

## Excerpts from Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (London, Black Swan, 2004)

### Chanu

Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat out the air in a fuff [...] Nazneen, who feared her husband would begin one of his long quotations, stacked a final plate and went to the kitchen. He liked to quote in English and then give her a translation, phrase by phrase. And when it was translated it usually meant no more to her than it did in English, so that she did not know what to reply or even if a reply was required. She washed the dishes and rinsed them, and Chanu came and leaned against the ill-fitting cupboards and talked some more. "You see," he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, "it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. [...]" He drummed his fingers against the Formica. [...] Nazneen began to put things away. She needed to get to the cupboard that Chanu blocked with his body. He didn't move, although she waited in front of him. Eventually she left the pans on the stove, to be put away in the morning.

'I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature. Can Wilkie quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy?'

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

### 9/11

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. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on. (p. 368)

### Alienation

Chanu: '... to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan.' (p. 28)

'all I saw was the Houses of Parliament, and that was in 1979.' (p. 289)

'I've spent more than half my life here, but I hardly left these few streets.' (p. 291)

'What for?'

'For the English lessons.'

'You are going to be a mother... Will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to the college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It's not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that.' (p. 77)

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 sombrely [...] 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. [...] they were not aware of her. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. (pp. 56-57)

### **Inter-generational conflict**

Mrs Azad: '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).

Chanu: 'All these people here who look down at us as peasants know nothing of history...in the sixteenth century, Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. Whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her.' (p. 185)

### **Symbols: ice-skating**

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 England [...] you can do whatever you like' (p. 492)

### **Clothing**

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)