

“THE OLD AND HONOURABLE CRAFT OF TAILORING”: EMPOWERING FABRICS IN MONICA ALI’S *BRICK LANE*¹

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In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), fashion acquires a central position, both as a visual discourse and as an industry which provides the female characters with an opportunity to access the labour market. Illuminated by feminist and socio-cultural studies, this paper intends to analyse the role that fashion, as an industry, plays in *Brick Lane*, demonstrating how Monica Ali exposes its ambiguous nature as a means which simultaneously empowers and exploits female migrant workers. I will argue that, through the story of Nazneen in Britain and the epistolary narrative of Hasina in Dakha, Monica Ali manages to portray that ambiguity at both ends of the international labour market, envisaging, in the end, new practices which enable female empowerment without entailing exploitation.

Keywords: *Brick Lane*, fashion industry, female characters, exploitation, empowerment

Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) has been widely heralded as a vibrant and colourful contribution to Asian-British fiction, following a literary genealogy which can be traced back to writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, Ravinder Randhawa, Hanif Kureishi or Meera Syal, to name but a few. Ali’s *début* novel narrates the story of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi migrant woman who arrives in Britain as a result of an arranged marriage to Chanu, a man forty years older than her. Through an epistolary narrative, which breaks the linearity of the main plot, Ali also recounts the intra-national migrating experience of Hasina, Nazneen’s sister, who moves from their natal village of Gouripur to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Received with great critical acclaim, *Brick Lane* has been translated into more than twenty languages and made into a film under the direction of Sarah Gavron in 2007. The favourable critical reception and huge commercial success of Ali’s first novel –along with that of other works such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2001) or Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* (2003)– highlight the prominent role that multi-ethnic literature has recently acquired in Britain (Galván 2000; Bradford 2007), contributing, as Kobena Mercer judiciously noted, to “making *present* what had been rendered *absent* in dominant discourse” (1994: 84) and the literary canon.

Modernity has largely been defined as the age of migration on a worldwide scale and the migrant, as Hanif Kureishi wrote, has become “a kind of modern Everyman” (1981: 4). Notwithstanding, more often than not, national and transnational instances of displacement have been regarded and analysed as male experiences and, consequently, women’s circumstances have tended to be rendered invisible or simply represented by men’s (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Papastergiadis 2000; Munck 2008). In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali redeems this female invisibility by creating a novel which primarily revolves around the plight of the female migrant, either at an intra-national –Hasina– or inter-national level –Nazneen–, thereby providing, as Sara Upstone points out (2010), a

counterpoint to predominant male-centred accounts of migration. What is more, Ali’s narrative also offers a kaleidoscopic insight into the relationship between migrant women and the labour market in the 20th and early 21st centuries –mainly, as I shall demonstrate later on, through their participation in the fashion industry. This constitutes a *quantum* leap since, as Papastergiadis notes, “the driving motivation for contemporary migrants is rarely expressed in the masculinist narrative of the pioneer. ... The experience of Third World women, a key force in the international labour market, cannot be described in such pioneering terms” (2000: 48).

The relationship between migrant women and the fashion industry, as part of the wider labour market, can rightfully be considered to constitute one of the main focuses of *Brick Lane* and, indeed, in the novel’s “Acknowledgements”, Monica Ali already adumbrates its relevance within the diegesis. What is more, in the aforementioned paratext, Ali explicitly acknowledges the debt of her fictional portrayal to Naila Kabeer’s empirical study on the interplay between the fashion industry and Bangladeshi migrant women (see Kabeer 2000). Nevertheless, despite Ali’s conspicuous concession, so far little criticism has examined the world of dressmaking in *Brick Lane*. Therefore, in the lines that follow, I intend to unveil the role that the fashion industry plays in *Brick Lane*, demonstrating how Monica Ali exposes its ambiguous nature as a means which simultaneously empowers and exploits female migrant workers. I contend that, through the story of Nazneen in Britain and the epistolary narrative of her sister Hasina in Dhaka, Ali portrays that ambiguity at both ends of the international labour market. Thus, although “the old and honourable craft of tailoring” (Ali 2007: 208) provides many female characters with a source of self-empowerment, paradoxically, it simultaneously plunges them into a world of female exploitation. Nevertheless, as I shall demonstrate in due course, in the end, the novel envisages new practices which enable female empowerment without entailing exploitation.

In *Brick Lane*, the world of the fashion industry is first introduced through the character of Razia, Nazneen’s neighbour and best friend in London. Trapped in the domestic sphere, Razia struggles to become a real *agent* in her migrating experience and, from an early stage in the novel, she finds in the clothing industry a feasible source of employment and a plausible means of overcoming her imposed passivity. As she complains to Nazneen, her husband “works all day and night. He keeps me locked up inside. If I get a job, he will kill me ...” (123). Yet,

‘The children are at school. What am I supposed to do all day? Gossip and more gossip. The children ask for things. Everything they see, they want. And I don’t have money. Jorina can get me a sewing job, but my husband will come to the factory and slaughter me like a lamb’. (123)

As the above quotation shows, Razia’s aim of becoming financially independent is, above all, triggered by her desire to be able to fulfil her children’s demands, which recalls McRobbie’s words when she states that women often consume on behalf of their families (1997) and, as Razia’s case suggests, they can also be said to be willing to *produce* on their behalf. Nevertheless, for Razia, entering the labour market does not turn out to be an easy task since, as the foregoing citation proves once more, her attempts to start working are initially thwarted by her chauvinist husband. Indeed, the character of Razia can be said to echo the plight of many Bangladeshi women who, as Kabeer suggests, fail to enter the labour market because their husbands refuse to give their consent (2000). Freed from patriarchal constraints once her husband dies, Razia finally succeeds in getting a “sewing job”: “I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now” (139). Now the family’s breadwinner, Razia displays an active

agency as she challenges and rebels against the resistance of certain members of the community who, like Mrs Islam, insidiously attack those women who decide to take up employment. Thus, when Nazneen warns Razia that Mrs Islam is spreading the rumour that Jorina has brought shame on her family because she is working in a garment factory, Razia replies in defiance: ““Is that what Mrs Islam says? Let her say what she likes, it will not stop me”” (97). Razia’s rebellion against the constraining values of the wider community becomes patently –and *visually*– obvious when she decides to change her sari for a pair of trousers and a “sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front” (188), thus highlighting, as I have argued elsewhere, Ali’s use of dress as a visual discourse on identity within the novel (Pereira-Ares 2010).

At this point within the narrative, Razia’s experience in the British sweatshop is compared to that of Hasina who has also found a job in a garment factory in Dhaka. In her characteristic broken English, Hasina writes to Nazneen informing: “Sister I [Hasina] have many thing to tell ... Job in new factory I am machinist real woman job now” (146). Through the story of Hasina, Ali also introduces the characters of three other women –Aleya, Shahnaz and Renu– who, not by coincidence, come to parallel the typology of women that Kabeer describes as potential garment workers in Dhaka (see Kabeer 2000). Whereas Hasina, like Shahnaz, is an unmarried woman who, to a greater or lesser degree, is free from patriarchal constraints, Aleya, like Razia in the main plot, is reported to have entered factory employment in relative defiance of her husband. Indeed, he has only acceded to her demand on the condition that she wears a burkha (150). As far as Renu is concerned, she embodies the character of a widow who has reluctantly been forced into factory employment as a result of her widowhood. In this way, through the characters of Razia and the three women working with Hasina, Ali succeeds in fictionalizing the prominent role that the fashion industry plays as one of the main sources of employment for women in developing countries and ethnic migrant women in developed nations, a role which has been widely documented by socio-cultural studies such as Kabeer’s (2000), McRobbie’s (1997) or Leach’s (1998). Furthermore, through these female characters, Ali offers a tentative glimpse of the reasons which prompt many Bangladeshi women to take up employment even if that implies putting their reputation in jeopardy. By the same token, Ali also shows the “bargaining” (Kabeer 2000) that these women often have to put into practice so as to counteract patriarchal resistance, a fact which is epitomized by Aleya’s compliance with wearing a burkha.

Set in two different parts of the globe –Dhaka and London–, Hasina’s and Razia’s stories bear testimony to the aforementioned ambivalent face of the fashion industry as a means which both empowers and exploits women. For these female characters –as well as for Aleya, Shahnaz and Renu– dressmaking provides them with economic resources, but it simultaneously turns their bodies into what Spivak called the “new focus of superexploitation” (Spivak 1987: 167). Through the participation of these women in the fashion industry, Monica Ali also manages to render visible the extreme exploitation to which many women are subjected in both western and eastern sweatshops and which Elizabeth Wilson has described as “worse than that of their English forerunners” (2010: 85). Indeed, in the main plot, the character of Razia reiteratively inveighs against the poor conditions under which she is working at a British sweatshop (189, 228), a sweatshop which ends up being closed down by health inspectors:

‘These bloody health inspectors’ said Razia. ‘Closed the bloody factory down. Came with an interpreter and went around asking stupid questions. “Is it always

hot in here?” I told them, “No, in winter you have to take a chisel and knock off the ice between your toes”. And they wrote it all down in their stupid book.’ (228)

Likewise, Hasina’s letters from Dhaka inform Nazneen, as well as the reader, about the low wages of the female workers, and the overtime they are required to do at the factory when “big order[s] come from Japan” (153). But Hasina’s case is even more dramatic than Razia’s since she is said to be insulted and attacked by Islamic fundamentalists who consider that men and women should not work together because it is in violation of *pardah*. Furthermore, as Siddiqi argues, in Bangladeshi factories, “there is indeed a strong association between job insecurity and vulnerability to harassment and exploitation, sexual or otherwise” (2009: 156). In a similar vein, Elizabeth Wilson contends that, in the South Asian subcontinent, the exploitation of a young woman may even reinforce patriarchal forms since “if she does escape the tutelage of her father, she is liable ... to become the prey of factory owners and supervisors” (2010: 86). This harsh reality is not far removed from what happens to Hasina in Ali’s novel since she ends up being accused of prostitution, dismissed and, finally, raped by Mr Chowdhury, her landlord and former protector (166). Unable to find another sewing job, Hasina accepts the help of Hussain, one of the jute men, who also ends up asking her for sexual favours.

Paradoxically, Nazneen’s first steps in the sewing business take place once Hasina and Razia have stopped working in their respective sweatshops. Urged by Hasina herself and following the example of Razia, Nazneen confronts Chanu with the possibility of her beginning to work. A couple of days later, Chanu arrives home with a sewing machine, determined to become the middle-man in a system of sub-contracted sewing home working. With the unconditional help of Razia, Nazneen learns to use the sewing machine and she soon manages to stitch different batches of jeans, shirts and vests. In this way, Monica Ali incorporates into the novel the practice of sub-contracted home working, a practice which, according to Phizacklea (1990) or Kabeer (2000), has become widespread amongst many British entrepreneurs who seek more flexible forms of production. According to these scholars, home working is also fraught with paradox since, whilst offering women the opportunity to achieve economic self-empowerment without having to face the potential insecurity of the garment factory, it strongly contributes to rendering the work of ethnic migrant women invisible and to deeming it as unskilled. Nevertheless, despite its potential drawbacks, sewing home working provides Nazneen with a certain degree of economic flexibility and, towards the end of the novel, she becomes the family’s breadwinner, thus subverting intra-household gender relationships. Regarding Chanu’s role as a middle man –a role that “he viewed as Official” (207)–, it has also been documented as a highly recurrent job among ethnic men “seeking a livelihood in fashion manufacture as an alternative to unemployment” (Phizacklea 1990: 85). Indeed, Chanu abandons his role as a middle-man as soon as he finds a job as a taxi driver, which brings Karim into Nazneen’s life as the new middle-man and her future lover.

Towards the end of the novel, Karim disappears from Nazneen’s life and, without a middle-man to provide her with sewing orders, Nazneen resorts once more to Razia who, at this point, has decided to set up her own sewing business, a sewing business run by Asian women and aimed at producing Asian clothes. The idea comes to Razia after visiting a new shop in London called ‘Fusion Fashions’:

They paused outside a new shop. ‘Fusion Fashions’ said Razia, reading out the name. Inside, a white girl stood in front of the mirror turning this way and that in a black kameez top with white embroidered flowers and a sprinkling of pearls

stitched near the throat. The trousers were not the usual baggy salwaar style but narrow-hipped and slightly flared at the bottom. (394)

The designs at ‘Fusion Fashion’ are suggestive of what has been termed “Asian-chic” fashion (Niessen et al. 2003), that is, traditional Asian clothes redesigned to suit the taste of western consumers. As Puwar (2002) suggests in her study on multicultural fashion, the appropriation and fetichization of ethnic dress by Westerners are likely to arouse ambiguous reactions, above all, amongst those whose traditions are being exploited. In *Brick Lane*, through the character of Razia, Monica Ali also gives voice to these responses: “Look how much these English are paying for their kameez. And at the same time they are looking down onto me. They are even happy to spit on their own flag, as long as I am inside it. What is wrong with them?” (394). Shocked by the commodification of Asian dress in Western shops, Razia decides to exploit this new trend in fashion, instead of letting those who despise it in its most genuine form profit from it.

In the last chapter of *Brick Lane*, the action has moved a year forward and Razia is now a “businesswoman” (482). Nazneen, Jorina, Hanufa and other women of the community are now working under Razia’s orders: “Razia parcelled out the work. She had a brief conference with Jorina about the stretch in a woollen jersey fabric destined for a salwaar kameez. She made some calculations and gave Hanufa her money” (482). Through her entrepreneurial adventure, Razia empowers many female characters of the Bangladeshi community and, instead of exploiting them, Razia seeks to exploit white women’s consumer desires. In this way, the women in *Brick Lane* become “savvy design agents in the new capitalist markets of the new millennium” (Bachu 2005: 140). They are no longer invisible women working in British sweatshops; they have re-defined their identities, becoming designers of Asian fashion without men interfering.

To conclude, in *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali can be said to unveil the *back office* of the fashion industry, portraying some of the most common practices in the sector: eastern and western sweatshops, systems of sub-contracted home working, and, finally, individual entrepreneurial adventures such as Razia’s. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the foregoing lines, through the story of Nazneen in Britain and the epistolary narrative of Hasina in Dhaka, Ali also manages to fictionalize the ambiguous face of the fashion industry as a means which might simultaneously empower and exploit migrant women at both ends of the international labour market. In this respect, *Brick Lane* can be said to exhibit a dialogic tendency since the novel does not, in monologic fashion, favour the empowering over the exploitative side of the clothing industry or vice versa. Nevertheless, at the end of the narrative, Raiza’s sewing business significantly opens the way to new practices in which female empowerment is possible without entailing female exploitation.

Notes

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