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June 5, 2018

**English Capstone: Female Freedom in *Brick Lane* Draws Attention to  
Oppression of Bangladeshi Women**

I. The Systematic Oppression of Bangladeshi Women

South Asian women are oppressed in their roles as mothers and wives, due to their patriarchal societies. “Reports from the South Asian countries demonstrate a phenomenon of injustice, suppression and helplessness due to traditional attitudes faced by women” (Niaz 2003, 174). This pressing issue is not widely covered due to the fact that these women are confined within their houses, regardless if they are subjected to domestic violence or not, and are not given voices. Few academic papers delve into the subject. The topic gains more coverage through newspaper articles as it is an ongoing widespread problem. The severe oppression and degradation of South Asian women create several other problems: domestic violence, suicide attempts and economic instability of single women. Bangladeshi women, the subject of this essay, are not free from the aforementioned struggles and are obligated to conform to misogynistic societal expectations. Misogyny is practiced to the extent that domestic violence is common in many South Asian households, especially within low income families. In particular, “Bangladesh is one of the least developed countries in the world and its estimated prevalence rate of violence against women is extremely high” (Khan, et al. 2017, 27). Domestic violence in Bangladesh persists as a major social issue. “In 2001, about 60% of [Bangladeshi] women reported having ever-experienced physical or sexual spousal violence” (Johnston and Naved 2008, 367). By 2011, the percentage increased to 65% (Hossen 2014, 6). The increase could be a result of media attention to the topic, making the women feel safer or more inspired to report violence against them. However, “women in [South Asian countries] are so suppressed that, instead of fighting for their rights, suicide may appear to be the only way out. Suicide rates of women have continued to escalate” (Niaz 2003, 179). Therefore, domestic violence and extreme oppression of women most likely remains unchecked.

The minority of Bangladesh women, who have loving and non-violent marriages, still suffer degradation from their community. It is close to impossible to survive in Bangladesh

without a male guardian, such as a father, husband or brother. Bangladeshi women struggle to provide for themselves and their children when there is no living male relative. In Bangladesh, women are often denied jobs (Ratje 2016). Thus, the women and their children are propelled into abject poverty, highlighted by malnutrition until they can find a rare job vacancy.

The derogatory treatment and abusive practices against women persist when South Asians immigrate to Western countries because immigrants often stay within their communities. In the context of this essay, when Bangladeshis immigrate to London, England they live in Tower Hamlets, the heart of the British-Bangladeshi community.

## II. Background on *Brick Lane*

Akin to any oppressed minority, few novels touch upon the topic of female Bangladeshi oppression skillfully. *Brick Lane*, written by Monica Ali, is amongst the few taboo breaking novels. Ali, half Bangladeshi and half English, was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, and was raised in Bolton, England. She studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics in Oxford. Ali's university education level is significant because Bangladeshi girls rarely receive a proper education and many drop out during high school (Girls'). Ali has the unique experience of being part of two divergent cultures and has an excellent education that aptly equips her to convey her message about Bangladeshi women.

Ali wrote *Brick Lane* in 2003 to given the white British community insight into their neighbors, a vital component of the London's cultural tapestry. She subtly attempts to raise awareness about the restricted freedom of Bangladeshi women and the difficulties they face whilst adapting to England. Fifteen years later, Ali's messages remain relevant due to the fact that no major changes have been made in liberating Bangladeshi women. *Brick Lane* follows an eighteen-year-old Bangladeshi woman, Nazneen, sent to marry a forty-year-old migrant Bangladeshi man, Chanu. The couple live on Brick Lane, Tower Hamlets. Nazneen has to deal with being married to a significantly older man, who is a stranger to her; in addition to living in a new country without the support of her family at an age many other young adults are still discovering themselves. Nazneen's English is heavily restricted, when she arrives to Brick Lane. Chanu does not aid her in learning English, in fact he vehemently discourages it. Nazneen was controlled by three different men for most of the novel: her father, husband and lover. She is left debilitated due to her lack of education. Nazneen is unable to propel herself out of her life-long confinement to her home because she has not been allowed to foster knowledge or interests

outside of her duties as a wife. She struggles to find her identity as a person other than being a wife who resembles a maid more than a spouse. Nazneen is unable to pursue any hobbies or a job. She is also discouraged by Chanu from exploring London. As she goes through the loss of her first child, raises her following two children and partakes in an affair amongst other events, Nazneen slowly forms her own opinions and gains confidence to seize her independence. Nazneen moving to London is detrimental to gaining her freedom, due to the fact that the novel contrasts Nazneen's life in London with her sister's, Hasina's, life in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Hasina is beautiful, rebellious and free spirited, yet is unable to gain true freedom. The more she tries to claim it, the more she is pushed into the fringes of Dhaka society. However, meek and submissive Nazneen is able to successfully support herself and her daughters by the end of the novel. **This essay analyzes the journey Nazneen undertook to gain her independence and compares and contrasts it with the oppression of Bangladeshi women.**

### III. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are used by authors as a method to make characters relatable to readers.

In order to convey, and subsequently inform the rest of Britain about, the life of Bangladeshi immigrants, Ali employed several stereotypes of them. Nazneen embodies stereotypes of both South Asian women and Bangladeshis in order to quietly encourage South Asian women to subvert their patriarchal cultures and to provide a baseline for people unfamiliar with Bengali culture. Nazneen plays into the stereotypes of South Asian arranged marriage, subservience in a patriarchal society, an uneducated wife and a radical religious group follower. More significantly, Nazneen is given the stereotypical storyline of an unhappy, underappreciated wife who enters an exciting affair that is usually exclusive to upper class female Caucasian characters. The stereotypes, used to paint Nazneen, highlights her journey to self-independence and freedom from patriarchy.

The first stereotype employed is arranged marriages, in which no love is developed and the woman feels trapped. The introduction of Nazneen is restricted to description of her unlikely survival at birth and her arranged marriage. Majority of Bangladeshi marriages are arranged; therefore, Nazneen is initialized to be relatable to Bangladeshis and has a defining trait of South Asian countries to most Caucasians. Nazneen is conveyed to be subservient within the first chapter of the book. Her first reaction to her future marriage arranged by her father is "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma" (Ali 16).

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**Commented [MOU2]:** Why does Britain need to be informed about this issue?

**Commented [BA3R2]:** Britain has become a patchwork of culture, these immigrants' children are as British as white British people. Women's oppression cannot be combatted without help from other countries. Condemns, calls, link why immigrants are important to gaining freedom

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Nazneen willingly conforms to a patriarchal society. She provides no objection to the sudden announcement of her impending marriage. She trusts her father to make all decisions about her life. Nazneen does not feel resigned to marry; she wholeheartedly believes it to be her honored duty. As time passes during her marriage and she learns more about Chanu, Nazneen begins to question the decision her father made. However, she feels forced to accept her life the way it is. When her daughter interrogates Nazneen about her marriage,

“Nazneen went into freefall. She bowed her head.

‘I mean, have you ever been in love with him? Perhaps before he got so fat?’

‘Your father is a good man. I was lucky in my marriage.’

‘You mean he doesn’t beat you,’ said Shahana.” (Ali ...)

Nazneen had to surrender her youth to appease her father, who she never sees again. She is paired with a bland man twenty years her senior. The conversation prompts the reader to pity Nazneen for being forced to accept an unfulfilling marriage. Her body language and non-response to the question indicates she now feels resigned to the marriage and is aware of the extent of her powerlessness over her own life. The phrase ‘arranged marriage’ is never mentioned in the novel signifying Nazneen, and the people surrounding her, view this as the norm. Ali portrays arranged marriages as negative, subverting Bangladeshi culture, in order for Nazneen to discover her freedom.

In *Brick Lane*, Ali heavily features an extreme stereotype of a patriarchal household (free of domestic abuse) then proceeds to implicitly criticize it. From birth to marriage, Nazneen is forced to acquiesce to first the will of her father then Chanu, who intentionally cripples her growth. His dominance over her life renders it bleak. Their marriage commences with Nazneen severely lacking support with her migration to London and her miscarriage. She is discouraged from learning English or executing any actions excluding household chores and reproducing. When Nazneen broaches the topic of taking in English classes in college to Chanu, he immediately retorts,

“And you can’t take a baby to college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It’s not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that.’

‘Yes,’ said Nazneen. ‘I see that it is not.’

‘Good. Now let me read.’ (Ali Ch 3)

An education provides an easier path to freedom. Due to circumstance and culture, Nazneen relies on Chanu for financial support. Therefore, he is able to exert greater control on her life. He does not see her as a person rather only a mother and a wife, with duties to him and their children, and treats her accordingly. Despite going to college as a mother is not simple as Chanu said, it is possible. Women are strong enough to go to college as a single mother and as a married mother. The reply Nazneen provides does not indicate that she believes it is impossible, only that she understands the difficulties. However, Chanu accepts her passive words at face value.

Throughout the novel Chanu pays no attention to the tone Nazneen is using. The most significant example is “If you say so, husband.’ She had begun to answer him like this. She meant to say something else by it: sometimes that she disagreed, sometimes that she didn’t understand or that he was talking rubbish, sometimes that he was mad. But he heard it only as, ‘If you say so” (Ali Ch 4). Nazneen quickly realizes that Chanu is not all knowing or powerful. However, the expectation in a patriarchal society is for women to conform to their role. Chanu married Nazneen because he believed it is the expectation of him. She is otherwise meaningless to him. He treats her as a sounding board because he does not expect her to have desires and to talk back. Chanu cut her wings in order to have a trophy wife. This is a stark contrast to the sister of Nazneen, Hasina, who ran away to elope.

Ali portrays Nazneen and Hasina to be stereotypical sisters, where Hasina is the foil to Nazneen. Nazneen and Hasina are two sides of the same. The disparity between Nazneen and her sister, in romantic relations and profession, displays the severe consequences of both sides: submitting to and subverting a patriarchal society. Hasina is described to be as beautiful as Nazneen is plain. Nazneen states that Hasina has a ‘love marriage’ therefore “it worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it...But then if you really looked into it, thought about it more deeply, how could you be sure that Hasina was not simply following her fate?” (Ali Ch 1) Nazneen constantly compares her life to rebellious Hasina. The deviant actions of her sister causes Nazneen to entertain more liberal views. In addition, she begins to accept the choice Hasina has made. However, the rigid conformity imposed on Nazneen in addition to her timid personality, as shown by her deep concern of thwarting fate, prevents her from carrying out similar actions in her own life. Whilst Hasina is in Dhaka and Nazneen is in London remain maintain contact with letters through the decades. The letters provide the reader insight into the vastly different life of Hasina. After her first husband subjects her to domestic abuse, she

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frantically writes to Nazneen, “Where I can go sister? I run away for my husband. And I run away from him also. Now I afraid to run again. You want to bring me to London. I like to come. But again this time your husband right and you must listen.” (Ali ...) Suppressed Nazneen, ironically, has more power than Hasina does due to being married to a ‘good man’ and living in a developed country. The relative stability of the life Nazneen leads allows her the freedom to discover herself. These letters tear at the bravado Hesina typically wears. Hesina follows her tumultuous heart instead of discovering herself. The unstable, unsuccessful life Hesina lives causes her to encourage Nazneen to be submissive to Chanu. One interpretation is that ‘love marriages’ do not work. However, a second deeper interpretation is that Hasina is not as free as Nazneen perceived her to be. Hasina highlights the difficulties a woman in Bangladesh faces when they break the mold. Bengali culture is not supportive of liberal feminist actions, whereas London is. Nazneen would most likely not have been able to achieve independence in Bangladesh.

The stereotypes resulted in mixed reviews of the novel. The white British community appreciated the stereotypes, which helped them understand and sympathize with the struggles of Bangladeshi citizens. Ian Jack, editor of Granta magazine, which selected Ali as one of Granta’s Best of Young British Novelists, said “we [the judges] liked the book because we (none of us Bengalis from east London) felt that it showed us a glimpse of what life might be like among one of the largest and least- described non-white communities in Britain” (Jack 1). Conversely, the stereotypes provoked backlash from the British Bangladeshi community for representing them as primitive. An example would be the eighteen-page letter the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council (GSDWC), which focuses on the welfare of Sylheti Bangladeshis in Britain. “Their main point was that their community had been represented in a ‘shameful’ way – that Bangladeshis (Sylhetis, in particular) had been portrayed as ‘backward, uneducated and unsophisticated” (Taylor 1). Most of the articles reviewing the novel **marginalize the message about disenfranchised Bangladeshi women due to being overshadowed by the unique focus on Bangladeshi immigrants and the infamous protests from that community.**

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#### IV. Themes

There are several themes in the novel all of which relate directly to the highly **regulated and** dull life Nazneen was forced to led. The first theme is communication. The inability to communicate defines and demarcates Nazneen life. She is unable to communicate her true

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feelings in Bengali due to the culture and religious expectations. She is unable to communicate in English because she was denied an education of the language. During the early stages of her marriage her English is restricted to submissive 'Thank you's and 'Sorry's. However, while walking around London alone for the first time, a man comes up to her and tries to speak Hindi, Urdu and then English, none of which she could carry a conversation in. Therefore, "She shook her head again and said, 'Sorry.' And he nodded solemnly and took his leave... in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold and stupid, she began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged." (Ali...) This interaction is the first time in her life that Nazneen is seen as a person. The occurrence is heartbreaking because it is with a stranger and she is apologizing. Nazneen has been demeaned her entire life, made to feel as if her opinion is worthless and uneducated. This minor event that most people take for granted made her day. Unfortunately, when she returns home that day and talks to Chanu about him going to Dhaka to find Hasina, he mocks the idea. In response Nazneen thinks to herself, "*Anything is possible...* I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!" (Ali...) The freedom Nazneen feels when she is lost in the sea of Londoners is starkly contrasted entrapment she feels at her home in Tower Hamlets. This difference is highlighted by her inability to voice her true thoughts to Chanu.

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## NOTES:

Quotes to include-

A Note on the Politics of ‘Good’ Literary Production **By Ali Ahmad**

- “amidst all the excitement surrounding *Brick Lane*, there has so far been disappointingly little critical engagement with the novel, a fact that is partly attributable to a certain blindness on the part of most reviewers, whose readings tend to lose rigour when they find themselves confronted with a text that appears to be set on unfamiliar terrain.”
- “It would make far more sense to confront these issues, so that a fairer assessment of the novel’s strengths and weaknesses as a work of literature can indeed be made. “
- “[Ali] declined an interview with the *Guardian*’s literary journalist, Maya Jaggi, on the basis that she feared it would reduce discussion of her work to the issue of ‘race’ (suggesting, in a letter of response, the name of a more suitable, non-Asian, non-female journalist to conduct the interview). The assumption that Jaggi’s perspective is necessarily narrowly black (in contrast with a non-Asian male whose stance is presumed to be uncontaminated by the dirty stench of politics) is less than sound.”

*The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane* **By Michael Perfect**

- “I argue that the major concern of the novel is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of integration; the veneration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies”

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