

SHORT STORY

Envy

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The scene was the Bumbu restaurant in the public-littered Jalan Sultan Road, Singapore. It used to be a shophouse in the sixties, and those which survive today aren't used as mama shops' anymore. The smart businessman buys the historic building, and converts it to a yuppie magnet. Bumbu's owners cashed in on the "authentically Asian" cravings of the yuppies and it was evident in the ambience of the restaurant.

Yusnita sat at the marble topped rosewood table with her parents while awaiting the arrival of her cousin Wanis. Her parents' favourite niece Wanis. The Wanis who she was always compared to over the past nineteen years. Wanis is so talented, Wanis is so smart, Wanis this, Wanis that. At times like those, Yusnita wished Wanis would go splat. As much as she enjoyed her cousin's company, she always felt inferior compared to her.

Yusnita sighed deeply, and inhaled the intoxicating scent of the sandalwood incense, while her parents wondered aloud about Wanis's whereabouts, constantly shifting their gaze from their watches to the entrance. Yusnita attempted to create some sort of sound while running her fingers around the damp rim of her glass. Then, like magic, the minute Yusnita looked up from her musical experiment, there she was. Wanis managed to look stunning in her tailored black pants and sheer black lace blouse. As she sashayed in, her radiant smile captured the attention of the other diners while Yusnita looked down on her favourite scarlet dress, wondering why it was her favourite to begin

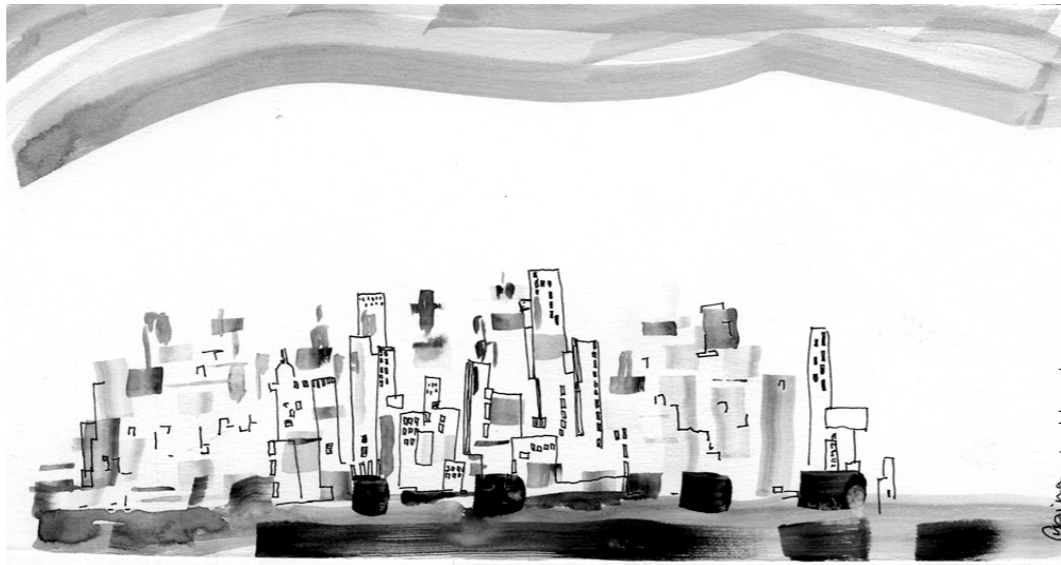
with.

"Mak Su! Pak Zul!" It's so nice to see you again!" Wanis beamed, hugging Yusnita's parents. Yusnita heaved herself out of her seat and was immediately encapsulated in a ring of warmth.

"Ital! How've you been woman? I love your dress! So cantik!" Wanis remarked, her eyes sparkling, the way they always do whenever they set their gaze on someone close to her heart. Yusnita muttered a quick thank you, certain that Wanis only complimented her dress out of courtesy.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't meet you earlier. I was just so caught up in uni work. What time is your flight tomorrow?" Wanis inquired as an awkwardly peroxide mop handed her a menu, whilst attempting a peek down her blouse. Pak Zul stared sternly at the pallid lad, who made a hasty departure for the kitchen. Yusnita let her parents answer Wanis. Of course, her mother had to ask Wanis about her exam results, to which she replied that she was disappointed that she missed out on a distinction by a mark, otherwise it would have been four distinctions.⁴

"Now if only Ita was more concerned with her schoolwork," her mother remarked sternly, as Yusnita looked through the menu for the tenth time. She had always wanted to study English in university, but her father would have none of that. He wanted her to study something practical -- something profitable. When Wanis told her about all the books she had to read for her unit in medieval English, Yusnita was reminded even more of the monotony of her studies. It must be so interesting to be able to immerse one's self in a world so



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different from our own, Yusnita pondered. Yusnita was especially interested in learning about the medieval period. When she and Wanis were little, they used to pretend to be princesses, and wore cardboard cones with scarves attached to the tip, on their heads, inspired by Miss Piggy during a particular episode of "The Muppet Show". Of course, Wanis looked more like a fairytale princess than she did; Wanis was always the prettier one.

As Wanis placed her order with the Lee Kuan Yew'-lookalike waiter, Yusnita made a mental note of all the physical features Wanis possessed that she didn't. Silky brunette mane, which came down to her size 24 waist which led to her sinuously long legs. Yusnita reckoned that if Wanis dyed her hair blonde and stood in a giant clam shell, Venus, in that renowned Michaelangelo painting, would pale in comparison.

Yusnita grimaced as Wanis daintily pierced a piece of cucumber with her satay' stick, before cautiously dipping it in the waiting bowl of chunky peanut gravy. Wanis looked at Yusnita's tau huay' and asked her cousin, out of concern, if that was all she was eating.

"I'm not that hungry."

"Ya, you should have seen how much we had for lunch!" her father interjected, before listing everything from the crisp goreng pisang' to the tear-inducing neon orange tulang' stew. Yusnita wondered how her cousin managed to eat so much yet maintain her figure. Wanis was not the type who enjoyed exercising. Yusnita couldn't remember the last time Wanis went jogging, save for the Terry Fox Run, which Wanis had told her about a year ago. Yusnita finally put it down to metabolic rate, and wondered why it didn't

run in the family. She glanced at her mother, who cut a petite figure, then resigned herself to thinking that maybe it did run in the family--she must have been adopted.

"Unfortunately, no matter how little some of us eat, we still resemble a hippopotamus."

Yusnita remarked, glancing at Wanis, who giggled girlishly. Though she did not show it, Yusnita felt like she was being laughed at. Throughout the rest of the evening, Yusnita could still hear the laughter. And the mocking you'll never be as good as Wanis! Never in a million years! You're nothing but a fat cow! This was accompanied by pontianak'-like cackles.

The cackling amplified when her mother asked Wanis about her boyfriend, Daniel. Yusnita could imagine a wave of disappointment sweep through the restaurant as Wanis gushed

about him. She even had a photo of him in her purse. Yusnita tried to be interested but listening to Wanis hurt her more. It's not that she never had a boyfriend. In fact, Yusnita had just ended a year relationship with someone she thought cared about her. It turned out that he was using her as a springboard into the corporate world.

Before they parted ways later in the evening, Wanis and Yusnita shared a parting hug. As Yusnita managed to wrap her arms around Wanis's lithe waist, she summarised Wanis's wonderful life. Gorgeous, smart and loved. How wonderful it must be to be Wanis. A lone tear rolled down Yusnita's cheek and Wanis managed to catch it before it descended to Yusnita's neck.

"Don't cry yang!", I'm sure we'll catch up again soon. There's no way I'm gonna lose contact with my favourite cousin in the whole wide world," Wanis said soothingly, emphasizing "favourite". Yusnita looked at her cousin. Did she forget to mention how endearing her cousin was? Yusnita smiled as she looked Wanis in the eyes.

"You'd better not," she playfully warned before throwing in a last hug for good measure. With that, Yusnita got into the taxi with her parents, and waved her perfect cousin goodbye, the latter's figure diminishing as the taxi tore up the streets.

Wanis sat herself on her bed and started writing in her organiser. Dinner with Yusnita and her parents was alright, but she couldn't fathom why Yusnita was so silent. Yusnita was usually so confident and chatty. Despite her voluptuous frame, Yusnita could still laugh at herself, and

eat whatever she wanted. She was so sure of herself, she didn't care what others thought of her. Wanis sighed, and continued planning her diet for the rest of the week. Thanks to dinner, she would have to forgo eating nasi lemak' with Daniel on Monday. Too fattening, she thought. She would have to settle for a salad or something.

Yusnita's confidence made her the perfect law student; Wanis was envious of that. As much as she enjoyed what she was doing now, she had always wanted to study law, but she did not pass the aptitude test. Maybe if she had taken law, people would take her seriously, instead of treating her like she was a bimbotic cheerleader.

Then again, maybe it was because Yusnita's parents had her enrolled in Harvard, that she was so silent. Wanis remembered how Yusnita didn't seem all too pleased when she complimented her red dress. Perhaps, Yusnita

thought she was a meena'³ who only knew how to talk about clothes and who thought that intellectual property rights was something to do with buying brains for personal use. Who knows what Yusnita thought of her?

Why should Yusnita be concerned about clothes anyway? Not only did she have other more important things in life to concern herself about, she was rich, thanks to Pak Zul's ever expanding business. She could have afforded all the dresses she wanted. Gucci. Versace. Prada. What did it matter to Yusnita? One dress must seem like another to her. Wanis had to scrimp and save in order to buy her lace top.

Wanis scribbled a final note in her planner, before sinking into the depths of her luxuriously soft bed. She fell into a deep sleep, mumbling, "Lucky bitch".

Nadia Vrishiba Haniff is one of Singapore's younger women writers.

1. A term used for small shops, usually run by Indian men, which sell daily necessities. They resemble non-air-conditioned Asian food stores, only they're smaller. These shops are rare sights nowadays, and are restricted to housing areas.
2. In Singapore, Mak and Pak literally mean "mother" and "father" in Malay. However, the terms are commonly used to refer to "aunt" and "uncle" respectively.
3. Cantik is a Malay word for pretty.
4. This is a typical Singaporean response. Singaporean students are rarely satisfied with their grades.
5. Lee Kuan Yew was the first Prime Minister of Singapore. He is now a Senior Minister.
6. Satay may be likened to a Malay version of the shish kebabs. It is a skewer of marinated meat, and is often accompanied with a side dish of spicy, peanut sauce and cut cucumbers, rice cakes and raw onions.
7. Tau huay is a plain bean curd, which is eaten with sugary water as a dessert. It is supposed to be good for the complexion.
8. Goreng Pisang, literally meaning fried banana, is a deep fried banana fritter, comparable to sweet version of Japanese tempura.
9. Tulang is an Indian dish that translates into "bones". It is a red stew that contains cabbage, onions, and, you guessed it, meaty bones. The bone is usually goat leg and one usually eats not only the flesh, but the marrow as well. It has origins among the poor pioneer Indian immigrant community in Singapore.
10. A pontianak is an evil female spirit. A contemporary comparison to the pontianak is the Blair witch.
11. A short form for the word "sayang". Sayang, meaning love, is often used as a term of endearment.
12. Nasi lemak literally translates to "fatty rice". The main component of the meal is a serving of rice that has been cooked in coconut milk.
13. A local phrase which is used to describe a ditzy female. Bimbo would be an apt English equivalent.

Jumping Ship: Three Bangladeshi Diaspora Novels in English

KAISER HAQ

On the map of South Asian anglophone literature, Bangladesh is very much on the fringe, more so than Pakistan or Sri Lanka. All the readable homegrown Bangladeshi poetry, fiction and non-fictional prose in English could be accommodated between two covers. There are good socio-political reasons for this. Though Bangladesh used to be the larger part of Greater Bengal, the most Westernized and cosmopolitan region under the Raj, the cross-border emigration of the predominantly Hindu zamindar and professional classes following the 1947 Partition soon turned it into the more provincial of the two wings of Pakistan. East Pakistan's agitation against what was perceived as an unequal partnership in the newly formed Islamic Republic was reinforced by lingual nationalism, which, after the bloody independence war of 1971, produced a nearly monoglot state proud of the thousand year-old Bengali literary tradition that it shares with West Bengal, Tripura and parts of Assam and Meghalaya. The country's self-appointed cultural commissars ritually inveigh against *apasanskriti*--"perverse culture"--by which they mean popular Western and Bollywood culture, and disapprove of attempts to produce an anglophone Bangladeshi literature. Individual Bangladeshis still trying to write in English--they could be counted on one's fingertips--work in isolation.

And yet this is not the whole story. English-medium schools flourish, offering pricey education leading to the British "O" and "A" levels. Their students, who belong to the upper-middle and wealthy classes, either go abroad for higher studies or go up to a private university at home. Some of them have literary interests and are aspiring anglophone writers. Among readers of English-language books there is a longing to see Bangladeshi English writers attain the kind of success that so many Indians have achieved. And so when Monica Ali gained instant celebrity with *Brick Lane*, many in the land of her birth were thrilled; soon pirated editions of the novel as well as a Bengali translation were being peddled on pavements and at traffic lights. But while most were obviously fascinated by Ali's representation of Bangladeshis, there were a few bitter dissenters, once again highlighting the perils of literary mimesis.

Monica Ali is the lone celeb of diasporic anglophone Bangladeshi literature, which is even less in volume than homegrown Bangladeshi English literature. There are in fact only two other diasporic Bangladeshi fiction writers we can consider, Adib Khan, whose debut novel *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994), won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (his two later novels are imitative magic realist fantasies and may be safely ignored), and Syed Manzurul (Manzu) Islam, who has followed up his collection of stories, *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* (1997) with a novel, *Burrow* (2004). But these three writers demarcate a fairly extensive fictional terrain and highlight both the general traits it shares with the rest of the subcontinental literary diaspora as well as its peculiarly Bangladeshi qualities. Of particular interest is the picture of Bangladesh that emerges in the works of these writers.

Tabish Khair's *Babu Fictions* (2001) will long be a useful reference point in discussions of subcontinental anglophone fiction, particularly for its insights into alienation, exile and the language question. Our three writers conform neatly to the upper-middle class, English-educated type described by Khair. Adib Khan took a degree in English from Dhaka University in 1973 before emigrating to Australia, where he studied at Monash University and then went into teaching. Manzu Islam is the son of the late Syed Nazrul Islam, Acting President of Bangladesh during the 1971 independence war and subsequently a cabinet minister, who was assassinated by the perpetrators of a coup in 1975. Manzu Islam went to England the same year, studied Philosophy and Sociology and then literature at the University of Essex; he is currently lecturer at the University of Gloucester. His first book was *The Ethics of Travel: from Marco Polo to Kafka* (1996), which critically examines the responses to alterity in Western travel writing. Both Adib Khan and Manzu Islam, then, belong to a category that has become quite common on the global--and not just the subcontinental/postcolonial--literary scene, the writer-academic. Monica Ali stands apart in more ways than one. Born in 1967 in Dhaka to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, she and her brother were taken by their mother to England during the 1971 war. Her father joined them a few months later, and after the unavoidable difficulties of a transitional period, the family settled into a middle-class existence. Though Monica Ali and her brother spoke only Bangla when they left Dhaka, they soon completely lost their first language, this curious fact distinguishes her not only from other Bangladeshi writers but from most subcontinental writers as well. After school at Bolton, she read Modern Greats (PPE) at Oxford, then worked in publishing. The idea for *Brick Lane* occurred to her when she came across the MS of *The Power to Choose* (2000), a study of garment workers in Bangladesh and Banglatown, London, by Naila Kabeer, a Bangladeshi sociologist teaching at Sussex University.

Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* exhibits "the dual alienation" that Khair identifies in the "returned natives in Indian English fiction." In the case of Iqbal Chaudhary, Khan's protagonist, one could speak of triple alienation: first from his native land, next from his adopted homeland, and finally from what the former has become during the years he has been away.

Eighteen years after he had emigrated, he visits Bangladesh with his daughter Nadine at the urging of a New Age faddist: "Go home . . . where you really belong . . . Heal yourself in your spiritual womb." In the book's very first paragraph Chaudhary arrives without warning at his ancestral village. He muses that if he had sent a message to his cousin Mateen, there would have been "dancing girls sprinkling me with rose-scented water and scattering flowers at my feet." This is pure Orientalist fantasy: things might have been different when Chaudhary's ancestors were decadent zamindars, but nautch girls in a conservative Bangladeshi village circa 1990? Really!

Chaudhary's portrayal of his village is in line with Orientalist stereotyping: "I can discern no changes in the years I have been away." No changes in a Bangladesh village in two decades following the independence war? Bangladeshi villages have probably undergone more changes during this period than in the previous two centuries! For the first time in history, villagers throughout Bangladesh (and not just in particular districts like Sylhet or Noakhali) began to look for opportunities for emigration or jobs as migrant labour. Chaudhary, however, can only see Bangladesh in terms of fabricated generalizations, stereotypes, caricatures. The sole purpose of his narrative is self-aggrandizement. He has evolved from an English-medium educated Bangladeshi alienated from the masses to a foreign citizen alienated from the whole world. But there is a crucial difference between the two forms of alienation. The alienation he feels in Australia, apart from the complication added by race, is something he shares with other citizens of that country; it is the outcome of the unavoidable anxiety of a secular, rational, consumerist *l'homme moyen sensuel*.

But vis-a-vis Bangladesh the alienation is absolute. Bangladesh is a hideous background against which he can admire himself. The country's embarrassing poverty, described with a fanfare of cliché s, becomes a source of moral satisfaction as he looks beyond himself "at the bleeding rawness of bare existence. It is an expansive experience, a forced act of selflessness to be able to reach out and feel a pulse of suffering not my own."

From the village Chaudhary moves on with tourist brochure thoroughness to deal with well-known varieties of Third World iniquity and grotesquerie: a charlatan of a Pir, guests at a feast gorging themselves with Yahoo-like abandon, the oppression of military rule, the hideousness of lepers who are said to infest Dhaka in their hundreds (actually there are hardly any), aggressive beggars who promptly mug Chaudhary. The Bangladesh independence war plays a crucial role. While it raged Chaudhary was carrying on with the girl friend of a friend who had gone to fight against the Pakistanis. The end of the war, sadly, did not bring immediate peace. There were sporadic reprisals against post-Partition Bihari settlers who had collaborated with the Pakistan Army, and Chaudhary's decision to emigrate was prompted by outrage at such barbarity. The mention of the reprisals is in itself commendable, since there is a tendency among Bangladeshis to elide them, as if they were negated by the fact that the Pakistan Army and its collaborators had perpetrated much greater atrocities.

Chaudhary's laudable moral outrage, however, is not only aimed at a particular phase of history one that lasted a few weeks; it links up with the other negative observations to justify his decision to be a migrant: "Do you know what it means to be a migrant? . . . You can never call anything your own. But out of this deprivation emerges an understanding of humanity unstifled by genetic barriers. No, I wouldn't have it any other way. I have had my prejudices trimmed to manageable proportions. . . . Difficult for you understand (sic), isn't it? You, who allow yourselves to be blinded by your pride in a singularly blinkered tradition which fertilises the grounds of bigotry."

The Mapmakers of Spitalfields, as Sukhdev Sandhu points out in his review of *Brick Lane*, was the first work of fiction about Banglatown (*London Review of Books*, 9 October 2003). The stories set in Banglatown give a sense of its milieu, despite their curious use of

language: "avoided each other's shadows and haunts"; "Have you eaten your head or what?" (Bangla idiom literally translated). Problems of language use remain in *Burrow*, which is otherwise a more ambitious and sustained performance. The protagonist Tapan Ali has been sent by his anglophone grandfather to England for higher studies. When he is halfway through his final year at university his grandfather dies, leaving him with the prospect of returning to Bangladesh as soon as he gets his degree. He realizes that "he wanted to stay in England. He had nobody and nothing in Bangladesh to go back to. Here he had his friends. Besides, the kind of life he wanted to live was only possible in England. He wanted economic independence, anonymity and no responsibility for anybody or anything." This self-regarding avowal is the premise for the narrative that unfolds.

Adela, a fellow student with whom Tapan has had a casual affair, suggests a marriage of convenience that should eventually get him British citizenship. (Her name alludes to *A Passage to India*; the connection is made explicit at one point.) Marriage alters the relationship, first sweetening it into a mellow romance, then suddenly souring it, precipitating a separation. The Home Office turns down Tapan's application for immigrant status and he becomes a fugitive moving from one hideout to another in Banglatown, helped by a tightly-knit group of friends. With one of them, Nilufar Mia, a university educated social activist, he has an intense relationship that could very well put his life back on an even keel. But Adela meanwhile has given birth to his son (unknown to him she was pregnant when they broke up); suspended in an emotional limbo, he cannot bring himself to ask her for a divorce so that he can marry Nilufar. He becomes increasingly spacey, prompting Nilufar to betray him to the immigration Police; she feels that it's best if he is sent back to Bangladesh before he goes completely round the bend.

But for Tapan the entire experience has a very different complexion. He feels a sense of community in Banglatown, which at this juncture

has been galvanized into resistance against racist thugs. Alone in his hideout he relives memories of his Bangladeshi village--central to them is the diminutive, skinny Vaty Das, a barber who had been a terrorist in the anti-colonial struggle and for twenty years a fugitive from the colonial Police. Tapan looks back on him as a kindred spirit: both he and the Vaty are moles who have hidden in burrows. Unlike Vaty, Tapan's late grandfather has collaborated with the colonial rulers and has opprobrium duly heaped on him: "An arse-licker of the British Raj." The account of colonialism never rises above the tritely simplistic: "they went around naming our things like they invented them. . . their greed is almost

boundless as Allah's bounty? . . . after naming, they pocketed our things like they were inheritances from their forefathers."

The portrayal of Vaty Das introduces magic realism, but only half-heartedly, so that the reader is disoriented rather than transported. Just as Tapan identifies himself with the communist Vaty Das, the latter feels a kinship with the martyred sufi Hajjaj Al-Mansur. Since in mysticism the way up and the way down are one and the same, one shouldn't be surprised that Tapan wants to burrow till he reaches "the airy depths of things," when he will be able to overcome gravity and fly. Tapan steadily becomes delusional about flying--and is in a state of elation when finally nabbed.

There are other burrowers: the colonial "Bombay Bill," who is at home in the maze of London's sewers, and the anti-colonial Masuk Ali et al, who quixotically tunnel towards the Tower of London in order to get back the Kohinoor diamond, a symbol of India's pre-colonial glory.

Despite the novelistic investment in the subjective drama of Tapan Ali, the book's core remains the portrait of the Bangladeshi immigrant community of ship-jumpers, bauls, spiritualists and streetwise spivs. They claim to have come to Britain to escape hunger, a point made by both Tapan and Nilufar in a peculiar idiom literally translated from Bangla: "I suppose we wanted to better ourselves. Improve our life chances. Some of us simply wanted to eat. I don't have to remind you how things are back in Bangladesh" (Tapan). In childhood Nilufar heard a madman shouting, "Go England. Good eating. Plenty, plenty rice. Plenty, plenty meat. England, good eating." The delineation of Banglatown is ultimately premised on the assumption that in Bangla-desh things are too bad to permit one to lead a normal life; the



pressures of life in a hostile environment are preferable to the problems in the mother country. Even in the fey state in which Tapan is nabbed, he affirms, "Here, right here, in the belly of London, is my home too." Unlike the other two novels, however, *Burrow* does not provide details about contemporary Bangladeshis.

Brick Lane is essentially the story of Nazneen, born in 1967 in a village in Mymensingh (she shares her birth year and ancestral village, Gouripur, with her creator), and 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. Though in an altogether different class than the other two novels, it is not without its problematic side. I am not referring to the virulent protest by certain Banglatown leaders who alleged that the novel besmeared the image of their community (the protesters confused realism with lack of sympathy) but the presentation of Nazneen's ill-starred younger sister Hasina. Strikingly good-looking and wilful, she elopes with her beau. 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." It's an all-too-common tale but in presenting it through Hasina's letters to Nazneen the author runs up against a technical problem. As Hasina has even less education than her sister, she is supposed to write imperfect Bengali, which is impossible for Monica Ali to imagine and translate. At her editor's suggestion she circumvented the problem by devising a bizarre pidgin that demands of the reader an effort to willingly suspend disbelief.

The technical failure becomes more glaring if one peeps into Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose*, which makes extensive use of interviews with garments workers, conducted in Bangla and translated into simple English. They are more convincing than Hasina's letters largely because the bland English used does not draw attention to itself, whereas the odd idiom of the latter makes the reader stumble.

By way of illustration let me juxtapose a few lines from an interview in *The Power to Choose* with Monica Ali's pidgin adaptation:

The best purdah is the burkah within oneself, the burkah of the mind . . . You see, if I keep my fingers closed into a fist, you cannot open my hands, can you? Even if you try, it will take you such a long time, it will not be worth your while. Similarly, if I maintain my purdah, no one can take it away from me.

(The Power to Choose)
Pure is in the mind. Keep yourself pure in mind and God will protect. I close my fingers and make fist. I keep my fingers shut like this you cannot open my hands can you? I say like this to her. Even you try it take such long time it not worth it for you. Same thing my modesty. I keep purdah in the mind no one can take it.

(*Brick Lane*)
Hasina's letters perform the critical role of delineating the condition of Bangladesh; what comes across painfully is a state of anomie. And yet, unlike the other two novels, *Brick Lane* does not quite write off the country, and till its open-ended finale depicts resolute attempts to cope with the chaos. Besides Hasina, there is Chanu, back in Bangladesh, while Nazneen stays back in Banglatown with their daughters. The girls are sure that their father will soon tire of Bangladesh and return, but meanwhile there is talk of a family 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 might seem like as a slogan for what the Tories notoriously described as the Race Relations Industry. But it reveals a significant fact about expatriate Bangladeshis: the men dream of return, but not the women, who even as second-class citizens enjoy rights denied them in the mother country.

The portrayal of Bangladesh in our three novels is compatible with *Time Magazine's* recent characterization of it as Asia's "most dysfunctional state." But, as Aristotle would have pointed out, the article describes a contingent historical situation, whereas the novels make an essentialist statement. *Brick Lane* just about avoids the pitfall, but not the egregious *Seasonal Adjustments* nor *Burrow*. Both condemn Bangladesh to perennial solitude in a remote corner of the banana republic of postcolonial letters. The writerly freedom to do so cannot be denied, but it is the critic's task to point out the implications of the choice. If one may end with a metaphor, in these novels Bangladesh is a ship beset with all sorts of problems--sea-sick passengers, disaffected crew, plague-carrying rodents, what have you. A few crew members jump ship, but they are no Lord Jims.

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