

□ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 304**

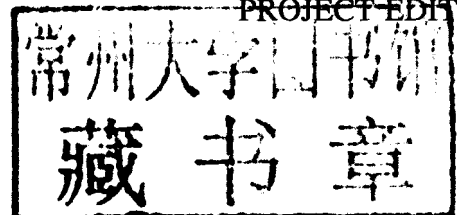


Volume 304

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Jeffrey W. Hunter**  
PROJECT EDITOR



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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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# Monica Ali

## 1967-

Bangladeshi-born English novelist.

The following entry presents criticism on Ali's career through 2009.

### INTRODUCTION

Ali is one of the most acclaimed young writers of the early twenty-first century. Born in Bangladesh but raised and educated in England, she is recognized for her focus on the previously underrepresented South Asian immigrants in Great Britain. Her fictional evocation of life within an insulated community is considered as rich in detail as novels by Charles Dickens or Gustave Flaubert.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ali was born in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, which at the time was known as East Pakistan. Her father, Hatem Ali, was a teacher who had met her British mother, Joyce, while studying in the north of England. When Ali's parents were married in Dhaka, they defied the Bangladeshi tradition of prearranged marriages. Civil war broke out in East Pakistan in 1971, forcing Ali's parents to move to England for the safety of their family. Ali later entered Wadham College of Oxford University and graduated with degrees in philosophy, politics, and economics. She went to work in the marketing department of a small publishing house before joining a branding agency. During this period she met her future husband, a management consultant named Simon Torrance. When her first child was born, Ali quit work and decided to join an online short story writing group. She had never tried writing fiction before, and soon found herself yearning to break out of the restrictions of short fiction. After the death of her maternal grandfather, she and her husband went on vacation, and she began writing her first novel, *Brick Lane* (2003). Ali wanted to get critical feedback on the first two chapters, so she passed them along to a friend who worked at a publishing company. Within days she was offered a book deal that included a generous advance, some of which she used to pay for childcare while she completed the novel. In early 2003—months before *Brick Lane* was to be officially

published—Ali became an overnight sensation when her name appeared in the prestigious literary journal *Granta* as one of the Twenty Best Young British Novelists under Forty. The novel was later short-listed for Britain's most esteemed literary award, the Man Booker Prize, as well as the *Guardian* First Book Award. In 2007 *Brick Lane* was made into an acclaimed film. Her second novel, *Alentejo Blue*, appeared in 2006, and her third, *In the Kitchen*, in 2009.

### MAJOR WORKS

Ali's fiction uses unadorned language to clearly communicate social concerns. The protagonist of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, was born in a Bangladeshi village and married off at age eighteen to Chanu, a man several years her senior. The couple moves to London and settles in the South Asian stronghold of London's East End, an area anchored by the titular Brick Lane, which takes its name from the brick-making industry that thrived there a century earlier. Nazneen is bewildered by life in London, and becomes ambivalent about her husband, Chanu, even as her dependence on him grows with the birth of each of their children. The course of the novel spans thirteen years, from 1988 to the events that follow the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. As the years pass, Nazneen begins to venture further away from Brick Lane. When she first arrives, she is afraid to leave the apartment, but she eventually meets her neighbors and even takes a job as a seamstress. Through her job she meets a young, charismatic Muslim activist named Karim, and with him she begins to explore the parts of London far removed from the insular community surrounding Brick Lane. A study of the exploitation of illegal immigrants, *In the Kitchen* doubles as a murder mystery in which a hotel chef, Gabriel, discovers the murdered corpse of a Ukrainian night porter.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ali's debut novel met with some controversy upon publication, as some critics deemed her representation of Bangladeshi immigrants condescending or one-dimensional. Despite these charges, the majority of reviewers lauded *Brick Lane*, praising the authenticity



of the narrative as well as the formal construction of the novel, which they have treated as a means of exploring the discourse surrounding minority groups. As commentator Jane Hiddleston claimed, “[T]he reader finishes less with an increased knowledge of the experiences of an unfamiliar section of the British population than with a sense of unease towards the sorts of discourse used to construct such knowledge.” Furthermore, reviewers have likened the depiction of female labor in Ali’s first novel to that in William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, and have compared Ali’s portrayal of pluralistic British identity to those of Andrea Levy in *Small Island* and Zadie Smith in *White Teeth*. Moreover, the manipulation of stereotypes in *Brick Lane* has been studied by commentators like Michael Perfect, who stated: “What is perhaps most interesting about *Brick Lane* is the degree to which it is prepared to employ stereotypes in counterpoint to its narrative of empowerment; the degree to which it prioritizes the celebration of multiculturalism over the destabilization of the stereotypical.”

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Brick Lane* (novel) 2003  
*Alentejo Blue* (novel) 2006  
*In the Kitchen* (novel) 2009

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## CRITICISM

Ajay Singh (essay date 16 October 2003)

SOURCE: Singh, Ajay. “Booker Bet.” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 166, no. 41 (16 October 2003): 66-7.

[In the following essay, Singh comments on Ali’s background and the composition of *Brick Lane*.]

Some readers might conclude that *Brick Lane*, the only novel by an Asian-born author to be short-listed for this year’s Man Booker Prize, is a story about female empowerment. But Monica Ali, 35, who was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and raised in northern England, sees her debut novel as primarily a meditation on fate and free will.

“What is the root of happiness? My novel asks this question. Is it better to accept life as it is, or is it better to change it?” says Ali, during a stop on a book tour of the United States.

Questions of free will and determinism, Ali points out, are more prevalent in the West than some might think. “On the one hand, we have self-help books that tell us everything is in our control,” she says. “On the other, we have psychoanalysis and a range of therapies in which acceptance is the goal.”

Ali, half-English by birth, understands such contradictions well. Indeed, she says she “swims in the same sea of conflicting hopes and beliefs” as her protagonist, a Bangladeshi immigrant to London called Nazneen. “Nazneen struggles with what she can change in her life and what she must accept,” Ali says.

The tall, soft-spoken Ali grew up hearing captivating stories about Bangladesh from her immigrant father in his native tongue. But such was the pressure of integrating with British life that she stopped speaking to her father in Bengali by the age of six, forgetting all but a few words of the language.

Turning only to English, Ali devoured the works of such writers as R. K. Narayan—“whom I love,” she says—and Austen, Tolstoy and Nabokov. She credits her love of fiction to a wide range of reading from an early age.

“I was the kind of girl whose face was always hidden behind a book,” she says. But she never forgot those stories from Bangladesh. And as she got older, Ali says, she became more and more interested in the land of her birth. “I felt a need to preserve the stories my father told me.”

Finally, she sat down and wrote the novel in 18 months.

“I had been thinking of writing the novel for quite some time but kept putting it off. If you want to achieve something you have to seize the moment.”

*Brick Lane* is a deceptively subtle book. Ali writes with such empathy and humour about her characters that it’s hard to dislike even the annoying ones. Although Ali’s prose is largely unadorned—even amateurish at times—she has a talent for fine similes and metaphors. Most impressive is her sense of detail and gentle satire. “Dr. Azad was a small, precise man who, contrary to the Bengali custom, spoke at a level only one quarter of a decibel above a whisper. Anyone who wished to hear what he was saying was obliged to lean in towards him, giving the appearance of hanging on his every word,” she writes of one of her fictional creations.

Chanu Ahmed, a plump and painfully comical émigré from Bangladesh is by far the book’s most complex, endearing and comical character. He lives in Brick

Lane, a run-down neighbourhood in London's East End, where most of the novel is set. Frustrated in his efforts to assimilate into British society, Chanu yearns to return to his native land after marrying Nazneen, an innocent, teenage bride from rural Bangladesh. "We will go back before they get spoiled," he keeps saying of his family. But like so many immigrants, he never does, partly because success in Britain constantly eludes him and partly because his "unspoiled" wife doesn't wish to return home.

Nazneen is much more open to the modern world, though she arrives in London capable of uttering only two expressions in English: "sorry" and "thank you." She's a devout Muslim, but that doesn't stop her from watching with fascination as young men and women ice-skate on television and lovers in films kiss passionately. Eventually, she grows tired of her middle-aged husband's intellectual grandiosity and her drab, insular life stitching garments in a high-rise council flat. In a move that surprises even herself, she begins a torrid love affair with Karim, a fiery Muslim who wants to radicalize a group of local Bengalis, and who is, ironically, fervently opposed to promiscuity.

Although religion was never part of the question for Ali—her Muslim father went to a Hindu school and married a Christian woman—there was the question of Ali's legacy to her children.

"I am worried that our kids will lose one part of my heritage," she says, especially since her own links with Bangladesh have weakened with time. A former freelance copywriter, Ali lives in London with her husband, who is English, and their four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. Ali says she was warmed by the reception of her book in the United States. "It was really gratifying to see all these South Asian women come up and say 'we're proud of you'."

#### Jane Hiddleston (essay date March 2005)

SOURCE: Hiddleston, Jane. "Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40, no. 1 (March 2005): 57-72.

[In the following essay, Hiddleston analyzes the formal structures in *Brick Lane* that draw attention to the novel's artificiality and its representation of Bangladeshi culture.]

Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life behind was all shapes and shadows.<sup>1</sup>

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* burst into the public domain in the summer of 2003, generating both enthusiastic critical acclaim and defensive anger. Praised by some for providing a much needed and so far unprecedented portrait of the Bangladeshi community of London's East End, the novel also irritated some members of that community, who saw its portrayal of their lives as inaccurate and derogatory. While some readers congratulated Ali for pulling back the curtains of the residences of Tower Hamlets and depicting the injustices and dissatisfactions suffered by their inhabitants, others were shocked by her boldness and offended by what they considered to be a gross misrepresentation of Bengali culture in London. Included in Granta's list of best young authors, nominated for the US Award of the National Book Critics' Circle, and short-listed for the Booker Prize, Ali at the same time received a letter from the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare council condemning her depiction of Bangladeshis as backward and uneducated. This divided response to Ali's work reveals not only differences in readerly expectations and preconceptions regarding the community in hand, but also a mire of uncertainties concerning the nature of literary representation, in this particular case and more generally. This article will try to elucidate these uncertainties and establish more clearly the nature and implications of Ali's fictional experimentation in *Brick Lane*. Both the responses cited above seem still to rely on some notion of literature as realist documentation, but an alternative approach might focus instead on the difficulties of such a construction, on the deceptive effects of the text's rhetoric. The novel at times draws attention to its own artifice, rather than purporting to provide straightforward knowledge about a community unfamiliar to many readers. I want to examine the fraught relationship between these readings, and the novel's ambivalent call to the reader to interpret it on two seemingly incompatible levels.

Ali's novel to a certain extent sets itself up as a fresh look behind the closed doors of a segregated community positioned at the centre of the British capital. Situated at the heart of London, side by side with the financial centre of the city, the geographical area around Brick Lane is nevertheless still conceived as a segregated space for the underprivileged. Although this segregation, this sense of separation from the rest of society, means that it is increasingly perceived as a tourist attraction, the area is still associated with stereotypes and myths of backwardness, delinquency and social nonconformity. Sukhdev Sandhu's review of *Brick Lane* in *The London Review of Books* traces some of the history of this exclusion, noting that from as early as the eighteenth century the area has been "a home for those who have been pushed out of their

homes".<sup>2</sup> It housed Huguenot refugees escaping French persecution, followed by East European Jews fleeing the pogroms in 1882, and immigrants from Bangladesh, Malta, Cyprus, the Caribbean and Somalia have been settling there for over two hundred years.<sup>3</sup> The Bangladeshi community is currently by far the largest of these groups, in part due to an influx of migrant workers who arrived from Dhaka in the 1960s in the hope of finding work in textile factories. As the area has become more and more densely populated by Bangladeshis, and as these seemingly transient migrants become a more settled and permanent population, Brick Lane has also become a site of cultural conflict, and the number of racist attacks has continued to grow. In addition, 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. Brick Lane has more recently been affected by rising (exoticist) consumerism, but it is still associated with social deprivation and poorly maintained housing estates, the inhabitants of which struggle to keep up with the boom in capitalist culture infiltrating nearby streets. One part of Ali's endeavour consists in puncturing the myths that circulate around this annexed region, and she seeks at once to humanize the apparent "underclass" of its residents and to expose the preconceptions informing popular images of the unfamiliar stranger within.

From this point of view, the early evocation of "shapes and shadows" in *Brick Lane* announces Ali's daring attempt to give form to the hazy figures that flicker behind the surface of persistent stereotypes and misconceptions. Ali boldly looks behind the walls of an area thought to be populated by migrants, living at once within and outside British society, and whose cultural practices continue to provoke bafflement and alarm. Discussion of the extent to which the novel does actually reveal the subterranean existence of the real inhabitants of Brick Lane, however, perhaps ignores the multi-layered nature of the project. First, the very notion of the "shapes and shadows" draws attention to the haziness of the figures sketched by Ali. The image of the net curtains plays on the notion of revelation or viewing, since they precisely allow the inhabitant to see without being seen, and to frustrate the viewer's desire to see. All we are offered are murky silhouettes, and this partial veiling both provokes and eludes our quest for knowledge. Furthermore, the use of this Platonic metaphor precisely reminds us that these characters are mere forms or outlines, imperfect shadows that fail to reveal any underlying truth. The evocation of characters in these terms emphasizes the ways in which they are flawed, insubstantial imitations; they are not real essences but forms carved out in language. Ali's text is split, then, by this contradic-

tion between the hope for revelation on the one hand, and knowledge of the impossibility of any complete unveiling on the other. She 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. At the same time, however, the process of uncovering can itself be read as a fictional construction created in discourse.

Secondly, Ali's gesture of pulling back the curtains can be seen as the latest, modern version in a series of endeavours to unveil the mysteries of an "Eastern" culture. Said's *Orientalism* tracks the history of this mythologization, locating across different forms of cultural production the Western desire to know and appropriate the "Oriental" other.<sup>4</sup> Said's scope includes both the quest for knowledge underpinning colonial occupation, and cultural narratives tracing the confusion of such discoveries with subjective and aesthetic fantasies and desires. One common trope, moreover, which resonates in particular with Ali, is that of unveiling, and of the penetration of interior space, demonstrated perhaps most famously by Delacroix. The celebrated *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* was the product of the painter's unorthodox penetration into the women's quarters in the house of one of the *raïs* during his travels in North Africa. First, the work is at once a revealing depiction of a space conventionally shielded from the public gaze, and a somewhat fetishized portrait of a subject already formed by Orientalist myths and stereotypes. It serves both to raise questions about the nature of women's existence cloistered in the harem, and to draw attention to the traps of the representation process, as the painting plays on exoticist misrepresentations and the deceptive allure of the unfamiliar other. Secondly, however, the Delacroix painting then seems to question its own endeavour, as the women are portrayed as distant and dreamy, immersed in another world to which we cannot gain full access. The penetration of women's private, interior space does not necessarily result in concrete discovery or knowledge.

Ali's *Brick Lane* undertakes a similar project insofar as it invites us to discover the occluded lives of the disenfranchized while also, paradoxically, showing the pervasive influence of myth in our apprehension of "Eastern" cultures. On one level, the text can be seen as an attempt to exhibit the life-styles and customs of a community traditionally either hidden from view or depicted according to popular stereotypes, and Ali sets out to inform her readers by portraying the supporters of radical Islam (as if) from the inside. To a certain extent, indeed like Delacroix, Ali wants to expose the suffering of an oppressed segment of society, and she also humanizes and provides a context for a form of

Islamic cultural practice that has perhaps recently generated more suspicion and more myth-making than any other custom. Nevertheless, while Ali wants to destroy certain myths, her own text testifies to the impossibility of ridding one's narrative of any mythologizing tendencies, and her text displays the traps and lures of the representation process itself. The novel can be read as a quest for knowledge, for unveiling, but it simultaneously betrays its own shaky status as a fictional construction that masks as much as it reveals.

The text can in this way be read on two levels. The first of these would be concerned with its success or failure as an accurate depiction of the people living behind the curtains of the flats situated around Brick Lane. Since the novel does name that community and is quite explicit about its aims to unveil it, its treatment as a "realist" text seems justifiable. The second level, however, would emphasize not the accuracy of the representation but the text's own use of rhetoric and its self-exposure as a discourse among many alternative, available versions or myths. As Nicholas Harrison points out in *Postcolonial Criticism*, both approaches are determined by a history of reading conventions and practices.<sup>5</sup> Harrison's conclusion to his explorations of Conrad, Camus, Chraïbi and Djébar stresses how literary texts do not intrinsically call for the use of just one set of interpretative strategies, and the understanding of literature as a process of formal experimentation belongs to a very particular reading community. In the context of Ali's work, however, since critics have already assessed its efficacy as a portrait of a particular social phenomenon, it might now be illuminating to foreground precisely those tropes and devices that announce its status as an artificial construct. Existing readings, that conceive the text either as uniquely revelatory or as grossly misrepresentative, can be counter-posed with this awareness of its implications as a literary experiment, a space where different discourses and rhetorical strategies are juxtaposed and realigned.

*Brick Lane* focuses on the trying life of its central character, Nazneen, born in Bangladesh, married off at an early age to the overweight, frog-faced Chanu and shipped off to London to live with him in Tower Hamlets. Ali concentrates in minute detail on the intricacies of Nazneen's life, shut away from the world with no freedom to make decisions of her own, and the narrative revels in its permeation of the interior of the home, as well as in its dissection of her repressed longings. Agony and stupor at the death of her first son are followed by the dull gnawing of routine domesticity, broken only by seemingly ridiculous fantasies about ice-skating, learned from the competitions she avidly watches on the television. Later on in

the novel, Nazneen meets Karim, an activist for a local Islamic group, whose seductive energy enthralls the housewife and leads her into an illicit affair. Through Nazneen's relationship with Karim, Ali explores the allure of the Islamic cause for characters who desperately need to reclaim a sense of self, and the text subtly juxtaposes depictions of hope with scattered comments on racism, prejudice, deprivation and social inequality. Noting also the conflicts between Nazneen, Chanu and their daughters, the novel seems to want to provide insight into the frustration and disorientation of a particular generation, caught between cultures and struggling to define itself on its own terms, according to its own choices and beliefs.

Since the novel opens with the scene of Nazneen's birth, one of the first issues Ali deals with is cultural practice and custom back in Bangladesh. In a style at this point reminiscent of Rushdie's humorous exaggerations, Ali comically describes the mother Rupban's surprise at the premature arrival, and subsequent survival, of the tiny Nazneen, by infusing the narrative with fantastic analogies and hints of unexplained customs or beliefs. Even in these opening pages, however, the reader is forced to consider the implications and effects of common stereotypes or rhetorical tropes. Ali already starts to plant images stemming from manufactured expectations regarding Bengali culture and thought, and in so doing she immediately casts doubt over her own project of revelation. One reviewer, Natasha Walter, complains in this context that Ali uses: "forgettable images. Nazneen's mother 'had been ripening like a mango on a tree'. The midwife 'was more desiccated than an old coconut'".<sup>6</sup> From this point of view, Ali's imagery seems somewhat stereotypical and contrived, taking obvious, stock signifiers of an exotic Eastern culture and using them to caricature the community of "foreign" characters evoked. Whether or not Ali intended to include such stereotypes in order to provoke the reader, or indeed whether she absorbed them unwittingly and reproduced them intact, remains in some sense open to question in this early scene. Most importantly, however, what is compelling about the passage is that in depicting Nazneen's origins in Bangladesh, Ali is precisely drawing attention to Western assumptions and stereotypes, or at least to the ways in which popular images serve to organize and shape our perceptions of Asian culture. A further example might be when Hamid greets the birth of a daughter, as opposed to a son, with resolute indifference before Ali cuts to an evocation of curry smells, and here the use of such stock images again provokes us into interrogating our preconceptions as readers approaching Bangladesh from the outside. Ali does herself pinpoint this shaky, mythical perception of Bangladesh, when she com-