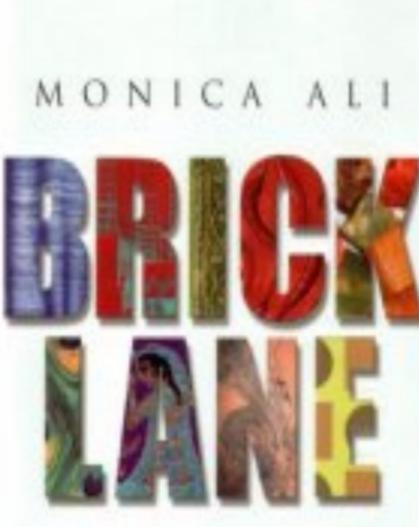




News from Bangladesh

KAISSER HAQ

Review of 'Brick Lane' by Monica Ali.



Earlier this year Dhaka-born Monica Ali created literary history when she became the first unpublished author to be included in Granta's decadal list of 'Twenty Best Young British Novelists'. Earlier lists had included Rushdie and Martin Amis (1983) and Hanif Kureishi (1993). The manuscript that earned Monica the coveted accolade is of her first novel, 'Brick Lane' (Doubleday & Scribner), which will be launched at the Terrace Bar, on the eponymous street in the heart of London's Banglatown, on 2 June, and in New York in September. Meantime, a chapter has appeared in the current 'Granta', which is devoted to the new Top Twenty, and advance copies have been put on sale at pre-launch readings. Laudatory reviews have started appearing in the weekend papers, and the author has been interviewed on TV.

Reactions automatically provoked by such media fanfare include



MONICA ALI – an interview

process of switching over to English?

M.A. In Dhaka I was, apparently, an early talker and fluent in Bengali by the time we boarded the plane. My mother was worried that if the attendants at the airport or on the aeroplane heard us (the children) speaking in Bengali they would keep us in Dhaka and not allow us to leave. So she stuffed our mouths with boiled sweets to prevent us from talking. This three-year-old child seemed to have a stubborn disposition. She did not want to speak to her mother in English and her mother was beginning to have trouble keeping up with her. But when she arrived in England there were only English speakers around. Nine months is quite a long time to a three year old. I still knew Bengali when my father arrived but it was not long before I was beginning to 'rebel' against Bengali. Perhaps I resented my father for 'leaving' us. I don't know. Nor do I know the exact point when the language was gone. There was certainly a span of years during which I understood but would not answer.

K.H. Where did you grow up in England?

M.A. I grew up in a northern mill town called Bolton (close to Manchester). There's a sizeable Asian minority there, mostly Gujaratis and Punjabis, a few Bangladeshis. My father had a few Bengali friends but we were not part of any tight-knit community. I think that my overriding concern as a child was to 'fit in', not to stand out from my white friends at school. Of course, as the child of a so-

K.H.: I believe when you arrived in England you spoke only Bengali. How would you describe the

two opposite ones. Those eager to keep up with the latest news of a celebrity and use her and her book as a convenient conversation topic. Others, with upwardly mobile eyebrows, question the motives behind the fanfare. Is it a case of the British cultural establishment creating an icon to represent the sizeable Bangladeshi community here? Or, to put it less pedantically: Is Monica the Asian Zadie Smith? In case the reader needs to be reminded, Zadie Smith, who appears alongside Monica on the 'Granta' list, is a British writer of Afro-Caribbean origin. She burst into fame a few years back with 'White Teeth', a colourful pastiche on multi-cultural London, and has recently published her second novel.

Needless to say, neither reaction is conducive to a healthy critical climate. The first is the reaction of name-droppers, whom we may write off at once. Eyebrow-raisers on the other hand, are often serious readers; it's a pity that raised brows may prevent them from looking at Monica's book with an open mind.

I believe 'Brick Lane' possesses a dual significance, depending on whether we are looking at it from a Bangladeshi or British perspective. To take the former first: the novel has set a benchmark for Anglophone fiction writers of Bangladeshi origin (shall we coin a word and dub them Banglaphone writers?), putting into the shade earlier attempts including those of the expatriates Adib Khan and Syed Manzurul Islam (not to be confused with our friend Syed Manzoorul Islam). For the British the novel is of interest as the first comprehensive fictional portrayal of Bangladeshi that will reach a large--in fact worldwide--audience. The 'Granta' editor, Ian Jack, commended it specifically for bringing 'news' from Banglatown.

'Brick Lane' may well be the only novel set in London (or even in Britain) with an all-ethnic cast of characters. Not that a few (white) natives and other non-whites aren't sighted, but only in walk-on roles. It is essentially the story of Nazneen, born in 1967 in a village in Mymensingh, married off at eighteen to a much older man, Chanu, who transplants her to a dismal housing estate in Tower Hamlets in London's East End, where she slowly and painfully acquires confidence in her own selfhood.

Nazneen's only connection with the mother country is through let-

ters from her ill-starred younger sister Hasina. Strikingly good-looking (true to her name, for 'hasina' means 'beautiful') and wilful, she elopes with her beau to Khulna. But the romance fades rapidly, the husband turns out to be a wife-beater, and Hasina runs away to Dhaka to join the vast army of garment workers. The perils of a pretty sweatshop worker are graphically illustrated: Hasina is slandered, sacked, sexually exploited. She eventually becomes a domestic and the last we hear of her is that she has eloped with the cook. She is a natural-born survivor. As Nazneen sums up, 'She isn't going to give up.'

Hasina's letters pose a technical problem. As she has even less education than her sister, she is supposed to write imperfect Bengali. But Monica has lost her childhood Bengali, so it is impossible for her to imagine the imperfect Bengali and translate it into imperfect English. She circumvents the problem by devising a kind of broken English. If the reader willingly suspends disbelief, the letters will give her a disturbing glimpse of Bangladeshi anomie. Bengali dialogue poses less of a problem: English with a South Asian slant works quite well. Monica has even rendered some Bengali saws quite effectively.

A pattern of balances, contrasts and inversions underlies the novel: between Bangladeshi and Banglatown, for instance, or between individual characters (e.g. the contrasting fortunes of the two sisters) and couples: there is conjugal unhappiness in two couples (balance), but in one case it is the wife (Nazneen) who is unhappy whereas in the other it is the husband, Dr Azad (inversion). The Azads are affluent, but Chanu and Nazneen are precariously balanced on the lower edge of the lower middle class (contrast). Other characters may be similarly related. One effect of this is that the novel's feminism never becomes doctrinaire.

Indeed, Chanu, who in a black-and-white feminist account would have been cast as a villain, is insensitive rather than wicked, and more importantly, emerges as a memorable comic character. His literary genealogy goes back to Dickens, and his later family ties link him to the creations of Meera Syal. My favourite comic episode occurs when Chanu takes his family sightseeing and engages a bus conductor in conversation:

'Can you tell me something? To your mind, does the British Museum

rate more highly than the National Gallery? Or would you recommend gallery over museum?'

'The conductor pushed his lower lip out with his tongue. He stared hard at Chanu, as if considering whether to eject him from the bus.'

'In my rating system,' explained Chanu, 'they are neck and neck. It would be good to take an opinion from a local.'

'Where do come from, mate?'

'Oh, just two blocks behind,' said Chanu. 'But this is the first holi-day for twenty or thirty years.'

There is a pervasive humour throughout the novel, which naturally speeds the reader along, while the occasional simile makes her pause to relish its aptness (e.g. An infant's face squashed into a purple mess, and he made a noise like a thousand whipped puppies.)

Nazneen's affair with Karim, though ultimately unsatisfactory, aids her quest for self-realisation and introduces her to Banglatown politics. I recall a time, circa 1980, when the Bangladeshi there lived in terror of white gangs. Soon after Bangladeshi youths began putting up organised resistance, and eventually secured their territorial rights. After 9/11 Karim and his friends, the 'Bengal Tigers', are up in arms against the Islamophobe 'Lion Hearts', but the novel underscores the ultimate futility of religious politics.

It comes to an open-ended close, with Chanu back in Bangladesh, while Nazneen stays back in Banglatown with their daughters, who incidentally are sure that their father will soon tire of Bangladeshi chaos and return. Meanwhile there is talk of a holiday in the old country. In the last scene Nazneen's daughters take her ice-skating. When she protests that one can't skate in a sari, her friend Razia quips: 'This is England. You can do whatever you like.' This is the novel's last sentence, and I suspect it may be narrowly interpreted by some as a slogan for what the Tories once notoriously described as the Race Relations Industry. But to me it reveals a highly significant fact about expatriate Bangladeshis: the men dream of returning, but not the women, who even as second-class citizens enjoy rights denied them in the mother country. If this makes Bangladeshi men unhappy they should do something to change their society.

aspect of your novel?

M.A. Until women have equality in this world I'll be calling myself a feminist. In terms of 'Brick Lane', I did not write with Nadine Gordimer with as much interest. There is this label 'world literature'. I don't know what it is, but I want to read that stuff. I am also interested in many different areas of literature that tap into a 'cross-cultural' experience but don't originate from the sub-continent. Chang Rae Lee for instance, writing about Japanese/Korean Americans, Julie Otsuka in the same area, Brady Udall writing about Native Americans.

K.H. I believe 'Brick Lane' is being translated into fourteen languages; are they all Western languages?

M.A. Western (e.g. French, German, Spanish, Portuguese) and Eastern European (e.g. Serbo-Croat, Polish) languages.

K.H. I hope you will make time to visit Bangladesh. You haven't been there since you came here, have you?

M.A. No, I haven't been back since '91. I'd love to go for a visit. I tried to do that just after Christmas but I couldn't get a visa, because I put 'writer' on my application form. It was subsequently explained to me that at the time they were very worried about letting any writers in because of the two Channel 4 journalists who had been recently arrested in Dhaka. They didn't realize that writers are not necessarily journalists. It's not going to be easy, between work and the children, but I would very much like to come.

K.H. I hope you can make it. I'd love to welcome you to the old country--to which I'm returning next month. Thank you for being such a good interviewee.

the up-an-coming Jhumpa Lahiri. 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. There is this label 'world literature'. I don't know what it is, but I want to read that stuff. I am also interested in many different areas of literature that tap into a 'cross-cultural' experience but don't originate from the sub-continent. Chang Rae Lee for instance, writing about Japanese/Korean Americans, Julie Otsuka in the same area, Brady Udall writing about Native Americans.

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Kaiser Haq teaches English at Dhaka University.



Letter from KATHMANDU

Ajit Baral emailed this fascinating account of a Nepali little magazine that tried to stay open at a time when public libraries were banned.

The literary magazine *Sarada* was started in 1934. It went on and off before folding up in 1964. Though irregular, its contribution to Nepali literature is immense in that it groomed countless numbers of writers and helped in standardizing, even if a little, the Nepali language, which is perhaps the most unstandardized language in the world. Its contribution, when we look from the vantage point of the present time, to the understanding of Nepali history is also by no means small.

Historian Shiva Regmi has compiled the editorials of this historic magazine in the book *Sarada Sampadakya Bicharharu* (Editorial Thoughts of *Sarada*). The editorials take us rapidly back into the past. Through its language, among other things. The not-so-perfect sentences of *Sarada* editorials (the translated editorial below might give one an idea) suggest that the Nepali language was just beginning to grow then. In fact, Nepali began to develop systematically in earnest after Turner wrote the first Nepali dictionary some three decades before *Sarada* came into existence. The editorials indulge overwhelmingly on topics such as how to write, what to write, what is prose, what is verse, etc. This indulgence is symptomatic of a language in the initial stage of development.

The Rana regime was in place when *Sarada* first came out. This regime used to discourage the

publication of books, magazines and newspapers, and the opening of libraries. Even the newspapers published from India were also not spared. For example, the Ranas had requested the East India Company to close down the *Gorkhali Weekly* that was being published from Benaras, India. And it did close down in 1920 or thereabouts. In 1930 the then Nepalese Prime Minister Bhimshumsher had handed down public punishment to those who had tried to seek approval to open a public library. The atmosphere was by no means congenial for the dissemination of knowledge. Still *Sarada* came out. Obviously not without cozying up to the Ranas, and restricting itself in its scope. Any wonder that the editorials show complete apathy towards social and political issues and are riddled with words and phrases of servility to the Ranas?

The editorials spanning three decades reflect more facets of history than the example presented below.

Even this translated editorial has more to offer in terms of history.

"Why didn't *Sarada* run?

The importance and the usefulness of a thing is felt when it's not around. We found *Sarada* near us for twelve long years. We rejoiced in its qualities, got angry seeing its mistakes. Some of its issues may have been safely kept, while most of them may have been torn and thrown

away. We did everything one could do to a callow magazine of a just sprouting language. But we couldn't quite realise its importance, as long as it was with us like our nails and flesh. (If we had understood its importance, we wouldn't have let it disappear from us.) And when it wasn't, we painfully realised, like fingernails without nails: Oh, where is *Sarada*?

We have been receiving the 'where is *Sarada*' questions the moment *Sarada* closed down. It was difficult for us to reply to all those queries. What to say? It was the time of [the Second World] war; paper was not only expensive but also unavailable. And at times we had to resort to crude paper. We felt like responding with this. But that was not enough reason. The war was global and it had affected the whole world, not just Nepal. Newspapers, magazines in other countries, however, were continuously running even if they had thinned a little. Why couldn't only ours run?

One of the reasons for *Sarada* not running in those days [the period when it couldn't bring out its issues] was writers' indifference. We didn't receive enough good articles to fill even reduced-in-size *Sarada*. We started prodding writers by showing these letters. Ours writers had ample reasons to give. They showed us their sunken stomachs. The day just passes by

while tending the stomach; where is the time to write? they said. And even when they wrote diligently, *Sarada* knew only to take, not to give. We went to writers who were doing well enough. They were evasive and gave us unsatisfactory answers. But we never stopped pestering them. And perhaps to evade our pestering that one good writer even said this: 'What to do. Those at the top don't like what we write.' One said to me just yesterday, 'Stop writing, if you want to prosper.' Surprising! But we didn't believe them. We said to ourselves, these writers lack devotion; these are not genuine writers. We had to, however, reply to the letters. The letters were from immigrant Nepalis, too. Should we answer citing these things? But this would be to clearly accept that good writers are not in Nepal.

Let's take our subscribers. We have few subscribers, and on top of that, 200-250 Messieurs neither pay the price of their subscription for a year or two nor deign to inform us to cut their subscription. As if they don't have any relationship with *Sarada*, their mother-tongue. Despite much disapproval, we didn't stop to knock at their door. Money, however, wasn't forthcoming. Why didn't money come? Because of stinginess? We Nepalis are not misers. Don't we drink? Don't we smoke? Don't we decorate ourselves? with snazzy clothes, nice, big houses, and the garland of 2-4 to 108

wives. Maybe we lack the courage to spend a one-fourth of a pice, to adorn ourselves with literature. No, definitely not. We are a brave race. We are brave and *play fight*. Yes, we *play fight*. Our policy plays fight (Not every language has the word *play fight* conjoined with the word *play*). But it seems we don't have the courage to be interested in literature -- the delightful play of words, emotion, and imagination. Maybe we should write these as our reply to the letters.

We were anxious and finding it difficult to answer. In the meantime, the Ramband answer to all these questions came to us:

*Srikrishna's annual help to *Sarada* and command to keep it running.*

This help is a command to writers to serve literature, to do *Saraswati* [knowledge] *pooja*, and to readers, to help literature through donation. Now we are confident that *Sarada* will trample all the obstacles on its way and move ahead. We received the annual help on the condition that it will run continuously. Therefore, we have an exciting answer to our letter-writing well-wishers: there is no cause for worry; *Sarada* will run.

THE PRICE

KAMAKSHIPRASAD CHATTOPADHYA (1917-1976)

(translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri)

The joy of sipping morning tea with stale mouth
Of stirring up a storm from the newspapers

Will end, alas, today:

Saturday's delight

Going home to the wife in Krishnanagar,

Pumpkin, spinach, aubergines bundled under arm.

There goes the greenhorn, there the hackneyed crook,
Someone's cousin, someone's uncle

Adept

In planning how to make the extra buck.

We have no-one to cook;

The servant might decamp

Never mind.

Do you know why the *koel* still goes on singing?
And the caterpillar creeps in placid rhythm,
The wall-lizard catches bugs contentedly?

It might not be so bad:

Ink-strokes, the falling leaves of early spring,

The page scrolled with the storm-filled sky's delight

On the brink of blue-tinged eyes.

