

Literature
EXTRACT From Brick Lane by Monica Ali (Doubleday, London, 2003).

Dr. Azad the man of science

Setting: A Bangladeshi family, Nazneen (of Gouripur, Mymensingh), living in Tower Hamlets, London with her 'always learning' husband Chanu (a graduate of the English department of Dhaka University no less), and their baby son Raqib ("Ruku"), have turned up at Dr. Azad's house without calling first. This is because Dr. Azad always drops by their home for dinner and talk but never invites them back. Dr. Azad's wife, who, despite the fact that 'her thighs are testing the fabric of her short purple skirt,' is not British but a transplanted Bangladeshi, has gruffly invited them in.

She showed them into the sitting room, where a pair of snarling tigers guarded a gas fire. Nazneen sank inside a large gold sofa. Chanu placed his box of kalamajam on a gilded, claw-footed table and stood with his arms behind his back, as if afraid he might break something. Raqib clapped his fat hands to summon the servants who were surely lurking in the kitchen.

Mrs. Azad stubbed out her cigarette in an ivory dish. She adjusted her underwear with a thumb, and a wiggle of her opulent backside. 'One minute,' she said, and strode to the hallway. 'Azad!' she screeched. 'You've got visitors.'

Nazneen exchanged a glance with her husband. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. She smothered a giggle on Raqib's cheek.

Mrs. Azad climbed inside an armchair. She tucked her feet up and her skirt rode up her large brown thighs. Chanu swayed a little. Nazneen eyed the curtains: miles of velvet swagged with gold braid, enough material to wrap up a tower block. Chanu cleared his throat. Mrs. Azad sighed. She tucked her fingers in her armpits and squeezed her breasts. The baby wriggled and Nazneen put him down on the thick cream carpet where he coughed up some of his supper. Nazneen put her foot over the spot.

Gradually, Nazneen became aware that Chanu was staring at something over her shoulder. When she turned her head she saw that Dr. Azad was standing in the doorway. The two men appeared to be frozen. The doctor was neat as a tailor's dummy. He held his arms smartly to his sides. White cuffs peeped out of his dark suit. His collar and tie held up his precise chin and his hair was brushed to an ebony sheen. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Nazneen looked at Chanu. He made a poor ghost, in his broken-down shoes and oversized green anorak.

'For the love of God!' said Mrs. Azad. 'Get your friends some drinks. I'm the one who's been on my feet all day.' She pushed her breasts higher up her chest. 'I'll have a beer.'

That stirred them. 'We were just passing,' Chanu explained, in a rush, as if he had just remembered his line.

Dr. Azad rubbed his hands. 'I'm delighted to welcome you. I'm, ah, afraid we have already had our meal, otherwise...'

'You'll stay for dinner,' his wife cut in. She challenged Nazneen with her battle-hard eyes. 'We've not eaten yet.'

Dr. Azad rocked on his toes. 'Not eaten as such. We've had some snacks and so forth.'

They ate dinner on trays balanced on their laps. An unidentified meat in tepid gravy, with boiled potatoes. It was like eating cardboard soaked in water. Mrs. Azad switched on the television and turned the volume up high. She scowled at Chanu and her hus-

band when they talked and held up her hand when she wished to silence them altogether. She drank a second glass of beer and belched with quiet satisfaction. Her husband had brought orange juice at first, and she jumped up in her chair as if she would strike him. Dr. Azad drank two glasses of water in his exact manner. He used his knife and fork like surgical instruments. Nazneen chased the soggy mess around her plate and clenched her stomach to try to stop it growling.

'I'll join you,' said Chanu to Mrs. Azad, 'in a beer.' He made the offer as if he were proposing to lend her a kidney. She shrugged and kept her eyes fixed on the screen.

My husband does not say his prayers, thought Nazneen, and now he is drinking alcohol. Tomorrow he may be eating pigs.

'Of course, all the Saudis drink,' said Chanu. 'Even the royal family. All hypocrites. Myself, I believe that a glass every now and then is not a bad thing.'

'As a medical man, I do not recommend it. As for the religious aspect, I hold no opinion.'

'You see,' said Chanu, in the voice of a man who has deliberated long and hard, 'it's part of the culture here. It's so ingrained in the fabric of society. Back home, if you drink you risk being an out-cast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same thing. That's when it becomes dangerous, and when they start so young they can easily end up alcoholic. For myself, and for your wife, there's no harm done.' He looked over at his hostess but she was engrossed in a scene of frantic and violent kissing. Chanu still had his coat on. He perched on a chair with his knees wide and his ankles crossed. He looked like the gardener who had come in to collect his wages.

Not for the first time, Nazneen wondered what it was that kept bringing Dr. Azad to see Chanu. They were an ill-matched pair. Perhaps he came for the food.

'We'll be in Dhaka before Ruku is in any danger. I've drawn up plans for the house, did I tell you? Very simple, very classical in design. I intend to be the architect myself.'

'Yes,' said the doctor, 'why not be an architect?'

'Exactly. What is the point of paying out to someone else?'

'Be an architect. Be a designer. Be a rocket scientist.'

Chanu looked puzzled. 'Design I could consider, but in science I confess I have very little background.' He spread his hands modestly. 'Anyway, I don't quite have sufficient funds for the house yet.'

'Ah, but when the promotion comes...' Dr. Azad sat rigid on a stiff-backed chair. He held on to the arms as if he were trying to squeeze blood from them. Since the business with the drinks he had not looked at his wife one single time.

'I have been at the council too long. Long service counts for nothing. The local yogi doesn't get alms. But I have some things in the pipeline. One or two ventures I'm developing. The furniture trade, antiques, some ideas for import-export. They're cooking away slowly. The problem is capital. If you don't have money, what can you do?'

The doctor smiled in his peculiar way, eyebrows up, mouth down. 'Make some?'

'I don't need very much. Just enough for the Dhaka house and some left over for Ruku's education. I don't want him to rot here with all the skinheads and drunks. I don't want him to grow up in this racist society. I don't want him to talk back to his mother. I want him to respect his father.' Chanu's voice had grown impassioned. Mrs. Azad tutted and held up her purple-taloned hand. Chanu assumed a loud whisper. 'The only way is to take him back home.'

A girl walked in and stood with her hands on her hips in the middle of the room. She had inherited her mother's sturdy legs, but her skirt was shorter by a good few inches. She spoke in English. Nazneen caught the words *pub* and *money*. Her mother grunted and waved towards Dr. Azad. The doctor quivered. He spoke a few sharp words. His shoulders were up around his ears. Chanu shifted in his chair and coughed. The girl chewed gum. She twid-

dled the stud on her nostril like a spot she was about to squeeze. Her hair was discoloured by the same rusty substance that streaked her mother's head. She repeated her request. Chanu started to hum. The back of Nazneen's neck grew warm. The doctor began to speak but his wife threw up her hands. She struggled out of the armchair and fetched a handbag.

The girl took the money. She looked at Nazneen and the baby. She looked at Chanu. The doctor gripped his seat. His feet and knees pressed together. His helmet-hair held a circle of light. He would never let go of that chair. It was the only thing holding him up. The girl tucked the money into her blouse pocket. 'Salaam Ale-Koum,' she said, and went out to the pub.

Mrs. Azad switched off the television. Let's go, thought Nazneen. She tried to signal with her eyes to Chanu, but he smiled vaguely back at her. 'This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy.'

The hostess cocked her head. She rubbed her bulbous nose. 'What are you talking about?'

'The clash of cultures.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'And of generations,' added Chanu.

'What is the tragedy?'

'It's not only immigrants. Shakespeare wrote about it.' He cleared his throat and prepared to cite his quotation.

'Take your coat off. It's getting on my nerves. What are you? A professor?'

Chanu spread his hands. 'I have a degree in English Literature from Dhaka University. I have studied at a British university--philosophy, sociology, history, economics. I do not claim to be a learned gentleman. But I can tell you truthfully, madam, that I am always learning.'

'So what are you then? A student?' She did not sound impressed. Her small, deep-plugged eyes looked as hard and dirty as coal.

'Your husband and I are both students, in a sense. That's how we came to know each other, through a shared love of books, a love of learning.'

Mrs. Azad yawned. 'Oh yes, my husband is a very refined man. He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him. But he has come a long way. Haven't you, my sweet?'

He comes to our flat to get away from her, thought Nazneen.

'Yes,' said the doctor. His shirt collar had swallowed his neck. 'When we first came--tell them, you tell them--we lived in a one-room hovel. We dined on rice and dal, rice and dal. For breakfast we had rice and dal. For lunch we drank water to bloat out our stomachs. This is how he finished medical school. And now look! Of course, the doctor is very refined. Sometimes he forgets that without my family's help he would not have all those letters after his name.'

'It's a success story,' said Chanu, exercising his shoulders. 'But behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy.'

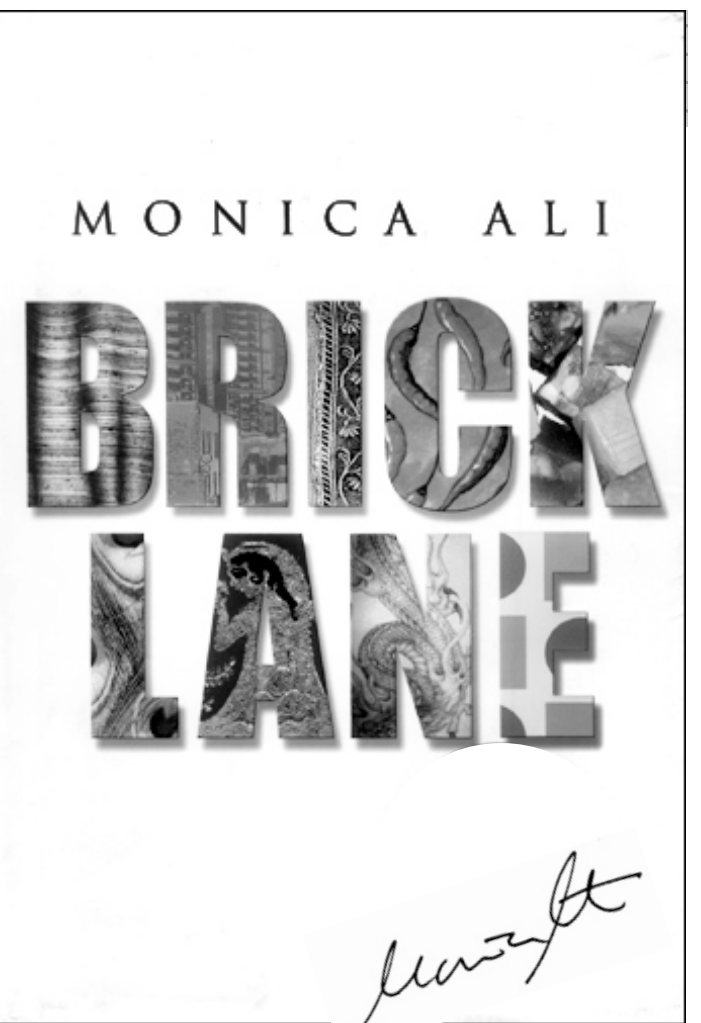
'Kindly explain this tragedy.'

'I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking'

'Crap!'

Chanu looked at Dr. Azad but his friend studied the backs of his hands.

'Why do you make it so complicated?' asked the doctor's wife. 'Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My



daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!'

Mrs. Azad struggled out of her chair. Nazneen thought and it made her feel a little giddy she's going to the pub as well. But their hostess walked over to the gas fire and bent, from the waist, to light it. Nazneen averted her eyes.

Mrs. Azad continued. 'Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.' She looked at Nazneen who focused on Raqib. 'They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That,' she said, stabbing the air, 'is the real tragedy.'

The room was quiet. The air was too bright, and the hard light hid nothing. The moments came and went, with nothing to ease their passing.

'Each one has his own tragedy,' said Chanu at last. His lips and brow worked feverishly on some private business. Raqib thought this conclusion unsatisfactory. He gazed at his father with cobra-like intensity, and then he began to cry.

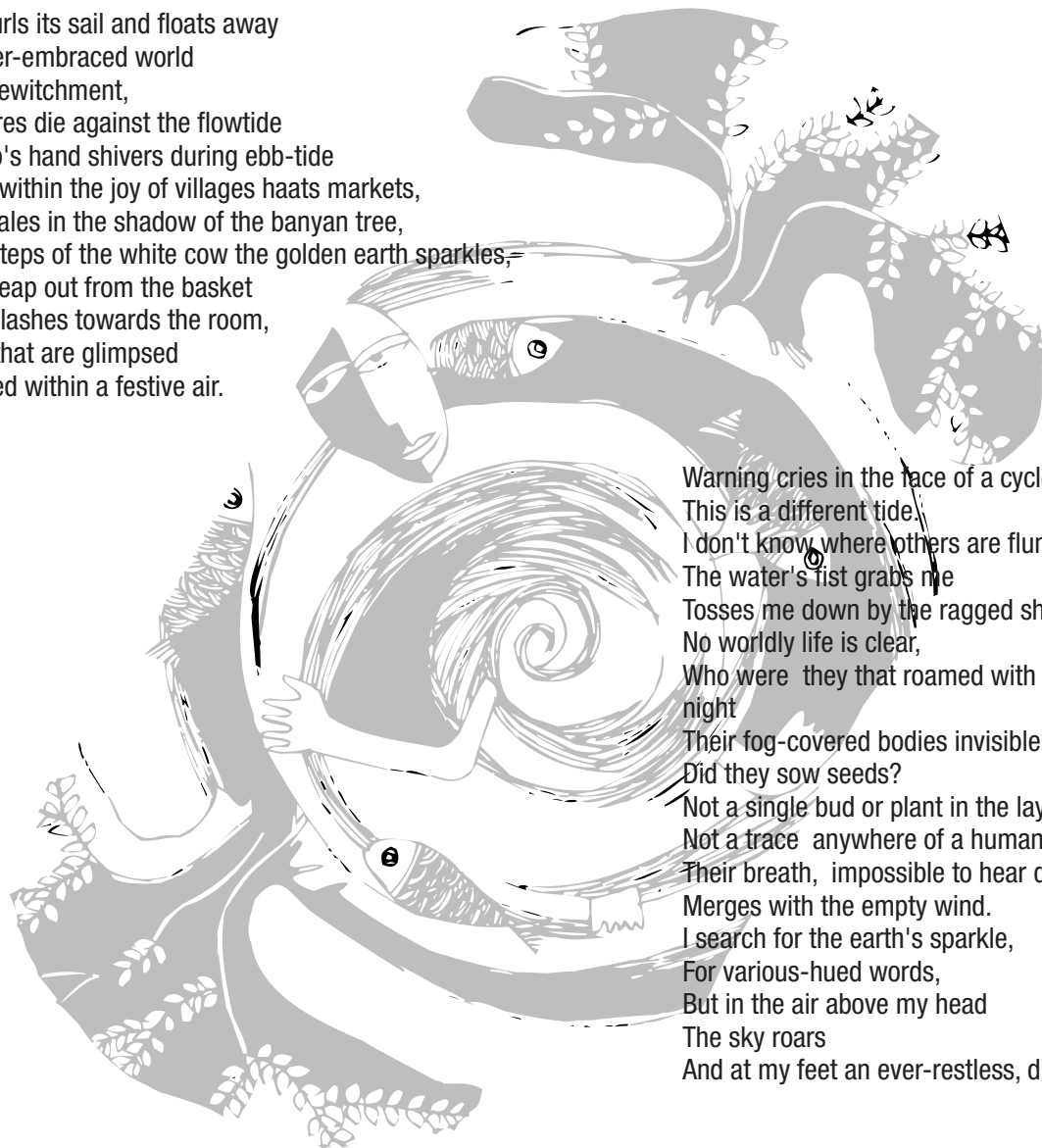
'Come with me,' said Mrs. Azad to Nazneen. 'I've got something for the baby.' In the bedroom, she looked at the back of a cupboard and pulled out a chewed teddy bear. She tried to interest the baby but Raqib just rubbed his eyes and rolled off to sleep. Nazneen changed his nappy and put his pyjamas on. He did not wake. Mrs. Azad smoked a cigarette. She stroked Raqib's head with one hand and smoked with the other. Watching her now, Nazneen felt something like affection for this woman, this fat-nosed street fighter. And she knew why the doctor came. Not for the food, not to get away from this purple-clawed woman (although maybe for these things as well), not to share a love of learning, not to borrow books or discuss mobile libraries or literature or politics or art. He came as a man of science, to observe a rare specimen: an unhappiness greater than his own.

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A Different Tide

ARUN MITRA
(translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

A boat unfurls its sail and floats away
In this water-embraced world
This blue bewitchment,
So many fires die against the flowtide
While sleep's hand shivers during ebb-tide
A dimness within the joy of villages haats markets,
Scattered tales in the shadow of the banyan tree,
In the footsteps of the white cow the golden earth sparkles,
Silver fish leap out from the basket
Morning splashes towards the room,
And faces that are glimpsed
Are enclosed within a festive air.



Warning cries in the face of a cyclone
This is a different tide,
I don't know where others are flung
The water's fist grabs me
Tosses me down by the ragged shore,
No worldly life is clear,
Who were they that roamed with lanterns on the banks at night
Their fog-covered bodies invisible now.
Did they sow seeds?
Not a single bud or plant in the layers of mud
Not a trace anywhere of a human touch,
Their breath, impossible to hear distinctly,
Merges with the empty wind.
I search for the earth's sparkle,
For various-hued words,
But in the air above my head
The sky roars
And at my feet an ever-restless, different tide flows.

Tell Me Mother

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri)

Tell me mother:
The weekdays come so fast and thick---
Have they a car to reach so quick?
But why does Sunday take so long,
Behind the others trudging on?
Has she the farthest skies to cross?
Is her home as poor as yours?

Tell me, mother:
The weekdays are an unkind lot,
To go back home they have no thought.
But why is Sunday so pursued
That she stays half the time she should?
Must she go back to do her chores?
Is her home as poor as yours?

Tell me mother:
The weekdays come with such long faces
No child can stand such airs and graces.
But when at weekends I get up,
There's Sunday with her face lit up.
She starts to cry when back she goes
Is her home as poor as yours?

