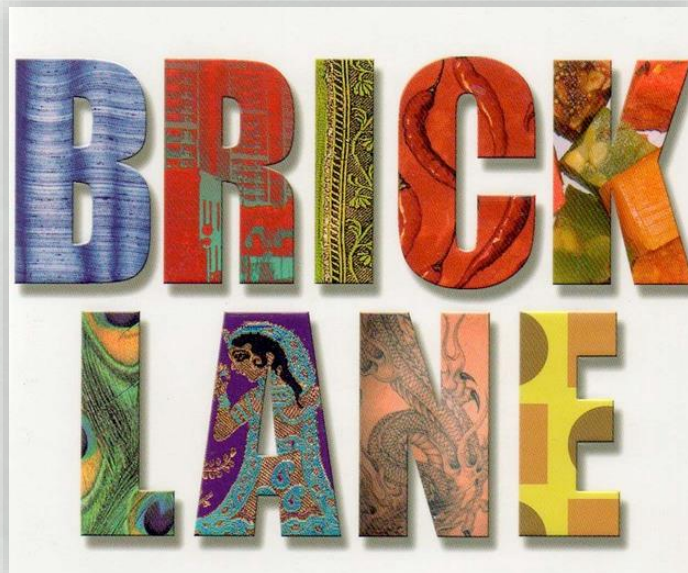


# Multiculturalism and ethnicity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Raffaella Antinucci



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# 1. Postcolonialism

- A series of **theories and discourses** developed in different fields that investigate and analyze the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism
- The process of **decolonization** affected both Britain's former colonies and Britain itself



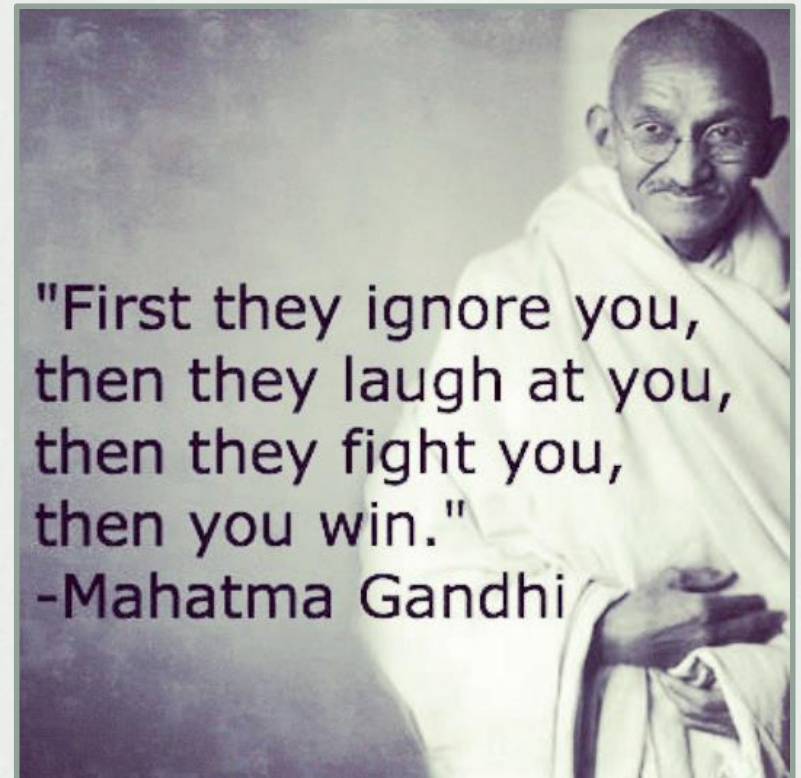
# What is colonialism?

An extension of a nation's rule over territory beyond its borders

Two sides of colonialism:

- The **militaristic** side (the physical conquest and occupation of territories)
- The **civilizational** side (the conquest and occupation of minds, selves and cultures)

- Colonialism does not end with the end of colonial occupation
- Resistance begins before the end of colonial occupation



## The basic assumptions in defence of colonial actions are:

- The colonized are savages in need of education and rehabilitation
- The culture of the colonized is not up to the standard of the colonizer
- The colonized nation is unable to manage and run itself properly, and thus it needs the wisdom and expertise of the colonizer.
- The colonized people pose dangerous threat to themselves and to the civilized world if left alone

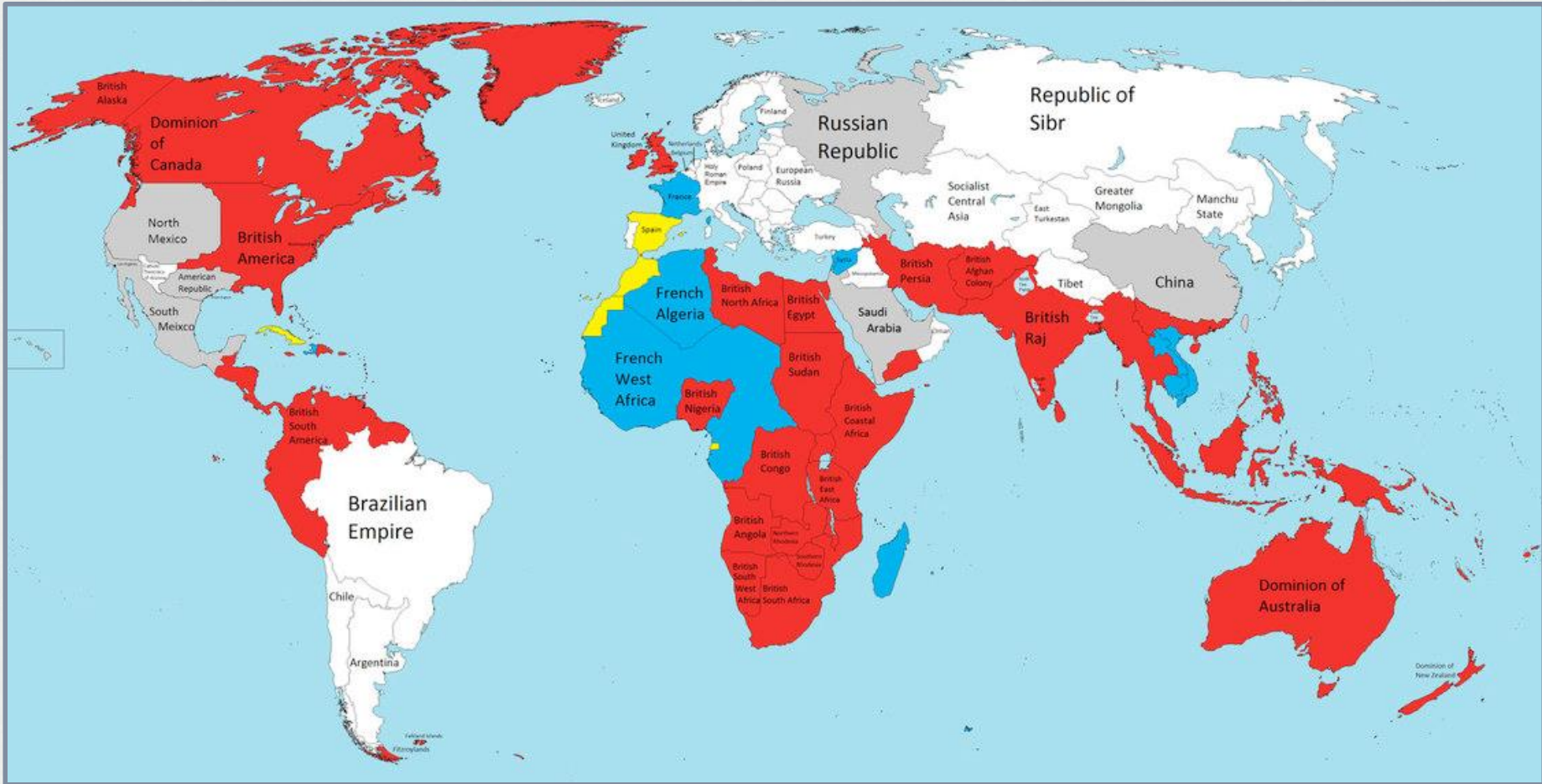
# The Effects of Colonialism

- The total or partial erosion of the colonized culture
- The total rejection by some elements among the colonized of everything western as a form of reaction and protest against the colonizer.
- The categorization of the world into ranks, such as first world, second world, the West and the stereotyping that follows.
- It fostered a strong sense of national unity. It brought industrialization and modern economy to the colonies; and above all it advanced cultural life where it occurred.



# What does 'post' mean?

- Ambiguities in the term Post-colonial
- 'Post' refers to the period “after colonialism began” rather than “after colonialism ended”
- the cultural struggles between imperial and dominated societies continue into the present both in the former colonies and in Britain (social resistance and tensions)



Some **ex British colonies**: African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, ...

# Postcolonial literature

- Postcolonial literature: literature produced by the countries that gained independence from colonial rule (esp. from the British Empire) in the XX century
- ‘Commonwealth’ literature: synonym (an association of many of the countries that used to be ruled by Britain)
- Writing helped to create a new national identity when the country is freed from the Empire (a form of ‘textual decolonization’)

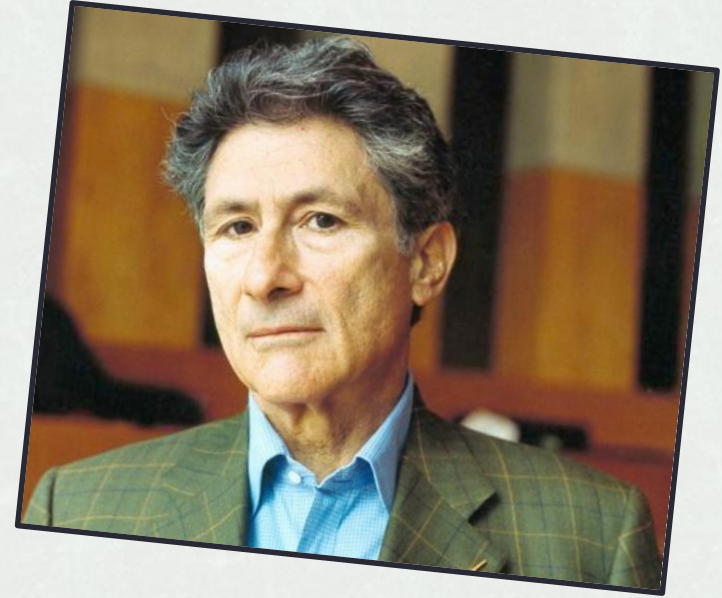
# Postcolonial theory

- Edward Said: *Orientalism* (1978)
- Spivak: “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988)
- Homi Bhaba: *The Location of Culture* (1994)

# Edward Said

- Palestinian Christian, Professor at Columbia University (New York)
- *Orientalism* (1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)
- moved colonial discourse into the first world academy and into literary and cultural theory
- was also very influential in third world universities (esp. in India)
- coined the term “**Orientalism**”

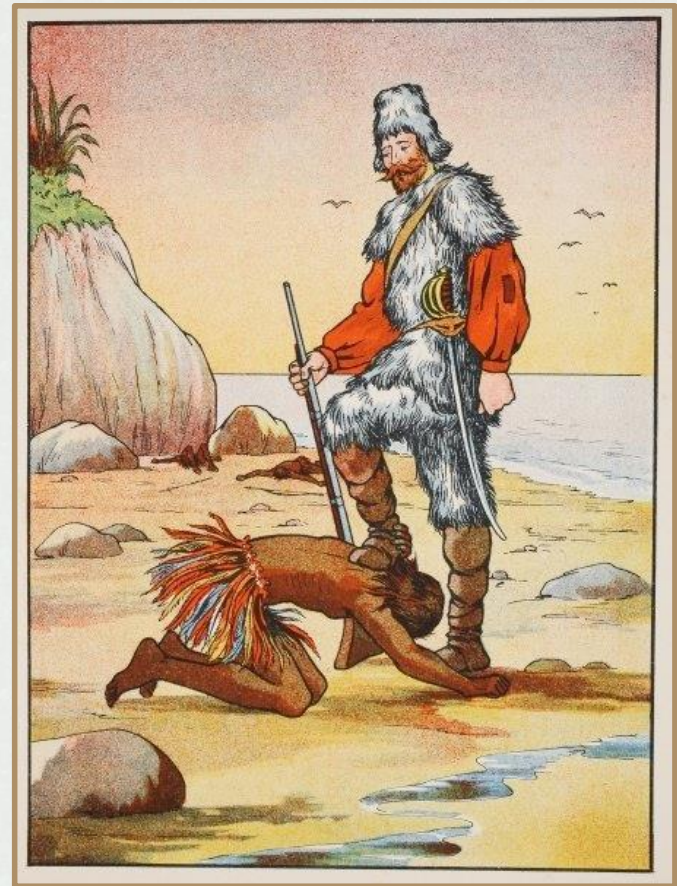
- described the binary between the Orient and the Occident
- a range of discourses including literature that served to define a ‘positional superiority’ of the West in relation to the peoples and cultures of the East
- The ‘Orient’ was stereotyped due to lack of knowledge and imagination (a “lumping” together of Asia)



# The process of 'Othering'

Creates negative identities, often in binary opposition to western ideals

- Savage
- Uncivilised
- God-less
- Stupid
- Cultural lacking
- Backward
- Sexually easy
- Cruel
- Exotic



# ‘Othering’

Examples of ‘othering’ are still very prevalent in contemporary culture.

For example, **advertisers** may offer consumers ‘a taste of the East’ or the ‘mysteries of the Orient’ whilst film producers scour the globe for locations (and attendant extras) to serve as a tastefully exotic background to the latest action adventure film. Similarly, architects and designers may incorporate hints of mystery, difference or ‘otherness’ in their work by utilising symbols such as a palm tree or a pagoda shape



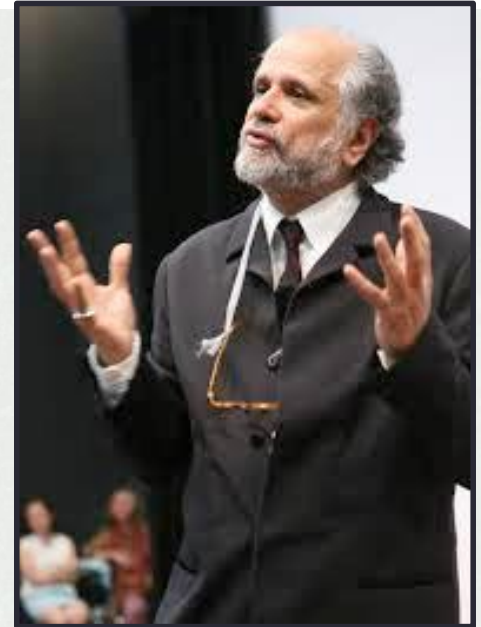
# Gayatri Spivak



- is an Indian literary critic and theorist, teaches at Columbia University
- introduced terms such as “**Essentialism**” and “Strategic Essentialism” (temporary solidarity for the purpose of social action)
- is best known for the article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), considered a founding text of postcolonialism, and for her translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*

# Homi Bhabha

- Born in Mumbai in 1949, Director of Humanities Centre, Harvard
- Applied post-structuralist methodologies to colonial texts in *The Location of Culture* (1994)
- Said's *Orientalism* focuses on the methodology of the colonizer to contain the colonized
- Bhabha focuses on the spaces of resistance



# 'Hybridity'

- Hybridization of cultures happens in a liminal space
- **Hybridization and liminality** undermine the notion of culture as pure and static
- Culture is in a constant state of flux – **process** of creating new identities
- Hybridization implies constant **negotiations**



# The 'Third Space'

- The Third Space develops when two or more individuals/cultures interact.
- The third space is a new hybrid that rejects the binary oppositional framework, but also contains the sense of the dual heritages that have contributed to its formation (*The Location of Culture*, 1994).

# Sadiq Khan to *The New York Times*

“I’m a Londoner, I’m European, I’m British, I’m English, I’m of Islamic faith, of Asian origin, of Pakistani heritage, a dad, a husband.”



# Which language?

- Some writers **reject English** as the language of the oppressor
- Others adopt English but **reinvent and expand** Standard English by making use of local words or of their communities' speech patterns
- **Diasporic writers** occupy a liminal space, as being both British and not British

# Which genre?

- Genres, too, including the novel, are hybridised with indigenous literary forms
- Sometimes postcolonial authors rewrite/ 'write back' /reread a familiar and canonical text of English literature (Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*)

# From the margins to the centre

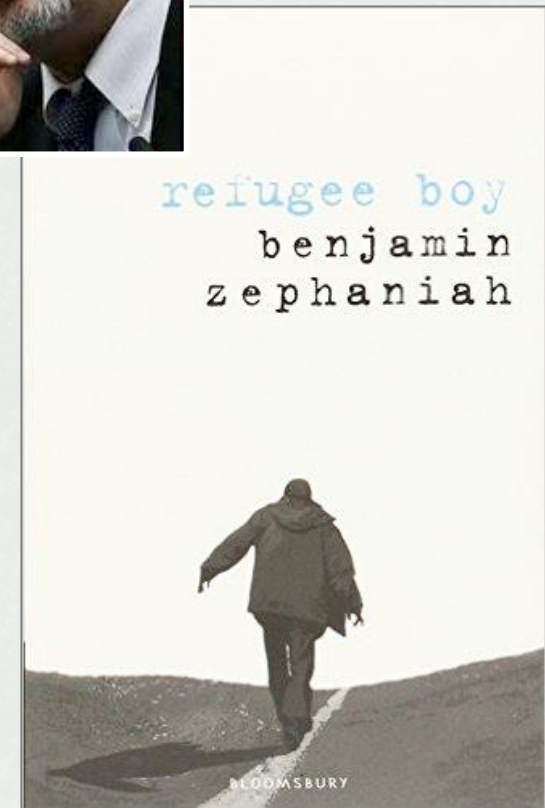
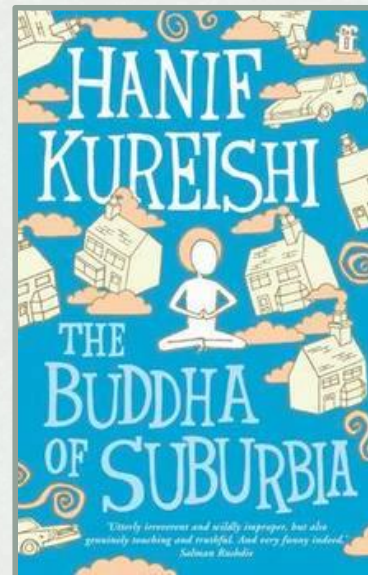
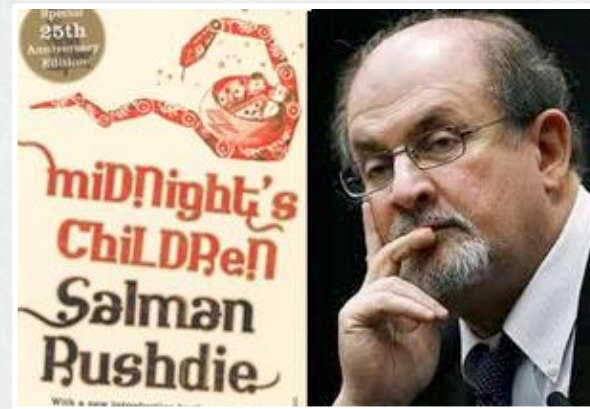


- Many authors set their stories in metropolitan environments
- **London:** Kureishi, Selvon and others (Zadie Smith, Monica Ali) create a new London, very different from the metropolitan image in colonial representations, **a place defined by the immigrant experience**



# Diasporic/'black British' literature

- Salman Rushdie
- V.S. Naipaul
- Hanif Kureishi
- Zadie Smith
- Jhumpa Lahiri
- Benjamin Zephaniah
- Caryl Phillips
- Bernardine Evaristo
- Buchi Emecheta
- Monica Ali



- Diasporic writings question traditional notions of Englishness/Britishness
- explore **negotiations** between dominant and minority communities, and between colonial, traditional, and multicultural values

**“The British”** (serves 60 million)  
by Benjamin Zephaniah



## 2. Brick Lane



# Facts

- Street in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets
- Runs from Swanfield Street to Osborn Street
- Famous for curry houses
- Was known as **Banglatown**
- Recently the street has been broadened with art and fashion





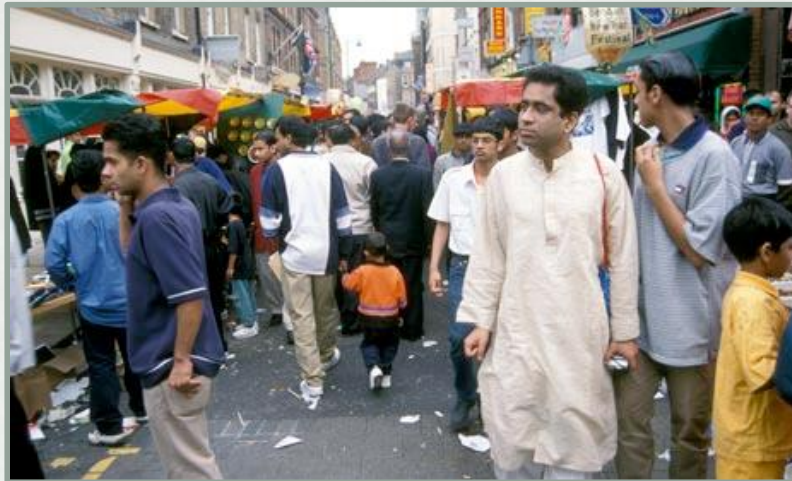


# History

- Used to be named **Whitechapel Lane**
- Renamed Brick Lane in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, due to a brick and tile manufacturer
- The street was expanded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century because of a growing population
- A wave of immigrants moved to Brick Lane in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, creating an area for tailoring, weaving and expanding the clothes industry (French Huguenots)



- The 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by Irish and Jewish immigrants
- The 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by Bangladeshi immigrants, which has continued to increase to this day
- Brick Lane bombing (1999)
- Thriving and fashionable artistic community



# Religion

- 1742 – French Huguenots built a chapel
- 1809 – ‘The Jew’s Chapel’ promoted Christianity
- 1819 – Promoted as a Methodist Chapel
- 1898 – Adapted to be a synagogue
- 1979 – Adapted again to be London **Jamme Masjid**, a mosque for the Bangladeshi’s



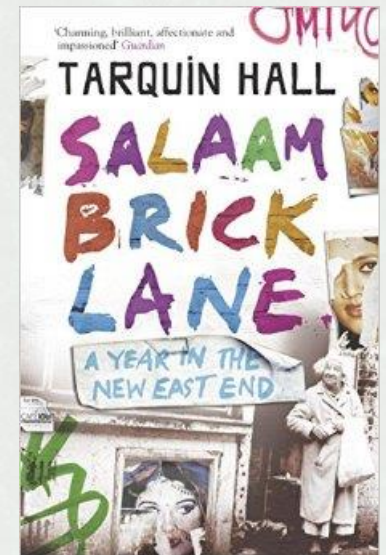
# Cuisine

- 20<sup>th</sup> Century immigrants brought the **Anglo-Indian cuisine** with them
- Most **curry houses** do not sell alcohol because they are run by Muslims
- The British empire was based in Bengal, India, so they get foods and spices from there

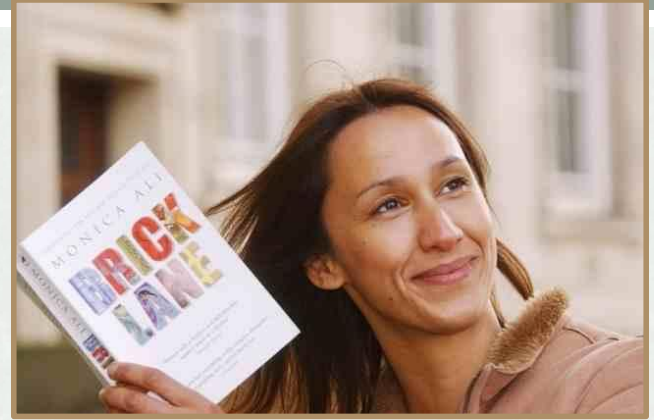


# 'Inspirational' Brick Lane

- Paul Makkar's short film (2002)
- Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004)
- Jeremy Gavron's *An Acre of Barren Ground* (2005)
- Tarquin Hall's memoir *Salaam Brick Lane – A Year in the East End* (2005)
- Sarah Gavron's film (2007)
- Steve Pyke's *Brick Lane 1984-1996* (2009)



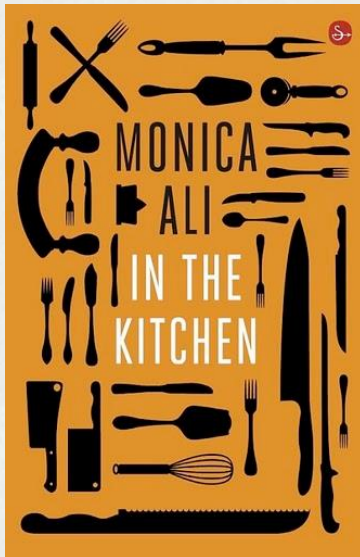
### 3. Monica Ali (1967-)



- Monica Ali was born in Dhaka (Bangladesh) to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, at 3 she moved to England (Bolton), studied at Oxford and now lives in London
- in 2003 she was selected as one of the “Best of Young British Novelists” by *Granta* magazine
- *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize

# Works

- *Brick Lane* (2003), Doubleday
- *Alentejo Blue* (2006), Doubleday
- *In The Kitchen* (2009), Doubleday
- *Untold Story* (2011), Scribner
- *Love Marriage* (2022), Scribner



## 4. *Brick Lane* (2004)

- The novel follows a young woman, **Nazneen**, from her birth in Bangladesh in the late Sixties to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (2001-2), after she has moved to London (1985)
- The protagonist is born at the same time as the author.



# Hostile criticism and controversy

- Members of the Bangladeshi community in London accused Ali of having **misrepresented** and portrayed Bengalis in a bad light.
- They criticised her **lack of authenticity** and experience as she never lived in Brick Lane and doesn't speak Bengali fluently.



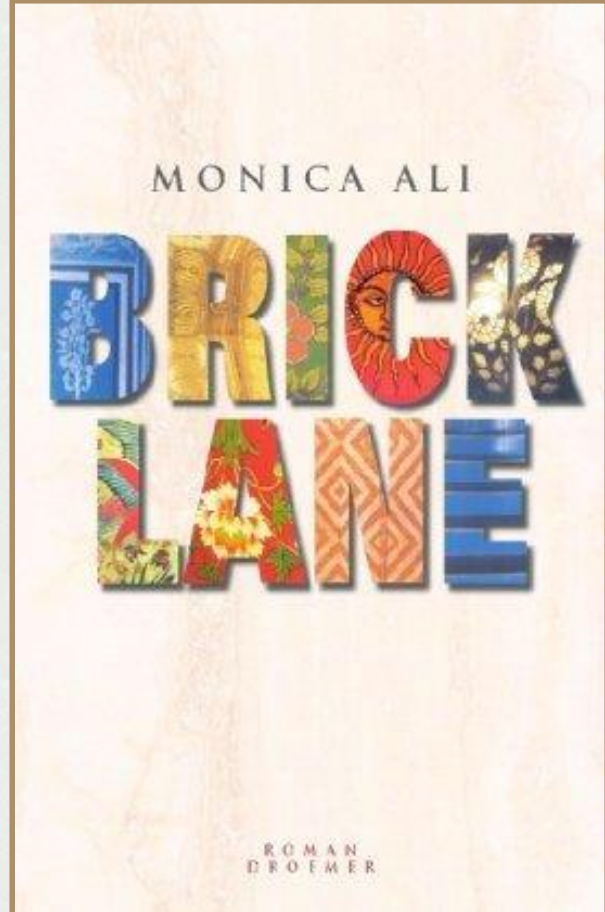
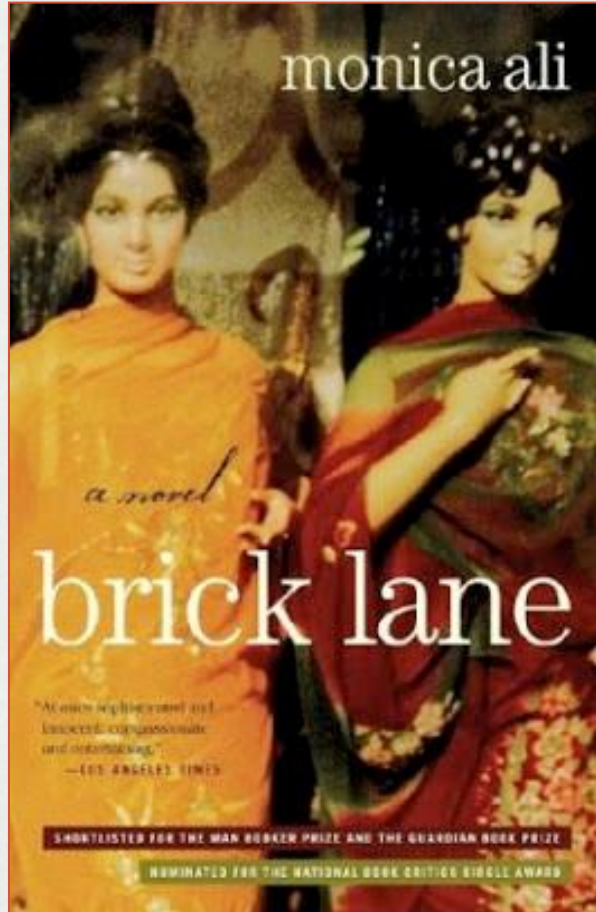
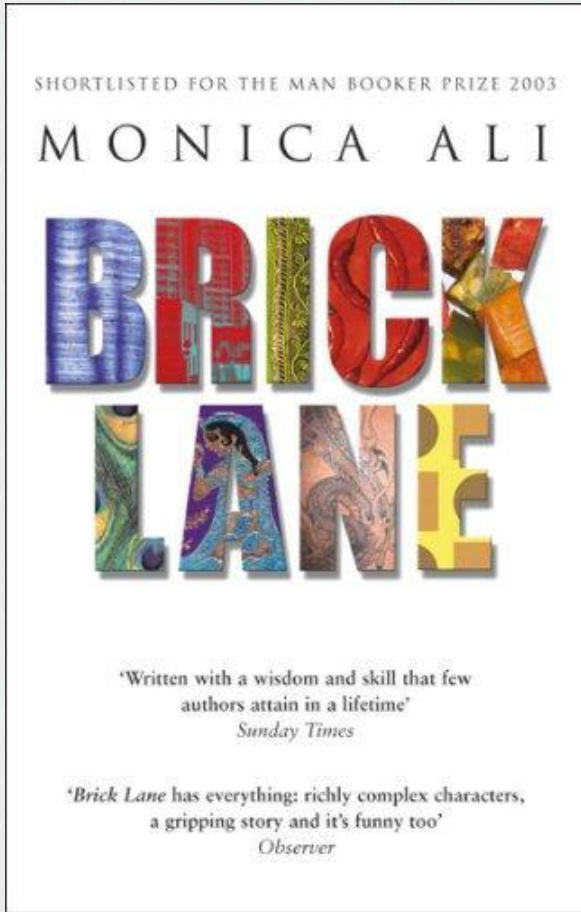
# Counter criticism

- Fiction always entails a certain amount of artifice and imagination
- Ali represents the experience of a group of Bangladeshi women who have rarely before been represented in British fiction
- In **Spivak's** terms, she has given voice to 'the subaltern', speaking *for*, or *on behalf of* a particular group (working-class, Bangladeshi women settled in Britain)

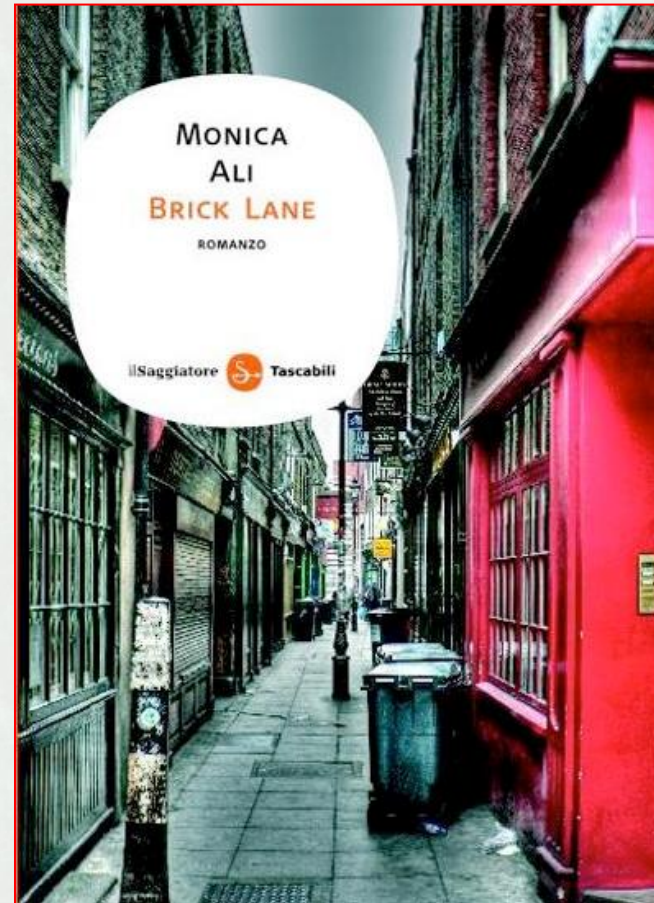
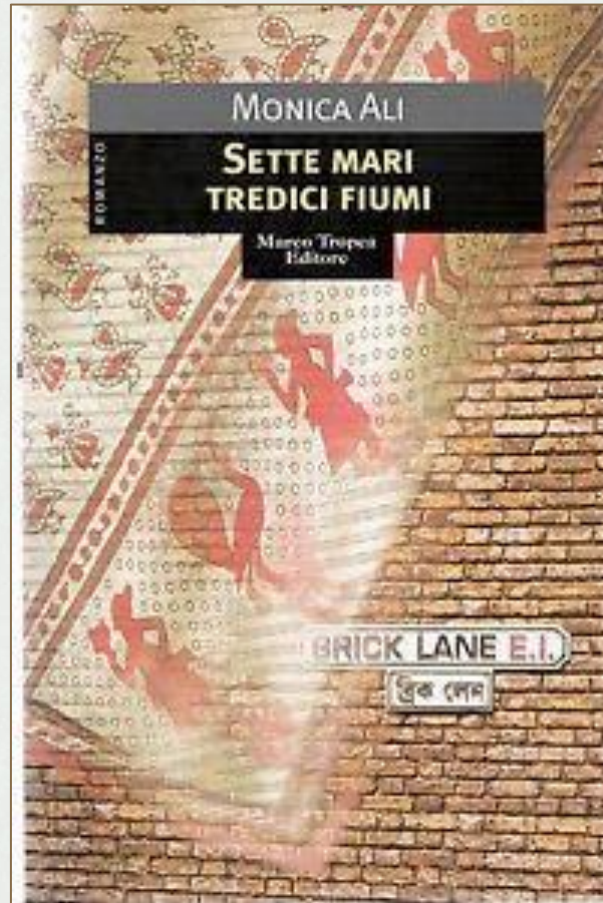
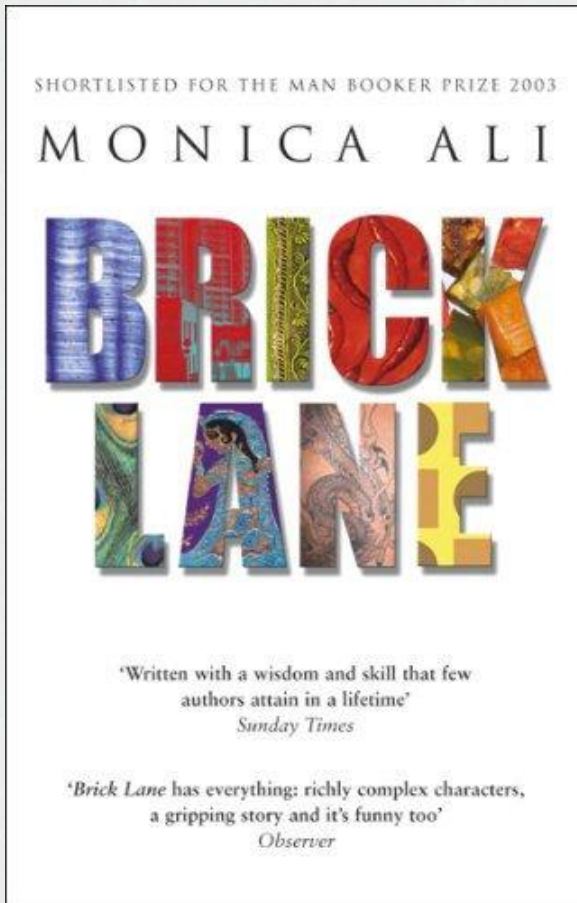
## 4.1 Title

- *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* was the title of Ali's manuscript, an expression coming from Bengali children's stories
- Doubleday editor turned it into *Brick Lane*, a most appealing title for a British audience (and a less stereotyped one)
- Marianne Velmans, publishing director of Doubleday, said:  
“[...] *Brick Lane* has lots of relevant connotations, whereas *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* would be more appropriate for a book about the subcontinent. The story starts in Bangladesh, but most of it is about the experience of immigrant communities in Britain.”

# Covers



# Cultural translation – Italian covers



## 4.2 Structure and setting

- *Brick Lane* consists of **21 chapters**. The novel begins with the main character's back-story.
- The novel then moves into the present day, but continues to revisit **the past** through Nazneen's thoughts and dreams.
- One chapter (Chapter 7) consists of **30 letters** written from Dhaka by Hasina over a period of 13 years (1988-2001). The letters reveal what is happening in Nazneen's life during the same 13-year period.

# Setting

- The story unfolds on two continents, **Asia and Europe**.
- It begins in Gouripur, a village in the Mymensingh District of East Pakistan, just a few years before the civil war between East and West Pakistan. The war ended when East Pakistan declared themselves a separate nation called **Bangladesh**(1971).
- The story continues in **London**, England, where many Bangladeshis fled to seek refuge from the political upheavals in their country or to seek job opportunities.

# Bangladesh



# Bangladesh





## 4.3 Characters

- **Nazneen Ahmed** – Chanu describes her as a “simple, unspoiled village girl”. Gradual process of self-empowerment; from a meek girl to an independent woman.
- **Chanu Ahmed** – Nazneen’s husband; he talks and plans a lot, but never accomplishes anything.



# Chanu's disillusionment

- First 6 chapters: a **domineering patriarch** who celebrates English culture and learning (literary quotes...), and **looks down on the majority of Bangladeshi** who are working class from Sylhet
- After the death of Raqib he becomes a more **sympathetic character** (a caricature at times)
- Concomitantly, he begins to see the hidden racism in British society (his expectations of promotions are frustrated), and he becomes disillusioned
- The only character who leaves the area and experience discrimination
- Decides to take money from the nation that in the past had exploited his people (inverted colonialism) and go back to Bangladesh
- **His decision parallels Nazneen's** reversal of plans (to stay in England)

# Women in *Brick Lane*

- **Hasina** – Nazneen's beautiful younger sister.
- **Razia Iqbal** – Nazneen's neighbour and friend who begins working at a sewing factory to support herself and her two children, Tariq and Shefali. Razia becomes a British citizen and proudly sports a sweatshirt with the Union Jack on the front.



# Other women

- **Mrs. Islam** – an elderly woman who is well-respected in the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets. She is a **money-lender** who collects very high interest and uses her power to force borrowers to pay back much more than what they owe her.



- **Lovely** – a former beauty queen who, like the other women in the novel, is looking for something more out of life.

# Male characters

**Dr. Azad** – a successful doctor. He is very proper and dignified, and often visits Chanu and Nazneen at their flat for dinner.



# Male characters

- **Karim** – works as a middleman for his uncle's sweatshop and takes sewing work to Nazneen's flat. He too represents a complex postcolonial identity: he was born in Britain in a Bangladeshi environment.
- He is caught up in local and global politics: after 9/11 (pp. 365-368) he becomes the leader of the Bengal Tigers (militant Islam)
- as Karim becomes more radical, he wears Panjabi pajama.



## 4.4 Style

- **Realism** is the dominant mode: third-person narrator
- **Linear narrative** with some flash-backs and flash forwards (through Hasina's letters), and a gap of 13 years after Raquib's death (chapter 7)

## 4.4 Style – point of view

- Omniscient narrator but **focalization** is limited to Nazneen (her perspective)
- Ironic distance but empathetic approach
- **Classic realism** and a traditional Western form (the novel) are adopted in order to articulate a marginalized voice to a **readership** that is primarily **white and middle-class**



## 4.4 Style – Language

- **Standard English** interspersed with Bengali words (not italicized) and parables
- non-standard, broken English is only used to convey Hasina's grammatically incorrect Bengali: “*Even we have nothing I happy*” (p. 11)

# Ali's novel as a work of translation

- John Mullan “a novel written in one language but supposed to be taking place in another” (*The Guardian*, 2004)
- ‘**Invisible multilingualism**’: the voice and thoughts of a mainly monolingual, Bengali-speaking protagonist (and characters) are conveyed in English with minimal Bengali intrusions
- Several **reminders** that English is a foreign tongue to the central character and that all literary action occurs ‘really’ in Bengali

- Bengali is not italicized
- Ali tags the language switch; code-switching is reported and *told*, rather than shown:

“Bibi read it out. ‘Dear sir, I’m writing to inform you’.

‘It all comes back so quickly’, **said Chanu, in English**. His cheeks were red with pleasure. (p. 137)

- Two strategies: tagging and **italization**:

“‘Kiss them for me. Give my salaam to the estate.’

‘*Ok, I do it.*’

‘Your English is getting good. Say hello to the tattoo lady from me’

‘*Thank you. But the tattoo lady is gone.*’” (p. 91)

# Translated Bengali(s).

Ali's English prose must represent different characters' use of Bengali.

- **Karim**: stammering Bengali

“It was a strange thing, and it took some time to realize it. When he spoke in Bengali he stammered. In English, he found his voice and it gave him no trouble.” (p. 210)

- **Hasina**: letters written in a broken, incorrect italicized English (to translate her semi-literate written Bengali)

“*Good good place and house too good also*” (p. 220)

# Language and conflict

Inter-generational and community conflict as translation

- Chanu and Shahana

“‘Kadam’, said Nazneen.

‘Bor-*ing*,’ sang Shahana, in English.

Chanu remained calm. ‘Bangla2000 web site. Who wants to take a look?’

[...] ‘What is the wrong with you?’ shouted Chanu, speaking in English.

‘Do you mean’, said Shahana, “‘What is wrong with you?’” She blew at her finger. ‘Not “the wrong”.’

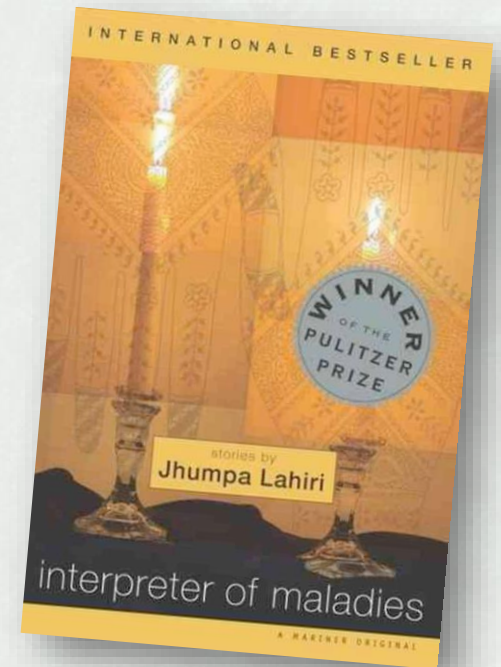
‘Tell your sister’, he screamed, reverting to Bengali, ‘that I am going to tie her up and cut out her tongue.’” (pp. 200-201)

## 4.5 Themes

- Identity and cultural 'translation': immigrants' alienation and women's 'double' alienation (Nazneen)
- Fate
- Self-empowerment
- Inter-generational conflict

# Migrants as 'translated subjects'

- The migrant's 'translation' in another culture and language is not only physical, but also symbolical and psychological
- Immigrants are 'displaced' subjects, living in a dimension of 'in-betweenness'
- **Jhumpa Lahiri**: "Almost all of my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive".  
"I translate, therefore I am."



# Michael Cronin (*Translation and Identity*, 2006)

- **Assimilation**: translation into the language of the host culture
- **Accomodation**: refusal of being translated into the dominant language

Migrants are not only translated beings but also translating ones (no full assimilation)



# ‘Assimilated’ subjects in the book:

**Razia** (Nazneen’s ‘interpreter’) is a good example of the ready-to-be-completely-assimilated immigrant:



- she has given up wearing her hair long and saris in favour of men trousers and jackets and short hair;
- she continuously fights with her husband in order to be allowed to get a job;
- she attends English classes.

Dr Azad'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 things.

[...] 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 their kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.” (pp.113-114)

# Second-generation immigrants

Both types of translations (assimilation and accommodation) can occur in one individual at different stages in their lives:

Karim, who “did not have his place in the world” (p. 375), sees Nazneen, a village girl, as “the real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. *An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her*” (p. 380, my emphasis)



# Second-generation immigrants

- Shahana

“I didn’t ask to be born here!” (p.148)



Chanu's 'accommodated' position:

“Behind every story of immigrant success there lies **a deep tragedy**. [...] I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own (...), 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. [...] about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent.’ (Ali, 2003, p. 113)

# The migrant's hybrid/fluid identity

The migrant lives in a 'contact zone' (Simon), understood as "a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities" (Bassenett and Trivedi, 1999, p. 14)

Ali's writing creates a "third zone/space" inhabited by the translated hybridity of the 'unhomed' migrants.

# Women's condition of double translated subjects

- Translated as migrants
- Translated also because they need 'interpreters' (usually her husband and children) who translate words and sentences and interpret the target culture for them.

# Nazneen's language learning

- Along with the majority of the other Muslim women on the estate, Nazneen does not speak English
- She becomes able to pronounce some words and recognize the appropriate context in which they may occur, but she is not able to make a connection between the signifier and the signified (e.g., *pub*).

“*Pub, pub, pub*. Nazneen turned the word over in her mind. Another drop of English that she knew.” (p. 21)



“‘What is this called?’ said Nazneen.

Chanu glanced at the screen. ‘Ice skating’, he said, in English.

‘Ice e-skating’, said Nazneen.

‘Ice skating’, said Chanu.

‘Ice e-skating’

‘No, no. No e. Ice skating. Try it again’

Nazneen hesitated.

‘Go on!’

‘Ice es-kating’, she said, with deliberation.

Chanu smiled. ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s a common problem for Bengalis. Two consonants together causes a difficulty. I have conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case.’” (pp.36-37)



# English as a 'liberating' idiom

- Little by little, Nazneen is no longer satisfied with the 'translation' supplied by her husband, and wants to interpret things for herself.
- Nazneen's eventual mastery of English becomes her means of redefinition, emancipation and 'self-empowerment', as well as an instrument of integration ("a stepmother": Skinner, 1998).

“The English have a saying: you can't step into the same river twice. Do you know it? Do you know what it means?' She knew.” (p. 488)

# Alienation

- Marx: the dehumanization resulting from the development of capitalism
- Today it has both **sociological and psychological connotations**: losing interest in the society, in cultural values, seeing those cultural values and norms vain and feeling alone and weak.
- “it is the feeling of foreignness or separation from the others, deprivation of sociable relationships, [...] loneliness and despair” (Budak)

# Nazneen's 'double' alienation

- As an immigrant
- As a woman



# Alienation as an immigrant

- Chanu: “This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy” (p. 112)

## Appearance:

- Non-white origins (Chanu’s quote, p. 28)
- **Clothing** as a symbolic indicator of cultural identity (Razia’s sweatshirt with the Union Jack represents easy acceptance of the British culture, p. 189; Nazneen’s daydrem, pp. 277-278)

- **Spatial isolation**: immigrants families do not even know the city they live in – famous London sights are invisible
- Nazneen's family **sightseeing trip** to London (Chanu's first holiday in 30 years)



# Monica Ali's experience as an immigrant



- “Growing up with an English mother and Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the tick of things, but rather **in the shadow of the doorway**” (Ali, 2003).
- As Ali herself, the lives of Nazneen and Chanu are located **in between tensions** too.

# Alienation as a woman

- Cultural and family constraints
- Roles as an obedient wife and model mother (p. 77)
- Chanu describes Nazneen:

“Not beautiful, but not so ugly either...Not tall. Not short...Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied... What’s more she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that” (p. 23)



# Domestic confinement

The **box shape** of the estate in which Nazneen and Chanu live brings to mind **a prison** and it foreshadows what Nazneen's existence will come to feel like in these apartments



# Bishopgate episode (pp. 56-57)

- Nazneen gets lost in the City, which is very close to Brick Lane (less than a mile) but culturally very distant
- **Defamiliarization:** office blocks perceived by Nazneen as alien buildings drawn from fantasy
- Strange environment: clothing, racial characteristics and forms of communication
- the scene encourages the reader to look at Western capitalist culture afresh



# Fate

- **Free will** vs the role of **Fate** in shaping one's destiny.
- Their mother, "Amma", teaches Nazneen and Hasina that nothing can be changed and that everything must be borne. Nazneen takes Amma's lessons to heart, but Hasina rebels early on and at 16 she elopes with a young boy for a love marriage.
- With the revelation of her mother's suicide, Nazneen begins to make decisions about her life rather than waiting to see what will happen to her. In doing so, she makes a better life for herself and her daughters.

# Inter-generational conflict

- Displaced from their country, in England, Bangladeshi immigrants try to recreate what they have left behind, but their English-born children are influenced by the only country they know. The younger generation wants to experience life for themselves and **they want to fit in with their peers** (experimentation with drugs and alcohol).
- This is a universal and age-old conflict, but it is perhaps more pronounced when a group is displaced and has the influence of another culture to contend with as well (Shahana, Karim, and Razia's son).



# Self-empowerment

The theme is developed within all the major storylines in *Brick Lane* and mainly regards **women**.

- **Nazneen** goes from being a complacent daughter and wife to an independent woman
- **Hasina**, who is strongly opposed to the philosophy of waiting and suffering, makes every effort to make a happy life for herself.
- **Lovely** also sets up a charity to help children deliberately burned by acid.
- **Razia** takes English classes and rebels against her husband when he refuses to let her work. Razia also gets a job after her husband dies and earns her British citizenship. By the end of the novel Razia helps to empower her friends as well when she sets up a sewing business.



## 4.6 Symbols

- **Ice-skating:** emblem of freedom and empowerment
- **Furniture and wardrobe:** psychological signifiers
- **Clothing:** personal and cultural signifiers
- **Snowstorm:** happiness reminder

# Ice skating

- Nazneen sees ice-skating for the first time on British television. She is mesmerized by the sport and she often pretends that she is skating on ice.
- TV episode (p.36)
- final scene (pp. 491-492)





# Clothing



- **Sari:** is the traditional dress of women on the south Asian continent. It is a long piece of fabric wrapped around the waist to form a long skirt, then wrapped around the upper body and sometimes draped over the head as well.
- **Panjabi pajama:** is a traditional outfit worn by Muslim men. Younger immigrants often prefer to wear Western clothing, but as Karim becomes more radical, he wears Panjabi pajama to make a statement.

# Traditional clothes



Sari



Panjabi pajama

# Clothing: Karim's metamorphosis



# Furniture – Wardrobe

- **the clutter** represents Nazneen emotional **confusion**
- One piece of furniture, **the large black wardrobe** in which she hides Hasina's letters, is particularly symbolic. Nazneen sometimes dreams that the wardrobe falls on her and crushes her into the mattress. In other dreams Nazneen is **locked** inside the wardrobe but nobody hears her hammering to get out (prison-like).

- Crammed council flat = prison
- Bangladesh memories = freedom



# Snowstorms

The water-filled glass domes that are collected by Dr. Azad are calming and remind him of a happier time in his marriage



# Final scene: the ice rink

- Two symbols that run throughout the novel are beautifully intertwined in the final scene: the **sari**, which for many women means some **restriction**, and **ice-skating**, which for Nazneen means **passion and freedom**.
- incongruity of the Bangladeshi dress and the Western footwear as a symbol of Nazneen's **hybrid identity**



“[Nazneen] said, ‘But you can’t skate in a sari.’

Razia was already lacing her boots. ‘This is England’, she said. ‘You can do whatever you like.’” (p. 492).



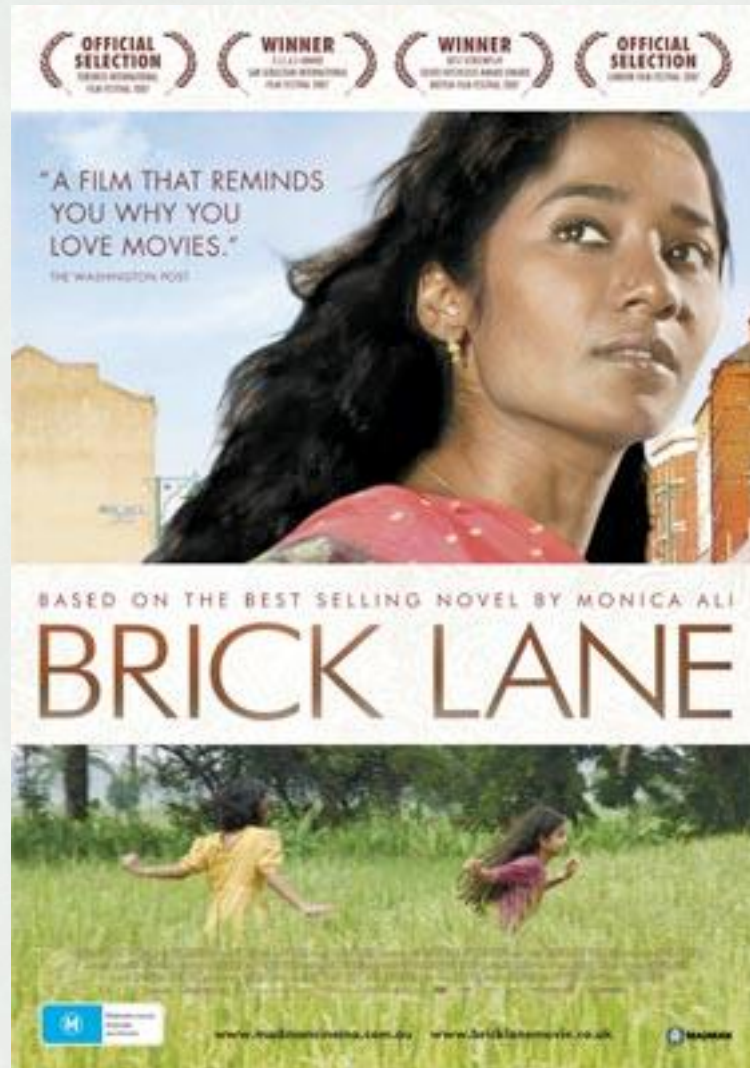


## 5. Criticism

- No mention of the **Brick Lane bombing** (24 april 1999)
- Undeveloped storyline after the 9/11 episode (pp. 365-368, and 414-415)
- the campaign that the Bengal Tigers carry out against the Lion Hearts ends in infighting and violence that detract to their cause
- Ali resorts to *mainstream* problems as **adultery** and **the domestic drama** rather than engaging with the “darker side” of multiculturalism (Chakrabarti, “Marketplace Multiculturalism”)

- Ali's linguistic strategies make her create a "third code" analogous to Bhabha's 'third space'
- The host space becomes a place of accommodation between the 'new' and the 'other'.
- By the end of the book Nazneen has embodied a fluid and hybrid identity, a "cultural amphibian" (Hsy, 2013, p. 207)

## 6. Intersemiotic translation: Sara Gavron's film (2007)



# Bangladesh vs England

- Bangladesh: audiovisual construction as a dreamlike place: brighter colours, music, photography (song with English subtitles, Nazneen's voice-over)
- England: darker tones, metropolitan setting



# Bengali vs English

- **Bengali** in the scenes set in the past or connected with the notions of 'home'. The first lines of Hasina's letters are read by Nazneen's voice-over in Bengali (opening) and then continued in English to preserve the level of accessibility of the film. Hasina's idiolect is simple but correct.
- **English**: Nazneen has a strong 'Asian' accent, while Bibi and Shahana use a standard variety of English, although they too use typical expressions to open or close dialogues (*Abba* or *Amma*)

## Chanu's syntactic deviations



Chanu: “From now on, no one speaks English.”

Shahana: “You said that last time.”

Chanu: Your behaviour is **getting bad to worse!**”

Nazneen “[in Bengali] Leave her!”

Chanu: “**This is** what they teach you **at the school?**”

This is what they teach you? I will not allow this to happen! To learn manners and to respect her father!”

# Readings for the exam



- “Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (2003)”, in Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, pp. 83-95
- Chapter 1
- Selected excerpts of the novel