali would have brought some other ‘facts’ or the other side of the Bangladeshi society into her fiction. The novel is neither a documentary account nor a historical one; yet the point is that the world it portrays does not embrace women’s reactions to or struggle against the massive oppression. I disagree with Harriet Lane who claims in her review that Ali ‘describe[s] people on the edge and, by so doing, get[s] to the heart of things’.\footnote{Lane, ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’} Ali gets only to ‘the right ventricle’ of the ‘heart’, to put it literally. As I have noted already, Ali entered only one part, or depicted only one part of the society. I see this as a defect of the novel. I do not want to discuss whether the novel is ‘realistic’ or not, although the very detailed description of the characters and their situations suggests it might be.

I would like to mention another point about this Ali’s position. In an interview with Shahnaz Yousuf, Ali says:

I was always interested in Bangladeshi history. So, when I was in university, for instance, I took a course in South Asian politics and history. That was an opportunity. I had another opportunity taking a course in Development economics. I’ve always had that interest. My father also told me about the history and stories about Bengal. He was certainly influential in sparking that interest.\footnote{This interview can be found at \url{http://www.adhunika.org/heroes/monica_ali.html} (accessed 02.05. 2006)}

The point I would argue here is that Ali is not concerned about the history of that society, but rather ‘had interest’ in it. It is true that we hear the narration from Nazneen’s voice, the letters are presented from Hasina’s perspective, and both are rural, naïve girls who are not involved in politics or organizations. Still, Hasina mentions many things about workers’ lives, strikes and student demonstrations, and we get acquainted with social and economic corruption as well (148, 155, 162, 268…etc). The question is: if Hasina knows about, or presents, these things, would it not be possible and even expected to show women protesting? Zaid tells of political parties and election, Lovely tells of charity organizations; there is no character to tell of anything, not even a little to do with
women’s struggle. Neither Hasina nor any other character around her bears the responsibility of this shortcoming. Ali has not created an environment or characters through which the struggle of women might be mentioned.

There are women’s organizations that are concerned with violence against women, acid attacks and other issues. Some examples of these are Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), and Women for Women A Research and Study Group… etc. Salma Sobhan, a founder member of ASK, claims that ‘The women’s movement, therefore, would appear to be up against a hydra-headed obscurantism’. As far as I know, these organizations were unable to protest against such obscurantism and disown Islam entirely from their strategies. Nevertheless, one very significant figure exists in the Bangladeshi society who has not only been able to exorcise herself of Islam, but who has also advocated that publicly. This is Taslima Nasreen, the secularist, humanist, feminist author. Bangladeshi society owes Nasreen and personalities like her. She has been fighting for the human rights of women, she has experienced hardships, and she faced a Fatwa and was obliged to leave the country. She lambasted Islam and the cultural backwardness of society so courageously that the Islamists do not tolerate her existence and women deem her their leader. The ‘history’ that Ali is aware of, through her father and academic sources, is void of Nasreen and women’s organizations, or maybe Ali has not had any ‘interest’ in that. This is a question left to her.

I have examined the way in which the novel presents many different issues about Bangladeshi women. I have shown how Hasina’s letters and Nazneen’s recollection of her past suggest the condition of women. We have seen how Hasina, who ‘kicks her fate’, lives a desperate life; she elopes with her lover, who she then escapes from; she faces difficulties in Dhaka; becomes penniless, is exploited and prostituted; and elopes again with Zaid. I have also analyzed and discussed the condition of other women around her, who are also forlorn. By analyzing the language of the letters, I have argued that they are a part of a postcolonial technique in which a Pidgin English is used. I have also claimed

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that the Bangladeshi words, and the notions behind them, aim to show some cultural, social, and political issues concerning women. These issues are told from a postcolonial angle, and put within the framework of the history of a ‘nation’.

I have given examples of domestic violence, acid attacks, prostitution, women’s obedience, and so forth. These issues are presented unequivocally but naively through Hasina’s voice, who is a flat character, and Nazneen’s flashbacks. The women are humiliated and beaten but no resistance is shown. They are prostituted but no way out is shown to them. To summarize, I have shown how the novel presents one side but it lacks the other side of the women’s issue and women’s struggle. At the beginning of this chapter, I have stated that Ali has a talent for giving a clear picture of the culture of the rural area. She has given us an image of the dark side of Bangladeshi society but it seems that her talent has failed to shape and fictionalize the positive side or the resistance of women against such oppression, which is a part of Bangladeshi women’s history, since she looks on from the periphery, from the outside. There appears to be a commitment, but it is curiously and problematically qualified.
Chapter Three: the role of Islam in oppressing women:
is Islam shown as a rusty tin or a gilded copper in *Brick Lane*?

‘The person who wants to modernize Islam is like that forgetful genius who wants to invent a machine in his/her garage, which can turn copper into gold!’

In this chapter, I will firstly state some points about Islam and briefly give my view on them. Then I proceed to explore some verses from the Koran about women and show how they contradict women’s rights. I try to discuss how women are oppressed in the novel. Generally, Islam mortifies women and is against their rights. I will include some historical facts about Islam. Therefore, I will necessarily cite some verses from the Koran. The verses I mention in this chapter are those which deal with the position of women and their rights in Islam. I will try to demonstrate that the verses I cite resemble some of the women’s issues presented in the novel. However, I do not purport that the novel is trying to present those problems as rooted in Islam. My aim is not to show whether *Brick Lane* gives examples of Islam’s position concerning women, as such things do not exist in the novel. It gives another image of Islam. Islam appears as a relief in the novel. The main point of my criticism is to question how Islam is presented. To strengthen my argument, I will refer to Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. In order to show how these writers present Islam differently from Ali in their works, I give examples from Rushdie’s short story ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ and Nasreen’s novel *Lajja*.

My aim is not to claim that Islam is the main source of the oppression of women. I believe that Islam is a necessary phenomenon in modern capitalist society to keep human beings generally in submission, not just women. To find the source of women’s oppression and inequality, we do not need to go back to a ‘gone with the wind’ type of history. Accumulating capital, the system needs to place human beings into different classes and strata. It benefits from a fractured working class and from splits within the same class. In some non-advanced countries in which Islam is dominant, religion plays an active role in authenticating this discrimination, especially against women. Even though I do not want to bind myself to the political side of the issue, I would say that Islam has been an authoritative power—both legally and ideologically—in those countries. Its power has actively affected the thought of people. As Marx and Engels put it, ‘the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class’.  

Furthermore, in reality Islam is an archaic and worn-out prejudice that is daily being revamped and its patriarchal measures constrain women. It is a ‘sacred’ pillar to sustain the oppression of women in the ‘Islam-stricken’ countries. In such societies, it is an effective means to stupefy women and thus keep them subjugated. And the worst thing about this is that they just have to be content with such conditions. Consider what Nazneen’s auntie says: “‘We are just women. What can we do?’[…] ‘God has made the world this way’” (103). The religious notion behind her speech means that there is no way to change an individual’s life. Islam and the Koran preach this lesson to women—and to the human beings generally. From this point of view, I will present and comment on some verses from the Koran.

I would like to begin with this verse, which shows the position of women in Islam:

Men are the Guardians over women because Allah has made some of them excel others, and because they (men) spend of their wealth. So virtuous women are those who are obedient, and guard the secrets of their husbands with Allah’s protection. And as for those on whose part you fear

64 I prefer to use Islam-stricken rather than ‘Islamic countries’ since I do not believe that the people of those countries are all Muslims. The notion I use is also developed by some Iranian and Iraqi secularists.
disobedience, admonish them and leave them alone in their beds, and chastise them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them […]

As Allah considers men as the ‘guardians over women’ and Allah’s speech cannot be changed, the segregation of women seems to be a ‘natural’ and irremovable part of society. This verse invites men to beat their wives (and in many cases, any female person in the family is or can be beaten by the males). Connecting this to the fictional work Brick Lane, we can see that Hasina simply but unconsciously gives clear images about this. I have shown in the previous chapter that she must be an obedient wife to the ‘lover’ with whom she eloped. In order to do so, she has to be careful so that her tongue ‘make[s] no trouble’. Looking again at Hasina’s observation that ‘if women understanding this no one will beat’, we see how women are required to keep silent and be obedient. However, trouble soon emerges: ‘In morning soon as husband go out for work I go away to Dhaka. Our landlady Mrs. Kashem is only person who know about it. She say it is not good decision but she help anyway. She say it is better get beaten by own husband than beating by stranger’ (58). What does this suggest? Does this mean that Hasina has not understood this regulation or just that she could not accept it? The consequences she faces later show that she instinctively wants to disobey but as she is naïve and unconscious, she cannot formulate or direct her disobedience. What the landlady tells Hasina suggests that being obedient has become a part of ‘people’s culture’. Women should conform willy-nilly to this culture. This Islamic culture, in my view, is imposed on people and women. Ali does not use any technique to attack this culture, nor do we see any suggestion, either in the characters’ speeches or in the narrator’s descriptions, of this culture being denounced.

Islam considers women to be of deficient mind, one of Muhammad’s speeches (the hadiths) indicates:

65 The Holy Qur’an, translated by Maulawi Sher Ali. Alnisa chapter, 4, verse 35, p.78. There are many other versions, both translating and interpreting the verses. The aim of this thesis is not to compare these interpretations. Therefore, for all the other quotations from the Koran, I will use Sher Ali’s translation. For further quotations, I write only the number of the chapter followed by the verse number and then the page. It has to be mentioned that in different translations the numbers of the verses vary.

66 According to an amendment in 1988, Islam became the formal religion of the state of Bangladesh and this was incorporated in the constitution. To learn more about the constitution, see the formal website of the Bangladeshi government http://www.cao.gov.bd/ (accessed 22.02.2007)
Once Allah's Apostle went out to the Musalla (to offer the prayer) of 'Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, “O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women).” They asked, “Why is it so, O Allah's Apostle?” He replied, “You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.” The women asked, “O Allah's Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?” He said, “Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?” They replied in the affirmative. He said, “This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?” The women replied in the affirmative. He said, “This is the deficiency in her religion.”

Considering women deficient-minded and inferior, Islam explicitly asks women to be obedient, and there should be someone to take care of them. This example, among others, shows that regulations and laws enacted according to Islam legitimize this inferior position of women. The women problems discussed in chapter two can be supposed to be ‘reflections’ of what women face in reality in Bangladesh. The case of Aleya is an obvious example showing that men are the ‘guardians’ and ‘possessors’. It is an example of beating women, or violence against women. The discourses about all the other female characters mentioned in chapter two prove the same ‘reality’ that reveals the position of women in Islam.

To elaborate on my discussion about the relation between Islam and the position of women, I will mention another verse, which considers women to be men’s possessions: ‘Your wives are a tilth for you; so approach your tilth when and how you like and send ahead some good for yourselves; and fear Allah, and know that you shall meet Him; and give good tidings to those who obey’ (2:224, 35). According to this verse, women are considered inanimate. They are just a ‘tilth’, which is ready for men to work on. The Koran emphasizes this low position of women in many other verses as well. The following example degrades women more than the previous one: ‘Beautified for men is the love of desired things—women and children, and stored-up heaps of gold and silver, and pastured horses and cattle and crops…’ (3:14, 49). Women are compared to animals and properties. Relating this view to Brick Lane, we can see that Hasina, Aleya, Renu, 67

who are characters representing most of the women in Bangladesh, embody the position of women in Islam. Hasina’s first husband beats her and her second one searches for perfection in her; thus asking and expecting her to be obedient. Aleya’s husband beats her as well and imposes a burkha on her. Renu is a ‘beautified’ ‘thing’ or ‘silver’ presented to the elderly husband three times her age.

In order to further my argument I will now turn to a related issue which is polygamy. Polygamy is legitimate in and recommended by Islam: ‘And if you fear that you will not be fair in dealing with orphans, then marry of women as may be agreeable to you, two, or three, or four; and if you fear you will not deal justly, then marry only one or what your right hands possess…’ (4:4, 73). The expression ‘what your right hands possess’ means those captive women after the wars of the Muslims with the ‘infidels’, who were considered as any other loot. The advocates of Islam justify the first part of this verse by the second part, saying that Allah claims that you can have many wives if you are ‘just’. If not ‘just’, you cannot (the captives are not counted ‘…forbidden to you are married women, except such as your right hands possess’ (4:25, 77)). The justification is worse. In chapter two I mentioned that Nazneen and Hasina’s father married another woman while Rupban was alive. That was the reason why Rupban committed suicide. I think that the suicide incident in the novel evokes a woman’s wrath against polygamy. Rupban, who always weeps and seems to be too weak to defy anything, has no other choice other than to kill herself. By virtue of this incident, Ali is indirectly protesting against polygamy, which is a negative protest. There is another example of polygamy in the novel, which is that of Amina. Her husband beats her as Razia tells us: ‘I saw her with a split lip. And one time she had her arm in a sling’ (71). In addition, her husband has been married polygamously for several years without saying anything: ‘She’s asking for divorce… He has another wife that he forgot to mention for the past eleven years’ (71). The irony here— that the husband had concealed it for eleven years— might be another example of Ali’s repudiating polygamy. However, she is neither criticizing it severely nor showing a serious protest. She is only murmuring about the case. I will deal with this issue in the coming chapter.
Neither Rupban nor Amina could divorce, but the question is: why? In order to adequately answer this question, we need to consider a related issue, which is women’s right to divorce. This right is not recognized for women in Islam. Consider these verses:

And the divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three courses; and it is not lawful for them that they conceal what Allah has created in their wombs, if they believe in Allah and the Last Day; and their husbands have the greater right to take them back during that period, provided they desire reconciliation… (2:229, 35). And if he divorces her the third time, then she is not lawful for him thereafter, until she marries another husband; and if he also divorces her, then it shall be no sin for them to return to each other… (2:231, 36). It shall be no sin for you if you divorce women while you have not touched them, nor settled for them dowry. [Sic] But provide for them—the rich man according to his means and the poor man according to his means… (2:237, 36-37). And if you divorce them before you have touched them, but have settled for them a dowry, then half of what you have settled shall be due from you, unless they remit, or he, in whose hand is the tie of marriage, should remit… (2:238, 38)

There are some other verses about divorce like 2:230; 2:232; 2:233; 65:2; 65:5 and 65:7. One can also see this position in the hadiths:

[sic] ‘A‘Asha (Allaah be pleased with her) reported: A person divorced his wife by three pronouncements; then another person married her and he also divorced her without having sexual intercourse with her. Then the first husband of her intended to remarry her. It was about such a case that Allaah's Messenger (sallAllaahu alayhi wa sallam) [peace be upon him] was asked, whereupon he said: No, until the second one has tasted her sweetness as the first one had tasted.68

The verses cited, the other ones mentioned by numbers and the hadiths clearly show how only men can decide to divorce. By illustrating these quotations, I aim to clarify how Islam looks upon women.

When Hasina wants to remarry, she is uncertain about her civil status: ‘Maybe my husband divorce me after some time. Is it possible get divorce and no one tell you about it?’ (160). It is not Hasina who can decide to divorce; it is Malek. Amina has to ask for a divorce as well. This means that she is not allowed to divorce her husband even though

she knows that he had married another. Nevertheless, Ali leaves Amina’s case unsolved. We never know what will happen to her. As far as Hasina is concerned, Ali does not suggest anything serious. Hasina left her first husband and later on does not know whether she ‘is divorced’ legally or not. She remarries and leaves this one too, without mentioning what has happened to her legal civil status. Ali chose a naïve character like Hasina, or Amina who does not appear at all in the novel but is only talked about, to deal with a matter as serious as divorce. Significantly, Amina is an Arabic name, which means ‘safe’ or ‘secure’. To a patriarchal man this suggests that it is safe if a woman like this is his wife. It is as though Ali does not want to initiate a discussion or develop an argument about the issue. She just ‘tells’ or ‘shows’ that such a problem exists for women without saying a word about the source of it, which is Islam. This stance is morally dubious.

This said, Ali highlights a very important issue through two of her characters: Renu and Monju. Both girls were married when they were children. We learn from Hasina’s speech that Renu ‘[sic] was marry at fifteen to old man who die within three months’ (151). We are also told that Monju was married at puberty: ‘At thirteen year age she marry and have baby’ (332). As a reader, this reminds me of Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha when she was nine years old. There are different sources of hadiths narrating this fact. One of the authentic sources of the hadiths is Bukhari—there is a reference to ‘the Bukhari collection’ in Brick Lane (302). It is cited in Bukhari volume seven, chapter 88:

‘Narrated Aisha: The prophet engaged me when I was a girl of six. We went to Medina and stayed at the home of Harith Kharzraj. Then I got ill and my hair fell down. Later on my hair grew (again) and my mother, Um Ruman, came to me while I was playing in a swing with some of my girl friends. She called me, and I went to her, not knowing what she wanted to do to me. She caught me by the hand and made me stand at the door of the house. I was breathless then, and when my breathing became all right, she took some water and rubbed my face and head with it. Then she took me into the house. There in the house I saw some Ansari women who said, “Best wishes and Allah's blessing and a good luck”. Then she entrusted me to them and they prepared me (for the marriage). Unexpectedly Allah's messenger came to me in the forenoon and my mother handed me over to him, and at that time I was a girl of nine years of age.’\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} The quotation is taken from ‘Muhammad, Aisha, Islam, and Child Brides’ by Silas. It is available at http://www.answering-islam.de/Main/Silas/ (accessed 02.03.2007). To find out more about the marriage
Child marriage was prevalent in the area before Islam and Muhammad. Nonetheless, Muhammad himself practiced this abominable deed. This Muhammadian *sunnah*\(^{70}\) has nowadays become an Islamic privilege and some people practice it in Islam-stricken countries. I have to add here that this phenomenon is not only limited to the Islam-stricken countries because it exists in some ‘un-Islamic’ countries too.

The striking point about *Brick Lane* is that it dares to broach the issue of child marriage and the lives of the both characters mentioned who are victims of this dilemma are ruined. Renu and Monju represent many teenagers who are married to men who are three times their age. Another point is that the way these characters are presented and the problems they face show the fact that the society in Ali’s novel is indifferent to them and they are lonely. In my view, this indicates that the ‘real’ Bangladesh is indifferent to women, or female children. Muhammad himself practiced child marriage and his followers did so; therefore, there was no law to prevent them from doing so or to punish anyone who marries a child at the time. What about today’s Bangladesh? According to a press release issued by UNHCR on 7 March 2001, 51% of girls aged 15-19 are already married.\(^{71}\) This shows how this immense and gruesome problem is a menace to children in that country. Renu and Monju are images of just a small part of this ‘real’ number. This serious issue is presented by a character, Hasina, who herself is an unconscious victim of her situation. We do not find any character, or event, speech, or ‘voice’ to show the struggle against this problem.

I have illustrated the issues presented in *Brick Lane* and commented on how they resemble the hardship that Islam imposes on women. I shall now turn to another point, which is the view that the novel gives of Islam. Before that, I would like to identify and explain some religious words and their meanings. Muezzin (54) is the person ‘who call[s] Muslims to pray from the mosque’.\(^{72}\) The OED explains it thus: ‘a public crier who proclaims the regular hours of ritual prayer from the minaret or the roof of a mosque’.

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\(^{70}\) According to the OED, *sunnah* (sunna, sonna, or sonnah) means ‘the body of the traditional sayings and customs attributed to Muhammad and supplementing the Koran’.

\(^{71}\) For the whole press release see [http://www.unicef.org/newsline/01pr21.htm](http://www.unicef.org/newsline/01pr21.htm) (accessed 02.03.2007)

\(^{72}\) Mahoney
and the word is spelled differently in the OED as ‘Maizins’, ‘Meizin’, and ‘Muetden’—the last one is taken from the Arabic written as مٔئذن and pronounced /mu’əðin/ (my own explanation). Other words are: namaz (69): ‘the five daily prayers for Muslims’; fajr (93): ‘the dawn Muslim prayer’; zuhr (93): ‘the midday prayer’; haram (213): ‘that which is forbidden [sic] to Islam’. Sura (57): means the main chapters in the Koran, and the OED explains it as ‘a chapter or larger section of Koran’. Tasbee (130): derived from Arabic meaning glorification or eulogy (praising Allah), but here it is the rosary which the Muslims use to praise Allah, as we see Nazneen ‘held the beads and passed them. Subhanallah [meaning glory to God]. Subhanallah. Subhanallah…Alhamdu lilla [meaning praise be to God]. 73 Salaat (234): ‘how to perform the Islamic ritual prayer’ and the ummah (238): ‘the community of Islam across all nations’.

There are many other Islamic words and notions but I shall limit myself to these mentioned. There is one more word, which is taqwa, explained by Mahoney as ‘the fear of Allah’. I think Ali uses this word incorrectly. It is a noun in Arabic, not an adjective as used in Brick Lane, ‘he was taqwa’ (255) (as if to say, he was the fear of Allah). Ali describes Karim in this way but she has failed in her attempt; it was better to use an English word for a direct description. As the description goes on ‘more God-conscious than [Nazneen’s] own husband' (255), it seems that Ali means a ‘devout’ Muslim or ‘pious’, which is taqiy in Arabic not taqwa. 74 These words are constituent elements of the Pidgin English used in the novel. I would say that by using these notions and words, Ali is attaching herself to Islam.

Nazneen and Hasina recite from the Koran many times. I will consider two illustrative examples. Hasina writes a part of a sura in one of her letters: ‘Do not despair of the mercy of God for Allah forgives all sins. He is the compassionate the Merciful’ (172). This is from chapter 39, verse 54 of the Koran. It suggests that Hasina and girls like her who have resorted to prostitution are ‘sinful’, but they can wait for Allah’s mercy. Nazneen recites, ‘To God belongs all that heavens and the earth contain’ (15), which is verse 32 in chapter four in the Koran. The narrator’s description of Nazneen

73 I have taken the meaning of Subhanallah and Alhamdu lilla from the Arabic-English dictionary Almawrid by Dr. Rohi Baalbaki (Beirut: Dar El-ilm Lilmalayin, nineteenth edition, 2005)
74 In Almawrid, the word taqiy explained to mean devout or pious.
gives an aesthetic view of the Koran and thus Islam: ‘The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased… How would it sound in Arabic? More lovely even than in Bengali, she supposed, for those were the actual Words of God’ (29). To describe Nazneen’s situation the narrator uses the expression ‘she supposed’, and this implies the ‘way in which [the narrator] sees the events and characters’. This narrative strategy is to be related to Nazneen’s personality and how the narrator presents her. I will elaborate on this point in the chapter about Nazneen, as there are some other verses related to her and her situation.

What I would like to draw the reader’s attention to is the way the Koran and Islam are presented. The word ‘more lovely’ right at the beginning of the novel gives an aesthetic image of the Koran. All the verses given later are those which are depicted to be ‘relieving’ to those who are in pain. None of those verses which result in some of those pains is mentioned.

In my view, this is partly because in the world of Brick Lane there is no ‘apostate’, ‘infidel’ or irreligious person to question Islam. Among the females, there is only Mrs Azad who does not rely on Islam but she appears only once in the novel (chapter five). There is Chanu, who also does not seem to follow the Islamic rituals:

He said… ‘rubbing ashes on your face doesn’t make you a saint. God sees what is in your heart.’ And Nazneen hoped it was true because Chanu never to her knowledge prayed, and of all the books that he held in his hand she had never once seen him with the Holy Qur’an. (41)

In some places, Ali uses Chanu to defend Islam. In one of the scenes when Chanu is talking to his daughter, Bibi, he criticizes the educational system in the UK, saying:

Who was it who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle for the West during the Dark Ages? Us. It was us. Muslims… ‘Dark Ages,’ said Chanu, and his face flinched from the insult. ‘This is what they are calling it in these damn Christian books. Is this what they teach you in school?’ He threw the book on the floor. ‘It was the Golden Age of Islam, the height of civilization. Don’t forget it. Take pride, or all is lost’ (215).

Protesting against how the ‘damn Christian books’ described Islam’s civilization, Chanu rapturously praises Islam. I think that this can be tied to what Edward Said writes about Western misconception of the Orient:

75 Lothe, p. 39
As much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. […] There were- and are- cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West. 76

Chanu’s focus is on a nation’s own culture and history. This, though a character’s speech, implies a defence of Islam since there are no other characters to criticize it.

To explore this problem more, I consider another reaction from Chanu. The leaflet put in their letterbox states:

Indeed, in our local schools you could forgiven for thinking that Islam is the official religion… the truth is that it is a religion of hate and intolerance… We urge you to write to your Head Teacher and withdraw your child from Religious Instruction. This is your right as a parent under Section 25 of the 1944 Education Act (251,252).

The narrator then describes his state to us: ‘He breathed hard… That night, for the first time since they were married, Nazneen watched him take down the Qur’an. He sat on the floor and he stayed with the Book for the rest of the evening’ (252). This does not mean that he had become a devout Muslim or a so-called extremist, but he resorts to the civilization of the ‘golden age’. This ‘sophisticated’ man does not want to see Islam and ‘Muslims’ being harmed. Seeing an announcement for a demonstration by the Islamists, he shows a trivial disapproval: ‘They have given no address… And the punctuation is poor. It gives a wrong impression of Muslims’ (259). It is as if the conflict between the racist group, Lion Hearts, and the Islamists is not so dangerous to him. Here, I will turn to another point, which is the way this conflict and the position of the Islamists are shown in Brick Lane.

In his review of Brick Lane, Michael Gorra makes a good point about Hasina’s letters. Gorra notes that ‘[…] Ali employs a large number of them to bridge 13 years in Nazneen’s life, from 1988 until 2001. This technique lets her avoid the difficulties of writing about the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, who set part of The Satanic Verses in

76 Said, Orientalism, p. 5
what he called “Brickhall”. Bridging this period in Nazneen’s life, the novel takes us out of London. We are not informed about the very important issue that a person sentenced to death because of having written a fictional book ‘mocking’ Islam and Muhammad. It is a clever way of circumventing the Rushdie affair, whether for it or against it. If Ali had wanted to introduce this issue into the novel, she ought to have added other episodes, created other characters, brought other discourses and conflicts in and changed her ‘literary project’. However, she did not create any such characters to this end. The letters mentioned take us back to Bangladesh. But even there, no negative view of Islam is given. The female characters are in a ‘real hell’ because of Islam’s reign but nothing is told about that. Even in Bangladesh, nothing is mentioned about the Nasreen affair. The Islamists issued a fatwa against Nasreen because of her novel *Lajja* (Shame). As she writes in the preface, ‘*Lajja* was published in February 1993 in Bangladesh and sold over 60,000 copies before it was banned by the government five months later[…] In September that year a fatwa was issued against me by a fundamentalist organization and a reward was offered for my death’.

The government banned the novel and the Islamists accomplished this ‘sacred mission’ and announced her blood *halal*. After the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Aydohya (India) in December 1992, Islamists in Bangladesh started a bloody conflict against the Hindus. *Lajja* ‘deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in the majority’. In this novel, which reflects many events which happened in reality, the Muslims are the persecutors. The novel focuses on Sudhamoy’s family, who are Hindus. Lastly, an Islamist group abducts his


79 As a tradition, when the Islamists issue fatwa against someone, they reward anyone who can kill that person. Thus, they declare that ‘his/her blood is halal to be shed’. Halal is the opposite of haram (which is something forbidden). Thus halal means something allowed or not forbidden. I have ironically used the word halal, which implies the English meaning to ‘put a price on one’s head’. Concerning Nasreen’s case, consult Taj I. Hashmi’s book *Women and Islam in Bangladesh* (London& New York: Macmillan Press LTD, St. Martin’s Press INC, 2000). Chapter Six is entitled ‘Militant Feminism, Islam and Patriarchy: Taslima Nasreen, Ulama and the Polity’, pp. 180-204. Although it is written from an Islamic viewpoint, one may realize how the Islamists reacted to Nasreen’s controversial writings and even how an academic person like Hashmi talks about her coarsely.

80 *Lajja*, p. ix
daughter, Nilanjana (known as Maya), and the family never sees her again. As the novel tells many stories about other Hindu girls who have been kidnapped, raped and killed, we know that the same has happened to her. In order to illustrate this point I need to quote at some length:

After independence, the reactionaries who had been against the very spirit of independence had gained power, changed the face of the constitution and revived the evils of communalism and unbending fundamentalism that had been rejected during the war of independence. Religion was used as a political weapon and a large number of people were forced to follow the dictates of Islam. […] They had then suspended him from a wooden beam and thrashed him. With each blow they had told him to become a Muslim; to read the kalma and announce he had converted to Islam. But Sudhamoy had held firm… One day, after Sudhamoy had again thwarted their efforts, they jerked up his lungi, and mutilated his penis. Sudhamoy had seen the blood and the severed foreskin and heard the harsh laughter before he had lost consciousness. […] He found it tedious to sit indoors all the time starting every time a procession passed screaming, ‘Naraye takbir, Allahu Akbar… Hindus leave the country if you want to live.’ Despite his optimism, and faith in his countrymen, he was aware that the fanatics could at any time bomb their house or set it in fire. It was quite possible that their belongings would be plundered and it was even possible that they would be murdered. […] In Golokpur, thirty Hindu women were raped… In Golokpur incidents of daylight rape were reported. Even women who had taken refuge in Muslim homes were being raped […]

Islam and the Muslims shown in Lajja are different from those presented in Brick Lane. In Lajja, they mutilate a man, burn many houses, kidnap and rape girls, whereas in Brick Lane they are ‘persecuted’ and ‘oppressed’.

While Lajja presents Islam critically, we do not see any trace of this in Brick Lane. It seems unreasonable that Hasina tells us of all these things that happened in Dhaka without mentioning anything about those events against the Hindus. However, Ali uses a misleading technique to avoid any comment on or critique of Islam. Brick Lane circumvents the Rushdie affair, and simultaneously the letters skip the conflict between the Islamists and the Hindus, and the Nasreen affair. The casual letters serve this technique. Thus, no letters appear from October 1992, ‘you ask to write but I cannot think what to tell’, until September 1993, ‘I not mean to make you frighten. Few time this last

81 Lajja, pp. 42, 65, 67, 160
year I take my pen and sit down. Once twice I begin the letter but words do not come’ (168). They stop again, omitting this period. Here I would suggest that Ali does not want to give an ‘ugly’ face to Islam. When she takes us as readers to Bangladesh, it is concealed whether Islam has done any harm to the Hindus or ‘Muslim’ women. Moreover, in Brick Lane’s London, the characters defend and support Islam.

In one of the leaflets by the Bengal Tigers, an Islamist group, there is a vague call for jihad, ‘a reminder to give thanks to Allah for our brothers who gave up their lives shaheed [martyr] to defend the brothers’ (274). We soon know that this is about the incidents in Chechnya:

We give thanks for Farook Zaman who died in the Duba Yurt operations in Chechnya, February 2000. He lived most his life an unbeliever until he repented and devoted himself to jihad. He was killed by a bullet to his heart. After three months his body was returned by the Russians. By an eyewitness account, his body was smelling of musk and it was the most beautiful of all the shaheed bodies he had seen in Chechnya (274). [...] Insha’ Allah may his story give us courage to use our lives for the cause of Allah (274-75).

As Mahoney claims, this is a reference to what happened in Duba Yurt in Chechnya in 2000, when the Russian troops attacked some areas and killed people and the Islamists reacted. Confused and angry, Chanu mocks this leaflet by saying, ‘smelling of musk. After three months! What is all this mumbo-jumbos? Are they mad? Poking these mad letters through white people’s doors. Do they want to set flame to the whole place? Do they want us all to die shaheed?’ (275). It does not seem to be a serious protest and remains mere mocking. This is followed by a TV scene, which shows the Oldham riots. As the Islamists depicted it, they reacted to the ‘white’ racist youths who provoked them. This scene suggests that what the Islamists do essentially consists of reactions to what has already been done to them. I want to link this point to another issue raised in chapter thirteen of the novel, which, in my view, negates the vagueness of the call for jihad.

The Questioner, who is a leading figure in the Bengal Tigers, announces that ‘this is time for jihad’ (281). As a justification for what he suggests, he brings some pictures of children who are victims of the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq (1990-2003). One of

82 As Mahoney alludes to, see the news about the Oldham riots at BBC link, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1354486.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1354486.stm). (accessed 07.03.2007)
them is a girl, ‘aged one year. Weight, nine pounds and four ounces. Ideal weight, twenty-two pounds. The photograph was taken in Basra, December 1996’ (282). Then the narrator describes the child, from Nazneen’s perspective: ‘Nazneen put her fingers over the baby’s wasted legs. She knew that the baby had never walked, never crawled. She looked at the shrunken face and the large dark eyes that demanded much of her’ (282). Another photograph tells us about ‘three babies on a blanket, and between them they had nothing but their small bones and a thin covering of skin’ (282). What the Questioner then says is very important as it enforces his intention of violence:

‘There is one crime against humanity in this last decade of the millennium that exceeds all others in magnitude, cruelty, and portent. It is the US-forced sanctions against the twenty million people of Iraq. […] If the UN participates in such genocidal sanctions backed by the threat of military violence- and if the people of the world fail to prevent such conduct- the violence, terror and human misery of the new millennium will exceed anything we have known.’ This is what the former US Attorney General [Ramsey Clark83] says. It is the new millennium now (284-85).

He thinks that it is ‘time for jihad’. I would like to connect this point to Hiddleston’s claims about Brick Lane: ‘the area has seen a sharp rise in radical Islam, as the community seeks its own identity in an attempt to fight back against discrimination and prejudice’.84 I agree that there is discrimination and marginalization. I disagree with the claim that if people are trying to retrieve ‘their identity’ they should necessarily cling to Islam. This is done in Brick Lane whose the characters’ adherence to Islam is striking. Here, Ali’s characters suggest that since Islam and the ‘Muslims’ are offended and persecuted, they have the right to ‘defend themselves’ and react. What is strange is that when the women are oppressed no need for response is shown; but when Islam seems to be persecuted jihad is suggested.

Brick Lane tells us a little and in passing about 11 September in chapter sixteen. We are told how the characters react to the incidents in Chechnya and the sanctions against Iraq, but we do not see any character react to 11 September. Chanu only says, ‘this is the start of the madness’, and utters, ‘Oh God’ (366), but he ‘says nothing’ (367). Then the scene simply shifts to the daily rituals in Chanu and Nazneen’s house: ‘It feels

83 As explained by Mahoney.
84 Hiddleston, p. 58
to Nazneen as though they have survived something together, as a family. She goes to the kitchen to heat up some dal and boil a kettle for the rice’ (367). As if nothing had happened, amidst this serious, dangerous and gruesome accident, the narrator brings us to Nazneen’s dream: ‘That night she dreams of Gouripur. She stands at the edge of the village and looks out over the light-slaked fields, at the dark spots moving in the distance… (368). No more about that is told to us. Again, here, in Karim’s words, is a justification for Islam:

A devout Muslim, right, willing to sacrifice himself for his religion. Does he go to bars and watch naked girls and drink alcohol? What kind of Muslim takes his Qur’an into a bar? And leaves it there? These stories are made up by idiots. People who don’t know nothing about Islam. May be a Christian carries his Bible round like a pack of cigarettes. He don’t know how a Qur’an is treated. They’re saying another Qur’an got left behind in a rental car by these so-called Islamic terrorists (382).

Nazneen says that a ‘Muslim cannot commit suicide’ (382). Not only Karim, as an Islamic leader, and Nazneen justify Islam, but the narrator has also fallen into this trap and refers to a hadith: ‘He who kills himself with sword, or poison, or throws himself off a mountain will be tormented on the Day of Resurrection with that very thing’ (383). Is the narrator an advocate for Islam? It is expected from a devout Muslim, such as Karim, to excuse Islam whereas he knows that there are verses from the Koran calling for killing, violence, and terror (like: 3:128, 4:90, 4:92, 5:34, 8:40, 8:66, 47:5, 9:12,13,14 …etc). In addition, the examples I have given suggest that neither is the narrator neutral; she is for Islam— not for Islamic terrorism.

In his ‘The Prophet’s Hair’, Rushdie does the opposite. Through the character Hashim, Rushdie wants to show that those who go back to the Koran’s assumptions tolerate nothing. Hashim, finding Muhammad’s beard strand and putting it in his house,

85 See that hadith, which is number 5402 in The Book of Medicine, at http://www.salafipublications.com/sps/sbk (accessed 09.03.2007)
86 In Narrative in Fiction and Film, Lothe says, ‘in discussions of literary texts I use “she” of the narrator if the author is female, and “he” if the author is male’. As the author of Brick Lane is female, I chose the pronoun ‘she’.
87 This short story was written in 1981, but later as a challenge to the fatwa against him for writing The Satanic Verses, it was republished in a compendium, named East, West in 1994.
88 I wrote an article entitled ‘How Islam is presented and explored in “The Prophet’s Hair”’. The article was submitted as a qualifying essay. It was then revised and published at http://www.theisoughtproblem.blogspot.com/
begins to behave like a typical Muslim father and husband, thus beginning to beat the mother and the children, and finally killing his daughter. When Hashim’s son, Atta, realizes that the cause of their disaster is the relic, he says to his ‘shock-numbed’ sister, ‘We are descending to gutter-level’. This implicitly means that Islam and Muhammad’s ‘holy hair’ disgraced and lowered them. Mocking Islam, this short story echoes Rushdie’s vision of Islam, which is not sacred to him. In his article ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ he says, ‘To respect the sacred is to be paralysed by it’.

I should add that Ali is questioning aspects of Islam in some parts of the novel; for instance, in the part about Nazneen’s illusions about imams being pregnant. The narrator here uses humour to ridicule imams:

There was a special dispensation for pregnant women. If she chose to, Nazneen could do namaz from her chair. She had tried it once and it made her feel lazy. But it was nice that the imams had thought of it. Such was the kindness and compassion of Islam towards women. Mind you, if any imam had ever been pregnant, would they not have made it compulsory to sit? […] How did I come to be so foolish, thought Nazneen. What is wrong with my mind that it goes around talking of pregnant imams? It does not seem to belong to me sometimes; it takes off and thumbs its nose like a practical joker (69).

The narrator goes inside Nazneen’s mind, and as a pregnant, tired woman, she imagines the imams have been pregnant. In Islam, imams are only men and thus such a thought is blasphemous. This is why she rapidly turns to condemn herself and her mind for having this thought. Another issue, which is controversial, is the ‘illicit’ relationship between Nazneen and Karim. It is a great ‘sin’ and a severe punishment for ‘adultery’ is suggested in the Koran: ‘The adulteress and the adulterer (or the fornicatress and the fornicator) — flog each one of them, with a hundred stripes. And let not pity for the twain take hold of you executing the judgment of Allah […]’ (24: 3, 338). Both of them are Muslims and rely on Islamic values, but they ‘commit this sin’. What is controversial here is that Karim maintains this relation though he knows it ‘is forbidden’ not only by the Koran, but also by the hadiths, as he reads a hadith to Nazneen from the Islamic website (347).

Since none of these tiny indications is developed in the novel and since excusing Islam seems to be more important in this section of the novel, these controversies remain mere whimpers.

Referring to relevant Koran verses, I have shown how Islam contradicts the human rights of women. Women have been crippled by Islamic values and Islam’s regulations. It seems that Brick Lane tries to give women crutches to walk on. The question is: how can women depend on these regulations and values? The novel does not suggest an answer to this question. On the contrary, what it tells us is to rely more on Islamic values, though perhaps not in a traditional way. I have shown how Hasina’s letters take us out of London from 1988 until 2001 and thus keep us far from the Rushdie affair and in Bangladesh from the Nasreen affair. This may be a good project literally, but it is misleading regarding what Ali thinks and wants to say about Islam. To me, on the pretext of having ‘one’s own culture’ and adhering to that culture privileged during a long history of the nation, the novel comes problematically close to accepting Islamic values.

Talking about Islam is unavoidable when one is trying to examine women’s issue in the countries where Islam is dominant. I have discussed how Islam, in reality, is not compatible with women’s rights. I have simultaneously shown related issues about the situation of women and their problems in the novel. Attempting to relate these two to one another, I have criticized the fact that the novel does not aim to show Islam as a source of the women’s dilemmas. I have also examined how the narrator’s ideological position affiliates itself to Islam. By not having created any ‘disbeliever’ or irreligious character, Ali assumes the corresponding position of the narrator. Moreover, Ali errs in adhering more to the cultural and ethnic authenticity and tries to prepare the readers for the perception that Islam is a genuine part of that authenticity. The narrator excuses Islam. We have seen that Ali’s characters are either Islamic or clinging to Islamic values. Consequently, the vision she gives of Islam becomes indivisible from that of the narrator. The novel’s apology for Islam is in conflict with the things it reveals about women and their problems. Nazneen relies on religion, even though religion has paralysed her. Hasina cites from the Koran, even though it does not consider her to be an equal human
being. Stimulated by the racism of the Lion Heart grouping and the authorities’ policy of marginalizing the Bangladeshi community, Chanu begins to defend Islam.  

I think that Ali is not trying to gild Islam, nor does she want to show it as a rusty tin. What she is trying to do is what Mansur Hekmat, an Iranian Marxist thinker (1951-2002), says about the attempt to modernize or beautify Islam. Hekmat claims that ‘the person who wants to modernize Islam is like that forgetful genius who wants to invent a machine in his/her garage, which can turn copper into gold!’ Linking this point to what Ali suggests about Islam in her fiction, I would conclude that she is abortively trying this ‘machine’. I do not want to claim that Brick Lane calls for Islamic terrorism, violence or jihad. Nor do I want to conclude that Ali is Islamic or even religious. Islam and political Islam have an immense hegemony. They have put many people in turmoil, among them Ali. She belongs to those intellectuals who claim that religion is OK and, on the pretext of ‘their culture’, she is trying to beautify Islam and thus she is a part of the ideology of the British bourgeoisie who want to say ‘keep your Islamic culture to yourselves’. This is why the narrator shows us the verses as ‘lovely' words of God, and the novel suggests commitment to, rather than criticism of, Islamic values.

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92 Mansoor Hekmat: Selected Works, p.360
In the two preceding chapters I have described the female characters in *Brick Lane* to show how women live and how they are oppressed. I have focused on only those who are presented as living in Bangladesh. This chapter will give some examples of Bangladeshi women who live in London but are still oppressed. I try to analyze their life conditions in ‘multicultural’ London. Simultaneously, I will discuss how a ‘multicultural’ society treats them as ‘outsiders’. I will then broach the question of the perpetuation of that oppression: why are women of ‘an ethnic minority’ repressed in London and why should they have minor rights? To do this, I will briefly examine the real existence of multiculturalism. I will then discuss how *Brick Lane* attends to this issue and what, if any alternative, it suggests.

At the beginning of the novel, Chanu tells us something which makes us foresee what will come in the following chapters: ‘They don’t ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here’ (32). This view leaves us with the impression that we will see some characteristics of ‘rural culture’. I will examine the most significant of these. The case of Amina, as I presented it and juxtaposed it with Rupban’s in chapter three, suggests polygamy. This case does not occur in Bangladesh, but in London. It may appear ‘normal’ in a country like Bangladesh, but how can it exist in London? Ali may here to a certain degree be asking a question of the British authority that pretends to be unaware of polygamy, which is forbidden in the country. The tentative irony used here that ‘he has another wife that he forgot to mention for the past eleven years’ (71), makes the suggestion weak. How can a person forget such a thing? In addition, what has been suggested after those eleven years? I have already stated in the preceding chapter that this case disappears and thus we do not see any result. It remains only as a slight exposition. We do not know whether she divorces her polygamous husband nor do we know if there are any legal repercussions for the man. Razia tells us that Amina is beaten too: ‘I [Razia]
saw her with a split lip. And one time she had her arm in a sling’ (71). This represents violence against women. It resembles Aleya whose husband severely beats her in Bangladesh.

Even in London it seems that Bangladeshi men are ‘guardians over women’ and they are their owners. Let us consider the relationship between Razia and her husband. As seen from Nazneen’s perspective, the narrator describes the husband as follows: ‘Razia’s husband appeared to Nazneen to be perpetually angry. She had never heard him speak except behind a closed door, to Razia, so she could not make out the words. Although he was silent, he had a thunder in his brows and his mouth had a murderous set’ (73). We get to know the personality of the husband, a dominating angry man. Clearly, Razia is an unhappy woman. It is no coincidence that she complains to Nazneen that her husband does not allow her to work:

‘He works all day and night. He keeps me locked up inside. If I get a job, he will kill me. He will kill me kindly, just one slit across here. That’s the sort of man he is. For hours, for days, he says nothing at all, and when he speaks that’s the kind of talk I get. […] Jorina can get me a sewing job, but my husband will come to the factory and slaughter me like a lamb.’ (123)

It is evident that the woman does not have the opportunity to work because she has to get permission from her husband. Not only does the husband not respect her, but the best ‘compliment’ he offers is ‘to kill her’. I would like to link this metaphor, ‘slaughter me like a lamb’, to the one used concerning Hasina right at the beginning of the novel.

When Hasina elopes, her father reacts and thinks that a daughter who has brought shame on their ‘honour’ should be killed. The narrator tells us that ‘Hamid ground his teeth and an axe besides. For sixteen hot days and cool nights he sat between the two lemon trees […] his only occupation was […] cursing his whore-pig daughter whose head would be severed the moment she came crawling back’ (16). This reaction frightens Nazneen, and she lies ‘awake […] starting at the owl calls that no longer sounded like owls but more like a girl felled by an axe on the back of her neck’ (16). Hasina is described as an owl, a symbol of a wicked person, in Hamid’s view; Razia is shown as a lamb, signifying her to be poor or despondent according to her own point of view. Both are indications of the same cultural notions. They are characters whose lives must be guided by male ones. One is in Bangladesh and the other is in London.
Razia is never a free woman until her husband dies. She is lucky that an accident happens, thus enabling her to become free:

My husband is dead. The work has killed him... At the slaughter place. They were going to load up, but there was an accident... Killed by falling cows. He was only alone a few moments and when they went back in he was underneath the cows. Seventeen frozen cows. All on top of him. [...] I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now. (139)

Now she is relieved. She seems happy that he is away and no one can force her to do anything. The death of the husband has cheered her up. She can get a job and be free. She takes up smoking, but Chanu criticizes her for that, as the narrator tells us: ‘It was a new thing, and final confirmation to Chanu that Razia was irredeemably low stock’ (190). She, who wore headscarf (123), now is in a ‘western’ fashion, ‘a sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front, and in a favourite combination paired it with brown elastic-waisted trousers’ (188). Furthermore, the narrator tells us, almost at the end of the novel, that she had removed all traces of her husband after his death (355).

Returning to Chanu’s sense of the ‘rural culture’, I would like to elaborate on this notion. He is not a rural person. On the contrary, he is educated and has many examination certificates. Nonetheless, he conforms to the values of ‘rural culture’. Let us consider some examples. Nazneen mostly stays at home. She has to prepare food before her husband comes back home, otherwise she would live in the fear that ‘a wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence’ (22). On the same page the narrator informs us that ‘Chanu has not beaten her yet. He showed no sign of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her’ [my emphases]. The narrator once again informs us that ‘there was Chanu, who was kind and never beat her’ (102). However, this remains unclear. Nazneen’s daughter Shahana tells her mother, ‘You mean he doesn’t beat you’ (303). Nazneen does not directly answer the question: ‘When you are older, you will understand all these things. About a husband and wife’. The narrator’s description of the situation does not resolve the ambiguity: ‘Nazneen did not know which one of them was wiser, the mother or the daughter. She did not know if Shahana’s questions were acute or naive, but all the same she felt proud of the girl’. Readers may understand or imagine the situation differently. To me, it seems
probable that the girl feels that her father might have beaten her mother. I will return to this point later.

Other issues are observable in the conjugal relationship between Chanu and Nazneen. It seems that Chanu has married so she can keep house and give birth. He describes her as a ‘good worker’ and an ‘unspoiled girl. From the village’ (22). He thinks that she is good for child bearing: ‘Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children’ (23). These descriptions seem to denote patriarchal thoughts. When she asks him to allow her to go out, he finds cultural excuses not to allow her: ‘Why should you go out? If you go out, ten people will say, “I saw her walking on the street”. And I will look like a fool’ (45). In addition, he justifies that ‘anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out’ (45). He assumes that Nazneen should get permission from him and if he accepted, he would look a fool (as if he were not already). He always overestimates himself and considers himself as an ‘educated man’ superior to her (192-371).

When Nazneen starts to work, he pretends to be proud of her and says, “‘When I married her, I said: she is a good worker. Girl from the village. Unspoilt. […] All the clever-clever girls are not worth one hair on her head’” (207). He seems to be praising this ‘good worker’, but he is reiterating his attitude, which I find asinine— the same attitude he expressed a few years ago when she first came to London. In my view, this is a man-chauvinistic culture, which considers a village girl unspoilt as she can be obedient and yields easily. This attitude continues to the last stage: ‘[…] he began counting money. He held a pile of notes and sat blinking at it for a long time. “Wife, my wife”, he said, “a wife does not keep anything from her husband” (369). Although this speech comes in a specific context, showing Chanu’s jealousy as the following episode clarifies, it dennotes his cultural values.

Not only Nazneen is the victim of Chanu’s cultural notions, but also their daughters, Shahana and Bibi. This time it is not in the 1980s but in 2001. It is useful to examine some related issues. Incurably dogmatic and stuck in his ethnic background, Chanu wants his children to comply with his assumptions: to listen to Bengali music; to recite national poems and anthem; to force them to know the history of Bangladesh; and even to wear Bangladeshi clothes. Shahana once refuses to recite poems. So the narrator
informs us that something will be going on soon: ‘Terrible in the incantation and
stunningly inept in the delivery, these beatings were becoming a frequent ritual’ (180).
Chanu begins to threaten her: “Tell the little memsahib that I am going to break every
bone in her body”[…] “I’ll dip her head in boiling fat and throw her out of the window””
(180). We are also told that
Chanu called her the little memsahib and wore himself out with threats
before launching a flogging with anything to hand. Newspaper, a ruler, a
notebook, a threadbare slipper and once, disastrously, a banana skin. He
never learned to select his instrument and he never thought to use his hand.
An instrumentless flogging was a lapse of fatherly duty. He flogged
enthusiastically but without talent. Busy still with his epithets of torture, he
flailed about as Shahana ran and dodged and dived beneath furniture or
behind her mother’s legs. (180-81)

These ‘epithets of torture’ force Shahana to begin reciting the poem against her will
(181). There are many other aspects showing the way Chanu treats his daughters
(201,202, 204, and 205). Nazneen always tries to mediate between Chanu and their
daughters.

Then the narrator tells of Nazneen’s worrying:

Nazneen thought about it now, as she undressed. The eternal three-way
torture of daughter-father-daughter. How they locked themselves apart at
this very close distance. Bibi, silently seeking approval, always hungry.
Chanu, quivering with his own needs, always offended. Shahana,
simmering in – worst of all things – perpetual embarrassment, implacably
angry. It was like walking through a filed of snakes. Nazneen was worried
at every step. (205)

The metaphor ‘a field of snakes’ suggests that Nazneen is in an embarrassing and critical
situation. She knows that if the daughters refuse to comply, the epithets of torture will
start again and there would be a ‘battlefield’. Chanu’s treatment of his daughters, coupled
with what the narrator tells us that ‘it was foolish to assume he would never beat her
[Nazneen]’, make us anticipate that this ‘educated’ man might have beaten her. Chanu’s
behaviour is like that of Razia’s husband, who beats his daughter Shefali: ‘Shefali,
twisting her hair, said, Abba, how many bricks you earn today? And landed on her back,
and cried quietly into her mother’s lap’ (125). There is no difference.

In order to elaborate on this cultural issue, it may be useful to juxtapose the
similar attitudes of Razia and Chanu of their daughters. Razia says that ‘Shefali will
make a love marriage over [her] body’ (51). Her speech suggests that a mother, thinking like Razia, would arrange a marriage for her daughter rather than letting her decide freely for herself. In another aspect, Razia says, “Shefali tried to go out of the house wearing some little thing like this [glittery vests]. I told her no way. […] Daughters! They are trouble”’ (229). This suggests that some parents, like Razia, are concerned about their daughters’ growing up and the way they will behave, have relations or wear clothes. In Razia’s view, Shefali is ‘trouble’ because she dresses ‘indecently’. There is a paradox here: she wears a Union Jack to show she has become ‘British citizen’ (229), but it is hard for her to accept her daughter wearing what she likes. This point of view resembles Chanu’s who once says that he ‘will go back before they [his children] get spoiled’ (32). As I have shown, he forces his children to follow what he believes in. Worried that they are not obeying him, he plans to go back: “She is only a child, and already the rot is beginning. That is why we must go”’ (182). There is no difference between Razia’s attitude and Cahnu’s as he says, ‘Too soon ripe is too soon rotten’ (371). The two words ‘trouble’ and ‘rotten’ clearly denote this similarity. An ‘ordinary’ woman has the same culture as the ‘educated’ man. I think that this is indigenous to a culture that makes ‘outsiders’ unable to be ‘insiders’ in the new society in which they live. In other words, they cannot be a part of a society into which they were not born.

Though it occurs at the very beginning of the novel (apparently in the mid-1980s) and is presented in short, there is another issue which is worth mentioning. Razia tells Nazneen the story of Jorina’s daughter:

‘[…] She [the daughter] won’t be coming any more. They have sent her back.’ ‘To be married?’ [asked Nazneen] ‘Of course, to be married and to live in the village,’ ‘They took her out of school?’ [asked Nazneen] ‘She is sixteen. She begged them to let her stay and take her exams […] the brother has gone bad, and they wanted to save the daughter.’ (49)

In Razia’s view, the parents do not want their daughter to be ‘spoiled’; therefore, they ‘saved’ her and sent her back to the place where she can be kept ‘unspoiled’. The issue suggested here is forced marriage. It seems to us, as readers, that Jorina’s daughter has been sent back to the village in Bangladesh to experience a life like that of Hasina, Aleya, Renu, or Monju.
The examples I have given and the issues I have discussed present different problems that women face. These include polygamy, violence against women, women’s inferiority and feebleness, forced marriage, and imposing traditional and cultural assumptions on children (notably females). By virtue of these suggestions, Ali on the one hand presents the relationship between men and women, and, on the other, between parents and children in the Bangladeshi community in London. She shows the ‘dark sides’ of ‘their’ culture. Though they are superficially presented, they are, I believe, enthralling points of the novel. They make readers think about those issues. They make readers question the existence of those ‘rural values’ in progressive and advanced London. They make one question the authorities’ silence about those problems or the way they may encourage them. Do they exist because of their ‘goodness’? I will turn to the next part of my argument, which will try to link these issues to multiculturalism.

In the past, racism was strong. The ‘black’ people or the so-called coloureds were inferior to ‘white’ people. After World War II, racism could no longer live. It was too inhumane to be accepted by people so the bourgeois authorities had to find a way to get rid of it, or to find an alternative. Multiculturalism emerged as that alternative. Graham Huggan makes a good point about multiculturalism:

Multiculturalism, as a discourse of cultural pluralism, is generally agreed to have emerged after World War II, a period of economic boom and labor shortage when migrations brought workers from the (former) colonies to take on a variety of usually low-paid jobs. […] Afro Caribbean and South Asian immigrants were — and to some extent still are — regarded as culturally ‘other’, and were/are subjected to varying forms and levels of discrimination, mistreatment, and abuse.93

As is shown here, and as it is in reality, migration is a consequence of colonization. Stricken by poverty, the colonized began to seek a ‘better life’ and thus migrated to the colonizing countries. For them, to get a job and housing, which they were mostly deprived of in their countries, was a better life. They became ‘cheap labourers’ and ‘outsiders’, or, as Huggan has stated, ‘culturally others’. The ‘others’ have been

marginalized and have been considered to be ‘minorities’. Minorities would consequently have minor position and minor rights. I will relate this to the novel.

We are told that the characters in Brick Lane are living in an unfair situation. Hiddleston convincingly argues that Ali is presenting that situation by using an indirect rhetoric. Responding to Sandhu’s comments that the novel only slightly tells of the violence against the Bangladeshis of Brick Lane, Hiddleston states:

While Ali certainly refrains from cataloguing racist attacks, she does demonstrate how popular misconceptions drive the broader political consciousness of the host society and affect immigrants’ lives. It is through this analysis of common images, terms and buzzwords that Ali critiques the racist environment in which her characters live. 94

This means that the novel implies the authorities’ handling of or some of their notions about Bangladeshis. This handling and such notions have led to popular misconceptions about Bangladeshis. I would like to add that at the same time there are direct speeches from the characters revealing such an environment. I will examine some issues about that ‘racist environment’.

Chanu’s dream of promotion never comes true although he has degree certificate. At the beginning of the novel, he complains about that to his friend Dr Azad:

‘I am forty years old. […] I have been in this country for sixteen years. Nearly half my life, […] When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary of the Prime Minister. […] That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn’t know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads. What can you do?’ (34)

We understand from this passage that ‘black’ people are treated differently from ‘white’ ones. To Chanu’s mind, the authorities should have not treated him like the peasants ‘possessing lice on their heads’ because he had the same ethnic background. This section of the novel occurs in the 1980s. James Procter writes that ‘it is the mid-1980s and Margaret Thatcher’s public spending cuts (which we are told jeopardize Chanu’s chances

94 Hiddleston, p. 68

61
of promotion within the local council) contribute to the air of neglect and deprivation associated with their rented council flat and the surrounding area’. According to this idea, the system has marginalized the immigrants, and specifically here the Bangladeshis. Being considered as ‘outsiders’, they can hardly expect a good job or promotion. This is why Chanu keeps dreaming of and complaining about promotion. Chanu often emphasizes that the immigrants are mistreated and discriminated against and this is a part of the system. Nazneen once reiterates Chanu’s notion with uncertainty:

‘My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem. […] He just likes to talk about things. He says that racism is built into the “system”. I don’t know what “system” he means exactly.’ (72)

To expand on this, I will point out how the novel describes Brick Lane in the section on the Thatcher era. When Nazneen goes out alone for the first time, we see Brick Lane through her eyes:

The streets were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them. […] A pair of children, pale as rice and loud as peacocks, cut over the road and hurtled down a side street, galloping with joy or else with terror. (55)

It seems that Brick Lane has not been cleaned for several days. This is an example representing the authorities’ negligence. Whereas, just a few steps further on, the narrator shows us a different sight:

She [Nazneen] looked up at a building as she passed. It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The building was without end. Above, somewhere, it crushed the clouds. The next building and the one opposite were white stone palaces. […] A woman in a long red coat stopped and took a notebook from her bag. The coat […] was long and heavy with gold buttons that matched the chain on her bag. Her shiny black shoes had big gold buckles. Her clothes were rich. (56-57)

The word ‘rubbish’ or ‘rubbish fortresses’ describing Brick Lane is juxtaposed with ‘glass’ or ‘white stone palaces’ describing the other building. The children who are ‘pale

95 Procter, p. 116
as rice’ are contrasted with the woman in a ‘coat with gold buttons’ and shoes with ‘big gold buckles’. It shows that children of a ‘minority’ are suffering deprivation whereas the ‘native’ woman represents a better status of welfare. These two different passages tell us that the immigrants and their district are in a poorer situation in Thatcher’s London.

The novel proceeds and takes us into another era, which is under Tony Blair’s government. Procter claims that this shift is a transformation. In order to support his claim, he uses the following quotation describing Brick Lane through Nazneen’s eyes:

The bright green and red pendants that fluttered from the lamp-posts advertised the Bangla colours and basmati rice. In the restaurant windows were clippings from newspapers and magazines with the name of the restaurant highlighted in yellow or pink. There were smart places with starched white tablecloths and multitudes of shining silver cutlery. In these places the newspaper clippings were framed. The tables were far apart and there was an absence of decoration that Nazneen knew to be a style. […] A very large potted fern or a blue and white mosaic at the entrance indicated ultra-smart. […] three-storey houses, old houses but the bricks had been newly cleaned and the woodwork painted. There were wooden shutters in dark creams, pale greys and dusty blues. The doors were large and important. The window boxes matched the shutters. Inside there were gleaming kitchens, rich dark walls, shelves lined with books, but never any people. (252-53)

Now it appears that the rubbish piles are removed and we see another decoration.

Elaborating, Procter adds that

The neglected facades of Brick Lane in the 1980s are being gradually tidied up and refurbished. The capital that had previously been reserved for the centre now appears to be flowing through the streets of east London. The area of the city that was once described as “visible but unseen” in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* is now on prominent display.⁹⁶

In this way, Procter wants to tell us that the changes in the area and the decoration of the shops and the facades suggest a change in the ‘multicultural’ London. Perhaps there is a superficial change, but this is relatively unimportant because the essence has not changed that much. I will examine the most illustrative scenes.

We know that Chanu gives up his dreams of promotion but thinks about and plans to make his fortune to go back to Bangladesh. His plans, in this new era of London, do

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⁹⁶ Procter, p. 117
not come true either. The narrator informs us that ‘He was offered a job washing dishes in a restaurant. (203-04). It seems to us that Chanu is collecting certificates in vain. He never gets the jobs he is hoping for. The ‘red carpet’ has never been laid out for him and he never becomes the ‘Private Secretary of the Prime Minister’. Then we are told that he ‘became a taxi man’ (209). This tells us that the ‘system’ he talks about is still discriminating against him. He still has this status when he goes out with Nazneen onto the street of Brick Lane, which has been differently decorated and ‘refurbished’, as Procter claims. In addition, Chanu keeps complaining until the end: ‘It’s like I’ve been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full’ (320). Through his speech, we understand that this expatriate is without hope and thinks that it is useless to wait ‘on the wrong side’ anymore; but it is better to ‘go back home’ (321).

I will turn to a related issue. I have stated that Chanu’s status is not changed and he is looked upon as an ‘other’. I see him even culturally as an ‘other’. Amidst the description of the ‘new Brick Lane’, we witness that Chanu’s cultural assumptions have subjected Nazneen to be another ‘other’: ‘Nazneen walked a step behind her husband down Brick Lane’ (252). There does not seem to be any difference between this Nazneen and the one who first came out onto Brick Lane and got lost and began to weep. She still is a woman dependant on her husband. She is subordinate to him, as I have shown in some examples at the beginning of this chapter. This becomes clearer in this new section when the camerawoman points the camera at Nazneen. She ‘adjust(s) her headscarf’, fearing ‘being watched’ (254). Procter comments that Nazneen ‘is seemingly objectified as part of the locale’s multicultural furniture and its tourist landscape. Ethnicity appears to signify primarily as surface style or fashion in this new version of multicultural London’. The novel describes to us how this place’s furniture and style of decoration have been improved since becoming a mixture of the new era’s developments combined with materials of ‘another ethnicity’. It seems to us that the ‘white media’s camera lens’ only sees the outward aspect of the matter. This is why I disagree with the suggestion that ethnicity signifies a surface style. We see two things together: the colourful area having bright glittering colours and Nazneen’s headscarf as a traditional ‘symbol element’ of her

97 Procter, p. 117
98 Ibid
ethnicity. The camera lens suggests to us that since the new ‘exotic’ materials and decorations are interesting and attractive, the ‘exotic’ woman with her headscarf is attractive and desirable as well. Accordingly, the camera sees the subordinated Nazneen as a real gem, preserving her ‘exotic’ appearance.

Chanu, the character representing an ethnic ‘minority’, remains in almost the same life situation. The novel tries to suggest that people of different ethnic backgrounds do not enjoy the same rights. What is more important is how the women live, what culture governs them in Thatcher’s era (or even in John Major’s), and whether their lives have been changed during Blair’s period. In their essay ‘Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism’, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park write that certain feminist scholars are involved in

‘[…] uncovering the forms of racism and sexism that structure the oppression of women of Third World origin in these [advanced industrial] countries’. These feminists seek to move beyond the discussion of cultural domination, resistance, and subversion with which many postcolonial theories have so far been largely content.99

According to these feminists, the fundament of the oppression of immigrant women is the racism and sexism which appear in different social structures within the system of society. The immigrants are marginalized because of racism. To consider immigrant women inferior to native ones because of the culture of their community is racist treatment, which strengthens sexist assumptions. Women are consequently located on the ‘margin of margin’. Looking at Chanu and Nazneen, or the other male and female characters in the novel, makes this vision clearer. Nazneen and the other women I have mentioned in this chapter present the bad conditions they had in the 1980s and later have in the twenty first century. In 2001 Chanu beats his daughters and degrades Razia. In the new era he repeats what he thinks about his wife, ‘the good worker’. Near the end of the novel, in October 2001, we are told about another arranged marriage (or forced marriage, perhaps): ‘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’ (466).

It is not a special culture which bears the responsibility of oppressing women. Nazneen and the other women are oppressed and they have almost the same subjugated position. They do not only represent the Bangladeshis, but also the other immigrants from different countries. Immigrant women (or refugees or asylum seekers) have fewer rights than the native inhabitants do. The perpetuation of this oppression needs to be questioned and criticized. Low-paid jobs are often for the ‘foreign’ workers since they are the ‘silent labourers’ who can accept ‘cheap labour’, apart from the ‘illegal’ workers whose wages are incredibly low. Among these silent and cheap labourers, women are more inferior. Either they are denied to take part in the labour market or their labour force is cheaper than the ‘cheap labour’. Nazneen and Razia stay at home for years, and then they get jobs; Nazneen because of the economic pressure on their family, and Razia when her husband dies. The two examples of Nazneen and Razia signify the neglected life of Bangladeshi working women in multicultural London.

Nazneen’s and Razia’s work seems to be ‘illegal’ since it is home-based. As Nazneen informs us: ‘Some of the women are doing sewing at home. […] Razia can get work for me’ (184). Accordingly, they are ‘workers sans rights’. We are informed that the factory where Razia works is closed down:

‘These bloody health inspectors,’ said Razia. ‘Closed the bloody factory down. Came with an interpreter and went around asking stupid questions. “Is it always hot in here?” I told them, “No. in winter you have to take a chisel and knock off the ice between your toes.” […] They say they are closing the factory for Health and Safety, but everyone thinks it is something else. The people who came are from Immigration.’ (228)

Razia’s ironic speech tells us that the workers in the garment factory are deprived of a simple or basic right, which is to have air-conditioning. They have to suffer through the hot summer and the freezing winter. We can imagine, through her speech, how little they are paid. At the same time, mentioning the people ‘from the Immigration’ leaves us with the impression that there is something illegal and because of that, the factory is closed for an unknown period. Nazneen’s work is another example of the lack of rights. She has to work most of the time, both to help Chanu’s plan to go home and to make a living as well.
Here we need to tie Nazneen’s work conditions to what Rajan and Park claim: ‘Women workers are generally found in what is termed the “unorganized” sector, which is often home-based labor, in which neither labor’s organized resistance in trade unions, nor the protection of labor laws is available.’ If Nazneen wishes to protest or has some demands, there is no way for her to express them. Moreover, if she did express demands, whom would she address? She works hard and Chanu is ‘the middleman, a role which he viewed as Official and in which he exerted himself […] dispensing advice’ (207).

Nazneen stands for many other ‘unorganized’ workers whose voices are never heard, the domestic work that has been their duty notwithstanding. I think that Razia, in addition, is among those ‘unorganized’ workers who seem to work ‘illegally’. Thus, no labour laws are available to Nazneen, Razia, or workers like them.

In an interview with David Boratav, Ali says, ‘I talked to people at a women’s center on a big housing project. They were setting up home working initiatives and finding ways of keeping their earnings secret from their husbands.’ The reality Ali is mentioning here about women and their inferior position is reflected in Brick Lane. Before starting her job, Nazneen thinks about keeping something confidential, as the narrator tells us: ‘Chanu would not know how many linings she had sewn or how many jackets she had buttonholed. He would not know how much money there should be’ (187). Connecting what Ali says with the images she shows in her fiction, it becomes clear that immigrant women are subject to a patriarchal culture. The same culture in their ‘own country’ that they escaped from keeps them under surveillance in ‘multicultural’ London. We can connect this to what Rajan and Park claim:

Immigrant women, trapped between the patriarchal families and communities on the one hand, and the racist state on the other, are particularly susceptible to family violence. As workers, we saw that they are vulnerable to exploitation, either as undocumented aliens in illegal production sites, or as employees in low-paying labor.

Chanu treats Nazneen and his daughters in accordance with his own patriarchal standards. Amina, Razia, Jorina’s daughter and Nishi are all victimized by the vicious

100 Rajan and Park, p. 59
101 See the whole interview at http://www.voices-unabridged.org/format/creat_format.php?id_article=62 (accessed 30.03.2007)
102 Rajan and Park, p. 60
values of the patriarchy. It is here, in my view, that the cases are related to multiculturallism.

Multiculturalism in its general sense of cultural pluralism calls for diverse cultures, sometimes opposed ones, to live side by side. Multiculturalism ‘celebrates the differences’, as some critics have put it. Thus it respects each group’s ‘own’ cultures. In doing so, it encourages those groups to inflict ‘their own cultural values’ on everyone who belongs to the same community. Multiculturalism, I would like to add, is a part of the superstructure of capitalist society that furthers the continuation of the same mode of production. To keep cheap labourers unorganized and silent, the system needs ideological criteria to fool them. Clinging to ‘one’s own culture’ or ‘own cultural assumptions’, no matter how backward they are, is only a parameter of those criteria. This is why we see the authorities respect different cultures excusing them as a part of each group’s origin. The arrow of multiculturalism is mostly pointed at women. As we have seen, the female characters of Brick Lane do not live a ‘better life’ under the mercy of multiculturalism. They are subjected to the same backward culture. The streets of London have never become much better for them. It appears that, up to the end of the novel, life is not so different for Nazneen, Razia, Nazma, Jorina or women like them. It seems that Shahana, Bibi and Shefali have been offered a different life from that of girls of ‘white’ parents or British natives.

Multiculturalism is to teach people from different ‘ethnic backgrounds’, especially workers and women, to adhere to ‘their culture’. Thus multiculturalism is not in favour of ‘minorities’. Rushdie makes an important point about multiculturalism:

A whole declension of patronising terminology can be found in the language in which inter-racial relations have been described inside Britain. At first, we were told, the goal was ‘integration’. Now this word rapidly came to mean ‘assimilation’: a black man could only become integrated when he started behaving like a white one. After ‘integration’ came the concept of ‘racial harmony’. Now once again, this seemed virtuous and desirable, but what it meant in practice was that blacks should be persuaded to live peaceably with whites, in spite of all the injustices done to them every day. The call for ‘racial harmony’ was simply an invitation to shut up and smile while nothing was done about our grievances. And now there is a new catchword: ‘multiculturalism’. In our schools, this means little more than teaching the kids to a few bongo rhythms, how to tie a sari and so forth. In the police-training program, it means telling
cadets that black people are so ‘culturally different’ that they can’t help
making trouble. Multiculturalism is the latest token gesture towards
Britain’s blacks, and it ought to be exposed, like ‘integration’ and ‘racial
harmony’, for the sham it is.103

To Rushdie, multiculturalism is a successor to ‘assimilation’ and ‘racial harmony’. The
definitions he gives seem to be different versions of racism. Multiculturalism offers
nothing more. I have shown that in Thatcher’s era the Bangladeshi neighbourhood was
neglected, and the women were neglected as well. Chanu suffered from racism ant yet he
practices a sexist culture. Later, multiculturalism preserves his sexist views on the pretext
of respecting ‘other’s culture’. He forces his children but no one, no authority questions
him. This suggests that the new generation of females, together with their mothers and
other women, are again marginalized. What Rushdie claims is that there should be no
‘cultural difference’. To celebrate the cultural difference means keeping women of
‘minority background’ different from the ‘natives’.

In the two different eras of London presented in Brick Lane, it is hard to detect a
visible change in the situation of Bangladeshi women. And this, I believe, suggests that
racism continues to exist. I would say that multiculturalism and racism are two sides of
the same coin. Looking at the novel from this angle, I would argue that Ali is criticizing
multiculturalism. She tries to suggest that because of multiculturalism immigrant women
are bound to be separated and kept isolated. Nevertheless, I find her critique inadequate.
In other words, she invokes this issue insufficiently. In the preceding chapter, I suggested
that she is more concerned with the ethnic origin or a nation’s own history and culture.
This aspect of the novel is so significant that it appears to prevent any resistance to the
negative and backward sides of that culture.

There is no apparent resistance, especially from women to those patriarchal
values. Nazneen has already submitted herself to Chanu and his dull, cultural advice. She
muffles her voice and always nods to him, simply saying ‘if you say so husband’ (99),
apart from her clandestine relationship with Karim. Razia prefers life in the UK to in
Bangladesh, but she is not a serious character and bears the same values. As her name
already suggests, Mrs Islam sticks to the Islamic values as she tells us at the beginning of

103 Quoted from Huggan, p. 96
the novel: she keeps ‘purdah in [her] mind’ (29). There is Mrs Azad whose personality and speeches seem subversive, but only a short chapter in the early section of the book is about her.

Among all the conformist characters, Mrs Azad seems the only one to suggest non-conformity. She who ‘tuck[s] her feet up and her skirt [rides] up her large brown thighs’ and has a beer appears to be a ‘queer’ figure among the ‘normal’ ones. When Chanu talks about ‘the clash of cultures’ and preserving ‘one’s identity and heritage’ (113), she begins to mock him, calling his speech ‘crap’. To show her refutation of that ‘heritage’, she articulates the following: ‘“Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that’s no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!”’ (113). She tells us that she is living in a Western way and enjoying freedom now; but this was not the case in her youth when she was in Bangladesh. Looking at her following statement of opinion, she makes it plain that she has banished those ‘cultural heritages’ which Chanu is proud of:

‘…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 white girls and I’m just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that’s my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English. […] They go around covering from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don’t have to change one thing. That […] is the tragedy.’ (114)

Her speech illuminates how free Mrs Azad considers herself because she has freed herself from traditional cultural assumptions. This is the only straight opinion which appears to refute what the other characters adhere to. This seemingly bizarre opinion silences everyone in the room. However, soon after Mrs Azad’s provocative speech the novel changes its direction and tries to make us busy ourselves sympathetically with Raqib, Nazneen and Chanu’s son, who becomes deadly ill. Moreover, even the following chapter of the book is about him and his death. Mrs Azad disappears. The novel fails to adopt her as a character representing resistance to ‘their culture’. It is as if this were being
done to avoid the argument between those who follow and those who refuse the cultural assumptions within the same community.

By virtue of the examples given in this chapter, I have examined and shown how ‘multicultural’ London does not appear to be a different place for Bangladeshi women. Beside the negligence of the authorities in the upkeep of Brick Lane, their indifference to the lives of women is presented in the novel. Polygamy still exists. Jorina’s daughter, a member of the 1980s generation, represents forced marriage. Raiza’s daughter, the generation after, is shown as prey waiting for arranged marriage. Razia herself is the victim of the same culture that she wants to impose on her daughter. Most of the marginalized community whose rights and/or personalities are denied are women, not least women workers. I agree with Bahri, who affirms what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has suggested:

‘Third-World’ women workers, defined by Mohanty ‘as both women from the geographical Third World and immigrants and indigenous women of color in the U.S. and Western Europe,’ are seen to ‘occupy a specific social location in the international division of labor which illuminates and explains crucial features of the capitalist process of exploitation and domination’.¹⁰⁴

Through this ‘capitalist process of exploitation and domination’, we see how Nazneen, Razia and women like them are exploited and deprived of their rights, including their individual rights. They are exploited twice; they are exploited by the capitalist system on the one hand and culturally subjected by their male partners, on the other. Mrs Azad, a woman belonging to a middle-class, does not seem to be exploited, or less is told about her to us. As I have stated, *Brick Lane* disapproves of multiculturalism and, to some extent, rejects the dark side of ‘Bangladeshi culture’. By exposing the severe problems concerning women the novel suggests this rejection.

In her review of the novel, Palav Barbaira suggests that ‘the divorces, beatings and affairs become scandalous gossip for the women of Tower Hamlets, who become the judge and jury for their fellow women, serving the “silent treatment” for those who

¹⁰⁴ Bahri, p. 217
transgress the boundaries of social norms’. I agree in the sense that we are acquainted with these issues from the ‘gossip’ between the women. But the cases which they are ‘gossiping’ about are not the only ones which are ‘transgressions’. I have mentioned that Amina asks for a divorce because she discovers her husband has had another wife for many years without telling her. Ali presents this ‘transgression’ as a reaction to polygamy. The problems, like polygamy, forced marriage and so forth, are broached by characters who are themselves victimized and silenced—silenced both within the same community and within ‘multicultural’ London. This is Ali’s implicit critique of the patriarchal social norms and multiculturalism. But the women’s silence may suggest a dual meaning; either to accepting the status quo or defying it. To me, the environment created for the women in the novel does not suggest the second. Surrounded by authorities practicing multiculturalism on them and a community inflicting patriarchal social norms on them, women are bound to be patient. In exactly the same way as no resistance was shown by women in Bangladesh, nor do we see any defiance in London. They can wait for their fate. So they either have to wait until their husbands die, or go back home and leave them alone.

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105 Palav Babaria ‘Unspoken norms; a review of Monica Ali’s Brick Lane’, can be found at Http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/summery_0199-4706156_ITM (accessed 15.01.2007)
Chapter Five: oscillating between fate and freedom:
is Nazneen finally free?

‘Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the
self-consciousness and self-esteem for man who has either not yet won
through to himself, or has already lost himself again. […] Religion is the
sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul
of soulless condition. It is the opium of the peoples. […] The criticism of
religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality
like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that
he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the
illusory Sun which resolves around man as long as he does not revolve
around himself.’

We have met all the characters in Brick Lane through Nazneen. The ‘very shy’ ‘good
worker’ introduces us to the others and to many of the novel’s main issues. In the
preceding chapters I discussed the other characters and their surroundings. We have seen
that Nazneen presents Hasina’s letters and the important women’s issues they suggest.
The women’s problems, racism in London, patriarchal social norms and the subjugation
of women all are presented through her and her relationships. It is necessary to study the
main figure of the novel and the critical aim of this chapter is to focus on this character
and her personality. Some readers have claimed that Nazneen gains her freedom
gradually after having been confused for many years. I will discuss whether she remains
a victim of her fate or can free herself. To adequately analyze Nazneen’s character, we
need to look at her speeches and the narrator’s descriptions of her. Nazneen, the passive

106 Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right translated by Joseph O’Malley (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1970), introduction. The whole book is available at:
http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.PDF
(accessed 14.02.2007)
protagonist as one reader called her, came into the world as a baby as if she were stillborn, and she remains silent most of her life. She is doomed to lead an obedient silent life and wait for the way fate will govern her life. The main aim of the chapter is to show that she remains subjected to fate.

Fate is everywhere in *Brick Lane*. Before the novel starts, Ali cites some words of Ivan Turgenev and Heraclitus about fate. The novel begins by showing the sorrowful atmosphere while delivering ‘the tiny blue body’ (12), but it soon tells us that her body ‘began to lose the blueness and turned to brown and purple’ (13). It is stated in the novel that it was as if God were calling the seemingly stillborn Nazneen ‘back to earth’. Knowing that the baby is ‘a girl’, Hamid reacts very apathetically. He coldly says, ‘“I know. Never mind. What can you do?”’ (14) From the very dawn of her life, Nazneen is left to her fate and she grows up hearing the story of ‘How You Were Left To Your Fate… Not once did [she] question the logic of the story’ (15). Fate brings her up. It keeps following her everywhere, governing and restricting her life and preventing her from having her own personality. Her mother advises her ‘to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her’ (15). This advice determines Nazneen’s life throughout.

The narrator’s direct definition of Nazneen’s being a ‘solemn child’ prepares us to get acquainted with Nazneen, the person who has ‘no complaints or regrets’ to tell anyone, the girl who subdues her feelings. Having this background, she cannot challenge her father when he is arranging a marriage for her: ‘Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma’ (16). As I have shown in chapter four, she has actually become the ‘good wife’, keeping he voice muffled. In this section of the novel, the narrator presents a philosophy that is closely related to Nazneen’s coming life: ‘What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life’ (16). On this view, Nazneen is supposed to endure whatever may come to pass and whichever way her life takes. Very soon after that, the novel shifts to Tower Hamlets, London. Through the narrator’s voice, we get to know that this principle prevented Nazneen from having wishes even in her heart:
Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish*. [...] Was it cheating? To think, *I know what I would wish*? Was it not the same as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it. (18)

The narrator goes inside Nazneen’s mind and exposes what she thinks and what she wishes for. It is suggested that Nazneen is confused. This passage needs linking to Lothe’s definition of free indirect discourse as being ‘grammatically and mimetically in an intermediate position between indirect and direct discourse’. The passage is a blend of using third and first-person pronouns. We are introduced to Nazneen’s direct speech. Then the narrator questions the character’s thought, a question that makes Nazneen doubt her ability to have wishes in her heart. Once again, the narrator is indirectly describing Nazneen and her inner side or her psychological status affirming that she does not know what the ‘wish would be’. This technique identifies the contradictions that have arisen in Nazneen at this very early stage of her marriage.

Nazneen stays at home and does not learn English except two words ‘sorry and thank you’ (19). The ice-skating scene on TV draws Nazneen’s attention. She finds it difficult to pronounce the word and wrongly says ‘ice e-skating’. Asking to learn ‘some English’, Chanu replies, ‘Where is the need anyway?’ (37) According to Chanu, she does not need the language since she has to stay at home and do her duties. The daily domestic rituals for a housewife begin:

Life made its pattern around and beneath and through her. Nazneen cleaned and cooked and washed. She made breakfast for Chanu and looked on as he ate, collected his pens and put them in briefcase [...] she ate standing up at the sink and washed the dishes. She made the bed and tidied the flat, washed socks and pants in the sink and larger items in the bath. In the afternoons she cooked and ate as she cooked [...] And the days were tolerable, and the evenings were nothing to complain about. (40-41)

This passage gives us an idea about the ‘good worker’s’ duties, repeated daily without any complaint from her. Is there really no complaint? She does not visibly express anything, but the narrator’s description right after this passage introduces us again to the contradictions inside Nazneen:

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107 Lothe, p. 46
Sometimes she switched on the television and flicked through the channels, looking for ice-skating [the narrator has used Nazneen’s way of saying the word]. For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory. But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned. For a while it was a worse Nazneen than before because she hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap, and dropped the pottery tiger and elephant as she dusted them and was disappointed when they did not break. (41)

The ice-skating scenes seem to implant wishes in her mind and heart. On the other hand, they also seem to bring dissent into her mind—dissent in a woman who is not even allowed to go to school to learn the language spoken in the country where she now lives. Ice-skating becomes a desire which never leaves her until the end of the novel. The text above also shows that she is starting to be bored of the rituals and housekeeping.

The first attempt to defy her husband occurs when she goes out for the first time alone, though she gets ‘home twenty minutes before her husband’ (60) to make food fearing that she ‘could reasonably be beaten’. It is a good start. She says to herself in a challenging way,

*Anything is possible*. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile, probably around the whole of London although I did not see the edge of it. And to get home again I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do! (62)

Ali uses a mixture of direct and indirect free discourse technique here. This short interior monologue suggests that Nazneen thinks that trying to do what she wants is not that hard. She does not seem to ask Chanu about her ability. On the contrary, she is half surprised by what she has done; though she lost her way and cried because of it. Her mind is blurred as well because she has to justify why she was in the pub, ‘to use the toilet’, not to meet anyone.

Still, it is a helpful attempt as the narrator tells how she naively shows her defiance:

Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers. The next day she chopped two fiery red chillies and placed them, like hand grenades, in
Chanu’s sandwich. Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (63)

There is an exaggeration in the resemblance between refusing duties and ‘insurrections to destroy the state’. This exaggeration reveals that these new things are too much for a wife fearing to be beaten for a lesser offence. At the same time, however, it is a realistic description of one woman’s challenge, a woman who has the status of Nazneen. Nevertheless, it is not rebellion. She still has to stay indoors.

Describing the flat in detail, Ali draws our attention to Nazneen’s inner thoughts. The decoration seems attractive to her, but it is like a prison: ‘she looked and she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity’ (76). With regard to this example, Hiddleston says that ‘the drive to unveil the changing inner musings of her [Ali’s] sequestered heroine results in a simple metaphor imposed upon the character by the narrator, rather than in genuine insight into inaccessible world of the immigrant woman’s psyche’. The metaphor ‘imposed upon’ Nazneen does not only have a literary function, but it is also a fictional means with which to reveal Nazneen’s situation and that of immigrant women like her in Brick Lane. As to the psychological part of the case, I agree with Hiddleston. Observing the events on from a peripheral angle, Ali fails to reflect Nazneen’s ‘inaccessible world’. Thus, the narrator fails to go deeper into Nazneen’s inner being or to reflect her needs. As a woman who is absorbed by the new life and confused by and torn between her blossoming desires and the prevention of their being fulfilled, she has a much more complicated psychological status. It is an intricate attempt to enter the ‘coffin’ in which Nazneen has been entombed. The narrator appears to have some obstacles to revealing this insight properly. Nonetheless, Nazneen has to wait in this ‘prison’. Chanu does not allow her to go to college to learn English justifying his refusal by simply stating that she is ‘going to be a mother’ (77). She unavoidably has to accept and submit to what her husband decides for her.

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108 Hiddleston, p. 65
To discuss the technique Ali uses to draw ‘the reader into Nazneen’s consciousness’, Hiddleston analyses it through a narrative perspective. I would first like to point out a few sentences in that discussion:

In the passage elucidating Nazneen’s private reflections, the perspective often switches from that of an external narrator to free indirect discourse, giving the impression that the character speaks for herself. Crafted metaphors, for example, are juxtaposed with more direct, unmediated reactions. In one passage, Ali describes Nazneen’s ill-defined dissatisfaction, and shifts from the position of an observant narrator to an apparent transcription of the character’s desperate thoughts. 109

The most apparent point in this passage is the technique that Hiddleston discusses. I have considered above an example concerning the presentation of Nazneen’s inner thought through the interior monologue Ali uses. Hiddleston gives another example, which will be cited here. But before quoting it, it needs saying that the passage comes after the narrator’s observation: ‘why did her father marry her off to this man?’ The passage:

There was this shapeless, nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless. What do you want with me? she asked it. What do you want? it hissed back. She asked it to leave her alone but it would not. She pretended not to hear, but it got louder. She made bargain with it. No more eating in the middle of the night. No more missed prayers. No more gossip. No more disrespect to my husband. She offered all these things for it to leave her. It listened quietly, and then burrowed deeper into her internal organs. (102)

To elaborate on what Hiddleston discusses, I would like to add that Nazneen appears to condemn herself. That is why she needs to make a bargain with the ‘shapeless, nameless thing’, which we later find out is meant by the narrator to be the jinn. It is as if she were promising that she will not try to disobey her husband or defy the imposed social norms. We are told about Nazneen’s uncertainty and dissatisfaction, or what Hiddleston terms ‘ill-defined dissatisfaction’.

Nazneen’s state continues to fluctuate between dissatisfaction and being constrained by the status quo. It is in this section that their son’s death occurs, dramatically increasing her despair. The novel leaves us with this and shifts to Hasina’s

109 Hiddleston, p. 65
letters which take us to Bangladesh. But the later chapters of the book tell us that Nazneen has remained secluded for years. The same rituals of housekeeping continue. Then another stage in her life begins, a phase in which she begins to work which results in great changes in her life. This is the climax of the novel. After sixteen years, only now a chance appears. Through this, a change both in the novel’s direction and in Nazneen’s life will appear. Chanu begins to flatter her, saying to his daughters that Nazneen ‘is the boss woman now. Anything she says, your father goes running off and does it’ (191). The reason why he begins to flatter is that he realizes the change in her financial situation. Nazneen is going to take part in the economy of the house, and may in fact partly help Chanu’s plans come true. It is work which changes Nazneen’s life.

To strengthen my comment on the role of work, I would like to quote an important passage describing Nazneen’s new situation:

The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could not smell it. More often, she tried to see and could not. It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman’s net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw. It was only in her sleep that the village came whole again. (217)

The beginning of the passage tells us that Nazneen is leaving the old life. The metaphor, fisherman’s net, gives the impression that she is no longer in a prison as before. She has changed from being the ‘buried’ woman in the ‘slab of entombed humanity’ into a ‘fisherman’ whose net has caught village life. She has now become the ‘boss woman’. The village and the life it stands for have become a dream— not only the village but even Bangladesh as a whole. Although the narrator articulates this change in relation to their return to Bangladesh, I think it also suggests the shift in Nazneen’s life. Even her imaginings change. Before she merely dropped Chanu’s ‘promotion from her prayers’, but now we are told that ‘through her half closed lashes she [sees] him [Karim] (220).

Through work Nazneen becomes acquainted with Karim, the new middleman who soon becomes her lover. The relationship becomes crucial to Nazneen. It gives her power. It makes her hesitate about going back home with her husband:
Some tears came to her eyes. [...] What evil jinn had come to her to play such tricks with her mind? To make her think that this young boy would be part of her life. [...] She smelled disaster, and for the first time it occurred to her that it was not only Shahana she would have to worry about if they ever went to Dhaka. (256)

This time the narrator describes the jinn as evil, conjuring up these thoughts. Nazneen does not try to exorcise it from her. She knows that she has a chance to think about herself, but she is still perplexed. She gets involved in the relationship and becomes passionately attached to Karim. Once again, the narrator informs us about Nazneen’s being perplexed: ‘[...] the tension inside her chest, which had been there for weeks, returned. She had taken a deep, deep breath because she had to shout – something urgent, some matter of life or death – but the breath and the shout got stuck. They would never come out. That was how it felt’ (273). This shout, like the first one when she goes out, remains muffled. At the same time, she is so confused that she does not know what the reason is. Even now we do not hear the shout to come out.

Nazneen and Karim’s relationship is an important element in Nazneen’s approaching freedom. It is also a significant issue in the novel, which provokes argument. Nazneen is committing ‘adultery’ and this is strictly forbidden in Islam. In chapter three, I discussed the punishment that Islam inflicts on those who commit ‘adultery’. I would like to add that the protagonist is ignoring the Islamic regulations because her emotions require this. Describing her protagonist’s sexuality, Ali is breaking a taboo. Nazneen is unconsciously infringing Islamic regulations. The narrator is aesthetically taking Nazneen, and us, beyond the social norms:

She did not know who moved first or how but they were in the bedroom and locked together so close that even air could not come between them. She bit his ear. She bit his lip and tasted blood. He pushed her onto the bed and tore at her blouse and pushed the skirt of her sari around her waist. Still dressed, she was more than naked. The times when she had lain naked beneath the sheets belonged to another, saintly era. She helped him undress. She felt it now: there was nothing she would not do. She drew him in, not with passion but with ferocity as if it were possible to lose and win all in this one act. He held a hand across her throat and she wanted everything: to vanish inside the heat like a drop of dew, to feel his hand press down and extinguish her, to hear Chanu come in and see what she was, his wife. (343)
Through this passage, the narrator tells us how Nazneen, deepening the sexual relation, likes to show her defiance to her husband. She wants him to see that she will do what she likes and desires. The beauty of describing her, enriched by the simile ‘a drop of dew’, strengthens the signification of the ‘un-Islamic’ deed.

Notwithstanding her eagerness, Nazneen breaks off the relationship with Karim, even after she has decided not to follow Chanu to Bangladesh. Karim presumes that Nazneen is leaving him because of her realization of the ‘sin’ they have committed, but Nazneen declares that this is not the reason: ‘that we have already done. But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn’t me, and you weren’t you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn’t see things. What we did – we made each other up’ (455). In this way Nazneen is telling us that what is important to her is not the ‘sin’ in itself; but Karim is not the ‘type’ for her. She is indifferent to what will happen to her in ‘hell’. She considers what Karim once called her: ‘the real thing’ (385). Nazneen does not like this image because it reminds her of what Chanu called her, ‘an unspoiled girl’. We finally see Nazneen free from two men because neither of them is the image she has in mind.

Another factor which helps Nazneen approach her freedom is Hasina’s letters. Hasina first encourages Nazneen to work, telling her that ‘working is like cure’ (152). I have shown how the letters document women’s lives in Bangladesh, and how they experience their daily dilemma. The letters provide an apparent vision for Nazneen: if she goes back to Bangladesh, her life will not be better than that of the women there. Furthermore, her children, especially Shahana, will never get used to or accept such a life. Nazneen is torn between the different, inner conflicts: refusing to go back with Chanu, thinking about Karim, most importantly thinking about her children, and lastly to depending on herself and deciding freely. At last, she shows her defiance and stays in London with her daughters. Towards the end of the book there is a beautiful scene about Nazneen. She is listening to the radio, there is a song — Lulu’s ‘Shout’, as Sandhu tells us110 — and she starts dancing, repeating only the word ‘shout’. Let us look at the narrator’s description:

110 ‘Come Hungry, Leave Edgy’
She waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table. *Shout!* She sang along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, feeling her hair shake out down her neck and around her shoulders, abandoning her feet to the rhythm, threading her hips through the air. She swooped down and tucked her sari up into her band of underskirt. *Shout!* (489)

The ‘shout’, which has been muffled for years, now breaks forth. She sings and dances. The movements clearly show us that it is as if she were skating, the very desire which has grown in her from the first year of her coming to London.

In an interview with Neela Sakaria, Ali explains the idea behind accepting or refusing fate. To illustrate Ali’s view on this, I would like to quote two questions and their answers:

Neela: Nazneen’s character centers around this issue of accepting fate and life as it comes. Does that notion have a cultural or religious basis? Where did that idea come from for you in this story?
MA: Nazneen’s central dilemma is this question of what she can control in her life, and when is it better to accept things. For her it is social, religious, and part of her family background. But we all deal with that very same issue. It is a fundamental human question. In the UK and the West and I’m sure in the America too, we see the external manifestation of this dilemma. On the one hand we have all of these self-help books, suggesting that we are in control of our lives. On the other hand, we have this increasing awareness of what is predetermined in our lives. Whether it is genetic science, or Freud telling us you are the way you are. Added to that we have this interest in meditation and spirituality and finding your inner peace. We all veer around various readings of this. We say ‘well if it’s meant to be it’ll happen,’ but on the other hand we’re constantly making lists of what we want to achieve and what we want to do. So yes, the question is the same for Nazneen, she just talks about them in different ways.
Neela: How does that concept translate to you and your writing?
MA: Well I always like to live my life as if I’m in total control of it. The more I’m forced to think about it, the harder that assumption becomes. The more I’ve thought about it and analyze it, the more complex it becomes. But anyway, the pig-headed person that I am, I pretend I can control everything in my life. 111

111 Book Wire speaks with Monica Ali, the author of *Brick Lane*, at [http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/MeettheAuthor/Interview_Monica_Ali.htm](http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/MeettheAuthor/Interview_Monica_Ali.htm) (accessed 11.10.2006)
What is important in this part of the interview is Ali’s opinion concerning fate. Of course, I do not want to claim that we should uncritically accept Ali’s interpretation of her main character. That would be falling into the trap of the ‘intentional fallacy’, from which I want to dissociate myself. However, there is necessarily a connection, albeit an indirect one, between an author’s background and opinion on the one hand and the thematic concerns of her fiction on the other. No literary text can be written in a cultural and historical vacuum, and Brick Lane is no exception. According to the viewpoint expressed in the interview, life teaches us to accept what is sometimes predetermined for us. The contradictions that surround Nazneen will shape her destiny. The conflicts she finds herself in, without having the ability to overcome them, and the general characterizations the narrator gives her are those crucial factors which will drive her to accept what is predetermined for her. Nazneen’s character mimics the viewpoint that Ali has about accepting one’s fate.

There is another important point to add about Nazneen’s character. I would like to ask whether she is a flat or round character. If we consider Forster’s concept of a round character, we can ask whether Nazneen is one. With a view to Brick Lane, one important dimension of Forster’s distinction is highlighted by Murfin and Ray. They emphasize that round characters ‘have the level of complexity and depth we associate with real people’, and ‘have been fully developed by the author.’112 Round characters can ‘surprise us convincingly, for they have full-blown personalities complete with ambiguities and quirks that make it almost as difficult to describe them reductively as it would be to describe a friend or family member in a single sentence’.113 I agree that Nazneen is a ‘richly complex character’, as in The Observer’s phrase114, but I think that she is not ‘fully developed’ by Ali. She is developed gradually, slowly, patiently, and unsurprisingly. I would argue that Nazneen does not have a ‘full-blown’ personality. It is not easy to describe her in ‘a single sentence’. I think there are certain ambiguities interwoven with the inner contradictions or conflicts she experiences, as I have shown in the examples above. However, I would like to add that she neither surprises us nor has

112 Murfin& Ray. p. 168
113 Ibid
114 From Geraldine Bedell’s review ‘Full of East End Promise’, which can be found at http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,977505,00.html (accessed 11.10.2006)
she any ‘quirks’. To me, her relation with Karim is neither a surprise nor a quirk. We simply do not see Chanu, who even though he snobbishly considers himself superior to Nazneen, cares much for her. We can consider an example in which the narrator informs us about the nature of the relationship:

‘[…] For now, he [Chanu] was speaking only to her. There was no one over her shoulder. The audience had finally gone home. She put her free hand briefly across his round cheek. To touch like this was permitted here, among these stateless people, where the rules were unknown and in any case suspended.’ (119)

Compare this to what Nazneen tells Razia about Karim:

‘He [Karim] lifts me up inside. It’s the difference between…’ She cast around. ‘I don’t know. It’s like you’re watching the television in black and white and someone comes along and switches on the colours.’[…] ‘And then they pull you right inside the screen, so you’re not watching anymore, you’re part of it.’ (428)

A comparison of Nazneen’s relationships with Karim and Chanu suggests that Nazneen needs to compensate for what she was deprived of before. In making this comparison, I would say that Nazneen’s looking for a new relationship is not an odd action. Seen thus, her new relationship cannot simply be considered to be a ‘quirk’. It did not surprise me when I read the novel. Unlike those who have a different ideological reasoning, and would consider her deed a ‘sin’ or moral ‘infidelity’, I expected to read such a thing about a character like Nazneen. It is certainly a function of fiction to make readers react in different ways to a text. But my point is that the general definition of a round character, one who may ‘surprise us convincingly’, sounds inconsistent to readers who are viewing this specific text from the same perspective as me. Nazneen is not in lack of complexity, but her slow development in the discourses of the narrative may induce us to invoke the definition of a ‘flat’ character. She seems rather like a mixture of a flat and a round character; round in the sense of complexity (but not ‘full-blown’) but flat in the sense of not being ‘fully developed’.

After about seventeen years, Nazneen appears to be a free woman. But the question still needs to be asked whether she is free. Is Nazneen free from the cultural notions that kept her subjugated and silent for years? Is she free from religion? Does she no longer accept the ‘Grace of God’? Is the final ‘shout’ a sign of her freedom? Nazneen
is a religious person. Whenever she is in trouble, she recites from the Koran. Whenever she feels worried, she depends on religion and the verses she recites comfort her. Hiddleston claims that for Nazneen, Islam is ‘a structure that provides her with stability’.\(^{115}\) We notice that in many places in the novel. When she is anxious about the first coming of DrAzad, she reads the Koran and ‘the words calmed her stomach and she was pleased’ (20).\(^{116}\) Later, the narrator tells us that Nazneen ‘did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her’ (21). When she first goes out and is afraid, as another example, she recites from the Koran.

Hiddleston claims that since Islam is only for the sake of relieving Nazneen, ‘as the novel progresses, the nature of Nazneen’s recourse to Islam changes’.\(^{117}\) What Hiddleston is trying to say is that Nazneen is not religious and is only drawing on religion superficially. However, I would argue that Islam leads Nazneen’s life and she does not seem ever to get rid of it. The narrator does not give us any hint of that. Even the simile Ali uses, ‘like a Sufi in a trance, a whirling dervish’ (299), to describe Nazneen’s state when having sex with Karim, is religious. We do not see Nazneen as before, with the rosary in her hand eulogizing Allah, but she never questions her religion. Although Nazneen infringes Islamic values through her relationship with Karim, this is no conscious confrontation with those values. Instead, she does this to find her match, the image she draws in her mind. Since she has waited for the ‘Grace of God’ throughout her life, she remains devoted to her religious background. For example, almost at the end of the novel, when Chanu asks her whether she would like to go home, she hesitantly answers, ‘if it is God’s will’ (372). She still depends on the Koran as a relief: ‘In the night, while her family slept, she performed wudu and took down the Qur’an. She read from the sura The Merciful’ (406).

As I have argued in chapter three, the novel comes problematically close to accepting Islamic values, and there is therefore no apparent or sustained critique of Islam. The hazy character of the heroine strengthens this lack of criticism. Nazneen herself is crippled by Islamic values. Nazneen is lost and remains lost until the end of the novel.

\(^{115}\) Hiddleston, p. 66
\(^{116}\) Hiddleston also gives this example.
\(^{117}\) Ibid, p. 67
Oscillating between freedom and fate, she gets her ‘freedom’ at the age of thirty-four, thanks to Chanu’s decision to go back to Bangladesh. Otherwise, she would have remained the devoted housewife: as the daughters enthusiastically ask their father when he leaves for Bangladesh, “But who will cook for you?” “Who will cut your corns?” (479) The question of the new generation suggests that the other women, whose husbands are still with them, are enclosed in the same cultural arena. They are bound to accept the isolation imposed on them by the cultural and religious patriarchal assumptions. Nor is Nazneen free from these values.

Nazneen is surrounded by such a hard life, and having a religious background, Islam seems to her to be ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless condition’. Nazneen is addicted to the ‘Grace of God’. She is stupefied by religion and the novel shows the verses of the Koran functioning as compensations for her concerns. Nazneen lives in the same religious illusions that nurtured her. Ali has not created her protagonist to question Islam— that is not the text’s aim. To me, Nazneen cannot find herself or, to put it in Marx’s words, she does not ‘move around [herself] as [her] own true Sun’. The Koran, as the symbol of religion, remains ‘the illusory Sun which resolves around [her] as long as [she] does not revolve around [herself]’.

Ania Loomba affirms Marx and Engels’ notion about the influence of the surrounding world:

Marx and Engels emphasised strongly that our ideas come from the world around us, that ‘It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness’ (1976, vol. 5:36). All of our ideas, including our self-conceptions, spring from the world in which we live. And this world under capitalism, itself gives rise to series of illusions.118

Applying this notion to Nazneen’s life, I would say that she is not responsible for nurturing these illusions. She is taught ‘to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God’. She is surrounded, isolated, and silenced by a community, which is itself marginalized. It is only when she begins to work that she starts thinking about her freedom; she is still surrounded by the same conditions of life and the system does not

offer her a change. She has no recourse other than Islam. Life treats her ruthlessly. To her, Islam is ‘the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless condition’. The question of releasing herself from this illusion remains the same. The environment Ali has created is not in favour of disillusioning Nazneen. In addition, in such an environment only characters like Nazneen would appear. The narrator has already told us at the beginning of the novel that ‘since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne’. It is the narrator’s philosophy which directs the coming actions of the protagonist. It is this motif which informs the other episodes. It is ‘this principle’, as the narrator calls it, coupled with the religious advice, which imposes stoicism on Nazneen. Fate embodied in this principle is ubiquitous to the extent that it does not seem to leave Nazneen even at the end of the novel. She skates with her sari, the symbol and signifier of her authenticity; without being aware or conscious of the fact that clinging to ethnic origin remains a source which determines her destiny.

One more issue to be added in relation to Nazneen is the simile of ‘the snowstorm’, which appears three times in the novel. Dr Azad uses them, thinking that life is like a snowstorm. We become acquainted with Azad’s vision through the narrator’s affirmation: ‘They were fascinating, these sleeping underwater towns. When you shook them they were whipped with a white explosion but then, only then, you could imagine the life within’ (66). This description first appears when Nazneen is pregnant and goes to the doctor. The second time the snowstorm appears is when Bibi is sick, and Azad expresses his view again: ‘‘You shake it.’ […] They watched the snow swirl around inside the glass and come to a peaceful arrangement at the bottom. “That’s it.” He took it back. “That’s like life,” he told Bibi. “Remember that is just like life”’ (272). The last time the snowstorm appears is almost at the end of the book: ‘He [Azad] shook up the snowstorm and watched the tiny blizzard whip around dome. “It’s calming, don’t you think?” Another shake. Nazneen assented’ (429). This time it appears after Nazneen experiences internal conflicts and complexities concerning following Chanu and abandoning Karim. Through this simile, the narrator imposes patience on Nazneen, and it is as if she were being told that after each misery happiness will come. To me, this simile echoes an Islamic summon for patience, and recalls these two verses from the Koran: ‘Surely there is ease after hardship. Aye, surely there is ease after hardship’ (94:6-7, 623).
The points I have discussed about Nazneen show the confusion she lives in. They suggest that she is a character who lacks self-esteem and self-confidence. Once she appears to be grateful to her father for marrying her to Chanu, but at other times she regrets this and questions her father’s decision. The problem is that it is not simply for some days, but it lasts for sixteen years; yet features of a new, free life do not appear to come true. In her review, Babaria notices that ‘Ali neither condones nor condemns any of her characters’ actions, merely providing them a platform for them to take place’. The question is: which ‘platform’ is provided? Is it a ‘platform’ to leave the characters suffering and used to stoicism? There could be another ‘platform’ or another environment. In the Bangladeshi community, even though there is a locked sphere overwhelmed by religious notions, there should be another environment. If we consider that other females who have ‘their sphere’ surround Nazneen, other determinations might emerge within this sphere. The ‘solution’ suggested in Brick Lane is to wait even if takes a very long time in the course of women’s lives. All you need, Brick Lane appears to suggest, is to wait for the religious utopia that will bring a perfect life later.

Disagreeing with some feminists’ claim that Nazneen eventually has become free, I would conclude that she has learnt that it was best for her to wait for her fate; otherwise she would have been like Hasina who has always ‘kicked her fate’ and eloped again with the cook. I have shown that Nazneen is always worried, remains confused and is mostly depressive. She is the ‘typical character’, as Engels put it, through which Ali has reflected her ‘outlook on life’: ‘[…] I’m a real pessimist. I drive my husband mad with my bleak outlook on life’. Although not a didactic novel, Brick Lane incorporates a message for immigrant woman to be stoic like Nazneen, a message of patience since God’s gift will come eventually. The novel attempts to pacify with endurance women like Nazneen, whose ‘shouts’ are caught in their chests and whose minds religion has torn. An implicit idea is suggested in the novel that women from the ‘Third World’ (not least

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119 Babaria’s review
121 Marianne Macdonald’s interview with Ali at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/05/09/boali.xml&sSheet=/arts/2004/05/09/bomain.html (accessed 02.05.2006)
villagers) may not expect the freedom that Western women enjoy and even take for
granted. This is not to say that this idea is a deliberately suggested, thematic issue in
Brick Lane; but the main theme about fate entails such an implication.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

As we have seen, *Brick Lane* embraces many themes: racism and ethnicity, sexual abuse and prostitution, women issues and problems, female sexuality, the conflict between old and new (or first and second) generations, cultural differences, multiculturalism and so forth. Of these, the novel pays most attention to ethnic origin or the history of nation. I have concentrated on the women’s issues. The text largely presents the condition of women, first in Bangladesh and then as Bangladeshi immigrants in London. I have analyzed how the novel presents and represents women’s problems in Bangladesh, through Hasina’s letters. The letters are the technique which enables Ali to shape and develop her narrative.

This technique shifts the narration from the third-person’s perspective to the first one, while articulating very important and serious issues. Ali has chosen Hasina to tell these stories about women. Hasina is a flat character, innocent and naïve, an acquiescent person who at first tries to ‘kick her fate’ but her miserable life keeps her undeveloped. The character, whose naïvety is well characterized, fails to present the whole story of women’s lives. Nonetheless, other characters who suggest many political issues of Bangladeshi society surround her. Most of them are middle-class characters who talk about the issues from their viewpoints. For example, Mr. Chowdhury, the landlord, talks about corruption from his point of view. Lovely’s husband is busily engaged with politics and the political parties and election due to his interest stemming from working at Bangla National Plastics. He is involved in a ‘party which is important for [his] position and job’ (226). There is Zaid, the cook, who Hasina finally escapes with, but he is not presented as a person active in politics.

The women workers around her are voiceless, silent, obedient, and even forlorn characters. Hasina herself is not the type of character who can present all these matters. How could such a simple character present the other side of Bangladeshi women’s lives? This limitation is the very point of the criticism introduced in chapter two of the thesis. This is, to me, a weakness of the novel. Although *Brick Lane* is a literary product, it
cannot be isolated from society and its conflicts. Looking at the novel from this angle, and furthermore examining it in an objective perspective, the text is a one-sided representation of the Bangladeshi women issue.

In chapter two, I have analyzed the situation of women using narrative theory to explain how the techniques and structures of the novel present women’s issues. My aim is not just to show the aesthetic part of the novel, but to show that this form and its structure are products of a historical era within which contradictory forces coexist. Relying on Marx and Engels’ notion about history, I would conclude that the dichotomy between oppression and defiance is an inevitable element of each history. If oppression of women is an essential constituent element of Bangladeshi society, women struggle for a better life is also a fact. In my view, this struggle for a better life is absent from Ali’s fiction. It is not the task of literature to change the course of history, and I mentioned Eagleton’s claim about that in the introduction. And yet literature can play a significant role in furthering these changes. *Brick Lane* is a literary work which does not play a visible role in changing women’s conditions.

*Brick Lane* is a product of a historical era including the atrocities of 11 September, the clash of ‘cultures’ or ‘civilizations’, Islam and/or political Islam’s endeavour for domination, multiculturalism through which many backward cultures and traditions are kept alive…etc. These issues have created, and have in themselves, economic, social, political, and ideological complexities. The intricacies implied in these issues have affected not only researches and social documentaries, but also fictional works and literary works and the arts. In other words, the status quo has resulted in ideological ambiguities.

This ideological ambiguity is reflected in Ali’s presentation of Islam. In chapter three, I deliberately referred to the verses from the Koran to show how Islam views women and their rights. My aim in juxtaposing these verses with the women’s issues suggested in the novel has been to show that the image of Islam given in the text is contradictory to Islam’s real position. In other words, the novel does not imply that the women’s issues presented are mimicking what Islam really suggests for women. On the contrary, as a ‘postcolonial’ aim of the novel, Islam is authenticated to be an important and inseparable part of ‘the history of the nation’. The spirituality suggested through the
protagonist imposes silence on the fact that Islam itself is a part of the oppression of women. That is why the specter of Islam, as Marx’s might have put it, haunts the whole novel and expresses itself to be ‘their identity’. Islam is not shown as evil; it is beautified in *Brick Lane*.

Ali’s characters are the products of this category, the ideological turmoil and the spiritual inclination are interwoven with the origin of ethnicity. Chanu and Dr Azad are signifiers of ‘sophisticated’ people clinging to their ethnicity and accepting religion as the undeniable constituent of that. Karim, the ‘fundamentalist’ Muslim, returns to the home of his ‘origin’ home. Hasina is always calling on Allah to show pity. Nazneen is victimized into accepting the author’s ambiguity and accepting Islam as a relief for her misery. Thus, the text is trying to suggest that women can ‘greet Islam with flowers’, as it is a relief to their souls or spirits. Regarding this issue, I conclude that the novel tries to reconcile women with Islam. This point does not only deserve comment, but also criticism. The thesis, and specifically chapter three, presents this criticism. To me, what makes one sceptical is the novel’s avoidance of the Rushdie and Nasreen affairs. I think that the novel’s attempt to give different, more positive image of Islam necessitates that conspicuous avoidance. This is why *Brick Lane* remains aloof from those affairs and those controversial authors, whose works resulted in the Islamists’ outrage.

Not only issues about women in Bangladesh are presented: Ali dramatizes important issues about immigrants and immigrant women in the London of the novel. I have discussed these issues in chapter four, showing that Bangladeshi women are marginalized and relegated to the fringes of ‘multicultural’ London. They are still victims of the same patriarchal, backward assumptions. We have seen that the different eras of London do not appear to be very different for women. This is related to multiculturalism which celebrates the differences of cultures and thus respects those assumptions, calling them a part of ‘their culture’, the very important criteria for keeping immigrant workers silent and low paid. The issues about women broached in these different areas constitute Ali’s criticism of multiculturalism. But, as I have shown, her focus on ethnic background as an originality veils her criticism concerning multiculturalism. There are no conflicts created or discourses on the issue.
The character who could have been a figure to implement that discourse is Mrs Azad, who signifies nonconformity. But her short appearance is an obstacle to showing that nonconformity. It is as if Ali wants to avoid any serious ‘anti current movements’, which may create arguments, suggestions or discourses. This lack creates a gap between the discourses that no character can fill. The book seems to be content with mere satirical articulations about connecting the ‘multicultural’ London with the state’s racism. Chanu is the character who suggests this satiric criticism. It is necessary to bear in mind that he is an ethnocentric (and even nationalist) person who scrutinizes London and UK society from this point of view. This slight criticism of multiculturalism is an asset of the novel, but it is also covered with the ‘dust’ of clinging to one’s ethnicity. Women’s struggle against the patriarchal assumptions in the Bangladeshi community surrounding the female characters is not exposed. The same criticism applies to issues suggested about women in Bangladesh.

The themes and the issues behind them are all introduced to the reader through the novel’s protagonist Nazneen, the ‘richly complex character’. We have seen in chapter five that she was brought up and nurtured to be silent and keep everything in her heart. Because she seemed stillborn, she has to be grateful to God who revived her. She is always reminded of the story of ‘How You Were Left To Your Fate’. Her dilemma, as Ali herself puts it, springs from accepting or rejecting her fate. She remains submissive to her fate and throughout her life she accepts ‘the Grace of God’. By defining her directly as ‘a solemn child’, Ali tries to give us the impression right from the beginning that her protagonist will remain silent. The mantra, ‘what could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne’, will become the ‘principle’ which predetermines this character’s subsequent actions. It is this artistic motif that creates the main theme of accepting one’s fate. To me, it is a nihilistic viewpoint, which the novel generally suggests. It is this motif which is required to impose the metaphors and similes, like for example ‘a field of snakes’ and ‘snowstorm’, on Nazneen. She is doomed to bear everything that is predetermined for her.

One very important element that remains an obstacle to Nazneen’s freedom is her reliance on religion. No character around Nazneen, whether male or female, questions Islam. There is no discourse by any character to question that religion. On the contrary,
religion is presented as the ‘sigh’ of oppressed Nazneen, and indeed of the other females. The novel keeps reminding us that the verses from the Koran give Nazneen a tremendous high. This is why the narrator uses the ‘sufi’ and ‘dervish’ similes for her, even when she has sex with Karim. It is not coincidental that the text always cites from the Koran, whenever it tells of Nazneen’s inner misery. In such a way, the text is trying to suggest spirituality, which here is distinctly Islamic.

To me, the issues I have discussed and the way they are presented in the text are indications of the prevalent ideas of the British bourgeoisie concerning immigrants. A part of that ideology— as, of course, a part of society’s superstructure— summons ‘Muslim’ immigrant women to cling to Islam as the best alternative for their spirituality. The bourgeoisie cannot suggest ‘Muslim’ women go to churches, for example, or follow Christianity, but it encourages them to resort to Islam and its values. It pushes women into being addicted more and more to that opium which stupefies them and thus keeps them subjugated. According to my analysis, the novel intricately suggests accepting Islamic values. Thus Brick Lane comes dangerously close to parroting the prevalent ideological notions of the British bourgeoisie.

I do not want to conclude that the text is simply a reflection of that bourgeois ideology. To apply Eagleton’s claim (about Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’), I would say that Brick Lane ‘has no simple correspondence’ with this ideological notion or ‘with the political and economic conditions which produced it’.122 As a novel, it ‘does not of course know itself as a product of a particular ideological [tumult], for if it did it would cease to exist’.123 Appropriating Trotsky’s claim that ‘a work of art should be judged in the first place by its own law’, Brick Lane is a complex novel possessed of great aesthetic techniques, something which makes it ‘stunning, almost poetic at times’. It is a literary product of a specific historical era, an era of the ‘multicultural world’, a world that needs to recognize religion as ‘a part of “their” culture’.

122 Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism. p. 15
123 Ibid
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