

## Politics of Right to Write and Monica Ali's Fiction

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### Abstract

The *Brick Lane*-writer Monica Ali's status as an ethnic icon – an image so hyped by the white media – automatically curbs her creative freedom of representation and confines her to ghettos. Consequently, Ali's other pieces are ignored, not because of their lesser literary merit but for their author's treading into "not-permissible" grounds, that is, "non-ethnic" materials. The audiences back home and within diaspora, on the other hand, tend to consider this Dhaka-born writer just as one more outsider having no legitimacy to deal with them, and they even voiced their outrage in London streets against *Brick Lane* (2003) for depicting what they considered a "shameful" portrait of them. They question her right to write about "home" just as the West could not appreciate the European or American settings and characters in her later books. Ali, on her part, however, claims to have disowned these licensing authorities in a bid to safeguard her writerly discretion. *Brick Lane* thus becomes the metaphor that embodies the poetics and practices of this intricate, intriguing politics in which the hegemonic publishing industry in the West along with the grinding U.S.-U.K. review machine (of *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and so on) has rather a decisive role to play.

### Abstract in Malay

Status ikon etnik Monica Ali yang menulis novel *Brick Lane*, suatu imej yang dibesar-besarkan "media putih" – secara automatik menghadkan kebebasannya berkreatif dan menjuruskan karyanya tentang kedhaifan. Oleh kerana itu, karya Ali yang lain di ketepikan, tidak kerana karya-karya tersebut kurang nilai kesusasteraan tetapi kerana penulisnya menerokai subjek yang "tidak dibenarkan" iaitu karya yang tidak berkaitan dengan "isu etnik". Namun begitu, para pembaca di negara asalnya dan di kawasan diaspora, berpendapat bahawa penulis kelahiran Dhaka ini hanyalah satu lagi orang luar yang tidak layak untuk menulis tentang mereka dan mereka hingga menyampaikan kemarahan mereka terhadap buku *Brick Lane* di jalan-jalan di London kerana menggambarkan mereka dalam keadaan yang difikir memalukan. Mereka menyoalkan haknya untuk menulis tentang negara asalnya sebagaimana pihak Barat tidak dapat menerima latar belakang dan karakter Eropah dalam bukunya yang kemudian. Ali, walaubagaimanapun, cuba melindungi haknya sebagai penulis dengan menyatakan

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bahawa beliau tidak lagi ada kena-mengena dengan pihak-pihak tersebut. *Brick Lane* menjadi metafora yang menjelmakan bentuk-bentuk puisi dan nilai-nilai praktikal keadaan politik yang rumit ini, di mana kuasa industri penerbitan di Barat berperanan penting dalam membuat keputusan.

### **Keywords**

Authenticity, Bangladeshi, *Brick Lane*, diaspora, exotic ethnicity, politics of identity

### **Keywords in Malay**

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I could set lines of enquiry about my book [*Brick Lane*] into two broad camps. 'Tell us about them,' is one.... The other reaction is rather different. What gives you the right to write about 'us' when you are clearly one of 'them'.... But the 'two camp' split in my case brings me back to the idea of the periphery. How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, my answer is I can write about it, because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and Bengali father means never being an insider. (Ali, "Where I'm Coming From")

Even before the writing of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* was complete, there was a lot of excitement over this would-be-first extensive portrayal of Bangladeshis in Britain, likely to reach a worldwide audience. Ali was being hyped by her prospective publisher Doubleday who had signed her up after having seen only five chapters of the book's first draft. This faith in her skill was reiterated when she was included in Granta's 2003 decadal list of "Twenty Best Young British Novelists" – earlier lists had included the likes of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi – and that too on the basis of her manuscript. The book was launched amid much fanfare at Terrace Bar on the eponymous street in the heart of London's Banglatown on 2 June 2003. Rave reviews of *Brick Lane* began to appear in weekend magazines and prizes were being showered on the book, hailing the author's wry cartography of an as yet literarily little-visible community in multicultural London. The book was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction for the year 2003. In short, with *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali became an instant sensation, the darling of multicultural circles and the white publishing industry.

One obvious reason for the instant success of this novel was its news-value to the ethnographically curious Britons about the colourful Bangladeshi population inhabiting the eponymous lane. *Brick Lane*, however, possesses, as Kaiser Haq points out in his entry on Monica Ali in *South Asian Writers in English* (2006), "a dual significance, depending on whether it is considered from a Bangladeshi or British perspective" (21-22). While the Granta Editor Ian Jack

commended *Brick Lane* specifically for bringing news from Banglatown (qtd. in Haq, “Monica Ali” 23), an area crowded historically by multiple ethnic minorities, one of the latest immigrant arrivals being from Bangladesh, still others saw Ali’s elevation to the status of celebrity writer on the strength of one book as British cultural establishment’s attempt to create an icon to represent the sizeable Bangladeshi community in the United Kingdom.

When Monica Ali left war-torn Dhaka with her British mother in 1971 she was barely four years old, and although she was fluent in Bengali when she boarded the plane, she claimed to have lost the language while growing up in the northern mill town of Bolton. In one of her personal essays Ali recalls how a Bengali woman in the East End invited her to take a test: “‘How can you know what it is like to be a Bengali mother,’ she protested, ‘when you don’t even speak our language?’” (“Where I’m Coming From”). Ali is thus perceived by many as being remote from the linguistic, cultural and emotive reality of either Brick Lane or Bangladesh.

The question is: half-Bangladeshi by birth and Briton, even global, in every other sense, can Monica Ali authentically represent the Bangladeshi community in London? Neither a resident of Brick Lane nor belonging to any other close-knit Asian community during her childhood or adulthood, does she have the right to speak of/for Bangladesh or the Bangladeshi diaspora? Taking this Dhaka-born writer and her fiction as a case in point, this paper intends to engage with the debates around the unique positionality of diasporic writers and the question of legitimacy and authenticity of diasporic representations of “home.” The essay will deal firstly with theoretical issues intrinsic to the politics of the right to write; secondly, reception and responses of different groups to Ali’s oeuvre, and thirdly, Ali’s own take and my observations on this politics.

In Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* (2004) we see a character regretting that the privilege of “speaking to all humanity” (277) remains a prerogative of the western writers; and the rest speak to a limited audience, as they are deemed unable to “see several cultures and literatures together... to see some sort of whole instead of the defensive little patch offered by one’s own culture, literature and history” (Said 49). Significantly, Diaspora writers often seek to resist any such idea that they should be seen not as *writer* per se but as someone representing certain (ethnic) collective. But then, their characters’ continuing negotiations with the chaos of multiple displacements – linguistic, cultural, geographical and so on – together with the authors’ own location in privileged western metropolises essentially entangle the diaspora narratives with the issues of identity and representation.

Jhumpa Lahiri once said that being pigeonholed as an ethnic writer and being expected to be a spokesperson for the community can be “stifling.” Though Ali herself has reservations about the bid to fix people in such identity slots, even when it is well-intentioned, and though she has published three more

novels, varied in themes and settings, to her credit post-*Brick Lane*, she is still being iconised as the trademark “*Brick Lane*-writer.” In spite of frantic media attempts, Ali has always resisted ghettoisation or an explicit/exclusive identification with the community, categorically mentioning in an interview that subcontinental literature is just one of her many areas of interest and hybridity for her does not boil down to subcontinental diasporic experience:

I am interested in Indian literature and history, but I don't necessarily feel any special relationship. I'd read Nadine Gordimer with as much interest.... I am also interested in many different areas of literature that tap into the 'cross-cultural' experience but don't originate from the subcontinent. (“Interview with Haq”)

Her “resistance” is also evident from her choice of interviewers or from the overtly European theme and locale of her second novel, *Alentejo Blue* (2006). When one does even a cursory search for interviews of Monica Ali, one comes across just one apparently Asian name – that of Neela Sakaria from *Bookwire* – in the jostle of ostensibly white European names. And then, there one comes across an article titled “Colour Blind” by Maya Jaggi who recounts an act of intellectual apartheid in which she was denied an interview on behalf of the *Guardian Weekend Magazine* with Monica Ali by her publisher for no better reason than the colour of Jaggi's skin. The incident, according to Jaggi, has raised

some fundamental questions about publishing, marketing and the media, the role of black and Asian journalists, and literature and power.... *They are symptomatic of a publishing industry that remains, to borrow Greg Dyke's phrase, 'hideously white'.... I'm sure Monica Ali would agree that all those who write want to be judged on their work, not their race or their 'niche'....* (Emphasis added)

Ali's tacit complicity with the white publishing industry and her refusal to belong to the ghetto make her an automatic suspect, at least in terms of authentic representation, to the diasporic Bangladeshi community in London.

While Monica Ali had become the blue-eyed girl of the London literary circle, she was greeted with disapproval by a large section of the community which she claimed to represent in her novel. *Brick Lane* upset many in the Bangladeshi community who considered it as a “defining caricature” for all Bangladeshi Muslims. The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, representing a large group of Bangladeshis in Britain, complained that the book treated Bangladeshis merely as economic migrants and portrayed them as ignorant (Hussain 92). The Council is particularly offended by the character of Chanu's derogatory comments on the Bangladeshis of *Brick Lane* in the novel: at one point he describes them as uneducated Sylhetis who had jumped their ships

and landed in London with lice in their hair. Ali was also criticised by the Council for her supposed lack of cultural literacy, for her “skin-deep understanding” of Bengali households. Both the book and its movie adaptation in 2006 had led to serial protests in Brick Lane. So much so, that Ruby Films had to abandon their initial plans of shooting the exterior scenes of the film in Brick Lane itself, and shot their footages elsewhere. For the angry protestors, the book, and possibly the film-adaptation too, were full of lies, slander and cynicism about this ethnic minority. The protests attracted so much media attention and thrilled expectations of a repeat show of sensationalism surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* that a Royal Gala screening of the film, scheduled on 29 October 2007 as part of the London Film Festival, had to be scrapped.

Is *Brick Lane* then a mere distortion, having cartoons as its characters, authored by a lady who has no right to represent “Sylhetis” in London, removed as she is from the reality of Brick Lane? The authenticity debate, however, is an old and recurrent one, and of course, has not spared even the latest Indian Booker prize winner Aravind Adiga’s debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008). Its depiction of a filthy, greedy and poverty-stricken life in the Bihari hinterland has been criticised by novelist-critics like Amitava Kumar, who accuses it of being “curiously inauthentic,” “a novel from one more outsider, presenting cynical anthropologies to an audience that is not Indian” (7). The charges against Monica Ali are not dissimilar.

As for Ali herself, she has treated the Brick Lane protests as belonging to an “economy of outrage” which trades exclusively on emotions, and is meant to whip up media frenzy and to curb the author’s freedom of expression. She has no anxiety of authenticity, and she disowns licensing authorities. The “authenticity game,” according to her, could lead to bizarre conclusions. For then memoirs and autobiographies would be the only valid genres and actors like Christopher Simpson – who is part Irish, part Rwandan, part Greek, and plays the role of Karim, the protagonist Nazneen’s lover, in the film adaptation of *Brick Lane* – would be waiting perhaps forever for an authentic role to come up (“The Outrage Economy”). Interestingly, the film version of *Brick Lane* directed by Sarah Gavron has a mainly non-Bangladeshi cast in leading characters who are surely obverse to the almost all-Sylheti-Bangladeshi cast in the novel. Tannishtha Chatterjee, one of India’s well-known art-house actors, played Nazneen; Christopher Simpson acted in the role of Karim while Satish Kaushik, an Indian film-director and comic actor, was cast in the role of Chanu. Authenticity-games are indeed intriguing, for none questioned the casting of Chatterjee or Kaushik in the film; their brownness could pass them off as “authentic” Bangladeshis!

Questions of authenticity and representation have always been crucial to the contemporary discourses on home and diaspora. The Indian-born Uma

Parameswaran once wrote from Canada to her fellow expatriates: "Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too, and I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind" (291). Her colleagues, however, seem to continue writing – compulsively and consistently – both about their present reality as well as their original homeland, perhaps because, for diasporics like them, these are overlapping, intertwined territories. And thus we see, from Naipaul to Rushdie, Mistry to Vassanji, almost all of the diaspora writers have attempted writing "home" although they are now far removed from the actual contemporary condition of their motherlands and tend to create rather "imaginary homelands." Sometimes this is a conscious career move on the part of these authors as, in the international literary industry there has always been a niche market for fictional representation of "exotic" ethnicity which, as part of its hegemonic politics, promotes these South Asians at its doorstep as "authentic" experts of their respective ethnicities.

Many diaspora writers are criticised on the ground of their having lost touch with the objective everyday reality back home; it is often argued that their home narratives are essentially framed by memory and distance, and that consequently, the world they take their readers into is filled with fragmentations and distorted images. In opposition to this, an equally noticeable tendency among writers and theorists is to regard dislocation or distance as an enabling condition. As Salman Rushdie has pointed out in his famous collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, if by writing from outside and trying to reflect the world left behind one is obliged "to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost," then paradoxically, "*the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed*" (11; emphasis added). In *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remarks that she is "not at home in either of the places" she inhabits (Bengal and the USA), yet she views this as an advantage, since she feels "it's important for people not to feel rooted in one place" (83). Talking about her debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007), Tahmima Anam too told *Times of India* that her "slight outsider's perspective" only made her book "slightly more acceptable to a wider audience." True, as Anam continues, "sometime distance brings perspective and it becomes easier to dwell on issues in isolation and detachment" (Walia 11), but then, as Rushdie opines, "too much distance can remove one from knowing the place altogether," so, "it's about striking the right balance between the imagined, invented memory and the real thing" (qtd. in Hazra 12). How much this balance is maintained in diasporic narratives like *Brick Lane* has remained a consistent topic of discussion for critics.

Therefore, the point is, rather than leading to a senseless pastiche, the diasporic space often provides such writers with a double-vision, that is, a unique perspective as "outsider-insiders," from which certain significant critical

perceptions about homeland become possible. But then, this diasporic position, however fruitful, is problematic as well, especially from the perspective of reception where the culture of adoption wishes to see through the text the culture of the “other,” while the culture of origin wants to assess the authenticity of self-reflection, and very often the writer is assailed for either misrepresenting the reality, or catering to hegemonic market forces. Jasbir Jain explains categorically that the work of a diasporic writer attracts the attention of two different sets of readers – the West looks for familiar landmarks, a West-centric vision, while the reader at home seeks his own validity – and the writer is trapped between the two (“The New Parochialism” 85).

Diasporic writers seek their audience globally while simultaneously, they remain cautious about preserving their subjectivity, difference and marginality (Spivak, “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern” 246). Evidently, this is a very different position from the one the home-based, or in Fred W. Rigg’s neologism, “anasporic” (286), writer is concerned with. It is argued that the diasporic writer occupies either a kind of “second space” – of exile and cultural solitude – or Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and chaos. The expatriate writers’ identity is thus at once plural and partial, or “half a life” as Naipaul would say, and to quote Rushdie, “Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (15). Thus, they remain, at best, informed and critical outsiders, but never total insiders. Indeed, the diasporic projection of home, as it is conceived from a marginal position, differs from a resident people’s reality, for those who are rooted in a place can afford to forget western pressure if they desire so. The act of leaving home and settling elsewhere shapes the writer’s sensibility and, consequently, the text in a unique way.

Diasporic writings tend to resort to chutneyfied – as Rushdie might say – narrativisation of the *des*; the “ethnic trap” serves as “exotica” and such a plot “encashes on the marketability of the homeland” (Mishra 284). These narratives often turn into creative elaborations of the pre-existing white stereotypes of eastern idiosyncrasies and fetishised symbols of the eastern culture. The repetitive appearance of the similar set of socio-cultural aspects and icons reflects rather futile attempts at evocation of the native life and ethos, and betrays their attempt at verisimilitude and anxiety about authenticity. And this ensures their entry, voluntary or unconscious, in the hegemonic niche market in the West that thrives on the commodification of an exoticised, abused Oriental, archived in fiction that reinforces the westerner’s impressions of an East untouched by modernities – globalisation, feminism, or individualism and so on. Neel Mukherjee recalls his experience with one UK publisher – he approached her for his debut novel *Past Continuous* (2008) – who wanted him to turn the novel “into a fluffy, romantic, weepy Exotica Fest”; she desired that he include more of India’s “heat and dust,” “smells and colours” (Sudarshan 1).

As is indicated above, it is not very often that diaspora narratives embark on a serious, sustained engagement with their original home and culture; more often than not, they come up with artificial, abrupt references to the native locales or cultural elements/icons merely for anthropological glamour or simply as a “device” in order to woo (“foreign”) audiences with exotica. The exotic outpourings of “home” become a convenient canvas for their “magical interpretations” in order to “spoonfeed” western readers with racial information. Monica Ali is already a case in point. Her distance from and inadequate knowledge and experience of original geographical and cultural scapes results in her inability to look at “home” in real terms; at times it only gets benignly parodied in the rather simplistic, fragmentary and clichéd anthropological details. No wonder, for Ali’s second-generation women in *Brick Lane* who aggressively try to adopt British customs, Bangladesh is deemed a nightmare to be eternally avoided: this is where girls are forced into marriage in their early teens, where one brushes one’s teeth with a *daaton* (meaning neem-twig) and has to do without toilet paper. The bleak picture of Dhaka in *Brick Lane* as a chaotic and unmanageable metropolis inflicted by poverty, squalor and decadence only serves to perpetuate the same negative stereotypes that the average Briton has of subcontinental life and culture. However, whether these home thoughts, articulated from abroad, should be regarded as essentially a white stereotypical representation can of course be debated, and perhaps these can outright be denied by the “home” readership, if only it chooses to indulge in smug self-complacency.

And while it is true that sometimes the diaspora authors unduly flaunt their hyphenated background or view it as an automatic license for exotic attention, it is still really intriguing as to where to draw the line between exoticisation and writing ethnicity. After all, one can still argue that if their writings at all participate in the politics of exoticised oriental, then it is only by default, because, references to the native locales or cultural milieu, since they are not very familiar to western readers, automatically lend their fiction certain anthropological glamour or exoticity. Now, if representation of ethnicity is automatically exotic, it is then impossible for a writer to break free from this politics; what should be of real concern therefore regarding this whole exotica discourse is to probe into the *intention* of using it.

As for the research behind *Brick Lane*, Ali claims to have been moved by the Bangladeshi academic Naila Kabeer’s book *The Power to Choose* (2000) that contains case-studies about Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London. She had also tried to interact with drug addicts and youth workers, people at a women’s centre and so on at Banglatown. In addition to the research, *Brick Lane* has its autobiographical touches: “I was drawing on my own childhood, not in a way that was particularly autobiographical in my straightforward way, but it was there” (qtd. in Adebayo



346). Nazneen shares her birth year and ancestral village Gouripur with Ali. Again, as Ali recalls in her essay “The Outrage Economy,” there is a lot of herself in Shahana, Nazneen’s rebellious teenage daughter whose irreverence does not spare her father’s attempt to resort to nostalgia. Ali says that her experience of the conflict between first and second-generation immigrants inspired her to write the novel; the reader thus finds a mild caricature of the older generation and its sentimental clinging to the image of “Tagore’s Golden Bengal, a teasing counterpoint to our drab northern Milltown lives” (“Where I’m Coming From”). Her father’s stories about village life – particularly the anecdote of Makku Pagla and his famously patched umbrella – colour the text too.

The diasporic, often never-materialised, urge to return to the roots, is a much-explored theme of the book. But then “home” here remains an intriguing, even elusive, concept. Often it is a lonely escape to an alternative reality from a defeated present, sometimes a bundle of betraying memories and longings, sometimes a wholly imagined idyllic hub and very rarely, a practically existing cartographic space ready for return. Ali’s Chanu, however, prepares his daughters for the journey back home through Tagore’s song about Golden Bengal, incidentally the national anthem of Bangladesh – “Chanu was taking the family back home and Tagore was the first step of the journey” (*Brick Lane* 145). The impossibly beautiful Bengal evoked in the song is the image of desire for home that he has to offer to his daughters:

In autumn, o mother mine  
 In the full-blossomed paddy fields,  
 I have seen spread all over- sweet smiles!  
 Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what an affection  
 And what a tenderness. (146)

The translation renders the tenderness for Golden Bengal in a slightly exaggerated and parodic tone, one that flavours Shahana’s and possibly the author’s responses to Chanu’s lengthy speeches, his attempts to infuse pride in Bengali history and culture in his daughters and frequent bouts of temper at inevitable failure. Innumerable references by Chanu to Bengali culture and history, ranging from the painter Jainul Abedin to the pre-colonial state of Bengali weaving industry to the syncretic religious traditions of Bengal, and his allegations against British colonial exploitation are all fact-based. Yet his nostalgia and pride about home are ridiculed, or at best tolerated by Shahana. Most of the praise about Bangladesh is mouthed through “the frog-faced” (12) Chanu, a character which invites irreverence and such laurels therefore cannot be taken seriously. This narrative strategy problematises her politics of representation: Ali seems to discard the memory-drenched golden image of home back in

Bangladesh and is partial towards London as the site of self-discovery, particularly for women.

Indeed, unlike the men of this novel, its women pine far less for the “home” in Bangladesh, which for them is more often memory and reality than a fantasised or discursive space. Hasina’s letters, written from Dhaka in bizarre Pidgin English, possibly meant to be a translated version of ungrammatical but energetic Bengali, present an ironic dystopic antithesis to Chanu’s dreams. They present Bangladesh as a state in anomie and chaos: there *hartal*-s are frequent, university students rally for the right to cheat, corruption is all-pervasive, politicians hire goons to win elections, and men are lynched on the street, all of which leave Hasina wondering: “Sister what is happen to police and court and thing? In England could such thing happen like this?” (221). Monica Ali defends her choice of Hasina’s idiom arguing that she “experimented with a more ‘pidgin’ English style in order to put her closer to the reader’s heart” (Haq, “Interview”). Besides such pious intentions, Ali may also have tried to exoticise Hasina’s letters – and the site they come from – by resorting to such a curious idiom. Hasina’s letters are the one real contact with the actual geographical “home” in Brick Lane but the contact, ironically, is alienating. Vignettes from the “real” context back home shows that patriarchy rules strong there; women live in a dismal state; suffering is routine, especially for the poor among them. And here in Brick Lane too the community is not kind to women who have somehow transgressed the pre-scripted, nostalgia-saturated role of the ideal obedient Bengali Muslim wife.

How real is the dystopic reality of Bangladesh projected in Brick Lane? For many, the portrait of Bangladeshi women, both at home and abroad, in *Brick Lane* seem too bleak to be true and even melodramatic at times. Such a monochromatically depressing picture no doubt led many Bangladeshis to question the authenticity of representation. As in the homeland, so in Tower Hamlets, poverty, unemployment and deprivation dominate Ali’s Bangladeshi society. In her attempt to depict lives of the Bangladeshi youth in Nazneen’s estate, Ali draws upon the familiar image of the Asian gang thriving on violence, drug abuse and crime. There is the heated debate over the stabbing of a boy due to a fight between two gangs with a history of rivalry, although many in Brick Lane dismissed it as a story cooked up by the white press to give Bangladeshis a bad name, just as they dismissed the novel as a figment of an almost evil imagination.

The religious identity of the community is presented as involving tensed negotiations between a Bengali diasporic cultural space and the global Muslim religious space of the ummah. Around the cataclysm of 9/11, Karim and his friends – “the Bengal Tigers” – are up in arms against the Islamophobe “Lion Hearts” who fear cultural adulteration and invasion, but *Brick Lane* finally underscores the futility of such divisive politics and the reductive binary.

Ironically, it is the second-generation immigrants who wish to foreground their global Islamic identity rather than the local Bengali one. Already distant from home and initially a soft target for the white racists, perhaps the religious identity has helped them in self-assertion and in restoring their dignity and courage, although they wear jeans, stammer in Bengali and aggressively try to adopt British customs. The tendency represented by Nazneen on the other hand tries to negotiate identity from the perspective of British-Bangladeshi nationalism, whereas Chanu is all for retention of a pure culture, identity and heritage, so much so that he prefers to leave England for the Golden Bengal of Tagore's songs, viewing Bangladesh as a safer place for his girls to grow up.

At the very end of the novel, in the depiction of Nazneen ice-skating in a sari, a scene impossible to visualise back home, Razia ecstatically proclaims the beauty of England in its hybridity and opportunities: "This is England. You can do whatever you like" (413). Ali's novel could be looked at as a collective bildungsroman of many expatriate Bangladeshi women who tinker with their limited personal space in order to achieve a certain degree of self-empowerment. The author's bias towards London and hybridity is thus overt; she espouses the need to assimilate, and seems to discourage practices of ghettoisation or exclusivist adherence to any particular notion of identity and community, evidenced in the way the "traditionalist" characters are finally ridiculed or even vilified. *Brick Lane* thus upholds, in Bharati Mukherjee's words, "the exuberance of immigration" (*Darkness* 3) through Razia, Shahana and through the protagonist Nazneen who finally decides to stay back and participate in a female garment entrepreneurship. The novel celebrates the adaptability both of its immigrant protagonist as well as that of the multicultural metropolis.

According to Yasmin Hussain, the novel fails in conveying the atmosphere and experience of Bangladeshi culture from *within*, as there are no community events and activities, except for the acrimonious defence group meetings which Nazneen attends in a local hall; Nazneen does not attend any wedding or funeral, nor are there any religious festival such as Eid which, for Hussain, are central to the reaffirmation of Muslim South Asian culture in the diaspora, marked in the narrative (108-09). Michael Perfect, on the other hand, argues that the character of Hasina propagates "stereotypical notions of the oppression of women in postcolonial Islamic societies," that "her letters recount a life of such singular, unending misery that it is difficult to see her as anything more than a symbol of subjugation" (111-12). For him, that Ali so obviously bases Hasina on the testimonies recorded in Kabeer's *The Power to Choose* is indicative of an attempt to make her an "authentic" character, to show that women like Hasina do really exist. Perfect further argues that while many of the women in Dhaka's garment factories whom Kabeer sees to embody increasing "wealth, autonomy and agency," Ali seems to appropriate only the

more “desolate of the testimonies recorded by Kabeer,” and modify them to make them look even “bleaker.” On the contrary, as he adds, while many of the London-based women interviewed in Kabeer’s research speak of “physical abuse, racism, isolation and extreme financial struggle,” Nazneen’s narrative has roots only in “the most fortunate and positive” of these testimonies. So, for Perfect, while Ali’s novel draws inspiration from Kabeer’s study in that both celebrate “the power to choose,” yet Ali conspicuously denies Hasina this power, and grants it only to Nazneen. According to him, Hasina is deliberately conceived as representative of utter “defeat and naivety,” because, this forms “a counterpoint to – and so serves to further emphasize and render extraordinary – Nazneen’s narrative of emancipation and enlightenment,” and thus, *Brick Lane* “prioritizes the celebration of multiculturalism over the destabilization of the stereotypical” (118-19).

Now to turn to Ali’s other books. Adib Khan, a Bengali author based in Australia, once commented that his “tryst” with multiple countries, communities and cultures endowed him with a capacity whereby “a Bangladeshi can fictionalise a white Australian’s experience” (28). Khan’s fourth novel *Homecoming* (2003) is thus set entirely in Australia, not about migrants, but about a Caucasian Vietnam Veteran, concerned with his lack of moral rectitude during the War. Perhaps thinking along this line, and possibly tired of the baggage of having to supply “news” from this particular overlooked community and keen to resist ghettoisation and the status of pampered instant icon as an ethnic writer, Monica Ali chose a startlingly different theme for her next novel, *Alentejo Blue*. The book is a loosely interwoven collection of stories set in the fictional village of Mamarrosa, in and around an apparently unspoiled rural region of Portugal called Alentejo, where Ali and her husband once spent their summer holidays. Ali presents a surprising range of characters and their multiple perspectives in this text, and in writing across the gender, age and insider/outsider divide, she has said that she felt she was “flexing a sort of writing muscle” (Interview with Mudge).

It is significant that *Alentejo Blue* in no way repeated the fairy-tale run of the best-selling *Brick Lane*. According to *Nielsen Bookscan* statistics, whereas *Brick Lane* had climbed U.S. bestseller lists and sold more than two million copies, *Alentejo Blue* squeezed out a mere six thousand in sales (qtd. in Arana). In spite of her almost apologetic “alibi” for choosing this rather unexpected subject – that she could not resist the theme which kept visiting her though she had originally planned to write a completely different book set in the north of England (Interview with Mudge) – she could not win her reviewers. Liesl Schillinger wryly comments, Ali’s characters are “trapped in their own heads. To let them loose into the dusty streets of Mamarrosa to act and interact, rather than silently stew, would be liberation for them – and perhaps for their author.”

The cold shoulder given to *Alentejo Blue* could be an example of the authenticity-game turned on its head. Monica Ali perhaps could never become an insider to the “white” landscape of Alentejo and thus did not own the license to make them her subject. By reversing the anthropological gaze in *Alentejo Blue*, she has violated the rules of the game and has hence been temporarily ignored. Possibly it is in Asia/Africa and their diasporic communities where the West wants to locate its depression at present, as, more recently, Aravind Adiga of *The White Tiger* fame would also testify. It might be in no mood to suffer a sad and claustrophobic Alentejo from Monica Ali.

In her third novel *In the Kitchen*, Ali turns to contemporary London yet again: the setting this time is the multicultural kitchen of a grand hotel called the Imperial. However, it is not the immigrants inhabiting the Imperial’s kitchen, rather it is the British-born head chef there, Gabriel Lightfoot, whom Ali focuses on: “Gabriel has been more in my heart and soul than any character I’ve written so far” (qtd. in Labi). She identified so strongly with him and his mental state, which deteriorates throughout the novel, that she herself experienced panic attacks and had to go to the doctor. Ali even spent a year at five big hotels in London to research the working lives of hotel kitchen staff; but all these were not enough to earn her favourable reviews. Stephanie Merritt, apparently positively, however, commented that though Ali “wrong-footed her readers” with *Alentejo Blue*, she now returned to “the familiar territory” with *In the Kitchen*, “which picks up *Brick Lane*’s themes: identity, belonging, family, loyalty, and considers them against the shifting lives of London’s migrant workers.” It is as if a writer like Ali has no right to write anything other than *Brick Lane*, as if dealing with any other material will automatically amount to becoming a trespasser!

Importantly too, in *In the Kitchen* Ali has chosen a setting and subject, rendered familiar and fascinating through television shows; the world of illegal workers is deemed a perfect breeding ground for crime and thus popular subject for thrillers. The novel indeed weaves a thriller-orientated plot: the dead body of a Ukrainian night porter, Yuri is discovered in the basement of the hotel, an event that forever alters Gabriel Lightfoot’s world. But this highly tensed plot parallels the sub-plot of Lightfoot’s regular long conversations – about race, migration, national identity, the waning of community etc. – with his dying father in a quiet mill town in northern England. Thus, as Merritt says, it fails as a thriller too, because, the mystery surrounding the porter’s death loses tension in all the “digression,” and also, there is something cartoonish about writing regional accents phonetically (Frenchmen who say “zis” and Caribbean women who call everyone “darlin” etc.). Marie Arana in *The Washington Post* describes it as an “overcooked novel” which creeps along like “your grandmother’s knitting.... It weaves ahead through clichés and repetitions, protracted and pointless conversations,” and declares that you may still be

tempted to read it because it comes from the writer of *Brick Lane*. It is also to be noted here that the publisher Doubleday describes *In the Kitchen* as a “follow-up to *Brick Lane*.” No doubt, Ali’s choice of location and subject matter post-*Brick Lane* has not been well-received by many a reader and critic, but it is bizarre that her own publishing house wants to erase *Alentejo Blue* from her bibliography. As Sukhdev Sandhu points out, Ali has run into a problem faced by many writers: she is assumed to have “home turf” from which “editors and accountants” are eager for her not to stray. She is being treated, deliberately or not, as “the mouthpiece for neighbourhoods and ethnic demographics” of which she has never claimed to be a member.

Ali’s latest attempt at claiming entry into the mainstream London literary circle embodies itself in *Untold Story* (2011) where she delineates a fictional princess whose life trajectory bears more than a passing resemblance to the most photographed yet most fragile woman who rocked an ancient royal house: Diana, the Princess of Wales. What if Diana did not die in a car crash in Paris in 1997, but sick and tired of her life in the tabloid fishbowl, devised a plan to disappear and reinvent herself abroad under an assumed identity? This is the yarn that Monica Ali spins in *Untold Story*. Apparently, this is Ali’s another “tryst” with the popular sub-genre of the thriller to respond to the taste of the general reading public in the West – she even gets her fictional princess Lydia relocated in a dozing townlet called Kensington, perhaps to please American readers since the book was published in the United States – but sadly, that too did not work. Joanna Briscoe comments that while Curtis Sittenfeld achieved a balance of fact and fiction with *American Wife*, about Laura Bush, Ali takes on an icon of Diana proportions which is “far more challenging, indeed, almost unworkable project.” Besides, Ali, she claims, is not quite at home with her transatlantic dialogue, overdoing all the “dang”s and “kind of schlubby”s.” Not only that, Briscoe also terms the story “debatably insensitive”: how can it be right to publish a book about a woman, who died so tragically, so close to the marriage of her son? This gives another wry twist to the already too fraught politics of right to write. If we now follow this line of reasoning, then the ethics of publishing books will be forever subject to, and dictated by public sensitivity, and no book will be written on the subject of any individual or collective tragedy!

Ali, however, stressed that the book was not simply a sequel to Diana’s life: “It’s primarily about identity, which is what I always write about” (qtd. in Benedicte and Pidd). Michiko Kakutani also points out that, though at first glance, the novel is quite a departure from the subject matter of *Brick Lane*, yet by turning Diana or, as the author has said, “a fictional character, based on Diana” into a British expatriate named Lydia, who is hiding out in a small American town, “Ali is able to address some of the same questions of identity and exile that animated her earlier work.” Thus Ali is never allowed to come out

of the shadow of *Brick Lane*; the spectre of her debut novel is eternally invoked almost as the “code of conduct” for her to keep her within the “rightful” track of writing.

As a way of winding up this discussion, it may be noted that without the anthropological value which one automatically associates with the representation of minorities in the West, the authenticity question would not have been so important or recurrent. Well, what if one still continues to ask how real is the reality depicted about home in the diasporic texts? Or one wonders what right do these expatriates have to speak about home at all? To approach a country they do not know much about from outside? Of course, Rushdie has a very simple answer to such queries – he says that literature is self-validating: “a book is not justified by its author’s worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written.... Literature is not the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups” (14). To counter the much repeated accusation of lacking authenticity and legitimacy of representation, diasporic writers thus insist on their freedom of writing whatever they choose to. In fact, there are difficulties in insisting upon a standard for accurate representation of any socio-cultural milieu; how would we, for example, specify what constitutes an “authentic” representation of Bengal and Bengalis?

In any study of diaspora literature, therefore, instead of insisting too much on determining accuracy of ethnic representation, or resorting to judgement in terms of certain pre-scripted standards, we should rather focus on how the complex, intertwined dynamics inherent in the diasporic existence work behind the diaspora authors’ unique vision of looking at themselves and their community in the home context or in the diasporic condition. The unique vision of an individual artist and the unique representation he or she provides of a community, though often challenged by readers from both within and outside the community, has its own value, and is worth discussing for an understanding of its unique characteristics, politics and worldview. True, the expatriate writer’s representation of home may appear limited, superficial/clichéd or even “treadmill exotic outpourings” at times; but then, let us remember Rushdie’s famous saying that *bis India* is “no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions” (10), and let us also not overlook the fact that one of the reasons behind the authors like Ali being accused of tarnishing the image of home is that “home” always wants to look good to the “foreigners,” more so when it is carried to diaspora, and so, exposure of anything negative about it, no matter whether real or fabricated, easily enrages it.

“Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things but rather in the shadow of a doorway is a good place from which to observe” (Haq), states Ali suggestively in an interview for Dhaka’s *Daily Star*. On another occasion, she mentions that she is quite in love with her liminal position in both the Bangladeshi and British communities, and defends her right to write about

her homeland, precisely because she does not belong to it (“Where I’m Coming From”). Of course, Ali, like all other authors, no matter wherever they are currently located and whatever their subject-positions are, has the right to speak of any individual or community of her choice. But maybe her dystopic vision of both native and diasporic Bangladeshis could have been hybridised with some optimism, and her almost utopic rendering of the turn of events at the end of *Brick Lane* (Ali orchestrates a rather dramatic conclusion: the Questioner wants to found a non-religious political organisation, based on local politics; Dogwood Estate on which Nazneen lives establishes a youth club; a Tower Hamlets task force is set to report on Youth Deprivation and Social Cohesion; and there is of course the garment enterprise where Nazneen achieves self-empowerment) a little more tempered.

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