“She Isn’t Going to Give Up”: Women’s Resilience in
Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* – A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

While Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* is most often analyzed from the vantage points of postcolonialism as a text dealing primarily with the plight of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London, it is difficult, if not downright impossible, to overlook the crucial role women and feminine resilience (in the face of not only patriarchy, but also racism, religion and social unrest) play in the novel. In actual fact, the story can much easier be read as the plight of women in their quest for self-determination and identity than as a novel about cultural clashes in the multicultural metropolis. The present essay sets out to prove that feminism is actually at the forefront of Ali’s novel, and that the feminine characters in *Brick Lane* stand for a post-feminist reflection on the (still) gasping abyss between theoretical gender equality and real-life sexism.

Keywords: Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, feminism, postcolonialism, culture clash, emancipation, immigrants, feminine resilience

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patriarchy, but also racism, religion and social unrest) play in the novel. *Brick Lane* is the story of Nazneen, a young woman of Bangladeshi origin, who comes to England by way of her arranged marriage to Chanu, a man significantly older than her. Brought up in the image of the submissive, obedient Bengali wife, Nazneen soon finds herself attracted to Western freedoms, and even enters a passionate physical relationship with the young Islamist radical Karim. In the end, Nazneen rejects both Chanu and Karim, and finds her voice and self-determination in her relationship with her two daughters and her female friends – an indirect feminist manifesto. In actual fact, the story of Nazneen can much easier be read as the plight of women in their quest for self-determination and identity than as a novel about cultural clashes in the multicultural metropolis. The postcolonial and feminist concerns are, however, not mutually exclusive, as Jameel Ahmed Al-Ghaberi accurately notes: “It is in this novel that Monica Ali narrates the success of a third world woman in a Western country who managed to overcome the constraints of cross-cultural sieges” (14). The novel’s political dimension intertwining with its feminist one is also noted by Sherine Fouad Mazloun, who argues that “women change in the process of globalization” (547). One might easily argue that feminism is actually at the forefront of Ali’s novel, and that the feminine characters in *Brick Lane* stand for a post-feminist reflection on the (still) gasping abyss between theoretical gender equality and real-life sexism.

In a *Guardian* article regarding her stance of feminism, Ali recalls her early encounter and fascination with feminism, while at the same time noting that any feminist movement she might have been part of in her youth was nothing more than a timid attempt:

As a student in the late 80s, I read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett. I knew that challenging the patriarchy was an urgent task, and I knew how to accomplish it: by making banners and drinking tea in the Wadham Women’s Room (at the Oxford college where I was an undergraduate). The banners were deployed on marches such as the one that protested against MP

David Alton's 1987 private member's bill to end late abortions. "Keep your hands off my body," we shouted, supremely confident, blissfully blind to any ethical nuance in one of the defining issues of gender equality – that of our reproductive rights. Looking back now, what strikes me most about our feminist vanguard was how timid it was. Wadham still has a Women's Room, but now it is available for women who can't get home at night. Why didn't we think of that? Of the 10 undergraduates at college on my course (PPE), I was the only girl. I asked the tutor in charge of admissions why. He explained that in his experience "clever girls who come here don't work very hard". I was outraged but too timid to say so, and I was also pathetically grateful I'd slipped through the net. ("Monica Ali on Feminism")

Considering that the author looks upon 80s feminism as a "timid vanguard," we might assume that *Brick Lane* was her attempt at setting things straight and engaging with feminism from a complex, individual, and profoundly personal perspective. It might also be Ali 'paying her dues' to the real-life plights of real-life women - those women she and her female colleagues at Oxford did not think of, as she herself confesses.

It is hard to overlook the fact that most of *Brick Lane*'s main protagonists are women: Nazneen, a Bangladeshi girl who comes to London at the age of eighteen as a result of an arranged marriage, her beautiful and impetuous sister Hasina, their mysterious mother referred to as Amma, their aunt Mumtaz, Nazneen's neighbours in London (Razia, Mrs. Islam, Jorina, Hanufa, Nazma, Sorupa), her daughters Shahana and Bibi – and even seemingly minor characters who briefly appear in the novel, but in actual fact have an enormous impact on the overall symbolism and significance of the text (e.g. the tattoo lady, the woman who commits suicide by jumping from a building, the sex worker Shenaz) are also of the female gender. Furthermore, *Brick Lane* is a solid wall of existential and narrative continuity, built by piling up the individual bricks of female experience. Men appear frugally and hastily in *Brick Lane*, disappearing as swiftly as they appeared and leaving no considerable traces behind: Chanu and Karim both leave to

Bangladesh, Razia's husband is killed in an accident - even Nazneen's baby boy Raqib dies unexpectedly at the frail age of five months. Men always leave, so women would do better not to place their existence in their hands, is what the novel seems to suggest. This is masterfully reflected by Amma's words: "Treat it like a baby, but it will fly away. Waste your love on a bird, but it cannot love you back. It will fly away" (Ali 217). Apparently Amma refers to the bird her sister Mumtaz has found and is taking care of, but actually she is talking about men, love, and her own unhappy marriage to her husband who has another wife he visits regularly. For Amma, a woman's life is an endless sequence of misery, sadness and misfortune, all of which have to be accepted in silence: "I don't want anything from this life,' she said. 'I ask for nothing. I expect nothing. (...) How can I be disappointed?'" (102). The stark irony, however, is that Amma is not at all as detached from things as she would like to appear. As the novel advances, it becomes more and more obvious to the reader that Amma is a profoundly troubled soul, who is, in fact, suffering greatly. Her husband's infidelity clouds her judgment and turns her into a beast wearing the mask of a saint, as her husband ironically remarks numerous times throughout the novel. Amma is the one who breaks the neck of her sister Mumtaz's bird, and she commits suicide by impaling herself on a sharp stick while wearing her best sari, leaving her children and her family to deal with the post-traumatic stress and the numerous questions raised by her suicide. It is only revealed in the end of the novel that Amma's death was not an accident: by that time the reader has already made out that Amma is not what she wanted to seem or what the narration initially suggested she was.

However, the narrator makes it quite clear that the cause of Amma's emotional breakdown was her husband's infidelity, and her incapacity to deal with and accept what is even nowadays nonchalantly referred to as 'the unchangeable nature of men.' As a result of the emotional abuse she suffered, Amma herself turns into an abuser, in life, and even after her death, when she returns to haunt the bruised consciousness of her already grieving daughter Nazneen: "'Don't think I wasn't watching you,' Amma snapped. A

little ooze of red ran out of the corner of her mouth. (...) She began to spit the words out and drops of red flew with them. (...) Amma walked towards her. She held her hands over her chest. The red spurted from between them. 'Now say this to yourself, and say it out loud. 'I killed my son. I killed my son'' (432). As most victims of abuse will do, Amma interiorizes the abusive behaviour and directs it at her own daughter, inflicting feelings of guilt and shame upon her. Amma symbolically stands for the internalized patriarchy: women who have been brainwashed out of their true self into accepting patriarchy's game of blind submission (to fate, materialized by men), violence and mental abuse, and who now apply the same patriarchal model that crushed them on their fellow women.

Nazneen is initially also trapped in this model, and the more she becomes conscious of it and tries to escape it, the more her self-inflicted feelings of guilt hold her back. There are passages of extraordinary descriptive, narrative and symbolic force in the novel, describing Nazneen's hallucinations brought about by her difficulty of letting go of her patriarchal upbringing: "As soon as she moved, the smooth wood of the choki turned to glue and stuck to her thighs. She tried to free herself but sticky tendrils lashed around her legs. (...) Thick fronds whipped around her stomach and arms, warm and wet as mucus and tough as vines. She bucked her body but the more she struggled the more the fronds lashed at her until they covered her chest, her neck, her face" (431).

In the face of patriarchy and oppression, *Brick Lane* offers various means of coping and resistance: Amma's, which translates to silent suffering and ultimately suicide (Bibi can also be partially included here – her nail and hair biting, as well as obvious anxiety, are signs of a profound unhappiness she is unable to express), Hasina's and Shahana's, which is basically rebellion and defiance towards social and moral norms, Mrs. Islam's, which is copying and emulating patriarchy, and Nazneen's and Razia's, which are based on spiritual growth, finding one's own voice, identity and individuality, and realizing that female spiritual communion is superior to heterosexual relationships (be they marriage or sexual

liaisons, in Nazneen's case). In the end of the novel, when Nazneen's husband Chanu and her lover Karim have both fled to Bangladesh (one because he has failed to become successful in England, and the other one in order to join an extremist Islamic group), and Razia's husband has been killed in an accident (he was crushed by the frozen carcasses of seventeen cows falling on him in the slaughterhouse he works for), the two women find themselves faced with the necessity of taking their lives into their own hands.

The ridiculous death of Razia's husband (who in his own home was a frequent verbal and physical abuser) is not the only episode of this sort presented in the novel. Most of the time men are presented as ridiculous by Ali: from Chanu's perpetually inflated stomach (and ego) to the holes in Karim's socks, the novel's imagery of men seems to suggest that women imagine manhood much more than they actually experience it. When men are not violent, aggressive, dangerous, or downright murderous, they can only be ridiculous, is the novel's ultimate implication. What remains is the realization that in most heterosexual relationships, partners "make each other up," as Nazneen accurately voices it in the end of the novel: "She touched his hand for the last time. 'Oh, Karim (...) 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). But while Karim fails to realize this, Nazneen feels the full blow of her realization: men as desirable and respectable life partners can only exist within the female imagination.

The novel's final scene of perfect female communion between the two middle-aged women and the two young girls, separated by generation gaps and conflictual cultural and religious identities, but held together by their common womanhood, speaks for the ultimate conviction that in order for a woman to achieve peace of mind and self-determination, she needs to exist in an all-female community, away from men¹.

All the tragedies and misfortunes of women in *Brick Lane* are inevitably tied to men: Amma's suicide, the disappearance of

Abba's second wife, Mumtaz's difficult social status as a widow and a guest in her brother's house, Nazneen's arranged marriage, her destructive passion for Karim that almost costs her her sanity, the death of her son, Hasina's life of misery, rape and subsequent prostitution, Razia's problems with her son's drug addiction, or Mrs. Islam's desperate attempts to 'become a man' by acting like one. One must also recall the numerous stories of patriarchal abuse presented in the novel: the Dhaka garment women getting beaten until disfigurement by their jealous husbands who do not want them to work, the young village girl who is taken to the jungle and raped by one of the men, the death of Monju, whose husband and sister-in-law pour acid on her for refusing to sell her baby boy as her husband had planned, and even the silent domestic tragedy of Bangladeshi socialite Lovely (an allusion to pop star Britney Spears' musical hit *Lucky*), whose husband married her for her beauty only, and who spends her life rushing from one pointless social gathering to another and worrying that other women might be prettier than her.

Not only resisting, but also renouncing patriarchy is a painful process that is also amply mirrored in the novel. Amma renounces it by death – unable to cope with it, she abandons it, even if this means abandoning life. Mumtaz devises a clever trick in order to eschew it: to be able to speak her mind and be taken seriously, she makes up a story of her being in contact with a wise jinn capable of giving anyone sound life advice – consequently, the villagers, who would have never allowed her to speak up as a woman, flock to hear and take her advice (or rather the jinni's advice, delivered through Mumtaz's words). Shanahah runs away from home preferring a life on the streets over obeying her father and moving to Bangladesh. Nazneen leaves both Chanu and Karim and decides to become an independent woman. Mrs. Islam decides to renounce her womanhood and fight patriarchy with its own weapons (violence, aggression and ruthlessness), but in the process becomes the very thing she initially despised. Razia bravely faces her drug-addict son and locks him up in a room until he renounces heroin. Even the nameless girls in burkhas at the meeting of the Islamist

fundamentalists The Bengal Tigers will not allow men to silence them, and insist that the audience be addressed as “brothers and sisters,” not simply “brothers.” The only two women in the novel who seem not to want to escape or renounce patriarchy are Hasina and Lovely – and not accidentally, they are both very beautiful. Lovely uses her beauty to secure a life of comfort and luxury, and Hasina repeatedly jeopardizes everything in order to pursue romantic love. The difference between the two is that the former trades with her beauty, while the latter sees it as a misfortune that causes her numerous troubles and hardships. Physical beauty, the eternal object of male desire, is the only thing Hasina and Lovely possess. While the first decides to use it to her advantage, the second is used by men because of it. The concept of “love marriage” is repeatedly referred to in the novel, and it is always portrayed as something equally destructive as arranged marriages, kidnapping or even rape. It is a “love marriage” that ends in severe physical abuse which causes all subsequent tragedies in Hasina’s life and forces her to take up prostitution in order to survive.

The ultimate conclusion of *Brick Lane* is that all heterosexual relations will result in the woman getting hurt, abused, or at best abandoned. The only valid and lasting human relationship is true female friendship, depicted in the novel’s final passages, with Nazneen being taken on a surprise outing to a skating rink by her friend Razia and her daughters Shahana and Bibi. The first thing Nazneen ever watched on British TV after her arrival in London was ice skating – for her, the movements of the skaters embody the very idea of Western freedom. But the first time she watches ice skating on TV it is performed by a couple, a man and a woman, and it seems to her that the man is lifting the woman up and allowing her to float. In the end of the novel, when they reach the skating rink, there is only a solitary woman on the ice, not covered in makeup and sequins, but wearing a plain pair of jeans. The feminist implications are obvious here: Nazneen can lift her own weight, she can fly and soar even without the help of a male figure. Additionally, the solitary woman in jeans on the ice stands for female self-sufficiency and self-dependency. Feminine resilience is

also pictured. in one of the novel's most moving passages, detailing the rebellion of Bangladeshi village women who are instructed by the sex worker Shenaz to withhold sex from their husbands in order to make them fetch water. Beauty and physical intimacy are for most women the only way to 'control' and 'subdue' men – unfortunately both have a painfully clear expiry date. The only valid alternative is female self-sufficiency: resisting and ultimately renouncing men, and even heterosexual relationships, in favour of a solid, truthful and supportive female communion.

Notes:

¹ See also Adrienne Rich's seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence," where Rich argues that lesbianism does not necessarily entail a sexual relationship, but should rather be understood as a profound spiritual communion between women, rejoicing in their shared womanhood.

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