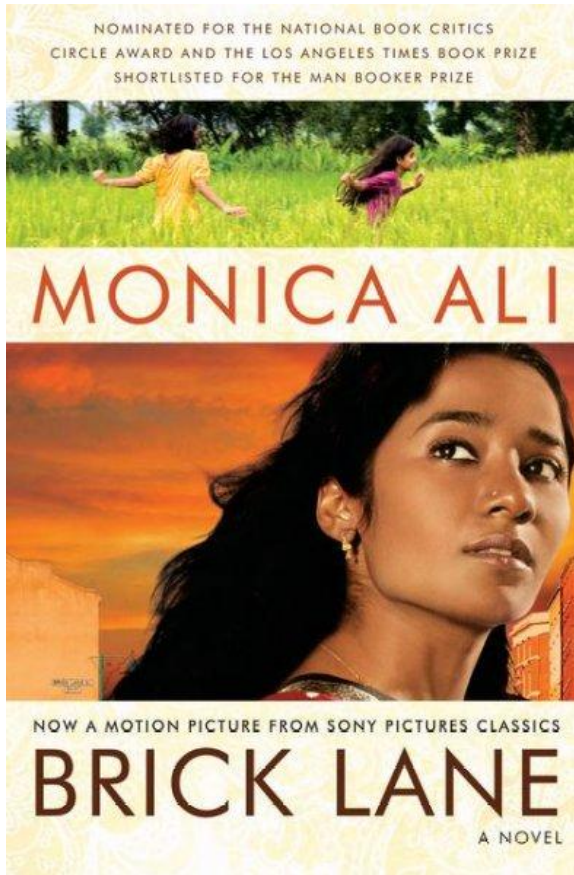


About the book...



Nazneen's inauspicious entry into the world, an apparent stillbirth on the hard mud floor of a village hut, imbues in her a sense of fatalism that she carries across continents when she is married off to Chanu, a man old enough to be her father. Nazneen moves to London and, for years, keeps house, cares for her husband, and bears children, just as a girl from the village is supposed to do. But gradually she is transformed by her experience, and begins to question whether fate controls her or whether she has a hand in her own destiny.

Motherhood is a catalyst -- Nazneen's daughters chafe against their father's traditions and pride -- and to her own amazement, Nazneen falls in love with a young man in the community. She discovers both the complexity that comes with free choice and the depth of her attachment to her husband, her daughters, and her new world.

While Nazneen journeys along her path of self-realization, her sister, Hasina, rushes headlong at her life, first making a "love marriage," then fleeing her violent husband. Woven through the novel, Hasina's letters from Dhaka recount a world of overwhelming adversity. Shaped, yet not bound, by their landscapes and memories, both sisters struggle to dream -- and live -- beyond the rules prescribed for them.

Vivid, profoundly humane, and beautifully rendered, *Brick Lane* captures a world at once unimaginable and achingly familiar. And it establishes Monica Ali as a thrilling new voice in fiction. As *Kirkus Reviews* said, "She is one of those dangerous writers who see everything."

About the author...



Monica Ali was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and grew up in England. She has been named by Granta as one of the twenty best young British novelists. She is the author of the novel *Brick Lane*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and is now a major motion picture, and *Alentejo Blue*, a story collection. She lives in London with her husband and two children.

Awards

American Library Association Notable Books 2004
Shortlisted, Man Booker Prize 2003

Book Reviews

Booklist

Nazneen arrived in the world in an exceptional way. The day of her birth, the bleak village midwife pronounced Nazneen stillborn. Nazneen's mother pleaded for God's mercy, and good fortune was granted her when the baby's cheeks flushed with color. Nazneen grew to be an obedient girl, unlike her sister, Hasina, who ran away from home with a "love match," defying her parents' wishes for an arranged marriage. Nazneen accepts her father's marriage match, and Chanu takes her from Bangladesh to a Bangladeshi community in London. Though he is not intentionally cruel of heart,

Chanu is an old man and Nazneen cannot help but feel trapped by the restrictions of her Muslim society in a land teeming with opportunity. When she ventures into the city, she is overwhelmed but animated by the hedonistic appearance of women carrying briefcases and smoking cigarettes in flimsy clothes. In an extremist male society, Nazneen must grasp at flecks of freedom, and Ali is extraordinary at capturing the female immigrant experience through her character's innocent perspective. ((Reviewed August 2003))
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Library Journal /*Starred Review*/

Most coming-of-age novels focus on an adolescent learning about life and love for the first time. Ali's debut shows that a 34-year-old mother of two can discover the joys and pains of growing up as well as any youngster. From the moment of her birth in Bangladesh, Nazneen has let fate determine her life-fate presented her with an arranged marriage to a ne'er-do-well, two battling daughters, and a run-down apartment in a London public housing project. Slowly, she wakes up to the world beyond her flat, first acquiring a job, then a lover, and finally her own voice. The reader, too, wakes up to a world where women are still at the mercy of men through culture, economics, religion, and complicity. Ali has the distinction of being selected as one of Britain's best young novelists by Granta magazine before her novel was even published; the judges chose well. Hers is a refreshing glimpse into

the everyday lives of families seeking balance between tradition and the demands of the wider world. Highly recommended for all libraries.-Ellen Flexman, Indianapolis-Marion Cty. P.L. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.

BookPage

"A tale of two sister"

The baby almost died. There was no midwife in attendance at the village hut in Bangladesh, for the mother thought the birth pain was only indigestion. When the infant Nazneen was delivered, she at first made no sound and appeared to be stillborn. Finally, she began to cry, but for days refused to eat. Rather than take her to a hospital, the mother decided to leave her to her fate.

So begins Monica Ali's enthralling debut novel, *Brick Lane*, which shows with great sensitivity how Nazneen lived long years of her life accepting fate, but finally—after an arranged marriage to an older man, three children and a constricted life in London—breaks free to make choices of her own.

Told from Nazneen's point of view, *Brick Lane* alternates her narrative with disturbing, sometimes comical letters from her beautiful sister Hasina, who eloped at 16, stayed in Bangladesh and suffered much while retaining her buoyant spirit.

Nazneen's is a compelling, often amusing voice.

Consider the way she describes her husband's flat: "The

sofa and chairs were the color of dried cow dung, which was a practical color."

There's a temptation to compare Brick Lane to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, since both deal with immigrant communities in London, but this is a very different book. More than anything else, Brick Lane creates full-blown characters in intricate relationships, developed patiently over time. Women's issues and world politics also get an airing here, including responses to September 11.

The novel, named for a street of high-end Bangladesh restaurants fancied by white Londoners, belongs superficially to the caught-between-two-worlds genre. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the author—who appeared on *Granta's* list of 20 young British writers to watch—grew up in London and knows both cultures. Even better, she knows the human heart. ~ *Anne Morris is a writer in Austin, Texas.*

Kirkus Reviews /*Starred Review*/

Everyday life requires courage. That simple truth is the foundation of this fine debut about a young Bangladeshi woman in London, struggling to make sense of home, family, Islam, and even adultery. You're only 18 when an arranged marriage whisks you off to a faraway land whose language you can't understand. Your husband is middle-aged and ugly as sin. What for Westerners would be a fate worse than death is for Ali's heroine Nazneen fate, period. A devout Moslem, she has

inherited her mother's stoic acceptance of God's will, even heeding her husband Chanu's advice not to leave their apartment in the grim projects on her own; people would talk. Chanu is happy to have acquired "an unspoilt girl. From the village." He's a gentle but insufferably verbose man, a low-level bureaucrat. He's also a born loser, and Ali's masterly portrayal mixes mordant humor with a full measure of pathos. The excitement here comes in watching Nazneen's new identity flower on this stony soil. Motherhood is the first agent of change. Her firstborn dies in infancy, but her daughters Shahana and Bibi thrive. A power shift occurs when Shahana rebels against her father, an ineffectual martinet; Nazneen the peacemaker holds the family together. When Chanu falls into the clutches of the moneylender Mrs. Islam (a sinister figure straight out of Dickens), Nazneen becomes a breadwinner, doing piecework at home and thus meeting the middleman Kazim, who is also an activist fighting racism. They become lovers; and again Nazneen sees herself as submitting to fate. But when Chanu, increasingly beleaguered, announces their imminent return to Bangladesh, Nazneen asserts herself. On one day of wrenching suspense, she deals forcefully with Mrs. Islam, Kazim, and Chanu, and emerges as a strong, decisive, modern woman. The transformation is thrilling. Newcomer Ali was born in Bangladesh and raised in England, where Brick Lane has been acclaimed, and rightly so: she is one of those dangerous writers who sees everything.

Publishers' Weekly /*Starred Review*/

The immigrant world Ali chronicles in this penetrating, un sentimental debut has much in common with Zadie Smith's scrappy, multicultural London, though its sheltered protagonist rarely leaves her rundown East End apartment block where she is surrounded by fellow Bangladeshis. After a brief opening section set in East Pakistan-Nazneen's younger sister, the beautiful Hasina, elopes in a love marriage, and the quiet, plain Nazneen is married off to an older man-Ali begins a meticulous exploration of Nazneen's life in London, where her husband has taken her to live. Chanu fancies himself a frustrated intellectual and continually expounds upon the "tragedy of immigration" to his young wife (and anyone else who will listen), while letters from downtrodden Hasina provide a contrast to his idealized memories of Bangladesh. Nazneen, for her part, leads a relatively circumscribed life as a housewife and mother, and her experience of London in the 1980s and '90s is mostly indirect, through her children (rebellious Shahana and meek Bibi) and her variously assimilated neighbors. The realistic complexity of the characters is quietly stunning: Nazneen shrugs off her passivity at just the right moment, and the supporting cast-Chanu, the ineffectual patriarch; Nazneen's defiant and struggling neighbor, Razia (proud wearer of a Union Jack sweatshirt); and Karim, the foolish young Muslim radical with whom Nazneen eventually has an affair-are all richly drawn. By keeping the focus on their perceptions, Ali comments on larger issues of identity

and assimilation without drawing undue attention to the fact, even gracefully working in September 11. Carefully observed and assured, the novel is free of pyrotechnics, its power residing in Ali's unsparing scrutiny of its hapless, hopeful protagonists. (Sept.) Forecast: Ali, who was the only unpublished writer on the Granta Best of Young British Novelists 2003 list, should attract considerable attention as she embarks on a five-city author tour in the U.S.

Film Review

VideoLibrarian

Based on Monica Ali's bestselling novel, Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane*, which chronicles the gradual liberation of a Bangladeshi woman trapped in a stifling marriage to a traditionalist husband in London, is a curious combination of contemporary cultural commentary and formulaic melodrama that proves to be atmospheric, emotionally strong, and very well acted. Indian beauty Tannishtha Chatterjee gives a quietly powerful performance as Nazneen, orphaned after her mother's suicide and sent to England at age 17 in an arranged marriage with older expatriate Chanu (Satish Kaushik). Sixteen years and two daughters later, Nazneen's husband loses his job, and her sheltered, submissive life changes after she decides to take in sewing at home to help with the family finances, work that introduces her to a young British-raised Bangladeshi named Karim

(Christopher Simpson), with whom she becomes intimate. When anti-Muslim sentiment arises in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Nazneen has to decide whether to return home with her husband or make a life for herself and her daughters in England. While the plot essentially presents time-honored clichés in a more modern context, the complexity of the characters elevates the film. Recommended.

Discussion questions

(<http://books.simonandschuster.com>)

1. In the beginning of Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*, we follow the protagonist Nazneen from her rural Bangladeshi village to London where she has gone from teenager to married woman. How does Nazneen cope with the transition? In what small ways does she rebel against her fate?
2. In his glowing review of *Brick Lane* in *The New Republic* James Woods says that *Brick Lane* "inhabits a fictional realm in which prayer, free will, and adultery all have their 19th century weight." Another reviewer compares her writing to Thomas Hardy's. How would you compare Nazneen's experience to that of Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* or Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or any other 19th century heroine who strays?

3. Chapter 2 presents Dr. Azad, the enigmatic doctor who becomes Chanu's unlikely friend. Nazneen is often bewildered by their friendship; what is the tie that binds this odd couple?
4. When Nazneen sees the ice skaters on television, she is immediately captivated. This image is recalled several times throughout the novel, at the end of the book Nazneen is at an ice-skating rink, about to skim the ice for the first time. What does the ice skating symbolize?
5. Nazneen's friend, Razia, thinks marrying for love is romantic but when it comes to her own daughter she says, "Shefali will make a love marriage over my dead body." Why do you think arranged marriages are valued above love marriages? Discuss the advantages of both using examples from the book?
6. Fate is a significant theme in the novel. What role does Fate play in Nazneen's life? Discuss the ideological struggle between Fate and self-determination.
7. In Chapter Three, Mrs. Islam tells a story about female empowerment. She says, "If you think you are powerless, then you are." How has Mrs. Islam chosen to live her life? Is she powerful? Empowered? Describe Nazneen's process of self-

empowerment? How does faith relate to female empowerment?

8. Shahana wears jeans and has a certain independence that Nazneen cannot help but admire. In Chapter 6 Nazneen tries on a pair of Chanu's pants, and asks herself, "where's the harm?" Discuss Nazneen's relationship with Shahana? Do you think Nazneen lives vicariously through her outspoken daughter? Why does Nazneen allow Shahana to kick her?
9. As a Muslim woman, relatively confined to her household quarters, Nazneen has limited contact with men. What is the nature of her relationship with her husband Chanu? With Karim?
10. Considering Nazneen and Karim's faith, how do you account for their relationship? How do you explain their attraction to each other? What compels them to continue their dangerous liaisons? Why do you think Nazneen decides to end it?
11. Discuss the culture clash between the Bangladeshi's and the English, Muslims and Christians, men and women and between the generations.
12. Chanu is a curious character of high-hopes and endless projects that inevitably fizzle. In spite of his education and ambition, why is Chanu unable to

rise above his struggling status? Is the racist system of England set against him? Or is he merely more a man of talk rather than action?

13. Razia, a queen of gossip, knows all the intimate details of the community dwellers. Why is she unable to see the signs of drug usage with her son Tariq? Why doesn't Nazneen tell her friend what she suspects?
14. How do you think life would have been for the family had Nazneen decided to return to Bangladesh with Chanu? Do you think Chanu will eventually return to London?

Readalikes (Springfield (MA) Public Library)

Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat

At the age of twelve, Sophie Caco is sent from the impoverished village of Croix-des-Rosets to be reunited with her mother, where she gains a legacy of shame that can only be healed when she returns to Haiti, to the woman who first raised her.

Typical American by Gish Jen

A novel portraying the Chinese immigrant experience follows the fortunes of the Chang family as they adjust to the freedom of America and become caught up in suburban life, greed, and the American dream.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

A portrait of the immigrant experience follows the Ganguli family from their traditional life in India through their arrival in Massachusetts in the late 1960s and their difficult melding into an American way of life.

Desirable Daughters by Bharati Mukherjee

Chronicles the journey of three Brahmin women as they follow divergent paths from their home in Calcutta and a rigid Indian society to seek new lives for themselves on two separate continents.

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

Encompassing two generations and a rich blend of Chinese and American history, this story of four struggling, strong women also reveals the memories and feelings of their daughters.