

Lynette led Michael to his computer table and made him sit down [. . .] ‘Now do you see?’ she told him [. . .] Michael sat gazing at the monitor for a long time, finally nodding his head and starting to type. Lynette watched him for a moment longer – then slowly headed for the front door to greet the police. (p. 251)

Michael’s role emerges in this story as a duty to record the marginalized experiences he witnesses on the estate. The placing of this story is significant in the structure of the novel. It comes before the longest, penultimate chapter which serves to bring together many of the characters encountered in the rest of the book. (The final chapter is a short concluding piece that rounds off Elisha’s framing narrative.) The placing of Michael’s story acts, then, as an indication of what the rest of the novel contains – an expression of authentic working-class, black experience in contemporary Britain.

To record the experiences of a marginalized minority culture is also one of the aims behind Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, a novel like *Society Within*, that is also set in contemporary London, but in Ali’s case dealing with a different ethnic community.

### MONICA ALI, *BRICK LANE* (2003)

When Monica Ali published *Brick Lane* in 2003, it came under a certain amount of hostile criticism from members of the Bangladeshi community living in the area in which it is set. Brick Lane is the main thoroughfare in an area of East London that has become famous for its South-East Asian (and particularly Sylheti) community.<sup>14</sup> A group called the The Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council charged Ali with misrepresenting that community in her novel claiming that, ‘most of the content of this book [. . .] is a despicable insult to Bangladeshis at home and abroad’.<sup>15</sup> In response to these objections a Labour Councillor commented, ‘I am certainly aware of the public concern about Brick Lane the book among people who actually live in Brick Lane’.<sup>16</sup> This last comment in particular reveals something of the fraught relationship between fiction and reality, and it is the tricky issue of

representation in fiction that is one of the most interesting aspects of Ali's debut novel.<sup>17</sup> In one sense, Ali is attempting to represent the experiences, through her main character Nazneen, of a group of Bangladeshi women that have rarely before been represented in British fiction. The criticism she received, however, addressed the question of what right and insider knowledge Ali, as an Oxford-educated woman brought up mostly in the north of England, has to speak for this under-represented minority.<sup>18</sup> This question, of course, is one that is pertinent to fiction generally, especially fiction that has an element of sociological concern. If writers were not allowed to use their imaginations to empathize with characters from a different class, gender or cultural background, then novels would be limited to a series of semi-autobiographical, first-person narratives. Once a novel is published, however, the reading public has the right to challenge the way in which that fiction might impact on the cultural reception of the communities it represents.

A theoretical context that is pertinent here is that of the literary theorist Gayatri Spivak who claims that the lack of representation of marginalized groups serves to maintain their powerlessness in the political arena. Spivak puts these ideas forward in her influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988). Subaltern, as Spivak uses it, is a term for anyone who is subordinate in rank, status or importance and refers to any member of a group that because of their class, gender, race or cultural background (or a combination of these) has little access to the mechanisms of representation and power within any given society. She discusses the difficulties for those on the margins to articulate their feelings, experiences and grievances in a public space, because the vehicles of public discourse such as the media, literature and politics necessitate a certain level of status and control over language to allow their voices to be heard. As she writes: 'On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*'<sup>19</sup> Spivak, here, refers to the 'epistemic violence' of imperialism and education by which she means the way in which language and discourse are used ideologically to maintain power and control over subjected peoples both within the colonized country through education and onto

colonized subjects through legislation. This control over the ability to voice an opposition to power is what Spivak means when she poses her question on the possibility of the marginalized finding a public voice. Within this subaltern position, Spivak also identifies several categories of marginalization such as class and gender leading her to the conclusion that women from marginalized cultures are doubly subjugated: 'If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (p. 28).

One of the aims of Monica Ali's novel is to provide a textual space in which the subaltern can speak. If marginalized subjects find it difficult to articulate their grievances, then there needs to be an alternative form and medium through which that voice might be heard. Fiction is one good place to produce this, although it has to be remembered that fiction, like any discourse, is subject to the power structures in place at any one moment. Fiction, despite this caveat, can produce a representative voice by adopting the marginalized position of the subaltern. This is what Ali attempts in the character of Nazneen in *Brick Lane*. Ali, therefore, is speaking *for*, or *on behalf of* a particular group – working-class, Bangladeshi women settled in Britain – and this entails a certain amount of ventriloquism and artifice.

Like *Society Within*, the dominant mode of *Brick Lane* is realism. There is a third-person narrator, who describes the characters' emotions and the events in which they are involved in a fairly unobtrusive way. There is no complicated framework of narrative levels, or self-reflexive concern about the position of authors and narrators. The narrator's job in the novel is to describe the events and characters without drawing attention to itself. There is a broadly linear narrative in terms of plot, although there is some jumping around of the temporal relationship between Nazneen and Hasina's stories, and a significant gap in Nazneen's narrative of about sixteen years after her son's death. On the whole, though, the chronology moves forward based on a realist framework of cause and effect.

The realist mode is also adopted in the use of language in the novel. The main narrator's voice uses a Standard English that does not foreground itself stylistically and language is used unselfconsciously to express Nazneen's experiences. There are, however,

issues related to the use of language in a postcolonial context in the decision to articulate Hasina's letters in a non-standard, grammatically incorrect language. This seems primarily to emphasize her cultural as well as geographic distance from the main setting for the text, but also to show her emotionally charged narrative and her desire to articulate feelings without caring too much about how accurate is her writing style. The use of non-Standard English represents this desire to convey her experiences quickly and it is presumed that the letters are in a grammatically incorrect Bengali, although Ali, because of her desire not to foreground issues of language, does not refer to issues of translation as, for example, Rushdie does in *Shame*. Although the narration could be described as omniscient, in that it has the power to enter the minds of characters, this, as often is the case when used in describing third-person narrative, is a misleading term. The narrator might have the power to provide access to the private thoughts of all the characters, but in practice, focalization is limited to Nazneen, and most of the other characters' inner thoughts are filtered through her interpretation of them. On the whole, then, the narration emphasizes Nazneen's perspective on events, sometimes treating her with an ironic distance, but always with an empathetic approach.

Ali chooses to work in a realist tradition, then, despite dealing with characters that come from a culture where, on the whole, classic realism is a foreign form. Spivak's theories are useful here: if Ali's aim is to allow a textual space for the articulation of a marginalized voice, then the mode of communication chosen needs to be one that is accessible to a mainstream audience. *Brick Lane*, then, adopts the conventions of a traditional Western form because her novel is intended, primarily, for a white, middle-class readership. Ali has decided to overlook the political issues involved in the mechanics of representation because politically, she wants to encourage the dominant readership to think about issues related to marginalized cultures. This is a problematic move in the context of postcolonialism, as Alistair Cormack has pointed out.<sup>20</sup> If Ali is to use a narrative mode that corresponds with the novelistic traditions of a colonizing nation, then there is the threat that any radical expression of postcolonial difference might be compromised. As Cormack argues: 'Realism may not be synonymous

with cultural conservatism, but it does seem to bar a more radical conception of subjectivity – a conception that is crucial for post-colonial critiques of epistemology'.<sup>21</sup>

To emphasize Nazneen's cultural distance from this dominant readership, Ali establishes a narrative relationship with her main character that mixes ironic distance with defamiliarization. As referred to in the Introduction, defamiliarization is a narrative technique identified in literary texts by the Russian school of formalist criticism, and in particular by Viktor Shklovsky. In an essay called, 'Art as Technique' (1917), Shklovsky defines this technique in the following terms:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.<sup>22</sup>

The technique of making the everyday appear unfamiliar is one that Ali often uses in *Brick Lane* in order to convey Nazneen's sense of alienation within her new environment. Consider, for example, the following passage, where she decides, in response to a particularly worrying letter she has received from her sister, to lose herself in the City:

She looked up at a building as she passed. It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out. Inside, on a raised dais, a woman behind a glass desk crossed and uncrossed her thin legs [ . . . ] The building was without end. Above, somewhere, it crushed the clouds. The next building and the one opposite were white stone palaces. There were steps up to the entrances and colonnades across the street. Men in dark suits trotted briskly up and down the steps in pairs or in threes. They barked to each other and nodded sombrelly [ . . . ] Every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw,

was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan [. . .] Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination.<sup>23</sup>

The location for this passage is Bishopsgate in the financial district of London, very close geographically to Brick Lane in East London, but culturally very different. The juxtaposition of these two areas provides a microcosmic view of contemporary globalized economies as rich and poor neighbourhoods are shown in close proximity. Defamiliarization is used well here in the description of the immense office blocks that make up the newer buildings in Bishopsgate: they appear to Nazneen as buildings drawn from fantasy, for example, the building of glass with its 'glass fan' entrance, and the 'white stone palaces'. Most of these buildings would be reasonably familiar to people brought up in Britain. However, the passage serves to show how alien they appear to Nazneen, who has been raised in a very different culture. The technique of defamiliarization, therefore, is useful here for describing the experience of the newly arrived immigrant. Ali, through Nazneen's perception, encourages the reader to look at Western capitalist culture afresh. The behaviour of the people in these locations is described in terms that separate them from Nazneen, in terms of clothing, racial characteristics, the way they communicate with each other and gender. Her marginalized position is made clear at the end of the passage where her difference marks her out as separate from this strange environment that exists less than a mile from where she lives in the run-down area of Tower Hamlets.

This passage emphasizes Nazneen's feelings of alienation and powerlessness, however, the novel as a whole follows her gradual empowerment as she begins to come to terms with the alien environment in which she is placed at the beginning of the novel. This empowerment is set against various cultural discourses that initially serve to contain her. One of these is the belief in fate that she inherits from her mother: 'As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate [. . .] fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, it can be fatal' (p. 15). This deterministic view of the world stresses that

Nazneen's future is already mapped out, restricting her power to change her situation, and it is this belief in fate that forces her to accept the arranged marriage with Chanu resulting in her being bundled off from her loving home in Bangladesh to the alien environment of the East End of London.

Despite her powerless position in the marriage with Chanu there are glimpses of an alternative freedom to which she is attracted. One emblem of this is the figure of the ice skater that first draws her attention on TV:

Nazneen held a pile of the last dirty dishes to take to the kitchen but the screen held her. A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that barely covered her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena [. . .] The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the thin blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until she would surely fall but didn't. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (p. 36)

This is another scene in which Ali uses defamiliarization to great effect, in this case the common television images of ice-skating. The romantic image of the woman freed from the constraints of dress, subordination to the male and seemingly gravity itself, present an alternative world to Nazneen who is weighed down with domestic duties, and the figure of the ice skater becomes a symbol of freedom in the novel.

As in this scene, Ali often uses clothing as a symbolic indicator of cultural identity. Razia, for example, Nazneen's close friend, is less concerned with retaining traditional Bangladeshi clothing and in one scene is described as wearing a Union Jack sweatshirt to represent her easy acceptance of British culture (p. 189). Another passage that emphasizes a connection between clothing and identity occurs when Nazneen is alone and is trying to imitate the dance

of a jatra girl. She slips and suddenly gets tangled up in one of her saris nearly choking herself. This experience produces an epiphany:

Suddenly she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces of Bishopsgate [. . .] And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin.

For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life. (pp. 277–8)

She soon dismisses this thought and returns to her sewing, but the moment represents a challenge to her previous reliance on fate as the primary controlling factor in her life. At this moment she gets an intimation that it might be possible to control identity by simply gaining control over what you wear. It is significant, in this context, that through Nazneen's work as a seamstress she eventually meets and has an affair with Karim, the Bangladeshi who visits her house to pick up the saris that she makes thus connecting her to the outside world of business. It is through her sewing skills that she is able to develop her own economic independence from Chanu. The end of the novel confirms this sense of empowerment in the ability to choose clothing as a way of taking control of personal identity and thus evading the determinism of fate. The last scene shows Nazneen skating in a sari representing a hybrid confluence of the two cultures that have made up her identity. Razia's assertion that, 'This is England [. . .] You can do whatever you like' (p. 492) in response to the incongruity of the Bangladeshi dress and the Western footwear, represents the affirmation of a cultural freedom for Nazneen marking her sense of liberation.

Parallel to Nazneen's empowerment is Chanu's gradual disillusionment with British society. Chanu is presented for most of the first six chapters as a domineering and uncaring patriarch. It is only after his emotional response to the death of their first child that he emerges as a more sympathetic character. Initially Chanu has an

encouraging, if naïve, view of Britain as a land of humanism, fairness and opportunity. He ambitiously undertakes a programme of education, taking an Open University degree, because his degree from Dhaka University is not valued in Britain (pp. 38–9). He also praises the British social security system that will not allow people to starve when they are unemployed (p. 73). It is only through bitter experience that he comes to realize the embedded, yet often hidden racism in British society. At work, his expectations of promotion are repeatedly frustrated, while his intellectually inferior, white colleague Wilkie is promoted ahead of him. Later in the novel, Chanu works as a taxi driver and his disillusionment increases: ‘You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it all out of the country. They never left home. Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now’ (p. 214). Chanu’s narrative is another example of the legacy of colonialism on individuals in the present. His initial celebration of English culture and learning show him at first to be an appropriated colonial subject. His later position, however, represents colonization in reverse as he is now satisfied by taking money from the nation that had exploited his people in the days of Empire. This bitter, yet more realistic position shows Chanu coming to terms with the economic realities of postcolonialism. He eventually decides to return to Bangladesh, a reversal of his plans that parallels Nazneen’s decision to stay in Britain, despite her wanting to return to her childhood home for most of the novel.

One of the grievances Chanu has in his later life is his daughters’ rejection of Bangaldeshi culture and their Westernization. The novel as a whole, however, rejects Chanu’s criticisms of the effects of British culture on his daughters and his political comments are often undercut by his lack of recognition of the way his relationship with Nazneen is itself political. In a telling scene at Dr Azad’s house, Chanu is firmly put in his place by Azad’s wife, who embraces her position as a Westernized Muslim woman. After Chanu has given a tirade against the younger generation, Mrs Azad replies: ‘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!’ (p. 113).

This reveals levels of cultural difference in terms of gender, and Chanu's resistance to the Westernization of his daughters is partly because of the weakening of his patriarchal power. Implicit in Mrs Azad's celebration of her daughter's freedom is recognition of what she sees as the empowerment of women in contemporary Western society. Throughout the novel, it tends to be the women who gain most by accepting British culture.

Karim, although he represents a better prospect physically than Chanu, is just as much caught up in the complexities of postcolonial identity. Nazneen notices that although his English is good, he stutters when speaking Bengali, showing the difficulty he has in coming to terms with one of the influences on his cultural identity. Karim has been brought up in Britain despite his Bangladeshi heritage, and his involvement in underground local politics is part of his working out of his cultural identity. His experiences are used by Ali to comment on the relationship between local and global politics. At the local level, this is identified in the leaflet war between the Lion Hearts, a right-wing gang in Tower Hamlets, and the Bengal Tigers, a Muslim group that is set up to resist them. The Bengal Tigers is a predominantly male group, the members of which seem to spend as much time positioning themselves within the group as they do in working out a clear response to racism. In the global context, *Brick Lane* is one of the first novels to include description of the events of 11 September in New York, but it focuses attention on the local response to this international event: 'A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razi wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on' (p. 368). The global impact of the New York attacks is played out in the local arena with small-scale attacks on individuals.

*Brick Lane* represents an individual's narrative of empowerment set against contemporary and historical contexts that inform the way in which ethnicities and cultural identities are formed, maintained and negotiated. It places emphasis on the need for an accommodation and blending of Western and Eastern cultures if an individual with a cross-cultural background is to live a fruitful life in a Western environment. Although examining and expressing the experience of individuals in marginalized communities in Britain,

it does so on Western terms and this is perhaps bound up with the realist form the novel uses. The ideologies supported by the novel tend towards the moderate and the liberal and these lie with certain female characters: Nazneen, Razia and Mrs Azad in particular. The criticism of the male characters is an attack on both the cultural separatism expressed by Chanu in the later parts of the novel, and Karim's dalliance with the oppositional politics of a militant Islam. This ultimately, however, represents a critique of the politics of difference and multiculturalism and this can be a provocative message, especially to a culture that feels itself to be under threat. The politics of *Brick Lane* make it palatable to a Western liberal tradition, and maybe it is this that fuelled the criticisms it drew from parts of the Bangladeshi community in East London.

## SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- The legacies of Empire and the postcolonial situation have provided subject matter for a large amount of contemporary British fiction.
- Postcolonialism refers to the situation in countries and parts of the world that were formerly part of the British Empire but are now politically independent.
- Although similarities can be identified between different postcolonial countries, there are a variety of individual contexts that make each situation unique.
- Writers such as Salman Rushdie are keen to identify the way in which colonial legacies and postcolonial politics affect the way in which people's identities are constructed.
- Several writers, such as Courtia Newland and Monica Ali, have attempted to speak on behalf of marginalized voices and communities that otherwise have only limited access to public platforms.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde* (London: Heinemann, 1994); V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*

- (London: André Deutsch, 1987); and Sam Selvon, *Moses Ascending* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1975).
2. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, [1983] 1984), p. 11. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
  3. Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London: Collins, [1859] 1965).
  4. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1978] 1991).
  5. The palimpsest metaphor is also written into the form of the novel as it overlays several discourses and narratives – some based on fact and history, some on myth and legend, some on fiction.
  6. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1984). See the discussion of Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' in the Introduction.
  7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 16–27, p. 17.
  8. Courttia Newland, *Society Within* (London: Abacus, 2000), pp. 31–2. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
  9. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. and trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422.
  10. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, [1979] 1988), p. 101.
  11. It is significant in this context that later editions of the paperback version of Newland's novel came with a free CD that included a number of R'n'B and Hip Hop tracks presented as if part of a broadcast from Midnight FM, the pirate radio station set up in the story 'Midnight on Greenside'.
  12. See, for example, Chester Himes's novel, *The Real Cool Killers* (London: Vintage, [1959] 1988).
  13. Ray Shell, *Iced* (London: Flamingo, 1993).
  14. Sylhet is a city and region in the north-east of Bangladesh.
  15. Matthew Taylor, 'Brickbats Fly as Community Brands Novel "Despicable"', *The Guardian* 3 December 2003, p. 5.

16. Ibid.
17. A similar outcry occurred when the film adaptation of *Brick Lane* attempted to use the street in East London for filming. See Paul Lewis, 'Brick Lane Film Protests Force Film Company to Beat Retreat', *The Guardian* 27 July 2006.
18. Monica Ali was born in Bangladesh but moved with her parents to Bolton, Lancashire when she was three. She was educated at Oxford and lived near to Brick Lane in East London for a few years prior to the publication of the novel.
19. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Ashcroft, Giffiths and Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 24–8, p. 25.
20. Alastair Cormack, 'Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*', *Contemporary Literature* 47(4) (2006), 695–721.
21. Ibid., p. 697.
22. Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 17–23, p. 18.
23. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, [2003] 2004), p. 56. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.