

She's Not One of Us

An Analysis of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*
and Sarah Gavron's film *Brick Lane*

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Chapter One

Introduction:

Orientalism, Neo- Orientalism and Re-Orientalism

In 1978 Edward Said, a Palestinian literary critic, published what was to become his most famous work, entitled *Orientalism*. Written after the end of the British Empire, *Orientalism* discusses how the West (the Occident) looks at the East (the Orient). Said claims that these two different worlds do not materialize but are results of imaginative geography created to make one part of the world appear as a contrast to the other. Said's theory also aims to show how the West's views of the East have been based on stereotypical and often patronizing ideas – ideas observable in literature, arts and political essays. Discussed, praised and criticized ever since, Said's theory has proven to be a seminal contribution to the field of postcolonial studies.

Due to the political climate of the last ten years, many will claim that Said's theory has gotten a new revival and this is often referred to as Neo-Orientalism. This form of Orientalism emerged after the Second World War, and refers to the attitudes towards the Orient in postcolonial times. In addition to *Neo-Orientalism* another phenomenon has occurred. In "The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals", Lisa Lau writes: "The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representations of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over by other Orientals, namely the diasporic authors."¹

¹ This article is accessed on <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/search#>. It can also be found in *Modern Asia Studies*. 43: 2 (March 2009) :571-90. All further references marked Lau will be to the internet article and therefore not contain page references.

,Writers from the former colonies writing to confirm the idea of Orientalism instead of contradicting it, is what Lau refers to as Re-Orientalism.

As literature has played an important role in presenting stereotypical Orientals, I will explore both of these new terms in relation to a contemporary bestselling novel, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. I will investigate how contemporary literature describes the Orientals when moved to a different setting; in the case of my thesis the setting is London. I will focus on the representation of Muslim men and women, exploring how the community itself is presented. Throughout my thesis I will also discuss how Monica Ali's background influences how we perceive the novel. I will start by giving a close reading of the novel in the light of Said's theory and the theory that has occurred in the aftermath of *Orientalism*. I will then proceed to look at the story and characters in a wider perspective, by comparing the novel to the movie version and by discussing the controversy around the filming. I will also discuss the term Re-Orientalism by contrasting Monica Ali to another writer, Hanif Kureishi, to see if it is possible to avoid the "stereotyping trap" when writing about ethnic minorities.

Monica Ali and *Brick Lane*

The novel up for analysis in this thesis is *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali's debut novel. It deals with the experiences of a female immigrant coming to London from Bangladesh. It follows her trials and challenges when faced with a new culture, a husband she does not know, and when for the first time she is exposed to romantic love. This is not the first novel to deal with the Bangladeshis in Britain, but it is the first to be narrated from a Bangladeshi woman's perspective. The novel takes place in Tower Hamlet in London. The narrative focus is on Nazneen, who has been married

to a Bangladeshi man living in what has become a well-established Bangladeshi community around Brick Lane.

There has been quite a lot of controversy surrounding this novel, and even more when it was released as a film in 2007. Demonstrations against the film set in Brick Lane and threats of violence made the filmmakers decide to change locations for filming certain scenes. The demonstrators were inhabitants of Brick Lane, who claimed that the novel presents a stereotypical view of the Bangladeshis without contributing to making the impressions of immigrants any better.

Born in Bangladesh by an English mother and Bangladeshi father, Monica Ali moved to Britain when she was three years old, because it was dangerous for her father, a government employee, to stay in the country. She has since then forgotten all her Bengali language, and most of her memories are faded (Ali June 17, 2003). Ali being half Bangladeshi may give her credibility with the publishers, but not necessarily with the community itself. The fact that she has not lived and experienced the area seemed to provoke those who demonstrated against the filming. The praise from the press and the condemnation from parts of the community make this adverse reaction an interesting subject for my thesis, which will look into the question of authenticity – an inevitable issue when talking of postcolonial literature. I have chosen to title my thesis “She Is Not One of Us”, since this statement was uttered by one of men demonstrating against the filming. This view is a useful reminder of the delicate balance between fiction and historical representation: clearly, the man does not want the novel, or Ali, to be seen as true representatives of the community. He seems to think the book is a documentary account; perhaps he has not even read it. It is important to mention that using the word “community” can be misleading, as the immigrants living in that area are just as different as people in other parts of London.

However, in lack of a better word to describe those who were angered by the novel who have a shared ethnic background, I will stick to this term, although it is not ideal.

Theoretical background for the thesis

I will frame my analysis on the idea of Orientalism, as presented by Edward Said in his book by the same name. Said is considered one of the most influential theoreticians in postcolonial times. He was born a Christian Palestinian, and his background has unquestionably exerted a large influence on ideas. I have chosen to use Said's idea of Orientalism, and theories emerging in its aftermath because it is one of the comprehensive theories in the field of postcolonial studies. The book by the same name, answers to centuries of one-sided covering of the Orient. Said has also been very interested in how literature has played an important part of this covering. Because of its extensive form and complex argument I will not, however, make detailed use of Said's seminal book and its many references. Rather, appropriating Said's idea of presenting other cultures stereotypically and simplistically, I will argue that these traits are still very much alive in contemporary literature.

Orientalism

I will now give a brief presentation of the basic idea of *Orientalism*. This idea is important to understand as it is essential to my problem statement. Moreover, Orientalism is the basis for other theories that have emerged from it. It is much easier to apprehend Neo-Orientalism and Re-Orientalism once we appreciate that different ways of creating differences between the Orient and the Occident have existed as long as there has been a relationship between the two.

The idea of Orientalism stems from years of political interest in the Orient. It emerged first as a field of study for missionaries wanting to convert Muslims to Christianity and justifying the crusades to do so. Later, governments wanted to take control of Muslim countries as colonies for economic reasons, and thus made use of the idea of Orientalism to make their actions legitimate. The stereotyping of the Oriental is well illustrated in the first chapter of *Orientalism*. Here Said draws upon an article written in 1972 by Harold W. Glidden, “who is identified as a retired member of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, United States Department of State” (48). In his article “The Arab World” Glidden narrows a description of this part of the world, consisting of over 100 million people, to a four-page psychological analysis based on four articles. He describes the Arabs’ need for revenge and the idea of shame versus the West’s logical and objective need for peace. He writes: “if from a Western point of view the only rational thing for the Arabs to do is to make peace... for the Arabs the situation is not governed by this kind of logic, for objectivity is not a value in the Arab system” (48). This extreme generalization, coming from someone likely to know the field, will easily be accepted, and will hardly be questioned by people with no opportunity to test his theories. Today, of course, fuelled by 11 September and the wars in the aftermath of this shocking event, it is not difficult to find this kind of rhetoric coming from people in important positions in the West.

Literature has always played an important role in presenting the stereotypical Oriental. Most people will find it difficult to understand complex anthropological studies and very few will have the opportunity to spend a lot of time abroad themselves, thus literature becomes an easy and entertaining way to learn about people in the East. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said writes:

Since my exclusive focus here is on the modern Western empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have looked especially at cultural forms

as the novel, which I believe were immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences. ... Readers of this book will quickly realize that narratives are crucial to my argument here, my basic point being that stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. (Said 1994: xxi)

However, there is one crucial difference between the worlds of the traditional orientalist writers and writers today: the world has gotten considerably smaller, and the experience of the “mystic” and “exotic” East no longer belongs only to a fortunate few. The Orient today is more accessible due to cheap airfare tickets, and has become a popular destination for cultural explorers as well as charter tourists. For the less adventurous too, the Orient has moved closer because of large waves of immigration to the West.

The fact that most of the immigrants in London come from earlier colonies is no coincidence. New legislations and labour shortages in the mid-twentieth century made large groups move from the earlier colonies to Britain. To most Londoners, who only knew the Orient through the literature written about it, the difference between themselves and the newcomer would be quite clear. Their ideas would already be shaped by years of Orientalist mentality, presented to the British people through media, literature and arts. In *Orientalism* Said notes that

Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world; “we” lived in ours. The vision and material reality propped each other up, kept each other going. A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery, as Disraeli once called it. (44)

This important point is equally applicable today. Although the Oriental is living side by side with the Occidental, the Oriental is a clear minority. Even the term “side by

side” may need to be adjusted as most immigrants tend to settle in the same neighbourhoods where they feel less alienated. Immigrants (as of today) hold minimum political power and are hardly represented amongst the economic elite. The Orientals’ interests in Britain are to a large extent catered to by the goodwill of the ethnic British people, whether it comes to getting jobs, get bills passed in the government or getting their novels published.

There is no longer a literary elite telling the Occident about someone far away. Large parts of the Occident are faced with the Orient every single day, and are forced to make up an opinion for themselves about how large the difference between the two really is. Yet the fact that the Oriental is now interfering with the lives of the Occidental, and not only the other way around, does not make Said’s theory less valid. It only means that we now have easier access to, and have to take into consideration, what the Oriental has to say about his or her own culture, as well as what the Western has learned through education or travels. What before was between two countries – one the colonial power, the other the colonized – can now be seen within the same city in the West.

Said has been criticized for not focusing on the Muslim women in Orientalism. Few aspects attract more attention today than the idea of the oppressed, uneducated Muslim woman who is forced to live under the strict rules of her dominating and violent husband. Although the West has been aware of the female Muslim for years, she was really brought to attention after the USA invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and got rid of the Taliban regime, which deprived the Afghani women of basic human rights such as education. This led to discussions, especially in Europe, of domestic violence, arranged marriages, and to banal debates about whether or not women should be allowed to wear headscarves in school. The whole idea of

women's rights in the East was not on the agenda when Said published his book in 1978, because women in the West were then more focused on claiming their own rights, at home and in public. After 11 September 2001 the Muslim woman, dressed in an all-covering burqa, became the ultimate symbol of Islamic fundamentalism and what we in the West had to fear. Many writers, especially female, started writing novels about their experiences, some because they actually had a story to tell, others because they knew that there was a market for these novels.

In the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* on 4 April 2004, Berit Thorbjørnsrud, a lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Oslo, wrote a comment on the current trend of large publishing houses to publish any novel that deals with tragic stories of forced marriages and honour killings of women in the Muslim world. Many of them claimed to be true, only later to be revealed as fiction. Thorbjørnsrud writes that the tragic stories, especially the ones about women, may give reasons to support military actions for people who do not know anything else of the Muslim world than what they read in these novels, where all our prejudices are confirmed. Of course, this is not to say of course that these novels are not important, but to stress that they may have more political influence than the author or the publishing houses are aware of, and that this trend may be seen as Neo-Orientalism. The authenticity of these novels is taken for granted by the public, because their stories confirm what we read in the newspapers and see on television. The experiences of some Muslim women are considered as representative of the hundreds of thousands of others. I will discuss Ali's book in light of these questions, arguing that because Monica Ali has a Muslim name, her publisher and the critics wanted this novel to be more of a representation of truth than perhaps it is. Distinguishing between fiction and reality becomes more difficult when the events taking place in the story approximate to historical (actual)

events. If there is an expectation that a writer – either by name, culture or religion – has taken part in these events, the line between fiction and reality becomes even more blurred. Monica Ali and the main character of Brick Lane, Nazneen, both come from Bangladesh, but that is also the only similarity between them. However, this may be the only proof of authenticity some readers need.

Neo-Orientalism

The form of Orientalism we see today, often referred to as Neo-Orientalism, differs from Said's version in some respects and on some issues. However, it stems from the same ideas and is driven by the same motivation. Instead of justifying having colonies, Neo-Orientalism may contribute to justifying military actions in former colonies. Since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the gap between the West and the Muslim world has grown larger, and the need to create differences between "us" and "them" has become an important political goal. As a consequence, the ethnic minorities in the West, and especially those with a Muslim background, have often felt they have to choose between the culture of their parents and the culture of the majority. The gap between the two worlds has been too big to bridge. This is of course an extremely difficult situation to be in, as most Muslim immigrants do not identify themselves with terrorism at all, but do not want to turn their backs on their religion and culture to please those who do not see the difference between a Muslim and a terrorist. In the article "Islam, Secularism and Multiculturalism After 9/11" from *European Muslims and the Secular State*, Jocelyn Cesari writes:

... it is striking how the idea of Islam as an international "risk factor", current since the 1980s, is bolstered by centuries-old representations of Islam that would be familiar in the eighteenth century, or even earlier. The same fixed ideas of Islam as an inherently violent and fanatical religion are continually re-invoked and readjusted to fit changes in international and domestic situations.
(39)

This comment indicates that despite the fact that our access to information about the Orient has exploded, the West still needs to demonize the Oriental. The creation of “them” or “the Other” which is the term most commonly used in postcolonial theory, is often done by stereotyping and simplistic descriptions, often unfavourable to the Oriental. The term “the Other” or the act of “othering” someone can be defined as

... a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through the stigmatization of an ‘other.’ Whatever the markers of social differentiation that shape the meaning of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ whether they are racial, geographic, ethnic, economic or ideological, there is always the danger that they will become the basis for a self-affirmation that depends upon the denigration of the other group. (<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/rww03/othering.htm>).

I will argue that affirming existing ideas of the Oriental is a dominant trait in *Brick Lane*, and that because it is written by someone with an Oriental background, it will be seen as a more certain “truth”.

Re-Orientalizing the Oriental

The immigrant writers have the opportunity to present their perspectives through their own writings. They can re-write and answer to the traditional Orientalism as it has been presented for hundreds of years. This does not have to be done through interviews with newspapers that have political agendas or through television where the reporters have the power and means to edit a report in order to alter its meaning. Rather, it can be done through personal stories written by someone who has first hand experience of living in two cultures. The question is of course whether the ethnic minorities are in fact writing to bridge the gap or contributing to make it larger. Their voice, especially if being critical towards their own culture, will be even stronger because of the credibility they naturally possess.

In “The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals” Lisa Lau claims that the large quantity of novels published by diasporic writers, especially

South Asian, have shown a tendency to take over the role as Orientalists. Since they are writing from the Occident, many will claim that this is simply another form of Orientalism, but Lau argues that there is a difference because the authors can be identified as Orientals by the majority in the Occident. This reformulation of the theory is essential to my thesis, since Monica Ali is half Bangladeshi and was born in Bangladesh. One could believe that coming from a former colony would make you eager to “write back”; a term used in postcolonial theory to explain how people from the former colonies gradually, and often belatedly, got the opportunity to tell their story from their point of view. This response was, and still is, absolutely necessary to extend and refine years of one-sided information about the Orient. The tendency Lau writes of shows that this way of “writing back” does not always occur. Lau points to three main problems with the tendency of diasporic writers taking over the role as Orientalists. As these problems are relevant to the critical issues to be explored in this thesis, I want briefly present them.

1. The necessity of being recognizably South Asian. When writing from a country and culture that is different from the one you grew up in, you start to see the traditions and customs of your original culture from a different perspective. When writing about that culture it becomes important to you to include those aspects. Lau observes that this is in stark contrast to the literature by home South Asian writers, where the South Asian context just happens to be the background, the setting which the narrative just happens to occur, rather than being the reason for the narrative.

2. Generalizations and Totalisations. Lau claims that diasporic writers, and especially women, have had a tendency to propagate certain cultural images which are only the norm in a small part of society, thus making it into a truth for a much larger part of South Asia. She goes on to write:

It is probable that this negative re-orientation by diasporic South Asian women writers via sweeping generalisations and thus glaring inaccuracies not to mention painful distortions may not entirely be with the cold commercial intent of exoticising in order to increase sales, nor even to brandish their colour and ethnicity as trophies. Being themselves in the less-than-comfortable position of constantly re-negotiating their own identities, these writers may have an unwritten agenda to simultaneously claim insider knowledge (and status), while somehow distancing themselves enough to claim the position of knowledgeable representative or emissary. (Lau)

In the article “Where I’m Coming From” Monica Ali writes: “How can I write about a community to which I do not belong? Perhaps the answer is that I can write about it because I do not truly belong” (Ali 17 June, 2003). Ali claims to belong neither to the British nor to the Bangladeshis, and therefore can have a critical view on both. I will, however, through my analysis show that her writings play more to a British audience, thus showing less understanding of, and a distancing process from, her diasporic culture.

3. *Truth claims.* Over the last decades, novels published by South Asian writers in the occident have had a tendency to blur the limits between pure fiction and autobiographical story. “So while the writing remains ostentatiously fiction, it can implicitly claim a larger degree of authenticity and validity through the closeness of personal experience” (Lau). These stories may not at all be representative, and often they function to relegate South Asia to the position of “the Other.”

In his book *The Word and The Bomb*, the author Hanif Kureishi, who also writes about ethnic minorities, notes that Said identified useful writing as “speaking the word of truth to power”. He continues:

In an age of propaganda, political simplicities and violence, our stories are crucial. Apart from the fact that the political has to be constantly interrogated, it is in such stories – which are conversations with ourselves – that we can speak of, include and generate more complex and difficult selves. (Kureishi 2005: 10)

Kureishi claims that it was necessary for him to write to establish his identity as an

ethnic minority, because the literature presented to him about his diasporic culture was to a large extent written by British authors like E. M. Forster and George Orwell. In the article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Stuart Hall notes that “Not only, in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see ourselves as ‘Other’” (Hall 1997: 225). Writing about their experiences as ethnic minorities becomes significant not only to create a common feeling of identity amongst the ethnic minorities, but maybe even more important to reclaim their identity from the majority culture.

Authors are dependent on publishing houses to accept their novels, and this may be easier by confirming prejudices than by contradicting them. In *Orientalism* Said usefully reminds us that people have always used literature to try to understand different cultures and even tended to believe the texts rather than the actual people you meet. He writes:

What seems unexceptionable good sense to these writers [Voltaire and Cervantes] is that it is a fallacy to assume that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books – texts- say; to apply what one learns out of a book literally to reality is to risk folly or ruin (...) It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human. (92)

To illustrate his point Said explains that if you have read in a book that lions are dangerous and then meet a dangerous lion, chances are that you would like to read more books by the same author (93). Let us try to apply this point to literature about the Oriental today. If we read a book that tells us that Muslims are violent, fundamentalists or lazy, and that immigrant (maybe especially Muslim) women are oppressed and naïve, and then proceed to read the newspaper or watch the news, we will probably get our prejudices confirmed. You will probably not even have to meet

the lion or the immigrant. We trust that the news gives us the truth, and if the news concurs with the literature we read, we will believe that we are getting the real picture. In some cases, we do not need the news either. We trust the writer's authenticity or credibility. I will read *Brick Lane* in this light, aiming to show what kind of impression of immigrants the novel leaves if it is taken to be a representation of the truth. This does not mean, of course, that I do not consider the novel as a work of fiction which, as indicated already, gives an indirect and aesthetic representation of historical reality. But it does mean that I am particularly interested in those aspects of the novel which are anchored in, and to some readers not easy to disentangle from, the physical reality of the places where the characters live.

The fact that we tend to favour explanations and stories that concur with our already established opinions, can be illustrated by a case in Germany, explained by Gerdien Jonker in the article "From 'Foreign Workers' to 'Sleepers': The Churches, the State and Germany's Discovery of its Muslim Population." A group of German scholarly experts, church officials and civil servants decided to invite a secular scholar of Islam from a German university to one of its meetings to talk about why some Muslim women cover themselves with the veil, as the veil had become the ultimate symbol of oppression. The fact that the scholar was of Middle Eastern descent only added to his credibility. His explanation was that Muslim women are seen as "sexual organs" by Muslim men, and therefore need to cover up. This explanation was met with consent by the group, as it confirmed what they already believed: that Muslim women were oppressed and threatened by their men. When, a few weeks later, three women (one a theologian, one head of a women's organization, and the third a Muslim) talked to the same group on the same subject, they were met with dismay and charged with lying and defending their men, as their explanations did not

concur with those of the secular scholar at all. “The suspicions of the audience proved to be stronger than the realities the woman had tried to establish” (Jonker 2005:121). Ironically, they fell into the same trap Muslim men are accused of, ignoring the female voice. This example is important to my thesis as it confirms that we see what we wish to see.

In this introduction I have tried to explain what political climate *Brick Lane* was published in, and how this may affect the way we perceive a certain novel. My methodical approach in this thesis is doing a close reading of the novel and the film. By using this method, which aims to explore significant aspects of the text and the film as they are actually presented (that is, written as verbal discourse or shown as filmic discourse), I aim to identify and discuss features that one would not necessarily notice if one were to read the novel just for entertainment. I specify that, though influenced by New Criticism in that I pay close attention to, and quote from, the literary text, my understanding of “close reading” does not exclude history and context. I think we need to be aware of, and relate literary analysis to, both these dimensions.

The idea of the oppressed, weak, immigrant woman is not something that was introduced with postcolonial literature, it has been there since colonial times. In the article “Image and Reality: Indian Diaspora Women, Colonial and Post-colonial Discourse on Empowerment and Victimology” Karen A. Ray writes: “During the colonial era in India, the image emerged of the “native woman” as a weak and powerless being who needed male colonial protection to save her from hopeless exploitation” (135). The question is of course if this has changed, or if the Occident still has such an idea of the Oriental women. The colonized is looked at through what has been called the colonial gaze, that is “to see the colonies through eyes blurred by

misinformation, misconceptions and stereotypes” (Hunt 2002: 1).² To retain the stereotyped image was necessary in colonial times, because it justified the colonizer’s actions in the colonies. I will in this thesis argue that the West has not lost its colonial gaze.

Before I embark upon the analysis presented in this thesis, it is important for me to specify that I do not under any circumstance wish to trivialize the troubles of women in Muslim countries or the challenges communities have to deal with when faced with difficult traditions from countries far away. I endorse the fact that issues of women’s rights are being put on the political agenda through literature. However, a possible problem is the way these stories can be used, and how these stories are indeed used as indications of reality in a time when the need to justify political actions such as war, and sometimes even racism, is needed. It is not necessarily the stories themselves that are the problem, but the way they are perceived by certain readers at a certain time. Said writes:

My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence – in which I do not for a moment believe – but that it operates the way representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual and even economic setting. In other words, representations have purposes, they are effective most of the time, and they accomplish one or many tasks. Representations are formations, or as Roland Barthes has said of all the operations of language, they are deformations. (273)

This point is relevant to the critical concerns of this thesis. Today, readers are hungry for stories that give us insight into communities we do not have the opportunity, or wish, to access. Authenticity will in many cases come from the fact that the writer has an immigrant background, and credibility will come if you have actual experience from the community yourself. Monica Ali may have the first quality, that is

² Jeremy Hawthorn gives an extended discussion of the term in: *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. 4. ed. London: Arnold, 2000.

authenticity, but many would argue that she is not possessed of the second. The problem is that a novel always will be the result of a more or less subjective story. Still, if the novel touches upon themes on the contemporary political agenda, one will automatically ask about the writer's authenticity.

The question I feel is important to ask is if Monica Ali's story does the Oriental justice, or if she uses her position as an ethnic minority author to confirm the stereotypes. I will claim that the latter is the case. As indicated already, I will argue my point by analysing Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* in the light of the different theories on Orientalism. Even though I will use Said as the framework of my thesis, I will also look for representations of Re-Orientalism, to see if the "Oriental writer" brings anything new into the picture, or if she only, through her possible authenticity, just adds to and thus confirms the stereotypes. It will be important to take into consideration what Monica Ali has said herself on the issue.

After this introduction the second chapter proceeds to analyse the novel, discussing the different characters and considering what kinds of impression these leave on the reader if the novel is seen as representative of the inhabitants of Brick Lane. In the third chapter I will start by explaining the controversy around the filming of the novel, and the literary discussions it prompted. I will continue by giving an analysis of the film version of *Brick Lane*, aiming to show that, in the light of my thesis, the film may be more believable and balanced than the literary text on which it is based. Finally, in a concluding chapter I will summarise my findings. Here I will also draw upon, and relate my conclusions to, literary discussions of this kind of novel.

Chapter two

Brick Lane – the Novel

“They Never Left Home. Mentally.”

In the introduction I have presented the theoretical framework for my thesis, and I have also introduced the different concepts of Orientalism. Aided by these concepts I now proceed to give an analysis of the novel *Brick Lane*, asking if one can find Orientalist traits in a contemporary bestselling novel.

Even before Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* was published in 2003, she was called the new Zadie Smith, even the new Salman Rushdie. *Granta Magazine* praised her as one of the new voices of the young literary scene in Britain. The magazine published parts of *Brick Lane* before Ali had even finished writing it, and the novel was bought by a production company shortly after its release. The extraordinary interest in the novel, even prior to its publication, is closely linked to the topics it explores. As mentioned in the first chapter, it was not the first novel to deal with Bangladeshis in London, but the first to focus on the “invisible” women of the area. The greater community was thirsting for novels like this after the terrible events on 11 September 2001 put the Muslim women forth as the ultimate symbol of religious oppression.

Brick Lane is Ali's debut novel. It received praise from the critics, but also criticism from the community she writes about, namely the Bangladeshi community in London. Despite the fact that Ali has been eager to stress that *Brick Lane* is only fiction, it is hard to get past the fact that many readers will still look at the novel as a representation of the Bangladeshi community. Although many novels have been written earlier about the immigrant communities, they have not been seen as

especially interesting by the majority of book readers. The terrible attack on New York on 11 September 2001, and later in London, made people more curious about Muslim communities. It may seem like anyone willing to write about them is welcomed to do so. Hanif Kureishi, one of the first ethnic minorities to write about Muslims in London, recalls that there was a time when nobody was interested in the Muslim communities. This is in strong opposition to today, he says, when people get a call *because* they are Asian writers, and are asked to write about whatever the publishers think will sell. Kureishi has on several occasions been asked if he, for instance, would be willing to write about the Muslim fundamentalists in Bradford – something he is not willing to do (ICA interview, Brick Lane DVD).

Monica Ali and the question of authenticity

Because the British- Bangladeshi Ali decided to set her first novel in the Bangladeshi community, many will expect that she is writing something authentic and that she does have an insight into a community that to most ethnic Britons seems closed. It may be, however, that Ali does not represent the Bangladeshi community to the extent that the publishers and media hoped for.

Born in Dhaka in 1968 by an English mother and Bangladeshi father, Monica Ali moved to Britain when the Pakistani civil war broke out in 1971. She does not have any “real” immigrant experience as she arrived in Britain at the age of four, and was introduced to the English culture and language long before then by her British mother. In Britain, she has never lived in the Bangladeshi immigrant community of which she writes – this was one of the main arguments of the people demonstrating against the filming of *Brick Lane*. Ali says she hardly remembers anything of

Bangladesh, and has relied on her father's stories to understand and learn about the country.

Ali herself has never claimed the story to be “the truth” about this community, but should probably have foreseen the fact that the publishers would use her Muslim name and her Bangladeshi father to give her an authenticity as a British - Bangladeshi writer. The jacket of the hard-back version of the novel refers to a review by Margaret Forster which says: “A very special novel – I adored it. It gave me everything I crave in a novel, taking me into a life and culture I know so little about.” This review, and the fact that it is printed on the cover of the novel, show that the publisher wants to give the readers the impression that what we read in this novel gives you true insight into the British-Bangladeshi community. Non-Bangladeshi readers will believe that through this story they can see what it is like inside a society few of us will ever know firsthand. The question is, of course, whether the publishers and the readers actually take into consideration the fact that Ali does not claim the truth – or whether our curiosity and need to peek into this community take over.

There are also indicators that, by changing the title of the novel, the publishers pushed Ali in a direction that she herself was not ready for. *Brick Lane* was originally entitled *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, but the publishers wanted to change the title to *Brick Lane*. It is not difficult to understand that an unpublished author is willing to make that sacrifice to get her first novel published. Yet it is sad, since the change of title probably contributed to some of the controversy around the novel – something Ali herself has been quite reluctant to talk about.

Ali is not the first writer to write about peoples or communities she does not necessarily know firsthand. As mentioned in the introduction, the question of authenticity is a difficult one, as is more often raised when it comes to culture and

religion than other subjects. In an interview, Gautam Malkani, the author of the novel *Londonstani*, says that no one ever questions the authenticity of someone writing about a mass murderer, but as soon as it comes to culture, this is of major concern. The issue of authenticity would probably not have been raised as a question to the same extent if Ali and Malkani had written novels about a foreign culture obviously foreign to themselves. The question emerges because they write about a community where the reader tends to *expect* them to have insight, either by name, religion or background.

In her article “The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals”

Lisa Lau writes:

Representations of South Asia, of South Asian culture, and particularly of South Asian women by the women writers – representations which emphasise and explore the sensitivities, mindsets, expectations, characteristics of South Asian women, are being largely created from without South Asia by diasporic writers, and imposed upon South Asia as representative of their identity, or at least, a significant part of their identity construction (Lau).

Lau goes on to claim that this tendency becomes a problem when the writers target readers who have little knowledge of these cultures, and therefore describe the cultures and customs in an over-simplified and stereotypical manner. Expressing a similar concern, Edward W. Said notes that “My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus” (Said 1978: 8). Some authors may put pride and dignity into making sure that what they write – be it about traditions, rituals or regional practises – is authentic, by having it double-checked for example with local residents. Others, according to Lau, “play the gallery and target a readership that, they comfortably suppose, has little or no knowledge of South Asian customs and culture” (Lau). Unless doing an anthropological study of the novel, a reader with no specific knowledge of the British-Bangladeshi community will be unable to pinpoint these

inaccuracies. The probable result is that the majority will end up having extremely simplistic perceptions of the minorities, which is one of the traps of Orientalism.

Although Lau states that Re-Orientalism is a phenomenon between the West and South Asia, I would argue that it can just as easily be applied to stories from the same city, as long as you have several segregated communities within it. The Bangladeshi community in London may be even harder for an ethnic Englishman to penetrate than the real Bangladesh. Suppose that people read this novel the way the publishers marketed it, that is as an insight into the Bangladeshi community. What impression does the novel leave? I will now discuss the novel to try to answer this question.

The beginning

The story of Nazneen, the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, starts in a village in former East Pakistan. She is born too early and was expected to die, so her mother silently obeys “Fate”, rather than take her to hospital. Nazneen survives, but is never allowed to forget that Fate gave her a second chance. With her mantra “what cannot be changed must be born, and since nothing can be changed, everything must be born” (11) to keep her strong, she marries the man her father has chosen for her and moves to London. During these first pages, we are also introduced to Nazneen’s sister, Hasina, who chooses to run away with her lover, instead of following the village norm and let her family decide who she should marry. The girls’ father, not particularly happy with having daughters in the first place, is furious and waits outside to kill Hasina in case she returns to the house, but she does not.

Hamid ground his teeth and an axe besides. For sixteen hot days and cool nights he sat between the two lemon trees that marked the entrance to the compound. For that time his only occupation was throwing stone at the piebald dogs that scavenged in the dump just beyond, and cursing is whore-pig

daughter whose head would be severed the moment she came crawling back.
(11)

The father is ready to kill his daughter for having destroyed the family's honour.

Just within these first twenty pages of the novel, we are introduced to a group of characters that can all be seen as stereotypes. The beginning of a novel tends to set the mood for what we can expect, and is also designed to make the reader want to read on.³ The first character we meet is Nazneen's mother, a naïve, uneducated and irrational woman who is advised by a one hundred-and-twenty-year old village midwife to leave the life of her daughter to Fate, as doctors and medicines still will prove useless. To most people in the West, where *Brick Lane* is published, this advice will be seen as madness. The idea of the Orient as irrational and the Occident as rational has deep roots in Orientalist thinking. I mentioned Glidden's perspectives in the introduction, and other Orientalists have commented on the same issue. In *Orientalism* Said refers to Cromer, who writes: "Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: 'Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo Indian should know that.' The European is a close reasoner ... The mind of the Oriental on the other hand ... his reasoning is of the most slipshod description" (38). One can find many examples of the fact that this view has not changed, and this stubborn misconception confirms that idea of Neo-Orientalism very much exists among people regarded as educated and intellectuals.

An illustrative example of this problem is a speech given by the English novelist and masculinity expert Martin Amis. He carries the Orientalist tradition into the twenty-first century by claiming that there are two things Muslim men hate more than anything: women and reason. To argue this point he refers to Quranic verses, and

³ The importance of beginnings in fiction has actually been thoroughly dealt with by Edward W. Said in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, which was published three years before *Orientalism*.

claims that the reason there is trouble between Islam and the West is because there is an institutionalized irrationalism among the Muslims. According to him the average Muslim man is incompetent of rational thinking (Malm 2008: 213). That a well-known literary scholar is able to attend a conference and state such generalizing “facts” about one billion people, goes to show that Orientalism is not only alive, but very much accepted.

Nazneen – The oppressed wife

It is through Nazneen that the reader is presented with what may be seen as the closest to the “true” voice. The story is written in the third person, from Nazneen’s limited perspective, and everything the reader gets to know about the community and culture to which she moves is interpreted through Nazneen. I mentioned in the introduction that the oppressed Muslim woman has become the symbol of Neo-Orientalism, and when we first meet Nazneen, she is no exception. Within the first three chapters of the novel, the reader comes to feel a deep sympathy for this village girl, who is thrown into the hostile environment of Tower Hamlet. She does not speak the language, she rarely goes outside, and she only waits for her husband to beat her. “Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume that he would not beat her. He thought she was a “good worker” (she had overheard him on the telephone). He would be shocked if she lapsed” (16). Chanu, desperate to be successful in Britain and just as desperate to be British in all the right ways, does not beat her, something which may be seen as one of the westernized things about him. Nazneen, who only knows the Bangladeshi ways, believes that all men beat their wives. She needs to move to Britain to be proven wrong.

Although Nazneen is surprised that Chanu does not beat her, his view on women is hardly up to date in Western terms. Soon after Nazneen arrives in London she overhears Chanu talking on the phone describing her to a friend as if she was an object or at the very best, a servant.

'No' said Chanu 'I would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes a bit too close together. ... What's more, she's a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I have is that she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complaint though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.' (17)

To a reader in the Occident this will come as no surprise, as the perception that women are seen as objects by Muslim men – either as sexual objects that need to be hidden from the rest of the world – or as domestic objects whose only purpose in life is to cook, clean and raise children is well established, as illustrated by the example from Germany in the introduction. Nazneen even confirms that Muslim women are perceived this way herself when, walking on the street, she notices a girl passing:

She looked at Nazneen with a ready kindness, a half smile on her lips, but in her eyes there was nothing ... a blankness reserved for known quantities like pieces of furniture or brown women in saris who cooked rice and raised children and obeyed their husbands. (325)

It does seem a bit weird, however, that Nazneen reflects like this, even after a period in London. She lives, throughout the novel, a very secluded life. It is not fully believable that she would reflect on this question that easily just by receiving a glance from a British woman, since her partaking in the British society, and her interest in public debates is minimal. In this case, it seems like it is Monica Ali's own Britishness that influence the writing.

Nazneen is isolated in her apartment. Although not lacking initiative, Chanu executes everything she wants to do. She wants to learn English but Chanu does not really see the point in her learning English, as they live in an area where you easily get by just by speaking Bengali. She wants to go outside more but her husband thinks

it is a bad idea: “‘Why should you go out?’ said Chanu. ‘If you go out, ten people will say, ‘I saw her walking on the street.’ And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don’t mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?’” (20).

Nazneen fills her days with the duties of a Bangladeshi wife, and as she is not allowed to leave the estate, she befriends the women living there. “Regular prayer, regular housework, regular visits with Razia” (40). She fills her days with routines, like a prisoner. She has absolutely no self-esteem as decisions have always been made for her by the men in her life. In many ways she tries to stay invisible to her husband, by obeying his rules, and not making any requests. She even puts pride in this task, and believes that her forsaking her own desires will give her a better record on the day of judgement.

This idea of her being subordinate to her husband sticks with her even after she has committed adultery and started working herself. She always walks two steps behind Chanu. “For a moment she saw herself clearly, following her husband, head bowed, hair covered, and she was pleased” (210). The lack of a voice of their own is often linked to with Muslim women – not only in traditional Orientalism – but also, and more forcefully, in Neo-Orientalism. The most illustrative aspect of this vexed issue is the ongoing debate of the Muslim veil, which critics consider as a tool for oppressing women and making them invisible in the society, often adding that women obey these rules because they are told to and do not have a choice. And if they do have a choice they wear it because they are victims of male dominating society. Nazneen confirms this. Although, as far as we know, Chanu never asks her to wear it, her pride in her way of dressing and her *purdah* are mirrored against her husband, not against herself as a woman or the benefit of mankind.

All the sacrifices Nazneen makes she makes for her husband or her family. And she believes this will pay off in the afterlife. However, there is a tendency now that young, Muslim women are standing up claiming that their religion is a matter between themselves and God and has nothing to do with other people, and especially men, at all. But somehow, and this is a typical part of Neo-Orientalism, we refuse to believe them. By doing this we somehow end up in the same trap we accuse Muslim men of, namely not letting these women have a voice of their own. We just cannot see that for example covering up in the presence of men can be anything but oppressing. I will try to give an alternative explanation. Let us say that it is true that the veil originally stems from a strong tradition of male domination and the need to control women's sexuality. However, many Muslim women today claim that they wear the veil to show people they are Muslims, something that may have become even more important for some since the Islamic faith has been under constant attack by the media and certain governments. For them, the veil is a way of showing their identity and to be closer to their God and they do not feel oppressed at all. This is what a lot of people in the West, as I said, refuse to believe. If we go back in our own history, we have many rituals that stem from oppressive traditions but which today have become integral parts of our culture. A father walking his daughter to the altar in a wedding ceremony, for example, is a tradition from when women were seen as gifts to be given between males in order to make financial arrangements. Today it is considered an emotional moment in a girl's life, and few people question this the same way as they question the veil.

One can ask if we do not allow the same transformation in Islam that we have seen in Christianity. The problem is of course that some girls are forced to wear something they do not want, but then we need to remember that it is the forcing we

need to get rid of, not the hijab. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's subordinate role is never explored, it is just silently accepted on her part. Nazneen never reflects upon this, neither does anyone else. And with the impression we have from the media of the submissive Muslim women, Nazneen fit the bill of the oppressed wife perfectly. However, despite her self-sacrificing manners, Nazneen's character does change. It starts with a small rebellion against her husband. Frustrated and angry because he does not want to send money to Hasina,

Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers. The next day she chopped two fiery red chillies and placed them like hand grenades, in Chanu's sandwich. Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (50)

Slowly her character makes baby steps towards independence.

There is an ellipsis in the story of Nazneen. Jakob Lothe defines "ellipsis" as that "for some story duration, there is zero textual space" (Lothe 2000: 60). Nazneen gives birth to a son who dies as a baby, and the next 13 years we only get glimpses into Nazneen's life through Hasina's letters. This type of ellipsis, where we know how much time passes, is called "explicit ellipsis". When we return to London, Nazneen has two daughters, and Chanu has started to talk seriously of going back home, realizing that he will not make it in Britain. Nazneen is allowed to start working, from home, as Chanu understands that he will need help with the "home fund", which has been set up to get them all back to Bangladesh. It is through this job she meets Karim, a young British-Bangladeshi boy who delivers clothes for her to sew, and after a while their relationship goes from being professional to being sexual.

It is quite difficult to understand the attraction between the two. Karim, who I will deal with later in the chapter, comes across as very aggressive. Even though one can understand a certain fascination on her side, finally meeting a man who is

executive, it is more difficult to understand his interest in her. Karim's own explanation is that she represents "the real thing". Karim explains that his choices as a young Bangladeshi boy are two: the Westernized girl, and the religious girl. "Ah, you. *You are the real thing*" (320). What does this really mean? Karim seems much more interested in religion than culture, and her religion is hardly reflected upon, as it is a natural part of her life. How he stops seeing Nazneen as an older woman and takes the step into sleeping with her, another man's wife, is not explained well in the novel.

However, the relationship between them is one of the few surprising elements in the novel. Nazneen's hard struggle to stay indifferent to "Fate" is put to the test when Karim opens up a world of forbidden desire. The reader is also put to the test, because in another setting most people would not condone adultery, but in this case we find it harder not to do so. We want Nazneen to have the sexual awakening that the relationship provides, and somehow it gives the reader more satisfaction than Nazneen. She is tormented by the fact that she is repeatedly committing a sin. Still, the relationship is the catalyst of her being more active in shaping her future, rather than staying the passive, subdued housewife.

Nazneen's isolated life and loneliness leads to her breakdown. She is constantly tiptoeing around to make sure people do not know of her secrets, but at the same time she is desperate for them to find out. She wishes that Chanu will realize that she is having an affair, so he could deal with her the way he should "perhaps even to stone her, as was his right?" (342). She wants to talk to someone about the affair and starts countless letters to Hasina to clear her mind. On the top of this she is struggling with the shame of her husband borrowing money from Mrs. Islam, something that turns out to be the way Mrs. Islam makes her living, and not a loan between friends as Chanu has explained. Nazneen realizes that Mrs. Islam will never

be happy with the amount paid back to her and that this will make it harder to go back to Bangladesh and help Hasina. All these worries, and the fact that she has nowhere to ventilate them, lead to her having a breakdown. Chanu calls it “nervous exhaustion” (281), not realizing that it is a deep depression that his wife is suffering. This is a common theme in Western feminist literature of the mid-nineteenth century, where this diagnosis was given as an explanation to why women were depressed. Chanu explains it like this to his daughters: “Nerves. Women’s thing” (281). It is of course not totally wrong to explain what happens to Nazneen like this, but the simplistic way it is presented by Chanu resembles the explanations given by male characters in nineteenth-century literature, where this simplistic diagnosis was often used, rather than trying to understand what lies beneath. By having Chanu explain the depression in this way, Ali indicates that even educated Orientals are far behind the Occidentals, as this is no longer a diagnosis in Britain.

Towards the end of the novel, Nazneen has gotten different opportunities to prove that she can manage by herself, and she is coming to realize that moving back to Bangladesh will not change anything. Chanu proves to be just as unrealistic about his plans for Bangladesh as he has been for his life in Britain, and Hasina does not want to be saved and keeps making the wrong choices. On top of this she will have to consider what moving back to Bangladesh would mean for her girls, and this makes her decide that it is better to stay.

Chanu – the comedy sidekick

Chanu moved to England in the hope of finding good work and a better life:

“When I came, I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become private secretary to the Prime

Minister. (...) That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different”.
(26)

Chanu's experience probably represents one of many similar of the Bangladeshi community. He has a degree in literature from Dhaka University, something that, according to him, does not count for anything in Britain. Desperate to be promoted and eager to become a success in Britain, he keeps on taking classes at the Open University, nailing his diplomas to the wall (or the directions to the University if he does not get a diploma). Chanu is very proud of the fact that he is educated, and loves to tell Nazneen how lucky she is to have found such an intelligent man. “I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you have married an educated man” (35). According to Bangladeshi standards, Chanu is probably very well educated, as Bangladesh still is a country with a high level of illiteracy. But the reader never believes his abilities. Chanu is ridiculed throughout most of the novel. One illustration of this is his inability to see his own limitations and to be realistic, and his firm belief that anything British is a proof of quality. Any ethnic Englishman will know that a degree from the Open University is not to be considered a quality education, but Chanu firmly believes that this will be his key to the job market. “Of course when I have my Open University degree then nobody can question my credentials. Although Dhaka University is one of the best in the world, these people here are by large ignorant and know nothing of the Bröntes or Thackeray” (29). In addition to this he keeps coming up with new ideas that he thinks will be revolutionary to the community, like a mobile library, and he does not understand why people are not eager to throw their money at the project.

Chanu is desperate to distance himself from the other Bangladeshis in the estate, but is frustrated the British do not see the difference: “These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped of an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads” (26). He

claims to be educated and westernized, but he does not see that he in many ways is very traditional. He has, after all, chosen to live among all the other Bangladeshis, and he chooses to follow their rules by limiting his wife's freedom of movement to avoid gossip. Chanu lives in constant denial of the limitations of his own abilities, desperately trying to win the respect of people by quoting Hume and Shakespeare. Half way through the novel, Chanu realizes that he will never be promoted, and that he would probably be more successful in Dhaka. He says about Mr Iqbal, the newspaper seller:

He comes from a very good family in Chittagong. God knows how many servants. And he is an educated man. We talk of many things. Why can he not rise out of that little hole here? Always buried under newspapers and his hands black with ink? In Chittagong he would live like a prince, but here he is just doing donkeywork by day and sleeping in a little rat hole at night. (265)

As there are no ethnic Brits in the novel, Chanu, who is desperately striving to be one, in many ways represents the British voice, and his arguments and complaints resemble what one hears in the public immigration debate. One example of this occurs during a conversation with his eldest daughter. Shahana comments on the fact that her friend Ali has got ten brothers and sisters and that their parents do not want them inside the house, because they only get on each other's nerves. "Ah, it's Overcrowding," said Chanu, dropping in the word in English. "Overcrowding is one of the worst problems in our community. Four or five Bangladeshis to one room. That's an official council statistic" (273). This remark does not sound like it is coming from someone who is actually, whether he likes it or no, a part of the community, but rather from someone on the outside looking in. Another example is when he comments on the Bangladeshi's refusal to integrate with the British society:

This is the tragedy," Chanu had said. "Man works like a donkey. Working like a donkey here, but never made a go. In his heart he never left the village." Here, Chanu began to project his voice. "What can you do? An uneducated man like that. This is the immigrant tragedy". (115)

This idea of Muslims keeping to themselves and not having any loyalty to their new home country is a great part of Neo-Orientalism. In his book *The Hatred Against the Muslims*,⁴ the Swedish writer Andreas Malm refers to the book *While Europe Slept – How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*. In this book Bruce Bawer describes how the loyalty to the Muslim *umma*, which is the word Muslims use to describe their connection to other Muslims, is so strong that it actually deletes any connection or allegiance they may have had with the kaffirs (infidels). He also writes that segregation is the only way they can prepare for their overtaking of the world, the only way they can make their plans in peace (Malm, 20). This could easily have been brushed off as anti-Islamic propaganda from some right wing extremes, but this book is actually published at the largest publisher of English literature: Random House. This fact in many ways legitimizes the use of extreme rhetoric, as many would expect a serious publisher to publish serious books. The tendency we see in Neo-Orientalism is in many ways more extreme and more bombastic than that of the traditional Orientalism. In Chanu's defence, he does not take things as far as Bawer, but he does confirm some of the thoughts, and I am afraid that because of books like Bawer's, or articles and discussions like it, readers of *Brick Lane* may overlook the fact that Chanu himself proves the statement wrong.

Still, it is interesting that Ali actually acknowledges that what the West is critical of, namely lack of loyalty, can easily be transferred to Britain's feelings towards India. Although Chanu is constantly glorifying Britain, he says: "You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to get money, and the money they made, they took out of the country. They never left home.

⁴ The book is not yet translated to English from Swedish. All English references to this book, are my own translations.

Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now. What else can you do?" (177).

As the story progresses, so does the relationship between Chanu and Nazneen. Still, the relationship is characterised by secrecy and avoidance of confrontations. Chanu does not tell Nazneen that he has borrowed money from Mrs Islam, and Nazneen does not tell her husband about her secret money stash and her relationship with Karim. It even takes quite a while before she tells him the truth about Hasina. Toward the end of the novel, as Chanu has decided to bring his family back to Bangladesh, Nazneen and the reader feel that Chanu knows more about the relationship between her and Karim than he admits to. As the Bengal Tigers (the radical Muslim group Karim has created) are to hold one of their most important meetings, Chanu has prepared a speech. Chanu has been frustrated with the rethorics of the Tigers, and he has now practiced a reply which he plans to give during this meeting where Karim is presented, and he brings Nazneen along. He is eager to get there, and practises the speech in silence. This event may seem Chanu's last opportunity to show how smart he is, and prove his masculinity to his wife's lover. But like everything in Chanu's life, it does not go any further than the planning. During the meeting he never finds the time to interrupt, and leaves the location with his head hanging low, once again without the ability to stand up for himself.

Ali could have, and some think she did use Chanu as a vehicle of criticism directed at British society, where educated people are "wasted" on jobs where they are overqualified. Chanu, after being overlooked time and time again when there are promotions in his office, starts to mistrust the system and blames it on racism.

Chanu had begun, she noticed, to talk less of promotion and more of racism. He had warned her about making friends with "them" as though that were a possibility. *All the time they are polite. They smile. They say 'please' this and*

'thank you' that. Make no mistake about it, they shake your hand with the right and with the left they stab you in the back. (58)

The feeling of not being taken seriously and adequately appreciated is what finally makes Chanu decide to return to Bangladesh where he believes his education would be properly valued, the only thing he plans and follows through. He stops going out of the house, and decides to test his powers at home instead. Not being able to provide for his family the way he is supposed to drives him to test his powers as the man of the house at home, ordering his daughters to do ridiculous things like holding books for him and turning pages while he reads:

They had to watch his face for signs that he was nearing the end of the page and then turn to the next. He was fair with them. He gave signs, little anticipatory raises of his tangled eyebrows. Only an inattentive daughter could fail to see. A disrespectful daughter. Who fully deserved the lashing, verbal or otherwise, that followed such dereliction of duty. (168)

This desperate attempt to gain respect at least at home is just one of several incidents that make the reader perceive Chanu as a quite ridiculous character.

Chanu's unemployment and humiliation when offered a job as a dishwasher at a restaurant make him lose the energy he used to have, but he decides in the end that the sooner he earns money for the tickets to Bangladesh, the sooner they would be able to leave. The flaw, however, if this is supposed to be a critique of racist employers, is that since Chanu is ridiculed throughout the novel, and presented as a comical character, the readers would probably not employ him themselves. Chanu's absolute inability to see his own limitations, his firm belief that it is the amount of diplomas, not the actual education that matters makes him pathetic rather than a figure of sympathy. Because he is pathetic in many ways the reader does not believe that it is racism that stops him from getting the good jobs. Although some readers may feel sorry for him when he decides to go back, but I think most readers relate that decision more to a lurking feeling of defeat, which is a common universal feeling, than to the

fact that he feels he is a victim of racism, a feeling western readers would find it harder to relate to. Chanu ends up being a comical character who in the end sees himself defeated in more than one area of his life. He is without a job, and leaves for Bangladesh without his wife.

Slowly, towards the end of the novel, Chanu starts to realize that Nazneen is not as eager to leave London as he imagined. He tries to indirectly convince her by making comments about how nice it will be for her to meet her sister again, not knowing that is Hasina who has adjusted Nazneen's glorified view on Bangladesh. Still, he realizes eventually that his wife is better off in Britain with his daughters, and he sets off to Bangladesh by himself to start a new life as a soap producer, a plan the reader know will be just as big a failure as everything else he has been trying to do.

Hasina – the naïve village girl

Parallel to the story of Nazneen we are presented with the story of her sister Hasina. Everything we learn about her is through letters written to Nazneen about her life in Bangladesh, which means they are presented in a first-person narrative. Hasina chose not to leave her life to fate and decided to elope with her boyfriend. Hasina's husband soon turns out to be violent and she runs away from him. Hasina comes across as an extremely naïve and simple girl, who despite having made her own choices and taken her destiny into her own hands keeps trusting everyone who seems to wish her well, only to be let down by them later.

Nazneen and Hasina are two opposites in many ways, but both of them confirm two traditional views on Oriental women. In the article "Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism" Jasmin Zine writes: "Within imperialist conceptions we have seen how the images of Muslim women have been represented in the Western male

imaginary as sensual harem girls as well as debased, voiceless and universally oppressed victims, forming a complex nexus of desire and disavowal” (35). Whereas Nazneen fills the role of the unfulfilled woman, Hasina, although not a harem girl, is described in such ways that she would surely meet the demands to be one. Her beauty always works against her, as she is often suspected of having relations with different men, something which also leads her into prostitution.

Through Hasina’s story we meet different male characters, all turning out to be no good. Her husband, although claiming to be in love with her, beats her. It does seem strange, though, that Hasina chooses to leave her husband because of this, as both she and Nazneen seem to find regular beatings a natural part of marriage. After being taken in under Mr. Chawdrhury’s wing, she starts working at the factory. Although women and men are working separately in the factory, she befriends Abdul, “a great study man like your husband” (130) she writes to her sister. But once again she is let down. Abdul falsely admits to having intimate relations to her, and she loses her job. Mr. Chauwdhry, who has acted like a father to her, also finds out and rapes her for giving to others what she could have given him (135). He continues to visit her and she gives him what he likes out of fear of being put on the street.

Hussain, another male in the building, provides her with material things and company, and she gives him sex in return. After a while Hasina starts working as a prostitute for him. One of her costumers, an albino man, proposes marriage, and she decides to marry him as Hussain is sick and she does not know how to survive without him. Her new life provides order and safety, but soon her husband turns against her and again she is left on her own. Once again she is let down and abused by another Muslim husband. It takes almost five years until Nazneen hears from her again. When she does, Hasina’s life has changed, she has been saved and taken care

of by Christian missionaries from the west. This is yet again a pat on the West's back, as "saviours." Hasina ends up a maid in a Bangladeshi family, but the reader can get the impression that they may be Christian converts. They use English names for themselves, James and Lovely, and English names for their children and they hire her from the Christian shelter where she has been saved from her life as a prostitute. She is treated well in the family, but evil men do not seem to stop haunting her. Her friend, Monju, has ended up in hospital because her husband and his brother and sister have held her down and poured acid over her face because she did not agree to sell her child. They poured acid on the baby as well, and Monju's last wish is to raise money to help the baby. When this seems to work out, she dies. These events will seem repulsive to any reader, and in Europe we have read about these things happening in other parts of the world. It does seem, however, that this story is included, just to make sure we really understand how terrible things can be in Bangladesh, and once again, how brutal these men can be. Hasina decides after a while to run away with the chef of the house, Zaid, and does so right after Chanu has come to Bangladesh. It is Chanu who gives Nazneen this information and it makes her realize that her sister may just not want to be saved.

Hasina's letters to Nazneen are written in broken English, often difficult to read and understand: "I hear of marriage and pray many time on your wedding day I pray now also" (18). The reader may wonder why Ali has chosen this kind of language, as Hasina would be fluent in her mother tongue, Bengali, which must be the language she writes as neither she nor Nazneen know any English. John Mullan suggests in his article "Foreign Thoughts" that Hasina's language has the intention of giving the impression of Hasina's semi-illiterate Bengali. However, it is not the spelling that is the main problem in her language, it is the word placing and grammar,

which she would not have a problem with as Bengali is her mother tongue. This feature makes Hasina sound more naïve, thus supporting the idea that she is a woman who needs to be saved. Her sentences are formed in an almost parodical English “Job in new factory I am machinist real woman job now” (120). Another puzzling aspect of this broken English is that Nazneen writes perfectly in her letters, although the reader has no reason to believe that she is more literate than her sister. We hardly get to see Nazneen’s replies to Hasina but when we do, Nazneen for example writes: “We are all well. Shahana is getting top marks in her class, and Bibi has grown at least one inch. I tried again to make dhoie, but it never comes out quite right, too much sugar I think, or not the right kind” (316). Her life in what seems close to isolation in London cannot have made her that much more literate than her sister, but the letters sent from London seem sophisticated, while the letters from Bangladesh seem illiterate and sometimes almost silly.

As mentioned earlier, since it is not possible to find a saviour amongst her own countrymen she needs to be saved by someone from the West. The question is what purpose Hasina’s story serves. One purpose may be to show how difficult it is to be a woman without a husband in Bangladesh. But somehow the reader may just as well be left with the feeling that most Muslim men are bastards, violent or unable to handle sexual emotions, something that is a common perception in traditional Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism.

Karim – the young fundamentalist

Halfway into the book we are introduced to Karim. As Chanu has realized he will have trouble finding the right job, he buys Nazneen a sewing machine and gets in touch with a sweatshop in order to obtain work. The work is delivered on the door by

Karim, a young Muslim boy of Bengali decent. Karim represents the young Muslims, who feel at home, but not accepted and appreciated in Britain. They are angry on behalf of their parents who have struggled in the country but are left with nothing in the end. “He had to retire because of the nerves. Couldn’t hang on any longer. Twenty-five years as a bus conductor, and now he can’t even leave the flat. That’s what you get, man. That’s what you get.” (191)

Because of his anger towards the British society, Karim finds comfort in radical Islam. A well-established Neo-Orientalistic notion is that the Muslim immigrants in Europe have never left the Muslim world – they have brought it with them (Malm, 20). Karim finds comfort in Islam *exactly* because his father has moved away from it. “His father, he told her, had no religion now. He had nothing but his pills” (215). Karim sees his father as a coward for giving up his religion to a country and culture that has given him nothing but problems, and Karim refuses to end up the same way. It is interesting that Ali is willing to give Britain part of the blame for young people turning towards radical Islam. In this critique lies an indication that if the first generation of immigrants had been treated better, and maybe even been encouraged to practise their religion, young boys would not feel the need to alienate themselves from the society. Chanu explains “Young ones will always rebel. If their parents are liberal how can they rebel except by becoming illiberal themselves?” (219).

Despite the fact that a lot of Neo-Orientalistic writings claim that the problem lies within Islam, that it is impossible for a Muslim to look a non-Muslim in the eyes and see a fellow human being (Malm, 23), Karim is not the first character in postcolonial writings to challenge this view. Hanif Kureishi, for example, did so in the short-story “My Son The Fanatic” which was later made into a film. The question

is if readers really understand that this is a critique against Britain, or if they only see the aggression and tough rhetoric of The Bengal Tigers, interpreting these activities as yet another sign that Islam is incompatible with Western values. I am afraid that since Karim comes across as quite aggressively religious from the start, many readers will not see beyond that particular character.

Whereas Nazneen finds great comfort and security in her religion, the Islam that Karim represents is neither loving nor merciful one. He is angry with his father for what seems to be adopting “Christian” or “Hindu” ideas of turning the other cheek, as he is treated badly by society. The tendency of young second generation of immigrants turning out more religious than their parents, is commented on by Hanif Kureishi in 2005 in the article “The Carnival of Culture” from *The Word and the Bomb*: “The British-born children of immigrants were not only more religious and politically radical than their parents – whose priority had been to establish themselves in the new country – but despised their parent’s moderation and desire to ‘compromise’ with Britain. To them this seemed weak” (Kureishi 2005: 97). Karim says about his father: “‘He thinks he is Mahatma Gandhi. He thinks he is Jesus Christ. Turn the cheek, man. Turn the cheek.’ She picked up the cups. ‘What about Mohammad? Peace be upon him, he was a warrior’” (192).

It is difficult, and not at all necessary to trivialize the rise of radical Islam in London after the terrorist attacks on 7 June 2005. *Brick Lane* was published in 2003, and the terrorist attacks on 11 September happened during the writing process, and were of course difficult to leave out of the novel. The rise of radical Islam in London is an issue that has been discussed several times even before 11 September by authors like Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith. This tendency is not covered in traditional Orientalism, but is an important aspect of Neo-Orientalism. The fear of young minds

being moulded by extremist religious leaders is constantly on the political agenda, but this issue has been reported on to a much larger extent after the London bombings in 2005, two years after the novel was published. Whereas 11 September 2001 was carried out by grown up men from a totally different country, 7 July 2005 was carried out by young boys, born and raised in Britain. This was one of the most shocking and scary aspects of the attack, and the constant question was how the event could happen. Experts on Islam and related subjects were frequently in the media presenting their theories, often confirming traditional Orientalism where “they” represent dogmatic rules, not appreciating “our” freedom of speech and not shearing “our” values.

Karim starts a Muslim organization with the aim to protect “Muslim rights and culture. We’re into protecting our local ummah and supporting the global ummah” (198). Compared to what we today have learned about these organizations after 7 July 2005, the Bengal Tigers start off quite harmless. They are angry because racist leaflets have been put through doors in the neighbourhood, and they want to stay alert, ready to take revenge if any racially motivated beatings or killings were to happen again, as this has happened in the past. The Bengal Tigers start a war towards the group The Lion Hearts who are scared of Muslims taking over the neighbourhood, “a war conducted by leaflet” (212). The leaflets serve as a discussion between the two groups, but after a while more concrete plans are being conducted and demonstrations are planned. The group starts to glorify people who have died for the “Islamic cause” in Chechnya and Gaza, seeming much like the idolization of suicide bombers that we have seen in the media. The girls in the group upgrade from hijab to all covering burkhas and one of their African members tells the group that he had tried every religion there is only to find that it is only Islam that is not “loose and lax” (231), and

they start talking of jihad, a word with quite a lot of negative connotations to most people in the West. Slowly, Karim's fundamentalist view does not seem so harmless.

Then the events on 11 September 2001 occur. It does seem a bit "glued in" to the story. Chanu is upset by the event, but Nazneen seems quite untouched. We do hear in a very short passage how this made everything difficult for the Bangladeshis. Some got their hijab ripped off, and Razia gets spit on for wearing a Union Jack shirt. Apart from this, the event is not commented on much from the community, though one would think that this was a hot topic in the estate. At one point Ali lets us believe that four elderly men at a newsagent's are shocked by the story, only to reveal that they are talking about something else (305). The only one who really comments on this is Karim. He slowly changes his way of dressing. He turns towards traditional clothing, a skullcap and a pajama and gets rid of his gold necklace, as some believe that Muslim men are not allowed to wear gold or silk. And then he starts talking of how the terror attack was just a conspiracy. Chanu and Karim are the only ones really concerned with the topic. Whereas Chanu realizes that 11 September will make it even more difficult to be a Muslim in Britain, Karim's comments on the issue show the mentality that the Muslim communities all over the world were criticized for after 11 September, namely not wanting to realize that the attacks were acted out by Muslims. Karim points to different aspects of this, one being that they found one of the hi-jacker's passport in the ruin. Karim turns to conspiracy theories and consider it unlikely that the passport belongs to one of the hi-jackers since everything else from the airplane was made into dust in the explosions.

Karim and Chanu are really not that different. Karim has the ability to turn his plans into action, but the way he treats Nazneen is similar to the way Chanu treats his wife. Karim is constantly telling her things to sound clever, and with him as with

Chanu, Nazneen makes sure he feels important and smart. An example of this is the scene when Karim is trying to think of a way to gather people to spread the message of The Bengal Tigers:

“Make it into a celebration,” she said. “People always come out for a celebration. Some singing, some dancing.”

“What? Like a mela?” ...

“Yes,” she insisted. “Like that.” ...

“You know, it could be like a mela.”

“Oh, but do you think so?” said Nazneen.

“It don’t have to be a negative thing. It can be positive.”

“Well,” said Nazneen, “if you say so.” (287)

For Karim, to feel smart in Nazneen’s presence is just as important as it is for Chanu, and goes to prove that they are very similar. I also mentioned earlier how Karim sees Nazneen as the authentic Bangladeshi. His explanation of how he could have made his family find him a wife from their village, but that it would require a lot of settling in which would be a hassle (320), reminds Nazneen of how Chanu used to explain to people with pride that she is “just a simple girl from the village”.

After their relationship turns sexual, Karim takes on the role as the man of the house while Chanu is at work, by sitting on the sofa with his legs up, ordering her around and explaining things to her as if she is not capable to understand them herself. Nazneen is used to this role and plays it just as well as she does with Chanu. This change in Karim gives the impression that Bangladeshi men are all the same, no matter their background. Although Karim realizes the sexual side of Nazneen and although he creates excitement in her life, their life together would probably end up being not much different from the life she has with Chanu.

The community – Razia, Mrs Islam and Dr. Azad

When Nazneen first moves to England she is secluded within her apartment. After a while she befriends some of the women on the estate, Mrs. Islam and Razia. Through

these characters Nazneen gets to take part in everything that happens in the community. The women get through their days by gossiping. “Spreading rumours is our national pastime” (20). Mrs Islam is the first woman to contact Nazneen when she moves in. She knows everything about everybody “if you were a Bangladeshi here, what could you keep a secret from her?” (20). Most of the gossip contains stories about other women breaking traditional moulds. It can be about women who get jobs outside the house, or people running off for love marriages.

As living in the estate in Britain creates a different family structure that it would have in Bangladesh, where they would have lived several generations in the same house, each with different roles, these women function as Nazneen’s extended family in Britain. Mrs. Islam functions as Nazneen’s mother-in-law. She is the oldest of the three women, and expects to be treated accordingly. She is authoritarian and gives orders to everyone around her. For this, Nazneen and Razia make fun of her behind her back. Razia functions more like the sister-in-law. She knows the rules of the community, and shares her knowledge with Nazneen. She is also the one who supports Nazneen when she starts working, and when she decides to stay in Britain.

These two women are Nazneen’s female companionship within the estate which functions as a small village, where nothing can be done without everyone knowing about it shortly after. Ali presents this community as extremely narrow minded, with absolutely no possibilities of choosing your own way, unless you are willing to be gossiped about. An example of this is when talking about Jorina, a woman who has got a job at a garment factory. Nazneen asks:

“Where is she going? To the garment factory?” “Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jews. All sorts. I am not old fashioned” said Mrs Islam. “I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is.” (22)

You are supposed to stick to your own kind, in your social life and in marriage. If not, you can expect to be secluded from the community.

The friendship with Mrs. Islam ends when Nazneen learns that Chanu has borrowed money from her. Mrs. Islam, a widower for many years earns her living by knocking on doors to collect the money people owe and when necessary she brings her two, aggressive, violent sons. Mrs. Islam becomes the catalysis for Nazneen's independence. Having paid far more than what they owe, Nazneen is angry with Chanu who (once again) does not have the ability to put his foot down. Realizing that she will have to take matters into her own hands, she asks Mrs. Islam to swear on the Quran that she is not charging interest to the loans, something which is forbidden in Islam. Unwilling to do this, Mrs. Islam lets her sons smash up a cabinet and walks away, and does not return. Nazneen realizes that she cannot depend on her husband to protect the family and that she will be perfectly fine on her own.

Razia supports Nazneen all through the story, and when Chanu leaves in the end, she and Nazneen make business plans. Razia has also been forced by her husband to stay at home instead of working, but when he dies she gets a job in an illegal sweatshop. "I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now" (114).

But Razia's husband was not the only one to give her a hard time. Razia's son Tariq is a drug addict, something she refuses to believe for a long time. She believes he needs money for books, but when things start missing in the house, it is harder to find explanations. Nazneen has understood the problem, but Razia would not hear any of it. Even though her husband dies, there is thus still a man in her life to give her grief.

The female characters seem more diverse and faceted than the male ones. Despite Nazneen being the submissive Muslim housewife, she undergoes a change, which makes her take control of “Fate” instead of the other way around. Mrs. Islam, who ends up being a villain in the story, starts off by being caring and helpful. The fact that she presents a Muslim woman as a villain, not only a victim is engaging. It is possible, however, to argue that she is a victim of the community, where it is difficult for a woman to find employment (much due to the gossip from women like herself) and by lacking someone to provide for her, she needs to join forces with her two sons by arranging financial “help” to people on the estate. Razia is also a woman who will gain sympathy from the reader as she is straightforward and refuse to let anyone tell her how to live. Her naiveté as to her son’s drug problem, seems very human as many will be able to relate to the wish to believe the best when it comes to your children.

Dr. Azad is one of the more sympathetic male characters in the novel, but he only plays a very small part. He is the doctor of most the Bangladeshis from the Syleth area in Tower Hamlet, and he is Chanu’s friend. Their friendship seems rather strange since they are two very different men, but as the story progresses one understands more of their relationship. Chanu uses Dr. Azad as an escape from what he believes is a very uneducated community, and he also believes that Dr. Azad can talk to his clients and help him with the promotions. Dr. Azad, on the other hand, is escaping an unhappy marriage. Chanu and Nazneen goes on a surprise visit to their house as they are never invited, and realize that Dr. Azad is married to what is described as an extremely vulgar woman.

The door swung out. A woman in a short purple skirt leaned against the doorpost. Her thighs tested the fabrics, and beneath the hemline was a pair of dimpled knees. Her arms folded beneath her breasts. A cigarette burned between purple lacquered nails. She had a fat nose and eyes that were looking for a fight. Her hair was cropped close like a man’s, and was streaked with some kind of rust-coloured paint. (87)

Towards the end of the novel, Dr. Azad comes to Razia's flat to check up on Tariq who has been locked up in his room to prevent him from taking drugs. Somehow Dr. Azad explains his marriage to Razia and Nazneen.

‘It was a “love” marriage you see.. What I did not know – I was a young man- is that there are two kinds of love. The kind that starts off big and slowly wears away, that seems you can never use it up and then one day it is finished. And the kind you don't notice at first, but which adds a little bit to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand’. (359)

His explanation, and the situation it is given in, seems like a flaw to the story. Dr.

Azad is a very private man with very good manners. For him to suddenly explain his marriage to two women does not seem believable. It is not credible that Dr. Azad was not familiar with this saying either, as growing up in Bangladesh he would probably have been exposed to arranged marriages several times. Lisa Lau gives a similar example from the diasporic writer Malladi's *The Mango Season*. In the opening paragraph of this novel the narrator says that even though she grew up in a country where arranged marriages were the norm, it always seemed brutal to her. Lau writes that it seems rather strange that the author should feel the need to explain that arranged marriages is the norm, as this is an explanation that rarely would emerge in an Indian novel, because if something is the norm there is no need to highlight it further (Lau). It seems like Ali has to write everything very explicit, both to show that she knows of Bangladeshi manners and traditions, but also because she is obviously writing for an ethnic British audience, a typical Re-Orientalistic trait.

It is cases like this that makes me wonder if Ali has tried to do too many things in one novel. Because she does not know the culture and the people within communities like this well enough, she will have to stick to simple explanations and scandalous happenings instead of really going into the characters. Another example is

Hasina's story: just as she is having great difficulties, one of her friends becomes a victim of an acid attack performed by her husband. It seems like Ali needs all the troubles of Bangladeshi women pressed into one novel, as many of these terrible things are familiar to people in the West through the media. Lau writes:

One common distortion of the images constructed by diasporic South Asian women writers occurs because of the overemphasis on being South Asian, and the almost rigid depiction of adherence of fictional South Asian characters to traditional ideals associated with South Asia. It is almost as if in an attempt to over-compensate and pre-emptively defend accusations of not being a 'real' South Asian, plotlines, narratives and characters in writings by quite a number of diasporic South Asian women writers are under pressure to demonstrate so-called recognisably 'South Asian characteristics'. This is in stark contrast to the literature by home South Asian writers, where the South Asian context just happens to be the background, the setting in which the narrative just happens to occur, rather than being the reason for the narrative in a deterministic fashion. (Lau)

Dr. Azad's need to explain his marriage to Nazneen and Razia, may be a typical example of this.

Bangladesh vs. England

The opening of the book takes place in Bangladesh, but quickly moves to Britain. Yet Bangladesh is still an important part of the novel since Nazneen keeps bringing forth memories of her childhood in the village. In addition to this, and to a large extent in contrast, she receives the letters from Hasina, keeping her updated about recent developments in Bangladesh. Hasina's letters "go a long way to dispel the idea that Bangladesh is still rural, paradisaic; it is urban, violent and locked into the global capitalist system" (Sandhu, 2003). This variation of narrative is interesting, and gives the reader a parallel story to follow. However, Hasina's story is a sad one. It is filled with brutal stories of how women are exploited, mistreated and molested. It does not paint a favourable picture of Bangladesh, especially not the men.

Nazneen has returning memories of her childhood. Although some are warm and funny, most are sad memories of the hardships of being a woman in Bangladesh. This is a significant aspect which critics of the novel have tended to overlook. As mentioned in the introduction it was often in the Orientalist's interest to present the native as primitive and brutal. Stories that would appear repulsive to a reader in the West, and that would add to the notion of "them" being different from "us". Some of the stories Nazneen remembers from Bangladesh are painful stories like this. One example is when Nazneen as a little girl walks by a tree where the local villagers have hung a man called Mustafa. He is not yet dead, and pleads for Nazneen to help him. Not knowing what to do – and, at a different yet in one sense related level, her firm belief in Fate – make her decide to see if he is still alive when she returns. She finds that he is not, and she sees how the local boys are laughing, dancing with this dead man hanging from a tree. This story paints not only a quite primitive picture of Bangladesh, but also repulsive.

In contrast to Hasina's letters and Nazneen's memories stands the council estate in London. Critics have claimed that the novel's sharpest criticism is levelled at this way of living, and some of that criticism comes, as I mentioned earlier, from Chanu. The question is, however, if this criticism is directed against the way Britain has handled the large waves of immigration, or if it is directed towards the people living there. Nazneen sees it like this:

She began to spend time at the window, as she had in those first few months in London, when it was still possible to look out across the dead grass and concrete and see nothing but jade-green fields, unable to imagine that the years would rub them away. Now she saw only the flats, piles of people loaded on top of one another, a vast dump of people rotting away under a mean strip of sky, too small to reflect all those souls. (302)

The main critique seems to be of the overcrowded flats and the socio-economic problems within the estate like drugs and gang-violence. The latter problem, however,

is created by the people living there not by anyone from the outside, and may be seen – like I have said – as a criticism of the people living within the estates as a criticism of immigration politics. Why some people in the area turn towards self-destructive behaviour, is hardly explored in the novel. Like so many other of *Brick Lane*'s themes, it is left barely untouched, just scarcely commented on.

Islam

Islam as a religion is not represented in a particularly bad way in this novel. Islam serves as comfort for both Nazneen and Hasina, and is part of what gets them through their troubled lives. Nazneen finds comfort in regular prayer times, and Karim's commitment to Islam is what draws her towards him. But the religion is also causing her torments, as her heart pulls her in directions she should not go and fills her with an excitement she should not feel: "Even if Karim was her future and could not be avoided, there were problems. Happiness, for instance. That would count against her. Because faith must be met with indifference" (211).

However, Islam is a significant aspect of the novel, and the reader is never allowed to forget that this is a novel about Muslims. Therefore, all the stereotyping and cultural statements, intertwined with religion (as it is in life) may give a negative and quite patronizing view on this particular group. Combined with the background most readers will have from the media, many readers are likely to consider *Brick Lane* as a novel about Muslims more than a novel of one immigrant woman's destiny or even a Bangladeshi woman's destiny. This inclination illustrates another difference between traditional Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism. In the book *Covering Islam* with the undertitle – *How The Media Determines How we See The Rest of the World*, Edward Said writes that up until the 1970s, people talked about nationalities or groups

of people such as Arabs, Pakistanis, Iranians etc. Lately people have started talking about Muslims as a whole (Said 1997: 37). While the traditional Orientalist actually distinguished between nationalities the Neo-Orientalists tend to see Muslims as one big group. This is one of the things Ali actually tries to remind us of in the novel. For example, Karim states that it has been difficult being Bangladeshi, as other ethnic minorities have been more popular and “trendy”. “If you wanted to be cool you had to be something else – a bit white, a bit black, a bit something. Even when it all took off, bhangra and all that, it was Punjabi, Pakistani, giving it all the attitude. It weren’t us, was it? If you wanted to be cool. You couldn’t just be yourself. Bangladeshi. Know what I’m saying?” (217). Karim realizes that he needs to be the role model for the young ones, and wants to make sure they contribute to the Muslim cause. The difference between these groups – Pakistani, Indians and Bangladeshi – would be much more visible and maybe important within the groups than it is to an outsider.

The fact that Karim comes across as an aggressive Muslim from the start overshadows the explanation of why young Muslims turn towards religion when looking for an identity. This has been done differently in the film which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The generation gap

In the essay “Where I’m Coming From” Monica Ali describes her inspiration for writing her novel. She explains that her experiences with the conflicts between first- and second- generation immigrants were a big inspiration. This comment highlights one of the most interesting parts of the novel. The gaps between Karim and his father’s generation, and Nazneen, Chanu and their daughters are well described, and believable, as they are presented in different ways. Problems arise when the first

generation start having children, who to a much larger extent have to be a part of the British society through school and friends. The second generation are “teenagers”, something that the first generation never had the luxury to be. In Bangladesh you are a child, then you marry or start working – the process of "finding yourself" is superfluous in a society where the community or the family is traditionally put before the freedom of the individual. The second generation of immigrants in Britain have the opportunity to have an education, and have time to reflect and decide on who they want to be.

The reason why this is the most believable part of the novel is probably because this change is something Ali has experienced herself, just like most young people today. In the article “The Outrage Economy”, Ali writes: “Brick Lane is in many ways a typical first novel, drawing on concerns and ideas that shaped my childhood. For instance, there’s a lot of me in Shahana, the rebellious teenage daughter, and maybe a bit of her still left in me” (Ali 13 October 2007). Because of this personal experience, the anger Shahana has towards her father for wanting to take them back to Bangladesh is notable throughout and is not explained to pieces like many other issues related to culture in the novel. Generational differences is nothing particular about ethnic minorities, it is just other problems that emerge. The teenager Shahana and the more easygoing, younger Bibi are two lovable characters that many will be able to relate to.

The ending

At the end of the novel, Chanu leaves England to start his business in Bangladesh, and Nazneen and her daughters are left to themselves, like they wished for, in London. When Nazneen first moved to England one of the first things she saw on television

was a couple doing ice-skating. To Nazneen this was extremely exotic, and she felt that to be able to dance like that, with a man with clothes so tight that his private parts stood out (27), would be the ultimate feeling of freedom. So in the end, Razia takes her to an ice-skating rink, where she in her traditional sari ventures to test her newly won freedom on the ice. This ending is supposed to signify the freedom Nazneen has now that she is without a man to decide over her. With her husband out of the country she does not restrain her emotions anymore, and nothing is met with indifference, which results in her jumping up and down on her mattress singing along to Lulu's *Shout* unable to restrain her happiness. At the ice-skating rink: "Nazneen turned around. To get on the ice-physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there. She said: 'But you can't skate in a sari.' Razia was already lacing down her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like'"(413). As Sukhdev Sandhu writes in his article "Come Hungry, Leave Edgy", "the novel ends on a note so high it's difficult to make out if it's meant to be ironic or not." From an Orientalistic perspective, this confirms the goal of Orientalism, namely to give the Occident a pat on the back.

Throughout the novel, we have been presented with the horrible realities facing women in Bangladesh. These stories are only to a certain extent contradicted by Chanu, who occasionally feels the need to boost his confidence by telling positive "facts" about Bangladesh. This ending is probably meant to be positive as to what Nazneen now can expect of her life, but at the same time it does not feel true. *Brick Lane* avoids talking about the difficulties that she can come to face in Britain. Karim mentions some of the things his father has been objected to, but this drowns in his religious rhetoric. Sandhu writes:

How strange then that this novel, part of it set in 1985, has so little to say about the campaign of violence and intimidation which marked the lives of

almost every Bangladeshi, young and old, male or female, who lived in and around Brick Lane before the current era of gentrification. To write about this area today or make sense of its cuspy, transitional status, one has to write about what went on before. (Sandhu 2003)

By avoiding these issues, Nazneen's prospects in Britain are glamorized, and not fully believable.

Chapter conclusion

I have through this chapter tried to show that it is still possible to find Orientalist and stereotypical patterns in a bestselling novel. One can, of course, ask how so many readers can love this novel, when it seems no less stereotyping than the novels from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. One reason is of course that the novel is very well written. It is no doubt entertaining, satirical and clever. Ali has a unique way of using humour when needed and there is definitely an interest in her fatherland as a base. Secondly, I think readers like what they read because they get what they expect, the oppressed woman, the silly husband, the young fundamentalist and harsh flashes to stories of suicide, honour killings and acid attacks. This would of course not have been a problem, had it not been for the way the critics received the novel – as a true insight into the community.

Part of the problem with *Brick Lane* is that Ali is trying to put too many themes into the same novel, and this feature cumulatively makes it less believable. I mentioned in the introduction that Lisa Lau identified the need of being recognisably South Asian as one of the problems of Re-Orientalism. I will argue that this can be said for Ali's novel. She does too many things in one novel, maybe especially when it comes to Hasina's letters. But it is through these that Ali really can show what she knows of the Bangladeshi culture. Unfortunately, it is this that makes it less believable.

Not at any point do I believe that Ali had a hidden political agenda of contributing to the growing islamophobia or racism in the West, if any, I believe she wanted to empower Bangladeshi women, but unfortunately the publisher and reader's perception of the novel may be different, much due to the political climate of today. This climate does not only create a certain type of literature and political books, it creates a hunger amongst readers to find out more about these communities and this religion. But just as a lot of people are more likely to get their everyday news feed from tabloids, more and more books on these issues with tabloid headlines and writings emerge. Said wrote in an article in 2003:

Today bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted to them and others by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange Oriental people. (Said, 2003: 4)

This trend has been no less in Europe. Andreas Malm calls this type of literature Eurabia literature. *Brick Lane* is of course fiction, but as Sandhu writes: "The novel is treated [by the critics and publishers] as a direct portal into the minds of Bangladeshi East-Londoners." If this is the case, then it is necessary to look into what that could say about a community that is so diverse it makes the use of the word "community" difficult.

When it comes to the issue of Orientalism, there are many issues in this novel that fit right into the idea of creating "the Other." Most readers with a Western background will find the characters, especially the male, extreme and hard to relate to. Although the characters do gain sympathy from the readers, I do feel that the male characters are the real victims of Orientalism in this novel. As we approach the end of the story, we realize that not one single woman is in a happy relationship with a Bangladeshi man. Nazneen does not feel completely free until her husband has left

the country and until she has broken the relationship with her immature, fundamentalist lover. Hasina encounters several horrible men eager to exploit her, not to speak about her friend Monju who gets mutilated by her husband and later dies. Mrs. Islam is a widow, and has managed perfectly well on her own with the help of her two aggressive sons. Razia's husband must die before she can take work and feel free, and still she has her son and his extreme drug abuse to worry about. I am afraid that this is an extremely one sided view, and since it is so one sided, I am afraid of what the reader is left with. If this is a "true" insight into this community as the publisher and marketers would like us to believe, what does that say about Bangladeshi men?

I mentioned in the introduction that an important goal for the Orientalist is to create a distinct feeling of difference between "us" and "them". I conclude, especially when it comes to the male characters, that *Brick Lane* does not interfere with this notion for reasons I have tried to pinpoint in this chapter. Although most readers will relate to many of the trials the characters face, the "otherness" of many of the characters overshadows the similarities.

Chapter three

The controversy and the film

“She’s Not One of Us”

In the last chapter I showed that there are several Orientalistic traits in the novel *Brick Lane*, and that this is caused by an extensive use of stereotypes. This feature of the novel becomes particularly evident when looking at the male characters in the novel. In this chapter I will explain the controversy prompted by the novel, which led on to an event bigger controversy around the film. I will also discuss the film version of the novel, and show that the film leaves quite a different impression than the novel in terms of stereotyping. I will end this chapter by asking the following question: is it possible to avoid Re-Orientalism when a writer with an ethnic minority background chooses to write about her diasporic culture? I will answer this question by comparing Monica Ali’s way of dealing with the issue to Hanif Kureishi’s, who started writing about South Asians in the early 1980s.

The Making of the Film.

The filming of the novel *Brick Lane* started in 2006. It was the production company Ruby Films which had bought the rights right after the novel was published. The film was to be directed by the young, award-winning director Sarah Gavron, and they assembled a famous cast for the roles. Then the controversy started. There had been some discussions of the book as well. Somebody sent a ten-page letter to the publisher claiming the novel to be stereotyping and insulting, but nothing more came of that. But when the book was to be adapted to film, and parts of the filming was to take place on location in Brick Lane, some parts of the community reacted. According

to the article “Local protest over Brick Lane film” by Richard Lea and Paul Lewis the protesters accused the book of being “racist and insulting toward the Bangladeshi community” and of containing “a most explicit, politically calculated violation of the human rights of the community” (Lea and Lewis 17 July, 2006).

The next day we could read the article “Insulted residents and traders threaten to halt filming of bestselling novel Brick Lane” by the same two authors. In this article the protesters have taken things one step further to stop the filming. Now they threaten with blockades of the street, and Abdus Salique, chair of Brick Lane’s Trader Association also tells the newspapers that young people will react strongly to the filming. He says: “Of course, they will not do anything unless we tell them to, but I warn you they are not as peaceful as me. She [Ali] has imagined ideas about us in her head. She is not one of us, she has not lived with us, she knows nothing about us, but she has insulted us”, to which the film company replied that they would not have embarked on a product that would be seen as racist, and that they would listen to the concerns of the community. One of the rumours going around regarding the filming was that one of the scenes in the film would be a leech falling from a Bangladeshi woman’s hair and into the food she was cooking. The committee of Brick Lane inhabitants was afraid that this would portray Bangladeshis as filthy, and that the film would be bad for restaurants in *Brick Lane*. Both Ali and the director assured the committee that such a scene does not exist in the novel, nor would it exist in the film. However, there *is* a scene in the novel where Nazneen is running around looking for Shahana and ends up asking in a restaurant, which is the only time a restaurant is visited in the novel. She briefly speaks to the chef of the restaurant who during their short conversation manages to pick his nose and wiping it on the apron; a touch it is

hard to imagine that Ali added in order to tempt people to visit the Bangladeshi restaurants.

An interesting aspect of this protest is that while others have claimed the novel to be stereotyping all Bangladeshis, the community itself was mostly concerned with the way a particular group was presented in the novel, namely the people from the Sylheti part of Bangladesh. The largest majority of the Bangladeshi community in London comes from the Sylhet area, but Chanu and Nazneen in *Brick Lane* do not, they come from Dhaka. Several places in the novel have been shown to illustrate this. On one occasion for example Chanu says about where Dr. Azad lives: “A substantial property,” said Chanu. He spoke in a whisper. “This area is very respectable. None of your Sylhetis here. If you see a brown face, you can guarantee it’s not from Sylhet” (86). On several other occasions Chanu refers to “these other people” in negative terms. To a reader with no particular knowledge about Bangladesh “these other people” may just as well refer to other Bangladeshis, as most are not familiar with the different ethnicities and conflicts within Bangladesh. To the many in the Bangladeshi community however, this was taken as a direct criticism of the majority of Bangladeshis who are from Sylhet as “backward, uneducated and unsophisticated” (Lea and Lewis, July 18, 2006). This aspect may also explain why there were almost only middle-aged people showing up at the demonstrations. Young people who are born in Britain of Bangladeshi parents will not have the same feeling of distance and conflict with other Bangladeshi people. They have probably felt the need to stick together as Bangladeshis against racism and attacks from Britons or other ethnic groups rather than fighting with their own people. This important historical feature is well represented in the novel.

A public debate

What started as a headline in the tabloids quickly made it to more serious broadcasting such as the BBC television news. Soon members of the British literary elite were thrown into the discussion. The Australian feminist and writer Germaine Greer came to the protester's defence, claiming that

None of this would have happened if Ali had not created her own version of Bengaliness. As a British writer, she [Ali] is very aware of what will appear odd but plausible to a British audience. Her approach to her Bengali characters is not all that different from Paul Scott's treatment of his Indian characters in *The Raj Quartet*. (Greer 24 July, 2006)

In a way this seems a bit self contradictory because if Ali has created her own Bengaliness, then no one can really take it as a representation of the community. The problem is that the novel *has* been taken as a representation for *the* Bengaliness by the publishers and the critics, despite the fact that Ali has claimed it is all fiction. However, Brick Lane *is* a real place, and Ali went there and talked to people in order to write the book. This makes the lines between pure fiction and some form of representation more difficult to see.

Salman Rushdie came to Ali's defence. He had many years ago had a similar quarrel with Greer in the media when Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was published and the late Ayatollah Khomeini declared a fatwa against him. Rushdie claimed that Greer's defence of the protesters was "philistine, sanctimonious and disgraceful, but not unexpected" (Rushdie 29 July 2009). He also criticizes Greer of forgetting that this is not the first novel to be published about the Bangladeshi community and that there is a large majority of Bangladeshis who actually supports the filming. It is hard to see what Greer wishes to accomplish with her criticism. One can hardly imagine that a woman who fought hard for her rights as a woman in the 60s would deny or even limit another woman, like Ali the right to tell a story. Still, it

is admirable that she dares to raise the question. I do believe, however, that the discussion between Greer and Rushdie never touched upon what actually may be the core of the problem: the role the media play in shaping people's opinions on specific communities, and in turn: how this kind of influence shapes the way we perceive a novel. The issue is linked to the *question of representation* that has been, and is, an important issue in postcolonial theory. Whereas Rushdie feels that a writer has absolute liberty to write whatever he or she likes, Greer feels that this liberty comes with a responsibility, the responsibility to realize that writing about the Muslim community in London is not the same as writing about a group of Oxford-graduates coming home for Christmas, as ethnic minorities have felt the need to defend themselves for a long time, and this novel may contribute to an even larger need of defence. No matter who you agree with, it is interesting and important that authors and theoreticians get involved in the discussion. I believe it is the discussions and not the outcome that shape people's minds. By having this discussion in the newspapers, readers will learn that there is always two sides of every story, and also bring to people's attention that a novel can never represent anything but the writer.

The discussion of the filming and the following threats made the production company decide to move the location to somewhere else for the filming of the last scenes. In a way, this decision proved unnecessary, since the protests turned out to be a lot less dramatic than expected, and the job of moving location involved extra work and expenses. It is also worth discussing whether a small group should be allowed to dictate others, because it leads us one step closer to censorship, something most people agree that we do not want. Some claim that out of fear of protests, Prince Charles withdrew from the Royal Film Performance for only the second time in 60 years. Monica Ali herself did not enter the discussion until over a year later, when she

wrote the article “The outrage economy” in *The Guardian* on October 13 2007. Commenting on the way the media covered the protests, Ali’s article was also a response to the self-proclaimed “community leaders” who felt strongly about the film.

Ali’s main emphasis in her article is that the conflict was totally blown out of proportions in the media. The people who protested were vastly outnumbered by the people from the area who showed up at audition to play extras in the film. In her article Ali explains how she talked to one of the photographers who covered the story. The photographer explained that he had to get really close to the protesters in order to make it seem like it was a huge group. Ali is also eager to tell the readers that she has a boxful of letters from readers of Bangladeshi decent who praise the novel and told her their personal experiences from arranged marriages. Moreover, Ali mentions an Asian woman who during an interview Ali gave Tom Stoppard became cross with Ali for avoiding to talk about the fact that the “community leaders” were angry because *Brick Lane* is a novel about female empowering (Ali 13 October 2007). Ali herself refused to phrase it like that in the interview, but this Asian woman did. By referring to this story, Ali “frees” herself from the confrontation with the leaders. Instead she hides behind the argument that “Asian women says so themselves,” and also gives herself credibility for empowering and inspiring Bangladeshi women. If one was to do a feminist reading of the novel, I think one would end up with the conclusion that it is feminist in a very old-fashioned way, where most women are victims of terrible men, and their only liberation would be to separate themselves from them.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to discuss if the production company gave in to the protesters too easily by moving locations. It is also disturbing that *The Guardian* felt the need to blow the case out of all proportions, because if *Brick Lane*

did not hurt the inhabitant's reputation, the protests certainly did, and there is no doubt that they were a clear minority. However, I do feel Monica Ali avoided the discussion by hiding behind the liberties of a writer. The expression "I write with the door closed" signalling that she does not think about the world outside when writing, is a dubious and inadequate explanation. As Stuart Hall writes "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always "in context", *positioned*" (Hall 1990: 224). A writer cannot free him or herself from this fact, even though Ali has tried to do so several times, as mentioned in the first chapter, by claiming to belong nowhere. Regardless, the film was made, and in the following section I will investigate whether the film confirms what I have identified as Orientalist traits in the novel and if so, how.

The film

There are two main challenges one needs to consider when adapting a novel to film. (<http://www.screenwritertools.com/adaptation.html>). The first is length. *Brick Lane* is a 300 page novel which pays great attention to detail, some critics have claimed too much. A screenplay rarely runs longer than 120 pages, and therefore it is necessary to leave out parts of the story. What is excluded and included shows how shows the director has perceived the story. The second challenge is voice. Many stories are written in the first person, and this is difficult to handle on film. *Brick Lane*, however, is written in the third person, but the narrator writes from Nazneen's limited point of view. In the film the director has solved this with a voice-over, narrated by Nazneen. This does give insight into her thought but very limited compared to the novel, where her interpretations and mental distress are a large part of the narrative.

In the process of making *Brick Lane* into a film, several choices had to be made as to which thematic directions the film should take. Sarah Gavron, the director of the movie, managed to make the novel into a one-and-a-half hour film. But in order to do so she decided to leave out quite a lot, both characters and events. I criticized in the second chapter that Ali handles too many themes at once in *Brick Lane*. Sarah Gavron, however, has chosen to focus on the different kinds of love people can experience. In this analysis I will first focus on the beginning of the film. I will then go on to focus on the three main characters in the film: Nazneen, Chanu and Karim, before I discuss how the generation gap and the ending is presented.

When the film was released in November 2007, the critics were divided in their judgment. Some, maybe due to all the attention in the media, felt the film was too dull, without challenging the viewer the way the novel does. Others claimed the film focused on what they felt was the true heart of the story, namely different kinds of love. The two main characters, Nazneen and Chanu, were played by Tannishtha Chatterjee and Satish Kaushik, who were almost exclusively praised for their performances.

The beginning

The first scenes of the film give quite a different impression than the opening of the novel, where we are thrown into the dramatic birth of Nazneen and learn how her mother refuses to take her to hospital. The film opens with Nazneen's narrating voice singing an old Bangladeshi tune. It is calm and tender. We see Nazneen as a child, playing with a child's curiosity in the green fields surrounding the village, and Hasina coming to join her. Whereas the novel opens quite brutally with the birth of Nazneen

and how she is left to her Fate, the film projects beautiful, colourful pictures accompanied by traditional singing.



A picture of the green fields of Bangladesh taken from the movie. (imdb.com)

As I explained in the chapter on the novel, the way a novel begins sets the for how we will perceive the rest of the narrative. This is no different in film. As we are introduced to a calmer beginning than the quite chaotic one of the novel, as viewers we become positively inclined towards and interested in Bangladesh instead of frustrated with the irrationality of Nazneen’s mother.

In the novel, it takes a long time before the reader gets to know of Nazneen’s mother’s suicide, and how she is told about it in a letter from Hasina who had witnessed the event and kept the secret from her sister since their childhood. In the film however, it is Nazneen who in the very beginning of the film witnesses her mother drown her self, with the explanation that “my mother could not

endure”(00:02:28).⁵ We are then told by Nazneen’s voice that things changed after that and that they never spoke of her mother’s death again. Her father had chosen an educated man living abroad for her; thus, he thinks enabling her to be happy.

Watching the film, we do not know what Nazneen thinks when she sees the picture of her husband, though the contrast between the 40-year-old man in the picture and the young, beautiful Nazneen speaks for itself.

In the opening of the novel, Nazneen’s father is portrayed as a cold, angry man whose main focus is to guard his family’s honour. In the film, however, though only present for a minute, there is a sadness to him as he lets go of his daughter and sends her off to be married. He also tries to put his arm around Hasina to comfort her. This gesture tells the viewer that the tradition of sending your daughter away to be married takes its toll on a father as well, and that he probably believes that he is doing the best thing by marrying her to “an educated man” living in the West, knowing the strain being a woman in the village took on their mother. This must have been a very conscious choice by the director, and it makes the role of the father in Bangladesh more faceted than just being the protector of the family’s honour, which is the simplified, stereotypical way Muslim men often are described. As Nazneen looks back at her father from the boat that takes her away, the background changes to London’s Tower Hamlet where Nazneen is returning home from shopping. Nazneen’s narrating voice speaks of home, and explains that her husband tells her that they will be returning soon. All of this happens during a single song, and as the melody fades out, Nazneen is locking herself into one of the hundred doors in the estate.

⁵ This reference refers to hrs:min:sec of the film.



Nazneen as she enters her flat in Tower Hamlet (imdb.com)

The approach Gavron has taken to the opening is interesting because of the way it differs from the novel's beginning, setting a very different mood. The girl's father is presented as much more human, and even the first impression of Chanu, apart from the picture, is that he is trying to comfort Nazneen by telling her that they will be returning home soon, which signals a certain tenderness in their relationship. That we see her walking the streets also breaks with the novel, where it takes a long time before she is allowed by her husband to walk outside on her own. The beautiful, colourful pictures at the beginning give the viewer an impression of a beautiful Bangladesh (though filmed in India) which stands in contrast to the sad story of their mother "who could not endure".

Nazneen's awakening

Whereas the story of Nazneen's time in London begins in 1985 in the novel, the film starts in 2001. This difference means that many of the events of the story that

occurred before then are seen in retrospect, or told by the other characters. Whereas Razia is one of the first women to befriend Nazneen in the novel, in the film they are introduced by Mrs. Islam when Razia moves into a flat close to Nazneen. Mrs. Islam then tells Razia about Nazneen's son Raqib who died and that "she keeps herself to herself (00:10:00) which indicates that Nazneen may be even more lonely than portrayed in the novel, where her friendship with Razia is a comfort from the beginning. When we meet Razia in the film, she is already a widow, sewing to earn money. To Nazneen she seems modern, with short-cut hair and smoking cigarettes.

Although even more quiet and alone than portrayed in the novel, Nazneen also comes across as a stronger character in the film. The fact that the directors chose Nazneen to be the witness of her mother's suicide, gives her strength. This is a parting from the novel that benefits Nazneen in the film. The fact that it was Hasina who witnessed their mother's suicide in the novel could be the catalysis of her running away from "Fate" out of fear of ending up like her mother. In the film, however, it is Nazneen who uses her mother's double standard to her own advantage. Her mother used to tell her daughters to endure but could not do so herself. Nazneen knows this, and uses her mother's experience to take the risks she otherwise would not have taken. When wondering whether to go to the first Bengal Tigers meeting, she remembers a conversation with Hasina where Hasina tells her: "Mother always used to say: we are women, what can we do? I say: Many things!" (01:18:08). With this in mind, and knowing that her mother's passiveness led her to end her life, she decides to go and see where it takes her. Nazneen in the film is not so bound to the idea of "Fate" as the Nazneen in the novel, something which also makes her more rational.

In the film Nazneen is eager to return to Bangladesh, and her main aim of helping financially is not to send money to Hasina, but to help Chanu with the "home

fund” which will buy them tickets home. Since we know nothing of their first 16 years of marriage, as viewers we start off with an openness towards Chanu. Whereas in the novel the reader’s perception of Chanu will be coloured by his comments on her as an object, and that he married her because “a blind uncle is better than no uncle”. In the film their relationship is already well established, and although there is no doubt that Nazneen is a traditional wife whose main responsibility is to look after the family, she seems well adjusted to the role, and Chanu seems happy with her.

There are several characters who have been left out of the film. Dr. Azad is hardly a part of the film, he appears as a guest at dinner but with no significant role. In the novel, Dr. Azad functions as a mirror of Chanu’s plans and silly proposals as they often come up in conversations with Dr. Azad. Although Razia does have a role in the film, she features much less prominently than in the novel. Her son Tariq, who in the novel has a severe drug problem, is not a part of the film. Neither are Mrs. Islam’s two sons, who function as her torpedoes in the novel.

Nazneen receives letters from Hasina in the film as well, and the viewer gets insight to her life through another voice reading the letters. In the novel, these are written in a strange, grammatically incorrect English. The voice in the film however, starts to read the letters in Bengali, to show that this is the language the letters are written in, and later continues to read in English. Though read with a Bangladeshi accent, the grammar is correct. I have argued that the strange English of Hasina’s letters in the novel, did not work very well. It would probably have been even stranger if the director had chosen for her to read it like it was written in the novel.

Nazneen is eager to help with the “home fund” as she wants to go back to see Hasina. In the novel, it is Chanu who brings her the sewing machine so she can work. Quite early in the film, however, Nazneen takes matters into her own hands and

accepts an old sewing machine from Razia, which indicates that Nazneen in the film is more executive than she is in the novel. When Chanu returns home, he is angry and withdraws to his room. In a letter to Hasina, Nazneen notes: “My husband says: ‘the loss of pride is a terrible thing’ but pride won’t buy us tickets home” (00:20:12). Nazneen understands that her working takes pride from her husband and his ability to support her. Chanu sees this, and the next day he brings home a computer, both to show that he accepts that she is working, and to prove to everyone else that he does have money to support his family. As the film progresses it becomes more and more evident that Nazneen’s main objection to her relationship with Chanu is not that she has the role of the traditional housewife or that he is older and does not please her sexually, but the fact that he keeps things from her and is unable to keep his promises. It is interesting to note that, in the novel, it is the fact that Chanu tells Nazneen that he has to help Hasina when he hears about her story but then never mentions it again that really makes Nazneen realize that he will not change and cannot be trusted. In the film, it is clear that Nazneen has told her husband about Hasina earlier, and that he has actually sent his cousin to “save” her. When hearing that she is once again in trouble it is the fact that she does not seem to be able to take care of herself that makes him reluctant to help, not because he is unable to do what he promises.

Chanu reclaiming his dignity

One of my main criticisms of the novel is the way it portrays the male characters. It may seem like the director has pondered this issue as well, as several changes have been made to make characterization of them more nuanced. Chanu is no exception. Chanu in the film is much the same as Chanu in the novel, but because the whole first part of the novel is left out, he starts with a cleaner sheet than he does in the novel, in

which Nazneen's repulsive feelings towards him are contagious to the reader. In the novel we hear how she is constantly hoping that her husband is not there when she opens her eyes, and how Chanu talks about her as an object. In the film we do not see this side of Chanu. He is still a dreamer, and he does not get any of his plans realized. Nazneen has probably experienced this for many years already, as she hardly takes notice when he introduces her to his plans. Nazneen is at first eager to go back to Bangladesh, but she soon realizes that when it comes to Chanu's plans, nothing will really change. His plans for their new life in Bangladesh are as grand as the ones he used to have in Britain, whether it is working as a professor at the University of Dhaka, or as a soap producer. As Nazneen realises this, she moves one step closer to a final decision of staying in Britain.

Even if Chanu in the film is just as comical as the Chanu in the novel, the director has made some important changes to his character and the comedy therefore works differently. I argued that in the novel we to a large extent laugh *at* Chanu, as he does not realize his limitations that are so obvious to everyone else. In the film, I argue, Chanu is given more dignity, and the comedy therefore is more based on Chanu as a jolly, happy figure in a rather grey and sad environment, than treating him as a fool.

In the novel, it is unclear if Chanu really understands that Nazneen and Karim are having an affair, as he never confronts her with it. In the film, however, it is much clearer that Chanu understands and that he does not approve. There is a scene in both the novel and the film where Karim is sitting in their living room surfing on Islamic pages on the internet, when Chanu suddenly comes home. In the novel, it seems like this makes Chanu uncomfortable, and after chatting away in his normal manner he suddenly leaves the flat. The scene is quite similar in the film, however, the look

Chanu sends Nazneen does not indicate avoidance of the issue. Chanu's knowledge and disapproval are further underlined in the film when Chanu finds a letter from Hasina by the front door. It turns out that Chanu already has got information on Hasina from his cousin, who has told him that Hasina "works the hotels in Dhaka", indicating that she is a prostitute. He has not shared this information with Nazneen until now, and he yells at her: "Maybe I should have been asking what you are writing to her. You are no different from you sister. (01:02:05). In this short scene, Chanu comes across angrier and more intense than we ever see him in the novel, and even if this is not a good side of him, one cannot really blame him for being angry about his wife's affair. At the same time, it gives Chanu more dignity and courage than he has in the book, where his cowardly avoidance of the issue becomes another annoying aspect of him. It is this event that leads to Nazneen's breakdown. The next scene consists of fast-forwarded snapshots of her life in Britain and life in Bangladesh to indicate chaos and uncertainty, and when she wakes up, Chanu is back to his old, jolly self.

Nazneen's breakdown is one of the elements that does not work as well in the film as in the novel. From the beginning of the novel, we are constantly reminded of how Nazneen is tormented by "Fate". If she does anything to disobey it, it will leave her worried to the point where she is actually physically ill. She keeps reminding herself of the two angels sitting on her shoulders according to Muslim faith, who write down all the positive and all the negative things which will be put before you on judgement day. As the relationship with Karim progresses into being sexual, as she keeps on hiding money from Chanu to send to Hasina, as she does not know anything of her sister and how she is doing, and as she finds out that Chanu borrows money which will make it even more difficult to go back home, tension builds up in the novel

to a point where the reader expects a breakdown. In the film, however, we are not introduced to all the factors that lead to the breakdown which therefore comes as more of a surprise. It may even come across as a hysterical reaction to the mean things Chanu has said to her when angry. In the novel it is clearer that Nazneen's loneliness is the trigger of her reaction as she has no one to talk to about these problems. Only late in the novel does she decide to lift her burden by talking to Razia. In the film she talks to Razia as soon as she finds out about Chanu borrowing money, so this does not contribute to understanding her reaction either.

That Chanu has been given more courage and dignity in the film than in the novel becomes even clearer in the scene where Chanu takes Nazneen to the Bengal Tigers meeting. In chapter two, I commented that this was Chanu's last chance of proving himself man enough for his wife, and to indirectly stand up to his wife's lover. But like in everything else he fails, and leaves the meeting without having said anything. In the film however, this is not the case. The Bengal Tigers are angered by the way Islam is presented and attacked after 11 September. In the film Chanu actually speaks up:

Karim:

We are going to show them how wrong they are. We have become victims, but not for long! We stand arm in arm with our Muslim brothers, ready to defend!

Chanu:

What is it that you are planning to defend?

Man in audience:

Islam, brother.

Chanu:

You think Islam unites us all? You think Islam is the place you come from? Islam is not a country. You think you are my brother? (He points at Karim.) More than the next man on the street, because we are both Muslims? All this fighting talk that we are all brothers. Three million died in East Pakistan in this lifetime.

Man in audience:
Not in my lifetime, uncle.

Chanu:
In your parent's lifetime. What was that? Brotherly love? It was Muslim killing a Muslim. Have you forgotten? Are you so lost? My Islam is in here. (He touches his heart.) And that is the only thing worth defending. (01:13:20)

After this exchange, Chanu and Nazneen get up and leave the room. Nazneen lingers for a second and gets eye contact with Karim before she leaves and follows her husband. Once out on the street, she takes her husband's hand. Nazneen never fully understands the Islam Karim talks about. As far as she is concerned, Islam is a religion of peace and comfort, shown in the film by beautiful, peaceful footage of her praying. To her, Islam is a deeply personal thing, and she realizes that it has been so for Chanu as well. This makes her realize that after 16 years they may discover they have more in common than she thought.

The way the scriptwriters chose to differ from the novel in this way is quite radical. I have already shown how the director chose to give Chanu more confidence by confronting his wife with the adultery. On the commentary track to the film, the scriptwriter Abi Morgan and director Sarah Gavron explain why they chose for Chanu to stand up and speak instead of following the novel. They explain that by the time they got to this scene, they were so fond of Chanu, they liked him so much and thought so highly of him that it seemed in his spirit to rise and speak. Since we spend most of the film laughing at Chanu and his firm belief in his ideas, it was important to have him stand up and speak at the end. He is not given that opportunity in the book, and the impression we are left with is that he is just pathetic. This raises another important question: does the lack of love for her male characters lead Ali to present them negatively in the novel? Chanu in the film now leaves England at least with the knowledge that he has stood up for his wife, and that his wife has appreciated the

effort. Taking her husband's hand is a big step for a woman who has always walked three steps behind her him, and his assent indicates that he is also ready for change.

The short speech Chanu gives at the meeting adds something else I felt lacking in the novel: the voice of a moderate Muslim man. Although the Chanu of the novel is a Muslim, he seems very unreflected, and his identity is just as much about being a Bangladeshi. His comments on Islam are mostly restricted to what Muslims have added to the world in terms of art and culture, but not his personal reflections on being Muslim. Religion is a big part of the female characters lives, but the reflections on Islam by the male characters in the novel, mostly come from the radical Karim. In the film, however, Chanu shows to a larger extent that there are many ways to be Muslim.

Karim's search for identity

Chanu is not the only character altered in the film adaptation. Karim gives quite a different impression in the film as well. In the novel, he comes across as aggressively religious right from the start. His religion is important to him, and he uses this as an excuse for his anger. Conversely, the Karim of the film does not really mention religion at all. I mentioned in the first chapter how Islam is presented aggressively and violently from the start by Karim, with his comments on his father turning the other cheek instead of standing up to racism. "He thinks he is Mahatma Gandhi. He thinks he is Jesus Christ. Turn the cheek, man. Turn the cheek.' She picked up the cups. 'What about Mohammad? Peace be upon him, he was a warrior'" (192). In the film, the last part of this comment is left out, which proves an interesting point. In the novel, this comment seems to fuel what the reader may think of Muslim fundamentalists and that Islam itself is a violent religion. But in the film, this

comment is said with a laugh, and the comment on Muhammad is left out. There can be several reasons for the director's decision to tone down Karim's religious rhetoric. When leaving this out, a non-Muslim viewer will easier gain sympathy for him. To most people in the West, aggressive statements coming from a religious fundamentalist will evoke resentment that will be hard to fuse with sympathy. It seems like the director wanted people to like Karim and to understand that religious involvement among young Muslim boys is just as much about identity politics as it is about religion. The film includes several of the scenes where Karim talks about finding your identity as a Bangladeshi and the problems of belonging, which makes it easier to understand his need to defend his background when he feels it is under attack. In the novel, The Bengal Tigers are presented as a group in chaos, containing different parodical characters. They never seem to agree on anything, even their political goals. The group is less ridiculed in the film. It is not so much the way it is organized and the different opinions within the group that is different, but more of their collective feeling of being treated unfairly by society.

One thing that also comes across more clearly in the film than in the novel is the sexual tension between Karim and Nazneen. It is easier to capture the small hints of flirting on film. In the novel, it can be difficult to understand why they fall for each other. Chanu has clearly stated in the beginning of the novel that Nazneen is not particularly beautiful, and the flirting between her and Karim does not come across as clearly. In the film Nazneen *is* beautiful, and the description of how their relationship gradually builds up to becoming sexual is shown in small subtle ways; a look, or even a small touch. Karim is also more charming and gentler than in the novel, where his aggressiveness and self-absorbance overshadow any hints of interest.

As the relationship with Karim also functions as a sexual awakening for Nazneen, it is interesting that the film includes a sexual scene between Chanu and Nazneen. In this scene Nazneen is a passive receiver of Chanu's lust. Lying on her back, she retrieves to the memories of her childhood, where she and Hasina used to imagine what it was like to kiss a man, practising on the trees in the village. Her passiveness stands in clear contrast to her relationship with Karim where she lets go of any limitations she may have had earlier. In the film this sexual awakening does not only shake her out of physical indifference, but it also awakens other senses. Whereas her memories of Bangladesh bring back colourful, detailed pictures of nature and the environment, her affair starts to awaken her senses in the environment of Britain as well. The big cherry tree in the estate is suddenly full of pink flowers and she stops to enjoy them in the same slow-motion way she earlier remembered Bangladesh. Her experiences in the past, the memories of her mother, the loss of her son has made her closed emotionally, and the relationship with Karim seem to lock her open. The film captures this development in an elegant way.

The generation gap

The two girls playing Shahana and Bibi work very well in the film, as in the novel. Clearly, the scriptwriter saw this part of the novel as an important and believable part of the story. In order to make sure that the viewers focused on this, and not many of the other elements from in the novel, the director made some changes. The most important one occurs at the end of the story. Shahana's fear of having to go to Bangladesh leads her to run away from home. In the novel this scene is contrasted with a violent riot between the Bengal Tigers and the police, which makes the scene chaotic and stressful. In the film, however, the riot has been left out for possibly two

reasons. One possible reason is that since the film does not portray the Bengal Tigers as violently and aggressively, the riot would be out of place. Another, and maybe more likely reason is to strip the scene of anything that would disturb the tension, fear and love between a mother and her daughter. Nazneen, dressed in a traditional sari, runs after her daughter until Shahana collapses in tears on a platform at Liverpool Street Station. The scene is moving and manages to portray emotional chaos in an almost peaceful way.

The ending

I argued in the former chapter that I find the ending cliché – like on the verge of becoming ironic. Nazneen’s newfound freedom leading her to try things she never would have tried before, and Razia claiming that “you can do anything in Britain”, make it hard not to think of traditional Orientalism where Britain stands in clear contrast to the primitive and brutal countries of the east. In the film, however, this scene is left out too. When Chanu’s car leaves for the airport, it starts to snow, and Nazneen and her daughters run out to make angels in the snow. It is of course possible to see this ending the same way as the novel: that Nazneen now feels free enough to leave her apartment and play outside with her children. However, in the film, there is nothing that has stopped her earlier. While in the novel Chanu limits her movement in the estate due to community gossip, this never happens in the film. As the camera slowly, almost romantically moves away from Nazneen, who is lying on her back in the snow, the visual images are very similar to the pictures we have earlier seen from Bangladesh – romantic, calm, representing peace and security. Therefore the ending of the film comes across as differently from that of the novel. Nazneen has now come

to peace with the fact that England is her homeland, and that she will start making memories there the same way she did in Bangladesh.

It seems like the director and scriptwriter have chosen to focus on fewer and different themes than the novel. As mentioned earlier, one of my critiques in the second chapter was that Monica Ali seems to attempt to do everything at once by including everything from honour killings to drug to adultery, thus merely touching on several, very serious themes. The director has decided to strip the film of many of these themes and chosen to primarily focus on the different kinds of love: the love between parent and child, between lovers and maybe most of all the love between two people who have not chosen each other, but have grown to love each other anyway. In the second chapter I commented on Dr. Azad's description of the two different kinds of love, which I argue was out of place. In the film, it is Nazneen who in the end comes to realize that there are two kinds of love, acknowledging that she has grown a strong love for Chanu, which seems much more in place.

When watching the film in the light of my thesis, I think it is quite fair to say that the film does the Muslim men more justice than the book. Not only has the director given the two main male characters more sympathetic personalities and more confidence, but she has decided to leave out all the other male characters who contribute to a negative view – like Tariq, all the male characters Hasina meet in Bangladesh and Mrs. Islam's two violent torpedo sons. One might consider these changes as just a result of the need to leave out parts of the story to fit the length of a standard motion picture. However, the alterations seem to indicate that the directors did feel some of the characters were treated unfairly in the novel, as they have added character dimensions that are not part of the novel.

One could argue that the director and her scriptwriters were worried of not being politically correct, and therefore tried to present a more balanced view on Muslim men than the novel does. However, it may just as well be that they felt that these alterations made the characters more believable. Whereas the novel to a certain extent gives Muslim women the voice many feel they lack, it does absolutely nothing to correct the notion of Muslim men being controlling, fundamentalist, violent or gang members, or like Chanu, just plain silly and unreliable.

However, concluding that the alterations made in the film does Muslim men more justice, thus removing it from the concept of Orientalism, does not mean that the film is necessarily more entertaining than the novel. As mentioned in the second chapter, several aspects of the novel that make it highly enjoyable. Ali's verbal language is a big part of this achievement and the narrator's discourse in particular is difficult to present on film.

Re-Orientalizing the Oriental

In the introduction I explained the three elements of Re-Orientalism as described by Lisa Lau. In chapter two I have tried to show how these elements in many ways can be found in Monica Ali's novel. First of all, Ali over-explains a lot of cultural things and we are never allowed to forget the "Bengaliness" of her characters. Second, these over-explained cultural traits leads to generalisations by reinforcing cultural stereotypes which in turn leads to inaccurate information about a very diverse people. Third, and this cannot be blamed on Ali, the novel has to a certain extent led to "truth claims" with both critics and publishers commenting on how it provides insight into the community, when Ali herself never has claimed it to be anything but a fictional story. A question that springs to mind when looking into this issue is if it is possible for a writer with an ethnic minority background to write about their diasporic culture

without contributing to Re-Orientalism? To discuss this question, I want to contrast Ali with Hanif Kureishi, who was one of the first writers to deal with immigrants in Britain. I will do this to show why I believe Kureishi is not Re-Orientalizing the way I have showed Ali is, even though they both deal with South Asian immigrants.

At the ICA (Inter-Cultural Arts) festival in 2007 Monica Ali gave an interview together with Hanif Kureishi. Interviewing these two together provides an interesting dynamic because they are two different generations of post-colonial writers, and therefore their experiences and representations are very different. Kureishi, growing up with an English mother and a Pakistani father, did not feel represented in the literature that existed in the 70s and 80s, and wrote to fill a gap. Kureishi started writing in a time that was not only difficult for ethnic minorities, but also for many Britons as they struggled with the consequences of Margaret Thatcher's politics. His first major success *My Beautiful Laundrette*, filmed and nominated for an Academy Award for best screenplay in 1985, was an ironic critique of Thatcherite entrepreneurialism and individualism. It became a huge success among the British public, but also the young ethnic minorities were relieved to watch a movie without the stereotypical immigrant presented as the butt instead of the teller of jokes. The film also opened the door for other authors wanting to write about minorities. Kureishi explains in the ICA interview that it was very difficult to get anyone to publish his books, because people were not interested in reading about the Asian community. Before the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi had struggled for many years because he wrote about subjects that were not in the public interest. The question is of course why they were not of interest and what has changed since then?

The main character in "My Beautiful Laundrette" is a young Pakistani boy with a British boyfriend, struggling to make something of himself while he keeps his

alcoholic father alive. These are themes rarely covered by ethnic minority writers. Kureishi does not believe that a film like “My Beautiful Launderette” would be as popular today as it became then. He explains that it is difficult to find that “weird angle” today because what people want is the “straight forward” story that concurs with people’s expectations. As I have shown in the first chapter, a straightforward story is what I believe we get in *Brick Lane*. Kureishi began by writing something that was about ethnic minorities, but definitely without making a point of it. Although the film was aimed at a much smaller audience than what has proved to be the case with his later novels, it was awarded an Oscar and gave Kuresihi credibility as a writer before he had started dealing with culture clashes.

In the ICA interview Kureishi also draws upon the fact that writers today *have* become representatives of different communities, and when asked if she feels the same way, Ali replies with a line from Kureishi’s film where the uncle says: “I’m a professional business man, not a professional Pakistani.” This of course refers to the fact that she is first and foremost a writer, not a Bangladeshi writer. And as a writer you have the opportunity to create whatever story you like. The story of Nazneen, she explains, started with a character, not a story. Ali did not at all foresee the controversy that came to surround the book, but as mentioned already the controversy was larger in the media than in real life. Ali explains that she did not have an agenda at all, neither post-colonial nor feminist, when writing the book. It started with Nazneen, and the story grew from her. The interviewer states that there is a possibility that people reading the newspapers that blew the conflict out of proportions, *do* think that writers should act as representatives of their culture. This may of be a valid point. But as mentioned earlier, the publishing industry and the critics did play an important role here as well.

Hanif Kureishi started writing the books he did because he wanted to fill a gap in the existing literature thus presenting an aspect of the Asian community that he felt was lacking. Most of his main characters are, like himself, born and raised in Britain. His books contain a wide range of characters, from the homosexual Pakistanis to the extremely religious, from feminist Muslim women, to parodic Indian fathers. They also include a range of ethnic Britons. Before his bestselling novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published, he actually received feedback from the publishers who were worried that the Uncle in the novel were too stereotypical, and that this possibly should be changed. Kureishi replied by explaining that the uncle in the novel is exactly like his own.

It is hard to imagine what would have been said about *Brick Lane* if the novel were published in the political climate of the late 80s- early 90s. It is difficult to claim that Kureishi is Re-Orientalizing in the same way. Even though his novels present characters who at least today would be seen as stereotypes, there are as far as I can see two main differences between his ethnic minority characters and Ali's. The first is that they are just one of many. Whereas most of the male characters in Ali's novel are either presented negatively or as stereotypes, Kureishi uses these types of characters as for example comic relief, instead of as the base of his novels. The second, and maybe most important reason for why I do not perceive Kureishi as Re-Orientalizing the way Ali is, is that he writes about different problems before they catch everyone's attention. Kureishi has covered many of the same issues as Ali does in *Brick Lane*. For example he explores Muslim fundamentalism in the short-story "My Son The Fanatic", which was also made into a film, and he also deals with the issue in *The Black Album*. Kureishi put this possible problem on the agenda and did not wait until he knew people would be eager to hear about it. Today he actually refuses to write

about it, even though asked on several occasions. The fact that he manages to put these issues on the agenda gives him credibility, because he knew about different movements within the different communities when others did not. Ali writes about these issues after they have become tabloid, and she does not challenge the way Muslim men are presented in the media in any way, which means that you do not really need any specific knowledge of Bangladesh to write it.

I argue that you do not have to contribute to Re-Orientalizing the Oriental, even if you are an ethnic minority writer, and even if you include certain cultural stereotypes. You just have to show that you know *more* than the stereotypes about the culture in question.

Chapter conclusion

Even though the film does leave out quite a lot of the story, I feel this gap makes the characters actually presented more believable. The film's main focus is on the different kinds of love people can experience. This is also a theme in the novel, but sometimes it drowns in all the different characters and events Ali wants to include. By stripping a lot of this literary material, and by making the characters multi-faceted, the audience is left with a more balanced view, and it is hard to see what the protesters would disapprove of.

The debate the protests led to, and the changes the film company made in terms of location, are important to keep in mind. Hopefully the film company made the changes they did, not to be politically correct but simply to make the film more believable and more recognizable to the audience.

I have also shown how *Brick Lane* does fit into the Re-Orientalizing pattern, explaining that it is not necessary to fall into the “stereotyping trap” when writing

about ethnic minorities. Dealing with culture is always a delicate matter, as people easily get offended, especially if they already feel they have to defend who they are. Writing successfully about ethnic minorities, however, requires that you know the culture you describe extremely well, which a writer like Hanif Kureishi clearly does. Maybe the problem is that Monica Ali does not. Writing successfully about any character, evil or nice, requires that the author really loves the character. To make a character believable, a writer needs to know why a character behaves the way he or she does, even if you are writing about someone very different from yourself. This is actually *even more* important when writing about somebody you do not really have a connection to. Ali does not seem to have a lot of love for her male characters. But the director of the film does, and this kind of affection and care serves to make the film more nuanced and believable.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

“They Like It for Authenticity”

This thesis set out to give a close reading of *Brick Lane* in order to show how contemporary literature written by ethnic minorities can preserve stereotypical presentations of the Oriental. My aim was also to see if the film adaptation contributed further to this stereotyping, or if the changes that necessarily have to be made when making such an adaptation left another impression than the novel. The close reading of the novel has revealed that *Brick Lane*'s male characters are to a large extent built on well-established stereotypes. The female characters are more nuanced. The film, however, has taken the liberty to both add and leave out different scenes, which actually make the film less stereotyping and therefore more believable than the novel.

Stereotypes and Re-Orientalism

Muslim women did not play an important part in traditional Orientalism. In the last few decades, however, they have attracted more attention as mass media make it easy to distribute stories and pictures of women deprived of their most basic human rights. The Muslim women are, through media, portrayed as voiceless and oppressed, thus increasing our curiosity towards them. Novels written by these women are sought after and published, and whether or not they are authentic stories, are hardly ever put to the test.

Brick Lane provided something that was lacking in British contemporary literature – the voice of one of these Muslim women who has moved to Britain. The

novel promised to take you into a life and culture most of us know nothing about, as claimed on the cover of the novel. In this thesis I have tried to explain what impression a reader with no knowledge of Bangladeshis will be left with, if considering this novel as an adequate representation. I have argued that the novel does not, like in a lot of Orientalist literature, leave a favourable impression of the Oriental, especially not the men. Rather, we have found the comical Oriental who is absolutely unable to see his own limitations, and blames everyone else for his failings, you have the aggressive religious fundamentalist, we have been introduced to the drug addicts and the torpedoes, and through the stories from Bangladesh we hear brutal and terrible stories of women mutilated and forced into prostitution due to the unfairness of the male dominated society. The women in the novel are treated with more care, and the diversity of the female characters also makes them more believable. The fact that these tendencies are found in a novel written by a diasporic writer, goes to show that Lisa Lau's idea of Re-Orientalism is very much valid.

The problem with *Brick Lane* is not that it presents almost exclusively extreme and stereotypical male characters. A lot of novels base their characters on stereotypes and it often proves to be both challenging and entertaining to read. The problem arises when novels based on stereotypes are presented as representation of reality. Monica Ali never claimed her novel to be the truth or having the experience to tell people what it is like being an immigrant like Nazneen. But I have argued throughout my thesis that, surprisingly, she did not see that her Bangladeshi name would give her more credibility when writing about Bangladeshis than if she were a total outsider. It is revealing that the question was never raised with Zadie Smith, a young novelist whose debut novel *White Teeth* was published a year before. Smith also wrote about ethnic minorities. But the range is wider, including Pakistanis and Jamaicans, but also

ethnic Britons, and Smith had no clear connections to any of them. Therefore, people never expected her to represent anyone, and the question of authenticity was never raised. My main critique of *Brick Lane*, though, is still the way the novel was marketed and published, not that Ali wrote a story based on stereotypes.

Writing without a mission

Ali has said that she did not have a mission at all when writing *Brick Lane* and that her story grew out of the character Nazneen. But as mentioned in the second chapter, I do believe that Ali feels for the Bangladeshi women coming to England, seemingly voiceless and misplaced in the large estates. I think Ali wished to give one of these women a voice and a story, and she does so through this novel. In *Orientalism* Said writes about Gibb, a Western writer who spoke against the secular nationalism in the Islamic states, and did so on behalf of the Islamic orthodox community. Said writes:

It is a tribute to Gibb's extraordinarily sympathetic powers of identification with an alien religion that he put his disapproval in such a way as to seem to be speaking for the Islamic orthodox community. How much such pleading was a reversion to the old Orientalist habit of *speaking for* the natives and how much it was a sincere attempt at speaking in Islam's best interests is a question whose answer lies somewhere between the two alternatives. (263)

This perspective can be applied to Ali as well. She does take on the role of speaking for these women, even if she has claimed that she does not. She would know that novels written by Bangladeshi women about Bangladeshi women in England were in a minority, if there were any at all. She should have been aware that her name would make people assume that she was writing as a representative for the community, much more with this novel than with her second novel, *Alentejo Blue* which is set in Portugal. Whether she likes it or not, when being the first person to narrate such a story, and when you by name and origin can be related to the people you write about, that is what will happen.

However, I do think she had the women's best interest at heart. The female characters in the novel are strong in their own ways, and most readers probably like them, except perhaps the development of Mrs Islam. If reading the book closely, behind the threats of fundamentalism, male chauvinistic behaviour and constant threat of the judgement day, Islam as a religion is actually presented as a strong comfort to these characters – not something that necessarily holds them back. However, I fear that this message is too subtle, and that with today's screaming headlines of the Muslim threat many people will read this novel and fail to see these positive elements.

In the interview at the ICA mentioned in chapter three, Ali was asked if she had foreseen the controversy prompted by the novel, or if she had even imagined that the book could be seen as controversial. To this, Ali replies: "you write with a closed door, it would be impossible to write otherwise." It is not difficult to see that if writers were to think of, and even take into consideration that what they write could offend someone, we would lose a lot of great literature. Literature that is critical puts new questions on the agenda. However, I do not believe in the idea of "writing with the door closed." Our interests, political agendas and life experiences are in most cases a result of social interacting, thus writing can never be taken out of those surroundings. No one reads or writes in a cultural vacuum. One cannot take into consideration what people will say about your text, yet you still know that people will have an opinion. Therefore I am puzzled that Ali did not at all foresee at least some discussion of the novel.

Representation

The debate on representation is an old one in postcolonial theory. It has become even more important in postcolonial studies than ever before. Who has the right to

represent others? Monica Ali never claimed to represent anyone, but critics and the publishers still gave her the authenticity, and so did the readers, which you cannot really blame them for. A related question is: how do you represent someone else? Representing someone else is done all the time in literature. Women write about men, for example, and vice versa. Within literary circles in the West, however, ethnic minorities are still lacking, and there are therefore few people to reveal simplistic traits about minorities in a novel.

Sarah Gavron decided to make certain changes when adapting the novel to film. I believe that was necessary. The film deprives you of what may be Ali's strongest card, namely her vivid language. When stripped of this feature, you are left with a quite simple story and a lot of stereotypes. These changes, which I dealt with in chapter three, make the characters more nuanced, and therefore less typical.

Final thoughts

Towards the end of *Brick Lane*, Chan and Nazneen go for a walk in the neighbourhood. Nazneen used to be puzzled by the emergence of restaurants with Hindu gods and goddesses in the windows, because, for her, Brick Lane was almost exclusively Muslim.

Days of the Raj restaurant had a new statue in the window:
Ganesh seated against a rising sun, his trunk curling playfully on his breast.
The Lancer already displayed Radha-Krishna; Popadum went with Saraswati;
and Sweet Lassi covered all the options with a black tongued, evil-eyed Kali
and a torpid soapstone Buddha. 'Hindus?' said Nazneen when the trend first
started. 'Here?' Chanu patted his stomach. 'Not Hindus. Marketing. Biggest
god of all.' The white people liked to see the gods. 'For authenticity,' said
Chanu. (373)

This passage becomes almost ironic when we think of the marketing of *Brick Lane*. The Muslims of Brick Lane know that the mystery of India and Hinduism is a better marketing trick than their own Muslim background. Thus to satisfy their costumers

they cover up their own identity with names that have nothing to do with their Bangladeshi and Muslim background to make sure the costumers know what they are getting. Much the same can be said about the marketing of *Brick Lane*. The name was changed from something that would mostly speak to a Bangladeshi audience, *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, to a name that would speak louder to ethnic British costumers: *Brick Lane*. In addition they accepted a comment from a famous, ethnic British writer, Margaret Forster, who claimed that through this book the reader would see what it is like in a community “a life and culture I know so little about”. This happened despite the fact that Ali herself has been eager to stress that this story is fiction, and despite the inhabitant’s objections to the way they are portrayed. An interesting field of further study would be to see to what extent novels like this influence the political climate, both in the domestic and international realms.

It is not a writer’s responsibility to educate people or to be politically correct. That would make the literary scene very one-sided. What I do wish for is that the publishing industry would give the readers the benefit of the doubt and market less simplistic novels the same way to make sure that the readers get a balanced view. In Britain, there are several novels available to readers who wish to challenge the Neo-Orientalist and maybe even more importantly the Re-Orientalist view, but these are rarely marketed and put forward in the same way as novels like *Brick Lane*. In Norway, you do not get access to many of these novels at all unless you are comfortable reading novels in English, as the Norwegian publishers tend to only publish and translate international bestsellers. This deprives Norwegian readers of the opportunity to experience beautiful, less biased novels, and it definitely makes the publishing industry increasingly tabloid.

Throughout this thesis I have shown not only that diasporic writers can and do enhance cultural and religious stereotypes in their writings, but also that being diasporic is precisely what makes it necessary to write in that simplistic matter. *Brick Lane* is, as I have tried to show, clearly aimed at a Western audience, as the novel is very explicit when it comes to religious and cultural practises, things that would be unnecessary to mention to an ethnic Bangladeshi. The film makes interesting changes to the story, and ends up being much less typical.

I conclude this thesis by stating that Edward Said's theory on Orientalism is still very valid today. But because the political interests in the Orient have changed, so have the stereotypes, and it is therefore plausible to refer to the new trend as Neo-Orientalism. I also believe that Re-Orientalism makes it even more difficult to differ between those who tell stories which can be seen as authentic and who do not, because many readers will assume that a writer with a Bangladeshi name knows what it is like to be an immigrant. Writing an authentic story is by no means a goal, but then the reader needs to know it is just fiction, something which was not stated clearly in the marketing of *Brick Lane*. Seen in this light, the film adaptation is more complex – and gives a more nuanced fictional representation of historical reality – than the novel on which it was based.

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