

# Stitching the Self: Domesticity, Agency, and the Intersectional Geography of Monica Ali's Fiction

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**Abstract** -The study presented in this research paper includes the complex formation of female identity and social integration in the novels of Monica Ali, with the main emphasis on her masterpiece *Brick Lane* (2003) and her most recent masterpiece *Love Marriage* (2022). Far beyond the reductive dichotomy of immigrant versus citizen, this paper explores Ali in the framework of intersectional feminist theory and qualitative literary analysis as dual locations of structural repression and subversive action, domestic spaces: kitchens, sewing areas, and family homes. It uses close-reading approach guided by the theory of Social-Spatial and the idea of habitus by Bourdieu, which enables one to interrogate rigorously the role of physical surroundings to impose an interiority of the migrant subject. Through considering the "micro-politics" of the household, the paper reveals how Ali protagonists, including Nazneen and Yasmin Ghorami, are able to attain a hybrid identity not due to a wholesale cultural assimilation but rather due to the strategic re-appropriation of their local environment and the care labor. It claims that Ali redeconstructs the classical narrative of the immigrant, making it a micro-struggle with the state instead of a macro-struggle with the state. Finally, this study assumes that to the characters in Ali, the home threshold is not a zone of exclusion, but rather a transitional zone in which the immigrant woman shifts her passive role as a historical object of patriarchy to an active role as the producer of her own social position.

**Keywords:** Monica Ali, Intersectional Feminism, Brick Lane, Love Marriage, Diasporic Identity, Domesticity, Postcolonial Agency.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE ARCHITECT OF THE "IN-BETWEEN"

Monica Ali exists in a unique, almost cartographic place in the field of modern British literature. Having been born in Dhaka, Ali is a son of a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, therefore his biological

and cultural background adds to a literary fascination with the "threshold," that border, sometimes tension-ridden location between cultures, classes, and opposing sets of expectations. By the time *Brick Lane* was published in 2003, it was released at a hot time in the history of Britain in the wake of the post-9/11 atmosphere and domestic tensions of multiculturalism. Therefore, the critics often labelled it as an absolute masterpiece of ethnic reportage, a sociological insight into the Bangladeshi enclave of Tower Hamlets. But a reductive interpretation of this kind that considers the novel to be just a product of anthropological concern is one that neglects the intricate feminist underplot, and the careful socio-spatial stratification that propels her stories. Ali not only records the experience of immigrants, but also challenges the very frameworks of power which constitute it, shifting between the macro-politics of the state to the micro-politics of the bedroom and the sewing table.

It is the richness of Ali in exploring that can be seen in the light of identity as a construct that exists in a flexible and not fixed form. Cultural identity is not a fixed essence and therefore a primal past, as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has made a famous statement that cultural production is never complete, but is always in process and always constituted within and not outside representation (Hall 222). It is this production that is the heart of Ali fiction. She denies the frozen identity that is usually imposed on migrant women by the traditional home cultures as well as the Western gaze. Rather, she traces a continual metamorphosis. This is done by being stringent in intersectionality. Using the framework that was first developed by Kimberle Crenshaw, Ali shows how convergence between social vectors of race, gender, religion, and economic position forms a particular, multidimensional arena of lived experience (Crenshaw 1241). To Ali, the protagonists of the book, oppression

is never a single identifiable power but a complicated suffocating net made of strands of traditionalism of the Patriarchal order, language isolation and instalment apathy of the West.

In this paper, it is assumed that the female characters of Ali, which are Nazneen in *Brick Lane* and Yasmin Ghorami in *Love Marriage* are much more than mere victims of patriarchal diaspora or clash of civilizations stereotypes (Ali, *Brick Lane*). They are the designers of the inclusion instead. Ali turns the classic literary cliché the domestic trap in which the home is the graveyard of female ambition around by transforming the domestic realm into a laboratory of self-exploration. The four walls of a council flat or a suburban semi-detached house could be symbolic of confinement in the hands of a lesser writer. But Ali uses the kitchen, the sewing area and the medical clinic as places of strategic reclamation.

Radical passivity, which refers to the philosophy of her mother of what cannot be changed must be borne, is the starting point of the journey in *Brick Lane* in which Nazneen finds herself. Her existence in London is at first one of spatial dissolution; she is shut up in the interior of the domestic space, her perception of the world is through the dirt of a council estate window. However, it is in this same restriction she starts resisting. The sewing machine is used as a means of economic subversion when she picks up sewing as a way of earning a livelihood in the garment trade (Ali, *Brick Lane*). It is a form of micro-political means through which she can not only circumvent the patriarchal factor of gatekeeping to her husband, Chanu, but it enables her to access the market of the larger society without risking her own security in her own room. This change of a silent watcher into a wage-earning tailor also represents a turning point in the story of the immigrants: the home is no longer where identity dies, but where it is being made, hustle by hustle.

*Love Marriage* by Ali is a 20-year-old commentary on Yasmin Ghorami. Though Nazneen was fighting against the odds of mere economic sustainability and language learning, Yasmin is fighting against the odds of career and mental orientation (Ali, *Love Marriage*). Being a junior doctor at the NHS, Yasmin seems to be a kind of success story of the diaspora, a woman who

has managed to pass the bridge into the British middle class. However, Ali shows that it is not a single line that is crossed to reach an elevated level, but rather a chain of recurring barriers. Yasmin has to balance the hyper-articulate, upper-middle-class demands of the family of her fiancée with the "invisible work" of caring in her own family. It is not her physical confinement, but the disintegration of the self that she is studying. She has to act as a good daughter at home, a high-achieving professional at the hospital, and an exoticised other when in the company of the London elite.

Through the analysis of these two characters, this paper claims that Ali reinvents the British immigrant story by concentrating on the geography of the inside. She shifts the battle not to macro-fights with the state (e.g., protest or policy-making processes) but to the micro-politics of the invisible labor of care and domestic politics of belonging. By showing that the process of becoming hybrid is not obtained through absolute erasure of culture and/or assimilation, both Nazneen and Yasmin break the conventional limits of the concept of being a British woman. Rather it is accomplished by the bold measure of constructing a self, using the very structures to be used to house them. They do not abandon their cultures in the quest to be free but they redefine their cultures internally.

Finally, the work by Ali implies that the migrant woman is in a permanent condition of being at the threshold. The action of belonging is an unending work whether it is one is sewing buttons in a kitchen or carrying out surgery in a theater. This introduction aims to put Ali to the forefront of her novels as not only a story of migration, but as an intricate feminist reading of the intersection of space, labor, and identity. Ali is also offering a crucial roadmap to the contemporary subject, who is no longer the product of their origin, but of the spaces they are bold enough to reclaim, by documenting the architecture of the in-between.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW: DIASPORA, HYBRIDITY, AND THE DOMESTIC TURN

The only way to find out the direction of the Monica Ali protagonists is to first place her work into the theoretical context of development of the British Asian

literature, the macro-politics of the nation-state to the micro-politics of a household. Some of the initial academic analyses of the diaspora tended to adopt a clash of cultures paradigm, which tended to reduce the immigrant subject to living in a perpetual state of grieved mourning over a homeland lost. Nevertheless, in his seminal intervention Stuart Hall changed the scholarly focus on identity as recovery of a pure past and put it on identity as production (Hall 222). According to Hall, the diasporic subject lives in the condition of a so-called hybridity, in which the meeting of the ancestral culture and the society that the diaspora inhabits forms what Homi K. Bhabha is notoriously known as a Third Space a liminal space in which new cultural signs are bargained (Bhabha 37). Although the framework by Bhabha is commonly used in the context of a larger social space (such as the city, or the language) this study claims that Ali has shifted this Third Space to the interior of the home by using the kitchen or the sewing corner as the location of intense cultural mixing.

The Ali work is further enlightened on the spatiality through the contributions of Avtar Brah who comes up with the concept of 'diaspora space.' Diaspora space is the conceptual and physical place where the local and the arrived clash and oppose each other unlike the so-called diaspora that signifies the circulation of individuals (Brah 181). The council flat in Brick Lane is not just a setting but a main diaspora space in which Nazneen has to manoeuvre the overbearing force of Kismet (fate) in the face of the London capitalist economy. Sara Ahmed, a feminist scholar in the present day, argues against the fact that these migrant homes are assumed to be stagnant in nature. According to the work *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed proposes that the orientated bodies of domestic space build it out; the reiteration of movement and work determines the purpose of the room (Ahmed 54). The given work hypothesises that the process of Nazneen being changed to an active wage-earner is a corporal realisation of the theory of Ahmed because she literally transforms her living room into a location of patriarchal imprisonment into a location of economic output.

Moreover, the academic discourse of Ali second-generation characters, in this case, Yasmin Ghorami in *Love Marriage* requires intersectionalism that

considers the movement of classes and occupation (Ali, *Love Marriage*). Claire Chambers notes that where previous British Muslim fiction was fixated on the concept of roots, current writings are focused on the concept of routes the various ways by which people explore secular and religious identities (Chambers 12). The conflict that Yasmin faces is not that of clash of civilizations but that of intersectional friction between her identity as a doctor and clash of cultural capital between the world she is in, represented by the white upper middle classes. This paper will employ (the thought of) Pierre Bourdieu known as habitus which is defined as the internalized social structures that govern behavior in favor of examining how the domestic upbringing practices in Yasmin and the performative liberalism in the west end contradict each other (Bourdieu 72).

Lastly, the issue of the "invisible labor" is an important yet less researched intermediary between two primary works by Ali. According to the arguments presented by Silvia Federici in her book *Revolution at Point Zero*, women have to do the unwaged work in the house to make the public economy work (Federici 15). Focusing the practice of cooking, cleaning and emotional caretaking, Ali confirms the home as a place where there is tremendous power, even though it is not recognizable. Whereas various critics have examined the work of Ali as an application of multiculturalism, not many have made a comparative study of how her characters employ the concept of domestic labor as a means of strategic reclaiming. This review confirms that Ali fiction represents a crucial extension of the Hall-Bhabha-Brah tradition, eventually suggesting that to the migrant woman, the threshold of belonging is not crossed at the national border, but at the family home doorstep.

### III. THE WINDOW AND THE MACHINE: RECLAIMING THE DOMESTIC IN *BRICK LANE*

The interior of the flats within the Monica Ali book, *Brick Lane*, is far more than simply a setting, the domestic interior of the London council flat is a physical expression of the psychological state of the main character, Nazneen. Her experience of being transported out of the rural scenery of Bangladesh to the very tangible, concrete Tower Hamlets is marked

by the transition of a huge expanse of nature to a very deep experience of spatial and language claustrophobia. Nazneen becomes a passenger in her life by having been socialized into the philosophy of kismet, a severe fatalism that holds that life is a script do not write. The flat serves as a "velvet prison," during the initial ten years of her life in London. It is the place where she can be comparatively safe with the cultural closeness and patriarchal shielding but where she is also stripped of her presence in the world of publicity (Ali, *Brick Lane*).

The imagery of the window is also brilliantly employed by Ali to denote the immigrant experience of being included in parts. To Nazneen, the window is an object that is not seen and yet cannot be entered; it is the window where she is able to bite a city that she is not allowed to touch. She can look through the glass at the ice-skaters and the mad gyrations of a Western metropolis, but she is practically invisible to persons outside. This optical fixing provides a dual existence: she is body-wise in England, but mind and language wise, she is marooned in the realm of the home. Her identity at this time is reactive and performative indeed, she is the keeper of the comfort of Chanu, the protector of the traditions of her daughters and the silent receiver of the tragic letters of her sister Hasina. The symbol that is the window is the one-way gaze in which the migrant woman is a viewer of a modernity that sees her as an anomaly or a ghost.

It is not the great political enlightenment that causes this stagnation of this velvet prison, but rather the imposition of a tangible thing, the sewing machine. The sewing machine is a two-sided symbol in the patriarchal family. At first sight, it seems to be a sort of continuation of household chores, a instrument of female work. Nevertheless, Ali reinvents it as a place of economic and psychological opposition. The entrance of the machine is the point, when the domestic space of Nazneen is changed as the space of consumption and service into the space of production. By accepting the garment work, Nazneen starts creating a new version of herself with sewing. This work is invisible to the state and to a great extent disregarded by her husband but it is what gives her the financial autonomy to push the limits of her confinements.

Sewing machine enables what can be called spatial reclamation. Not the flat is any longer a place where Nazneen waits awaiting in her existence the onset of her life; it has become a workroom wherein she haggles over her own worth. The mechanical pointlessness of the needle is an anti-narrative to the dead silence of kismet (Ali, *Brick Lane*). In this piece of work, Nazneen becomes an independent participant in the local economy of Tower Hamlets. A wife is no longer a wife or a mother, but a worker and has an actual connection to the exterior world. This change is a key to Ali and her feminist project: it implies that in the case of the migrant woman, she does not need to flee to a new place in order to realize her liberation, but simply redefine the balance of power in the home.

Moreover, the process of sewing gives Nazneen a chance to act in the ways that do not subdue any one part of her existence, as she is a woman of color, a Muslim, and a working-class immigrant. The work she does is culturally particular, but the result of it (financial agency) is liberating everywhere. The device is turned to be an intermediary between the private and the public. It introduces the external world (as fabric, deadlines, and ultimately the radicalizing power of Karim) into the "velvet prison," in other words, breaking the glass of the window motif. The window is no more an obstacle that she peeps through but a source of light to her work (Ali, *Brick Lane*).

Ali exploits this shift in order to criticize the traditional narrative of migrants which considers the incorporation of the local as housewifery. In the case of Nazneen, it is the home where her revolution takes place. One of the sources of her resistance has to do with the so-called micro-politics of controlling her own income and the unobtrusive manner in which she starts claiming increasingly physical space in the flat. The sewing machine is in the middle of the room and this indicates that her labor and her agency is no longer being peripheral. She learns to live in a place that is both Bangladeshi in its traditions and British in its economic reality as she masters the machine that makes her master the architecture of the in-between (Ali, *Brick Lane*).

Finally, the re-appropriation of the domestic in Brick Lane is a powerful statement of the agency of the marginalized. Nazneen demonstrates that despite the

fact that the society in which she lives is patriarchal and attempts to restrict the movements of a woman, the domestic trap can be turned into her castle of self-discovery. When Nazneen eventually chooses to remain in London as Chanu goes back to Bangladesh, she has already made the hardest of all jumps which is the jump in her own mind. The sewing machine not only gave a wage, but also gave a voice. It turned the so-called velvet prison into a house of her own creation and showed that even the greatest identity changes can occur in the smallest areas of the house, stitch by stitch.

#### IV. THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE

The sewing machine is a fusion of the domestic as well as the global economy. Nazneen transforms her living room into a micro-factory by absorbing piece-work. It is an important turning point in the description of inclusive feminism by Ali. Nazneen has no need to go outside the house to seek agency; she introduces the agency to the house. This is the phenomenon referred to as the Law of the Threshold by Malashri Lal which is the bargain between the inner and the outer world (Lal 14).

Nazneen is able to earn financial freedom through her work, which Chanu cannot maintain, no matter how educated he is and how much he talks big. Her identity is also complicated by the fact that she is getting into the conflict between religious tradition and individual desire when she has a relationship with the radicalized young Karim. Finally, the fact that Nazneen chooses to remain in London at the very end of the novel is not an assimilation action towards being a British, but rather a reclaiming of the place, which she created herself (Ali, *Brick Lane*).

#### V. THE TUPPERWARE TOWER: CLASS AND PROFESSIONAL INCLUSION IN *LOVE MARRIAGE*

In case *Brick Lane* is an examination of the difficulty trying to fit into the British social existence, *Love Marriage* (2022) is an examination of the fears related to having arrived. Yasmin Ghorami is a young and high-achieving doctor, someone who seemingly has made the multicultural dream work. However, there is

a sense of alienation in her due to the perception of exclusion based on class and cultural shame.

Symbolism of food and class Ali employs the Tupperware Tower, the pile of vessels of the traditional food her mother, Anis, insists that Yasmin takes to work as a symbol of the weighty identity Yasmin attempts to repress. In a high-stakes workplace and sterile setting of a British hospital, the aroma of her mother cooking is a symbol of professionalism lacking in the mind of Yasmin (Ali, *Love Marriage*).

In this case, Ali examines another aspect of inclusive feminism, which is the intra-class obstacles formed by the mobility of classes. Yasmin is not fighting against a husband or even a state, but against her urge to become colorless, classless, in order to enter into the world of upper-middle classes of her fiancé, Joe Sangster. This *Love Marriage* in the title does not only mean the marriage between two individuals, but also the healing of the two fragmented parts of Yasmin as a person.

#### VI. THE ETHICS OF CARE AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

One of the key pillars of Ali is his work is Ethics of Care. In the two novels, women supply most of the emotional and physical labour (Federici 15). This may be seen as an oppressive aspect of feminism as it would be viewed traditionally, however Ali introduces it as a source of extreme social power.

In *Love Marriage*, we also see that Anis Ghorami (the mother of Yasmin) leaves her husband in the end to pursue her life, though does not give up her position as a nurturing mother (Ali, *Love Marriage*). Instead, she expands it. Ali recommends that communities should be established so as to bring about inclusion (Federici 15). It is the invisible labor of women that holds the social fabric together whether it is the web of women in the council estate in *Brick Lane* or the disintegrated families in *Love Marriage*. This work is kind of a opposition to the seclusion of the modern Western life.

## VII. LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY AND THE VOICE OF THE "OTHER"

Language in the literary world of Monica Ali is never just a neutral story-telling tool; this is a main location of conflict and a means of building a hybrid identity. The language serves as the initial point of entry, which the migrant subject has to pass and the linguistic changes that Ali explores in her work show that her characters have to walk the fine line between their inherited heritage and their British truth. Ali is subverting the dominant position of the standard English and, so, adopts a postcolonial approach of the so-called de-centering, making sure that, not only is the voice of the immigrants heard, but it is heard in terms of its own cultural and rhythmic values.

This linguistic resistance is most tragically played out in *Brick Lane* through the epistolary sub-narrative of the sister of Nazneen, Hasina. The letters by Hasina make use of broken, breathless, and most rhythmic English. Instead of an indication of absence or brokenness, this style symbolizes a translated identity (Ali, *Brick Lane*). Ali deliberately does not use refined prose to make Hasina, in all its original fixtures and emotional urgency, to reproduce the code of thought of Bengali. This enables the reader not to perceive the foreignness as something that creates a hindrance, but a textured reality. The voice of Hasina is not assimilated and the English-speaking reader has to adjust to her rhythm, almost reversing the conventional role of the migrant adjusting to the language of the host. Ali shows through Hasina that the Other does not require perfect grammar in order to have a deep and rich interiority.

On the other hand, in *Love Marriage*, the language landscape does not display the second-generation experience where the identity is a performance that is fluid instead of a pursuit of the unique voice. The main character, Yasmin Ghorami, is in a condition of persistent code-switching (Ali, *Love Marriage*). She moves between three different language regimes: the professional language of the NHS that is medical jargon, denoting her professional power and her mobility into the upper-middle class; the proper English language used to reflect the demands of the upper-middle-class liberal intellectual community of which her fiancé belongs; and the language of Bengali-

infused domestic speech that is spoken in the intimacy of the Ghorami home. This language stratification proves that the identity of Yasmin is performative and intersectional. She employs words as a defensive barrier or olive branch, based on what threshold she is living in. The tension between these registers unveils the unseen work needed to fit in the contemporary Britain.

Finally, Ali employs language as a social act that is radical. Making the Bengali ideas and rhythmic forms a part of the English novel, she makes a hybrid tongue that reflects the lives of her characters (Nayar 104). This approach helps avoid the situation in which the immigrant experience is internalized as a remote commodity; rather, the reader must experience the linguistic realm of the characters. By so doing, Ali confirms the hybrid voice as an effective and valid vehicle of the British literature (Upstone 63). She demonstrates the fact that being a part of something is not accomplished by the process of shutting down the voice of one's mother tongue, but through the process of letting the voices to become reshaped by the language of the host and establish a new and common narrative environment in which the voice of the Other becomes that of the center.

## VIII. CONCLUSION: THE ARCHITECTURE OF RECLAMATION AND THE GLOBAL DIASPORA

With the longitudinal study of *Brick Lane* and *Love Marriage*, it is clear that Monica Ali in her feminist vision does not reject the heritage nor accept the tradition passively, but rather her vision of feminism is inherently inclusive and intersectional endeavor. Ali breaks the Western liberal feminist fiction that tends to position the migrant woman as having two options: either to liberate herself by renouncing her culture or to remain oppressed in it. Rather, the protagonists of Ali show that the real agency lies in renegotiating the positions inside the cultural fabric. Making the domestic sphere, where the other has traditionally been confined, an experiment in self-identification, such characters as Nazneen and Yasmin Ghorami show that the freedom can be discovered not in a far, secular elsewhere, but in the strategic appropriation of the surrounding space (Hall 222).

To Ali, inclusion is much more complicated than mere disappearance of difference or cultural assimilation enactment. It is a fragile and day to day balance held between the burden of the past and the tide of ambition. This is a balance that the micro-politics of the home effect and the labor of care, the sewing act, and the family secrets are powerful instruments of politics. According to Ali, the domestic space is not a space of silence, but a discursive place of change where the immigrant woman ceases being the peripheral figure in a national discourse and becomes the key figure in dictating her social belonging. The development of the moving towards the manual labor of Nazneen in the council flat to emotional labor of Yasmin in the London suburbs, traces the shifting geography of the South Asian diaspora, where the class and circumstances might change, but the threshold is the main location of the crucial negotiation.

In the end, the fiction of Monica Ali provides an advanced map of making sense of the identity in a world that is more fractured and global. Her focus on the intersectional identity of women in the crossroads of race, religion, and the class helps the reader realize that the home of the immigrant is not a stagnant and motionless artifact of the past, but rather a field of the future. Her stories indicate that belonging is not a place, which the state gives, but a form of production (to borrow the phrase of Stuart Hall) which is constantly being sewed together by actions of resistance and repossession in everyday life. With the world diaspora ever expanding Ali makes his work a strong testimonial of the fact that the most radical revolution does take place at the kitchen table and that the personal is not merely political but is the very backbone of social inclusion.

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