

MUSINGS

# Religion, Diaspora and the Politics of a Homing Desire

FAYEZA HASANAT

Let me dedicate my inaugural musing in this page to the writers of the Bangladeshi diaspora spread all over the world; after all, I myself speak as a diasporic woman who has spent her whole life learning how to keep her steps unflinchingly steady, and walking through the shifting grounds of [un]homelands, wearing shoes of melting hot iron and speaking in shredded tongues about my multifaceted consciousness.

The diasporic concept of home is more than an unrequited desire for a lost homeland; it is a homing desire. As Susheila Nasta writes in *Home Truths: Fiction of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*, it is a desire to "reinvent and rewrite home" and to "come to terms with and exile from it". In the shifting consciousness of the diaspora, one's perceptions—of spatial and metaphysical home, identity, religion, war, or memory—are always in a flux, and dangerously alluring as well.

In this piece, the definition, or rather the positioning of a good Muslim in the Bangladeshi diasporic context is at the center of my scrutiny. Since religion and sexuality are intertwined with the diasporic theme in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*, I will first focus on the chaotic juncture of religion and the politics of diasporic homing desire as depicted in these novels and then discuss the impact of such entanglements.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* deals with the dreams and deceptions of diaspora and religion. In the novel, Chanu's dream to live the life of a gentleman is surely nothing but the residual impact of British colonialism. A postcolonial Pip, overwhelmed with his great expectations, Chanu dreams to be the shadow of an English educated gentleman, disregarding the truths of his own existence. Chanu's first benefactress, Mrs Islam, a diasporic Miss Havisham, lends him money to buy comfort and happiness for his London home. But Chanu discards his benefactress once she threatens to ruin

him. He then takes Dr Azad as his other Havisham, a man who lives a dissatisfied life in his postcolonial 'Satis House,' accompanied by his wife and a daughter—the Stellas of the diasporic world—who are disenchanting (from Bengali culture) and fallen (from the normative grace bestowed upon traditional Bengali women).

According to Dr Azad, Chanu is inflicted by the "Going Home Syndrome," a disease common among immigrants. Nazneen, Chanu's wife,

Such fractured memories of vacillating consciousness initiates what Deleuze and Guattari has called "a schizophrenic mélange" of epistemic violence. And for Nazneen, the epistemic violence occurs when she unwittingly smudges the line between religion and sexual temptation. When she meets Karim, the middleman from a garments factory, the first thing she notices is the flimsy pamphlet that he carries with him, titled, "Are you a Good Muslim? Twenty ways to tell." During

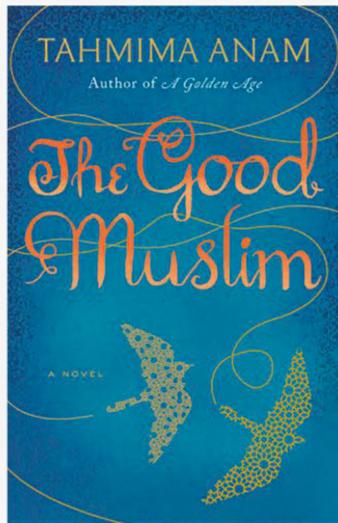
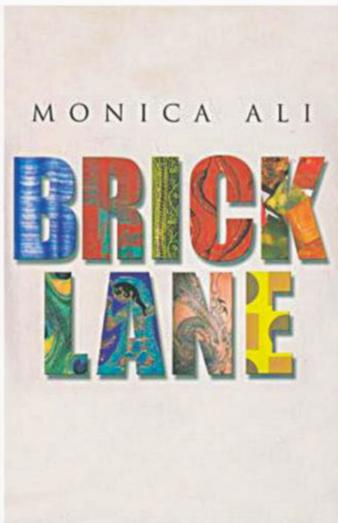
becomes for them a site of seduction and allurements.

Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* narrates the life of Maya, a medical doctor, and her brother Sohail, a freedom fighter of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Maya and Sohail have not migrated into a new country; rather, the very concept of their country has gone through a process of migration.

For Maya, the liberation movement has given her the opportunity to spread roots in the real homeland; the only movement she can think of is that of moving forward with her fight for democracy. She sees herself to be a Bangladeshi first and Muslim next. On the other hand, Sohail is torn between his national identity and his religious creed. In the process, he refuses to belong to the homogenized culture of the new nation. Sohail is unable to adapt to the double consciousness of an imagined diaspora. In Sohail's case, his consciousness about such an imagined diaspora reshapes itself through the prism of religious ideology, provoking his religious culture to usurp his national culture.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that "the phrase false expectation suggest great expectation" (33). Monica Ali's Chanu has suffered the consequence of being entrapped within this paradoxical framework of false/great expectation of a real/imagined home. Tahmima Anam's Sohail builds his own Satis House on the edifice of religion. But in the light of what we know, it would not be an overstatement to say that for the good Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, the shout of love is always, as Nietzsche puts it, "gripped by an unconquerable horror," and that the world for them is indeed a madhouse. And as I understand it, the diasporic consciousness is nothing but a dystopian, schizophrenic, and multifaceted mélange.

Fayeza Hasnat teaches English at the University of Central Florida.



however, does not share his disease, because unlike him, her vision of home (or the lack of it) is not constricted by location, relocation, or dislocation. Instead, her homing desire is built on the edifice of fractured memories. When Chanu tells her about their future home in Dhaka, Nazneen remains impassive, thinking, "Would we still sit like this in Dhaka? In a room like this? And would we sit like this and would it feel just the same and would everything be the same but just in a different place?" (310).

one of his visits, Karim asks for a prayer rug. The moment he starts praying, Nazneen begins reciting the prayer with him inadvertently and soon feels desire welling in her.

In between sewing and praying, Karim and Nazneen start having their sexual adventures; and in between sex and sewing, they chat about religion and about various ways to be good Muslims and plan to attend meetings organized by a radical group called the Bengal Tigers. Diasporic home thus



## Nineteen Thirty-Four

BANGLA ORIGINAL:  
JIBANANANDA DAS

TRANSLATION:  
RAKIBUL HASAN

A motorcar  
Fills the mind with misgivings.  
A motorcar is always a thing of darkness,  
Though its name is the first  
Among the children of light  
In the bright streets of daylight  
And glowing gas lamps at night.

It's a creature of the dark:  
In clear dawn light  
While walking past green corn fields  
I look at a motorcar in amazement  
And see a 1934 model,  
Glimmering, causing a dust storm,  
Rushing on a red brick-built road  
Going underneath two hijal trees;  
Streets, fields and dew disappear.  
The morning light suddenly vanishes,  
Like a shy bride  
Faced with a contrary view,  
The field and river, as if, lifeless,  
Suddenly lose poise.  
This motorcar is a trailblazer,  
It's rushing in a direction  
Where everyone is supposed to be going;  
The course of a motorcar  
Fills the mind with misgivings,  
Just like darkness.

In the stands  
Beside footpaths  
On the East and West sides of the city's main field  
Are motorcars;  
Soundless.  
Heads covered,  
Seats decorated and cavernous  
Steering wheels and headlights polished;  
Why are they so still?  
A tree of a Kolkata park is still as well  
But for other reasons;  
I too am still but for another reason;  
The stillness of a motor is for some dark reason

It is a dark thing:  
In night's darkness, thousands of cars  
Dash past  
Paris-New York-London-Berlin  
Vienna-Kolkata  
On this and that shore of the sea  
Like myriads of wires,  
Like meteors of night,  
Like endless enigmas  
And with the endless resolve of men and women  
They also run  
But where they head to I don't know.

The destination of a motorcar – a motorcar itself  
Has always been a mystery to me,  
It seems to move towards some darkness.

I don't want to go anywhere so fast;  
I have the leisure to walk to wherever I want to,  
The leisure to wait and lounge for a long time  
after reaching my destination.  
Let other people be excited  
About all kinds of amazing feats – I don't feel the  
need for them!  
I am a hopelessly outdated man  
In this new century  
Underneath the stars!

Rakibul Hasan teaches English at Daffodil University.

## Portrait of the poet as young woman

S. CHANDRAMOHAN

Her hair  
Freshly harvested

Dreadlocks off limits to combs.

It is an unedited gospel of love.

Tresses like streams  
Of eternal fire-  
From the arsenal of her body.

Poems conceived in a celestial tongue  
When stars align with cesarean precision.  
It is our own language.

Her verses  
Are neither left nor right aligned  
Time zones hinge at every line break  
Like sunflowers- un-aligned to the scorching heat.

Every evening, on her terrace,  
she lets her hair down and flies a kite,  
Her verses tell vivid stories  
Stitched together in myriad colors.

Her verses gurgle like rivers let loose.  
She never braids them  
With her bare hands  
Before a poetry reading.

When her poems are read  
No boyfriend or pimp is allowed  
Inside the reading hall.

Her kite, untethered to her surname,  
Soars high, till it gets entangled with the stars.

Attempting to translate her poems  
Is like making love to a capricious mistress.

Her curly, kinky stream of verses  
Sway to the rhythm of her gait  
Untamed by the clanging of her anklets.

Her book of poems,  
a treatise on disheveled hair  
and tresses on fire.



S. Chandramohan is an English language poet based in India.