Migratory Modernisms: Novel Homelands in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

This essay argues that Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), imports elements of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* into its narrative as a form of cultural translation that inserts a contemporary story of Bangladeshi migration into the tradition of the 20th century British/Irish novel. The clue that unravels the connections is the name of Chanu's boss, Mr. Dalloway. The numerous subsequent echoes of the precursor texts (Chanu as Bloom; Nazneen as Clarissa) are not instances of the empire writing back against colonial dominance, or belatedness, or post/colonial mimicry. Ali's transplantations of Joyce's Dublin and Woolf's London into the migrant enclave of post-1970 Brick Lane perform a "translation" in which the "origin" and "target" texts are linked yet remain incommensurable. Like migration itself, this cultural translation is portrayed as a site of creativity that legitimates the new while it registers the connection/disconnection between the old and the new. Ali's intertextual strategy places *Brick Lane* at the centre, not the periphery of modern British literature.

Keywords

Migration, homeland, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, British literature, translation

> Migration is a central force in the constitution of modernity. . . . The metaphor of the journey, the figure of the stranger and the experience of displacement have been at the centre of many of the cultural representations of modernity.
>
> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration* (10-11)

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> Diasporic subjects are distinct versions of *modern*, transnational histories.
> James Clifford, "Diasporas" (266; emphasis added)

Migration accompanies the turbulence of modernity, as both cause and effect of epistemological turmoil. What Papastergiadis calls "the journey of modernity" (11) invokes human mobilities as constitutive of the modern – from the physical and geopolitical to the psychological, philosophical and spiritual. Unmoored from certainties of stasis, people on the move confront the figure of the strangers they meet in the elsewhere of travel and the stranger they find within themselves. Out of such displacements emerges a complex phenomenology – the despair of disjuncture and uncertainty, the nostalgia for lost traditions and homes, and the exhilarations of new openings and synergies. As Clifford writes, "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" ("Diasporas" 257), and the "empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*" (269). For Clifford, the "cultures of displacement and transplantation are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political and cultural interaction – histories that generate what might be called *discrepant cosmopolitanisms*" (36). Such discrepant cosmopolitanisms overlap with discrepant and divergent modernities.

Sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis and anthropologist James Clifford are describing the cultures of "the new migration," that is, the intensification of global migrations with the rise of late 20th century globalisation. However, I am struck by how apt their formulations are for early twentieth-century cosmopolitan modernity and for the transnational mobilities of many American, British, and European modernists – for the wandering expatriates like Ezra Pound, James Joyce, H.D., Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy; for the migrants like Joseph Conrad, Henry James and T.S. Eliot; for the restless travellers like E.M. Forster, Mulk Raj Anand, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen and even Virginia Woolf, to name but a few. What can we make of this continuity between different halves of the century, especially in the face of the obvious differences of privilege and relations to past histories of colonialism? Such differences are paramount to proponents of the "new cosmopolitanism," a cosmopolitanism "from below" that many sharply contrast to the cosmopolitanism "from above" evident in early twentieth-century *flânerie* and voluntary travel.[2] Such spatio/temporal distinctions between above and below or old and new cosmopolitanisms are common in current postcolonial theory. But like Rebecca Walkowitz in *Cosmopolitan Style*, I think the continuities are worth exploring. While Walkowitz finds the continuities in style, I locate the ongoing connection

[2] For current debates on cosmopolitanisms "from above" and "below," see Friedman, "Wartime Cosmopolitanism."

in migration, broadly understood as all forms of human mobility. In my view, the massive migrations of late twentieth-century postcolonials to the metropoles of their former colonisers represents not a postmodern break from early twentieth-century modernity but rather the continuation of the symbiotically linked modernities that connected the West and its colonies as constitutive of the earlier modernity. As I have written elsewhere, I object to the periodisation of modernism that announces an endpoint – e.g., 1945 – at the tail end of colonial modernity and the beginnings of emergent postcolonial modernities (*Planetary Modernisms* 83-96). The modernisms that accompany these interlinked modernities across the globe cover a longer span of time than the conventional datings of modernism, such as 1890-1945. As complicit in global colonial and postcolonial cultures, planetary modernism includes not only portions of the nineteenth century but also the long twentieth century, including the post-1945 period of the "new migration" (*Planetary Modernisms* 215-310).

Migration and its effects – intercultural contact zones; travelling, transplanting, and indigenising cultures; hybridisations; and diasporic longings – have been central to narratives of colonial and postcolonial modernities since 1945. For writers like Aimé Césaire, Tayeb Salih, Salmon Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, radical representational ruptures characterise their migration narratives, directly linking their texts in aesthetic as well as epistemological terms to earlier writers in the West. Here, however, I would like to focus on one early twenty-first century migration narrative whose engagement with earlier, Western forms of modernism is not particularly formalist, but is nonetheless acute and attests to forms of continuity between the earlier and later modernities. Short listed for the Booker Prize in 2003, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a predominantly realist novel of migration.

Brick Lane's publication – after a reputed £200,000 advance – and later film adaptation in 2007 were the occasion for considerable controversy, even protests against it on the grounds that it was *not* a realistic portrayal of the Bangladeshi community around Brick Lane, that it reinforced stereotypes of Muslim immigrants and that its focus on an individual woman's emergence from an oppressive marriage played into the colonial narrative of the white coloniser's burden to save "brown" women.[3] Its formal attributes echo the Victorian novel and such postcolonial descendants as Naguib Mafouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-1957) in its nuanced ethnographic social history with a large cast of characters. While not openly allied with the high modernist mode of Joyce or

[3] For debates about the novel's "realism," see Upstone, who proposes a category of "utopian realism" in defense of the novel; and Hiddleston, who argues that attacks on the novel's lack of realism miss its self-conscious artiface. For controversies about the reception of the novel and the film, see Ahmed, Benwell et al., and Perfect. In 2006, *The Guardian* printed a column by Germaine Greer (23 July 2006) which produced a kaleidoscope of views about Ali, her novel and the film.

Woolf, *Brick Lane* shares formalist qualities with less experimental Western modernists such as D.H. Lawrence, Conrad and Forster. Moreover, a closer look at its narrative strategies suggests ruptures in its ties to realism – its uses of epistolary interludes; motifs; free indirect discourse; occasional interior monologue; interruptive flashback memories, dreams and hallucinations; allegorically weighted names; and intertextual allusion and citational strategies. However, the main continuity I see between *Brick Lane* and earlier modernists in the West lies not so much in its form, but rather in the postcolonial encounters that Ali stages with her precursors, encounters in which the continuity of earlier and later modernities is affirmed, in which the turbulence of migration is newly highlighted as constitutive of modernity itself.

In telling the story of a Bangladeshi family's migration to London from the 1970s through 2002, *Brick Lane* deliberately imports elements of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* into its narrative as a form of cultural translation, indeed a transplantation and hybridisation that inserts a contemporary novel by the half English/half Bangladeshi novelist into the modern twentieth-century British/Irish novel.[4] The echoes of the precursor texts are both playful and serious. They are not implanted, I would argue, as instances of the empire writing back against colonial dominance, of belatedness or colonial derivativeness, or of a post/colonial mimicry.[5] Rather than rely on these older models of postcolonial resistance and angst, I prefer to read Ali's transplantations of Joyce's Dublin and Woolf's London through a lens based on migration – specifically Papastergiadis's notion that migrating people and symbolic systems perform a kind of cultural translation. Papastergiadis sets up an analogy between new developments in translation studies and migration studies. Just as translation theory now avoids privileging the origin text and recognises the translated text as a new text in its own right that blends elements of the origin and target languages, his migration theory avoids privileging the authenticity of the homeland culture and recognises the migrant's new culture as a hybridic intermingling of homeland and hostland cultural practices. In translation, the origin text and the target text remain incommensurable because elements of each culture are not fully translatable into each other; this incommensurability is no longer read as negative but instead as a site of creativity. Similarly, migration involves a kind of cultural translation that legitimates the new while it registers a gap between the old and the new – a disjuncture that accounts in part for the turbulence of the journey.

[4] I borrow here from Edward Said's "Traveling Theory" and "Traveling Theory Revisited" and James Clifford's "Traveling Cultures," seminal essays for a theory of circulating and indigenising texts and cultures, also discussed at length in *Planetary Modernisms* (62-69, 167-72, 215-21).

[5] See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* and Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* for theories of postcolonial strategies of resistance, ones that insufficiently explain (in my view) *Brick Lane*'s relationship to its precursors.

Brick Lane accomplishes a parallel cultural translation by linking its story with *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* at the same time that it insists on its difference, its creative incommensurability. The first clue to Ali's intertextual project is the name of Chanu's boss, Mr. Dalloway (16); this link to *Mrs. Dalloway* gives the reader permission to see a host of cultural/textual translations centred on names, issues of masculinity and social standing, motifs of depression and suicide, and mysteries of human character. Updating the ambitions of Septimus Warren Smith for social mobility in the context of migration, Chanu arrived in London in the 1970s from Bangladesh with his English major, love of English poetry, and university certificate in hand, his heart full of dreams and his head full of schemes for advancement in the metropole. He even spouts Shakespeare like Septimus and attends Morely College (27), the same London night school where Woolf taught working men and women in 2005-2007 (Lee 218-20). While the Great War interrupts Septimus's advance, Chanu comes up against Mr. Dalloway, whose refusal to promote Chanu leads to a series of retrenchments from middle class to working class status, from desk job to taxi cab, a descent that he experiences as a series of humiliations, initiated when he sees Wilkie, his white co-worker with less education, get the promotion he believes he deserves. Ali's choice of the boss's name conjures the Richard Dalloway of Woolf's novel, a member of Parliament of sufficient class and political standing to have the Prime Minister attend his wife's dinner party. He may also invoke Dalloway's earlier, more sinister incarnation in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in which Mr. Dalloway defends the British Empire just before he sexually assaults the novel's young protagonist, Rachel Vinrace. Ali's cultural translation of Woolf's Richard Dalloway into a late twentieth-century migration narrative echoes the power and privilege associated with the Englishman and highlights the humiliation of the postcolonial subject embedded in that masculine privilege. British nativist racism, embodied in *Brick Lane*'s Mr. Dalloway, holds out the promise of a better life to its former colonial subjects but then refuses systemic assimilation to Bangladeshi men. To counter the shame of what he considers his own failure, Chanu succumbs to nostalgia, to a defensive pride in a pre-colonial Bengali past, and to what he had mockingly called the "Going Home Syndrome" (18-19). Near the end of the novel, he himself succumbs to the syndrome and returns home in 2002, only to discover that Dhaka is no longer home, if it ever was; success is as elusive in Dhaka as it was in London, though for different reasons. The novel's closing implies that he will rejoin his wife and daughters in London, having learned that home is where the family he loves is, not in a geopolitical homeland.

Chanu's emasculation in London also represents a cultural translation of Joyce's Leopold Bloom, the wandering Jew who is both of and not of the land of his birth, Ireland. Translated into the twenty-first century, South Asian Muslims are the new Jews in London, as I will discuss in more detail later. Ali

layers her characterisation of Chanu with richly textured evocations of Bloom set within a narrative that "translates" Joyce's triangulated tale into the Bangladeshi enclave of London. As the novel unfolds, Chanu is revealed to be more and more like Bloom, as a modern hero both mocked and admired, even loved for his generosity of spirit, insatiable curiosity, dignity in the face of humiliation and deep love for his family. As readers, we are not aware of these parallels at the beginning. We meet Chanu as the forty-year-old man who has sent for a village wife whom he can order around and for whom he can play "Big Man." Nazneen is only nineteen, terrified by the turbulence of her journey. Her culture shock is mapped onto her obedience to Chanu as her fate. His bulging belly and hardened yellow toenails she must cut serve as metonyms for his unmanliness, repulsive physicality and the disgust she feels. Her rebellion against him and against fate grows the more he determines to keep her in the slot of traditional village girl – by denying her desires to learn English, go out in the streets by herself, associate with more assimilated Bangladeshi friends and attend college.

Nazneen's acculturation to London life is measured in her growing disillusionment with his grand talk of promotion and endless schemes for advancement. When he borrows money from Mrs. Islam to purchase himself a computer and her a sewing machine, the breadwinner/wife roles begin to reverse. While his computer gathers dust and he sinks into idle despair, Nazneen learns how to sew and acquires significant income from her piecework at home. Nazneen is the one who figures out that Mrs. Islam is a hypocritical usurer and then confronts her to break the woman's hold over the family. Increasingly independent economically, Nazneen forms a clothing business with her Bangladeshi friends, doing the designing herself.[6] She inflates as Chanu deflates; she acculturates where Chanu becomes increasingly lost in fantasies of Bengal and a grand return home. She blends many of her Bangladeshi cultural practices with London ways of being, a cultural blending symbolised by the novel's final scene: the image of Nazneen ice skating in a sari. But in systemic terms, London can absorb women migrants more easily than the men, who are kept in their place.

In this plot that seems so significantly different from *Ulysses*, where's the cultural translation? It's there, as a kind of metempsychosis (to echo a Joycean motif), as a transportation from past to present, as an uncanny presence of the familiar within the unfamiliar that becomes more visible as the text progresses. The conflation of Chanu's repulsive physicality with his ineffectual schemes

[6] Nazneen's sewing venture is a direct echo, indeed transplantation of, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* in which the initially passive and frightened Celie gains confidence and starts a successful clothing line as a necessary step in becoming independent. Like *The Color Purple, Brick Lane* is an epistolary novel in which the correspondence between forcibly separated sisters constitutes an emotional core in the novels.

recalls the blending of Bloom's abject corporality and his grandiose fantasies in episodes like the Lestrygonians (124-50). The emasculated and cuckolded body of the Irish Jew morphs into that of the Bangladeshi Londoner, gaining a charge from the layerings of anti-Semitism and racism within the Irish and British national imaginaries.

Chanu, like Bloom, is an impotent figure whose wife seeks pleasure elsewhere in a sullied marriage bed. Evoking and conflating Molly's affair with Blazes Boylan and her fantasies of an affair with Stephen Daedalus, Nazneen has a torrid affair with Karim, a charismatic young leader of angry Muslim youths, the second generation Bangladeshi on the estates who are disillusioned with their immigrant parents' hard work and efforts to achieve some level of acceptance in a hostile hostland. Much as Blazes Boylan brings Molly music for her singing career as a precursor to adultery, Karim brings Nazneen the cloth that she sews. After she defies Chanu to attend a political meeting where Karim speaks, the affair begins with scenes of lovemaking that match Molly's sexually explicit memories of her day with Blazes. Chanu, unlike Bloom, seems unaware of his wife's betrayal, but Nazneen's rising empowerment and independence bear uncanny resemblances to the Circe episode of *Ulysses*, the enactment and projection of Bloom's fears and humiliation into the petticoat government of Bella Cohen, the protean form Molly takes in his fantasies in Nighttown (350-497). Ali's realist representation of Chanu's humiliation is not experimental like the Circe episode, but the feminisation of the (post)colonial man is quite similar.

Chanu reincarnates Bloom in his more positive aspects as well. Chanu has Bloom's endless curiosity and restless zest for life – even his despairing refusal to work is shortlived, after which he starts driving a cab, reading about the past glories of Bengal, and dreaming of a return home. His diasporic longing for an imagined Bengal echoes Bloom's fascination throughout the day for Israel, stimulated by the Zionist flyer he carries with him. Unlike Chanu, who actually returns to Bangladesh, Bloom has no intentions of joining the Zionists in Israel. But both men are deeply diasporic figures. Additionally, Chanu is a nurturing figure much like Bloom, who begins the day bringing Molly breakfast in bed and ends it by bringing the homeless Stephen to 19 Eccles Street, a substitute for his lost son. Like Bloom, Chanu too has lost an infant son, and when Nazneen falls apart at the death of their son, Chanu is there to pick up the pieces, cooking and feeding her, caring for her. Again, we see this motherly side of Chanu when Nazneen suffers a complete mental breakdown haunted by the ghost of her mother's suicide and tormented by her deceit and the conflicting demands of both Karim and Chanu for her loyalty (268-80).

Nazneen is no Molly Bloom. One of the differences is a representational one. While Molly can be read as the feminine ventriloquised by a writer who was ambivalent about feminists and feminism, as much as he detested what

Irish religion and culture had done to his mother,[7] Nazneen is a protagonist who moves away from a characteristically Bangladeshi feminine fate epitomised by her mother and into a form of subjectivity based in agency. Mirroring her rebellious and independent sister Hasina back in Bangladesh, Nazneen breaks free from the fate of Bangladeshi femininity by asserting a self that both participates in and exceeds sexual desire and the body's corporality. But in spite of these differences, the humanism that underlies Joyce's portrait of a marriage, where love exists in spite of impotence and betrayal, is reborn in Ali's representation of the love that develops over time in Nazneen's arranged marriage. As she sees evidence of battery, drugs and alcoholism among the Bangladeshi men in both London and Bangladesh, as she comes to understand Chanu's fundamental kindness and tolerance, as she becomes disillusioned with the Islamist machismo of the Muslim youth, Nazneen realises that her father chose well for her in picking an "educated man." When Chanu confesses to her his dream of "going home a Big Man," Nazneen says:

> 'What is all this Big Man?' She whispered in his ear. Sadness crushed her chest…. 'What is all this Strong Man? Do you think that is why I love you? Is that what there is in you, to be loved?' (402)

Nazneen refuses his plea to return "home" with him, because for her, home is newly relocated. But she has come to recognise her love for him and for the family they made together. Monica Ali joins a long line of women writers who imagine the independent woman's lover/husband as somehow maimed or abjected – like Rochester in *Jane Eyre* or Achilles in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, both examples of wounded men who rely on women they love for strength and whom the women come to love in return. Such men – whether imperial, colonial, or postcolonial subjects – have greater capacity for nurturance and companionship than the he-men like Blazes Boylan and the citizen in *Ulysses* or like Karim and the Questioner in *Brick Lane*.

While Nazneen's story departs significantly from Molly Bloom's, her capacity to survive and thrive – to bend not break – and to interlace love and independence is reminiscent of Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as are her links to Woolf's representations of madness and suicide. Karim's smothering love for Nazneen and demand that she marry him are reminiscent of Peter's overpowering love for Clarissa, while Nazneen's decision to reject Karim's proposal and accept Chanu on her own terms echoes Clarissa's choice of autonomy in marriage with Richard Dalloway, even at the price of excitement she feels with Peter or with the more forbidden but even more enticing sensations she felt with Sally Seton.

[7] For discussion of Joyce's ambivalence about feminism, see my "Reading Joyce."

Woolf's original plan for *Mrs. Dalloway* to feature the suicide of a society lady who "accidentally" falls down the stairs morphed into a novel with a single psyche split into two protagonists who never meet – Septimus and Clarissa.[8] In spite of their obvious differences of gender and class, they share a special bond signified by overlapping motifs and by a psychic similarity of moving rapidly through the extremes of ecstasy and despair. Ali's uncanny cultural translation returns to Woolf's original plan by having intense psychic suffering, madness and suicide centre in the stories of women in both Bangladesh and Britain. One of Nazneen's first experiences in London is learning about the woman on the 16th floor of the estates "accidently" falling to her death in a suspected suicide (26). Just as Clarissa imagines – uncannily relives – Septimus's suicide and finds in her bond with his assertion of freedom the will to live her life fully (184-86), Nazneen stands at the window and "suddenly. . . was sure that she had jumped" – "a big jump, feet first and arms wide, eyes wide, silent all the way down and her hair wild and loose, and a big smile on her face because with this everlasting act she defied everything and everyone" (26). Like Clarissa, who meets the gaze of the mysterious old woman in the window across the way right after her epiphanic identification with Septimus's suicide (186), Nazneen's reverie ends in connection with the tattoo lady "across the way." Ali transports the old woman Clarissa twice seeing through her window into the tattoo lady who sits naked "across the way," smoking and drinking beer, a woman with whom Nazneen regularly exchanges gazes, nods and waves in the early sections of the novel – until the tattoo lady is removed, much as Septimus was to have been removed (6-7, 23, 26, 31, 37, 66).

Nazneen's uncanny bond with the depressed woman on the 16th floor foreshadows her own two descents into madness, which come after she has defied her fate as a woman: first, by attempting to will her baby son back to health and second, by taking a lover. In both cases, madness descends with the hallucination of her dead mother come back to life to chastise Nazneen for her sin of resisting fate – much as Stephen's mother haunts him for not serving God properly in the Circe episode of *Ulysses*. Nazneen is finally freed from her madness when a letter from her sister Hasina confesses the dread secret that impelled her own rebellion. Hasina had witnessed their mother deliberately killing herself by falling on a spear in the granary, making it look like an accident to maintain her reputation as a sainted woman who never complained about her husband's affairs. Amma's death by spear translates into Bangladeshi terms Septimus's death by spear on a Bloomsbury fence. Septimus's spear is a metonym for the bayonet deaths of trench warfare that killed millions of young men while Amma's spear evokes women's particular suffering within conservative Islam, the demand that she accept her destiny and her husband's

[8] See Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 160-61.

desires without question. Once Nazneen realises that Amma chose her own fate in the end – even against the prohibitions against suicide in Islam – she frees herself from a socially induced madness and exercises a defiant agency without guilt. She chooses not to marry Karim; she chooses to support her daughter Shahana's desire to excel in school (like her father) and remain in London; and she chooses not to accompany Chanu back to Bangladesh. Nazneen has redefined "home" on her own terms, independent of the demands of both lover and husband.

Woolf's adaptation of the *doppelgänger* motif in the twin figures of Clarissa and Septimus reappears in yet another form in *Brick Lane* in the paired fates of the two sisters: Nazneen and Hasina, who also echo the letter writing sisters in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. At core, Clarissa and Septimus are quite similar, as their shared motifs repeatedly suggest, but their differences of gender and class lead their twinned souls into different destinies: marriage/war; life/death. Clarissa accepts "proportion" and "conversion" to society's conventions, marrying a "safe" man, tucking away the desire she feels for Sally Seton as a stolen moment (32-33), not one to base a whole life upon. Septimus commits suicide in defiance of "proportion" and "conversion," the values of Sir William Bradshaw who would lock him away in the rest cure (98-100, 148-49). It's a suicide that ironically preserves "life," a contradiction that Clarissa intuits and with which she nourishes herself (184-86).

Hasina and Nazneen are set up as opposites who are nonetheless uncannily linked. As doubles, each lives out a destiny the other could have; each represents a life path for Bangladeshi women, one based on resistance, the other based on acceptance. Hasina challenges her fate, refuses to have her father arrange a marriage for her, runs off to the city and chooses her own mate, a love marriage, an assertion of her own sexual desire. Nazneen accepts her fate, obeys her father and accepts the marriage he arranges for her with an older man she has never met, and is forced to travel far from home to make a home with a man she finds repulsive, in a land she finds foreign. In the course of the novel, Hasina, the figure of freedom, becomes entrapped – the female body whose free sexuality she chose eventually imprisons her. Nazneen, the figure of acquiescence, becomes the signifier of freedom, growing ever more confident as she makes friends, leaves the house, chooses a lover and forms a business. This reversal of the *doppelgänger* fates plays dangerously with the familiar narrative of the oppressed third world woman who migrates to the West and becomes free. Ali's treatment of Hasina – from her stereotyped life story to the awkwardness of her letters written in pigeon English (why would

she write to her sister in English anyway) – has been much criticised.[9] However justified these criticisms, the pairing of Hasina/Nazneen means something different in the context of the Clarissa/Septimus doubling. Like Septimus, Hasina refuses to do what's expected of her; while her life becomes a living death in ways, she has also struck out for freedom, specifically sexual freedom, the freedom of her body. In this way, she foreshadows Nazneen's own sexual freedom later in the novel, when she takes a lover. As the only letter writer in the novel (Nazneen tries but can hardly write a line), Hasina is also something of an artist figure, just as Septimus is with his wild jottings and visionary dreams. He fails to communicate, but tries, an effort linked to his capacity to *feel* the war everyone would forget. Hasina also tries – and her fumbling English signifies the stress of that attempt – an effort that makes her the novel's second narrator. In spite of the descent of her life from choice to entrapment, Hasina is a figure of agency who keeps seeking freedom. Like Clarissa, Nazneen's acceptance of a conventional fate produces a life with less *sturm und dram*, a life in moderation and proportion, but a life that is ultimately life-affirming, in part because of the defiance her sister lived out more fully. As for Woolf, the *doppelgänger* narrative allows Ali to delineate two sides of the same personality, two divergent life paths nonetheless linked narratively.

By the end of her journey, Nazneen bears an uncanny resemblance to Clarissa, as dramatically different as they are: Clarissa, the wife of an MP, the hostess of a Mayfair party for the elite; Nazneen, the wife of a "failed" immigrant whose first boss bears the name of Clarissa's husband, the resident of Brick Lane. Their Londons are not the same, but each woman has achieved a certain psychological freedom and life-affirming relationship to others in their milieus. Woolf and Ali mark that status through constructions of what Woolf called a "moment of being," in Joycean terms, a moment of epiphany, revelation. In *Brick Lane*, this moment occurs in the final sentences of the novel when Nazneen's friend Razia and her daughters Shahana and Bibi surprise her by bringing her to a skating rink, where Nazneen chooses to skate on the shimmering ice in a full flowing sari. The significance of this choice returns us to Nazneen's early culture shock in London when she saw images on TV of women in short skirts and sequins twirling freely across the ice, an image that encapsulated all the freedoms she did not have. Throughout her acculturation to life in London, the motif of skating as an image of the female body, free in motion and speed, recurs in Nazneen's mind (22-23, 27, 71, 112, 302, 414-15). The novel's epiphanic conclusion has its distant echo in Clarissa's appearance in

[9] See for example Hiddleson, 62-63; Perfect, 113-18. Perfect also demonstrates how Ali drew from Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* in her rendering of Hasina's difficult life.

her sea-green dress at her life-affirming party in the final section of *Mrs. Dalloway*:

> They stood her up and turned her around. Shahana untied the knot at the back of her head.
>
> "Go on. Open them."
>
> She opened her eyes.
>
> In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colors that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath. A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirts. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs.
>
> "Here are your boots, Amma."
>
> Nazneen turned around. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there.
>
> She said, "But you can't skate in a sari."
>
> Razia was already lacing her boots. "This is England," she said.
>
> "You can do whatever you like." (*Brick Lane* 414-15)

> And now Clarissa escorted her Prime Minister down the room, prancing, sparkling, with the stateliness of her grey hair. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seems, having that gift still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed; turned; caught her scarf in some other woman's dress, unhitched it, laughed, all with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 174)

The differences between Nazneen and Clarissa don't need repeating. But it's the trace, the faint echo that lies hidden in the difference that interests me. At novel's end, Nazneen grasps at something intangibly incandescent – the freedom of movement across the ice, her sari marking her ties to her origins, but her skates on the ice signifying what she has made of her enforced migration. Clarissa, caught in the web of the conventional "Mrs. Dalloway," finds a mermaid spirit, a lolloping freedom in an imaginary sea. "What is this terror? what is this ecstasy," Peter wonders as he sees Clarissa appear in the final words of the novel: "It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was" (194). And to her friend Razia and her daughters Shahana and Bib, it is Nazneen. There she was too.

Up to this point, I have stressed the ways in which *Brick Lane* inserts the personal life stories of a Bangladeshi immigrant family into two classic narratives of early twentieth-century British and Irish modernism, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. At another level, however, *Brick Lane* retells the story of the nation, of national identity, of national belonging and unbelonging. Can an immigrant ever find "home" in the hostland? Can an immigrant ever belong?

Without doubt, *Brick Lane* echoes the familiar tropes of immigration narratives of both Britain and the US: leaving the homeland full of high hopes for a better life; the shock of arrival[10] and difficult acculturation in the new home, exacerbated by hostland hostilities and discrimination; longing and nostalgia for a homeland that is increasingly imaginary; generational conflict over degrees of cultural retention and assimilation; success stories counterbalanced by failure stories, and so forth. *Brick Lane* bifurcates these conventional plots along gender lines, having Nazneen increasingly become the figure of flexible adaptation to the new homeland while Chanu progressively suffers from the "Going Home Syndrome" he originally mocks (18). Challenging gender conventions, Nazneen becomes a figure of adaptive hybridity in London while Chanu ends up feeling dislocated in both London and Dhaka, lost in unfulfilled desires in both hostland and old homeland.

However, the subterranean echoes in *Brick Lane* of national identity issues in *Ulysses* add another dimension to the conventional migration narrative. As the prototypical "wandering Jew," Bloom is a figure of perpetual homelessness; or, to borrow from Emily Dickinson, he is "homeless at home" ("To the bright eyes"). Although born in Ireland, he is never perceived as fully "Irish." In the Cyclops episode, the Irish nationalist dubbed "the citizen" and his pals in the pub spout anti-Semitic sentiments to Bloom's face and behind his back, denying that a Jew can also be "Irish." Bloom challenges this view, saying, "A nation?… A nation is the same people living in the same place" (272). When the citizen sneeringly asks, "What is your nation?," Bloom answers simply, "Ireland…. I was born here. Ireland" (272). Although critics debate Joyce's relationship to the Irish nationalist movement of his day, *Ulysses* challenges British imperial hegemony in countless ways while it satirises an essentialist Irish nationalism based on notions of blood and Celtic purity.

Like Bloom, Chanu can never be accepted as fully British because, as Paul Gilroy famously quipped, "There ain't no black in the Union Jack." Bloom as Europe's Jewish pariah figure is reborn in *Brick Lane* in Chanu, the "black" immigrant from the former British colony. Unlike Bloom, he was not born in Britain. Like Bloom, however, he hopes to define the nation as "the same people living in the same place." But to the nation based on the imagined community of white Englishness, he can never belong. His experiences of unbelonging in Britain – starting with Mr. Dalloway refusing to give him the promotion he deserves – are what produce his retreat into a sharp and historically based critique of British imperialism (261), idealised notions of Bengal's great history and his final decision to go home. "Back home," he tells Nazneen, "we'll really know what's what" (390). What he finds in Dhaka,

[10] I borrow this phrase from Meena Alexander's *The Shock of Arrival*. See also my "Bodies in Motion."

however, is a shock of another arrival, the realisation that he is homeless at home. In the world of *Brick Lane*, immigrants of colour are the new Jews, not fully at home anywhere.

Brick Lane's narrative of white racism against immigrants of colour and the rise of jihadist resistance to it also contains traces of, even as it updates, the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses*. Published in 2003, *Brick Lane* was most likely written in the midst of the racial conflict that swept northern English towns in 2001, culminating in confrontations between white National Front/neo-Nazi gangs and British South Asians in Bradford, just before the cataclysm of 9/11. The final third of the novel reflects the impact of white gang violence against the inhabitants of Tower Hamlets, where Chanu and Nazneen live, as well as the entrance of global Islamist jihadism into their community. Karim, the young man who becomes Nazneen's lover, helps organise the Bengal Tigers movement to resist white gang violence through locally-oriented activism. But a figure mysteriously called "the Questioner," whose namelessness uncannily recalls the unnamed citizen in the Cyclops episode, challenges Karim's focus on local leafleting by invoking global jihad, the responsibilities of all Muslims to defend the *umma*, even if violence is necessary to do so (230-37). Unlike Joyce's "citizen," his essentialist identity is transnational, based in a religion, not an ethnicity. But like the citizen, his worldview is binary, us versus them, believers versus infidels. And like the citizen, the Questioner's concept of identity is essentialist, fundamentalist – evident in his rough dismissal of women at the meeting. "The Qur'an bids us to keep separate. Sisters. What are you doing here anyway," he glares at the two women in burkhas (235).[11] By the end of the novel, however, we learn that Karim too has become a jihadist, abandoning London activism for Bangladesh, where he can't speak the language or understand the cultural codes (409). Like Joyce, the implicit moral code of *Brick Lane* rejects essentialist identity and advocates the messy ambiguity and creative tensions of cosmopolitan multiplicity. Much as Bloom insists on making a home for himself in Ireland, in spite of the anti-Semitism of Irish nationalism, Nazneen claims London as her home, in spite of the anti-immigrant hostilities. Without sentimentalising the nation-as-home, both *Ulysses* and *Brick Lane* envision a hard-won cosmopolitanism in which outsiders nonetheless claim a form of belonging others would deny them.

What then is the purpose and effect of Monica Ali's uncanny evocations and revocations of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* in *Brick Lane*? I suggest that this affiliation between *Brick Lane* and its modernist precursors is not a case of dominating influence; of the postcolonial novel as derivative of its modernist

[11] The novel's jaundiced view of pious Islam is evident in the allegorical portrait of the novel's one, truly evil character, the usurer Mrs. Islam, who extorts vast sums of money from poor immigrants, ostensibly to build mosques in Bangladesh.

precursors or of colonial mimicry in Homi Bhabha's sense. *Brick Lane* is not a diluted form of *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysses*; nor is it a parody of its precursors that unseats their hegemony – indeed, its predominantly realist form belies those kinds of affiliation. Rather, *Brick Lane* transports elements of the earlier novels – particularly their gendered and imperial plots – into a new place, into what Avtar Brah calls "diaspora space," by which she means the site of transculturation, where immigrants and natives alike undergo major transformations resulting from global migrations. *Brick Lane* accomplishes a "cultural translation" – in Papastergiadis's terms – of modernist classics into contemporary London filled with migrants from the former British Empire. Like Joyce's *Ulysses* with *The Odyssey,* like Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* with *Ulysses*, and like Derek Walcott's *Omeros* with both the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*, Ali uses the earlier analogues of her text to refuse the marginalisation of a Bangladeshi story and to insert that story into the epical tradition of Western culture and more specifically British literature. "There ain't no black in the Union Jack," to cite Gilroy once again. But a significant effect of *Brick Lane*'s modernist analogue – the uncanny familiarity and unfamiliarity of its narrative – is to re-colour the Union Jack in the diaspora space of late twentieth-early twenty-first century British modernity. This cultural translation affirms a continuity between the cosmopolitanisms of the early and late twentieth century, between the world-changing cataclysms of World War I and 9/11. It also fosters a twenty-first century rereading of Joyce and Woolf through the lens of Ali's migration novel in which the turbulence of migration is constitutive of different and recurrent modernities. *Brick Lane* invites us to return to *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway* to read them anew.

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