

“How you were left to your Fate”:  
The Responses of Two Sisters to the Surrounding  
Societies in *Brick Lane* (2003)

by Monica Ali

A Pro Gradu thesis

by

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| <p><b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b></p> <p>Tutkielman tarkoitus on selvittää kuinka Monica Alin kirjassa <i>Brick Lane</i> (2003) kaksi islaminuskoista sisarusta, Nazneen ja Hasina, reagoivat ympäröivään yhteiskuntaan omilla elinympäristöissään. He ovat kumpikin lähtöisin pienestä bangladeshilaisesta kylästä, mutta päätyvät asumaan miljoonakaupunkeihin, Nazneen Lontooseen ja Hasina Dhakaan. Heidän elämänpoluistaan muotoutuu hyvin erilaiset samasta taustasta huolimatta ja tarkoitukseni on vertailla heidän kokemuksiaan toisiinsa. Olen valinnut pääteemoiksi tutkimukseeni perheen, yhteiskunnan ja työn, uskonnon sekä olen lisäksi pohtinut romanttisen rakkauden ja järjestettyjen avioliittojen eroja. Nämä teemat nousevat mielestäni eniten esiin kirjassa ja koen ne merkityksellisiksi tekijöiksi analysoidessani kahden nuoren naisen kohtaamia haasteita ja kehitystä elämässä.</p> <p>Tarkastelen valittuja teemoja naisnäkökulmasta, vaikkakin myös miesnäkökulmaa sivutaan, sillä kirjan mieshahmot vaikuttavat merkittävästi naisten elämään. Analyysini käsittää kolme eri yhteiskuntaa: bangladeshilaisen Dhakassa, bangladeshilaisen Lontoossa sekä brittiläisen yhteiskunnan. Näistä viimeksi mainittu on tosin vain taustalla kirjassa ja myös analyysissäni, sillä naishenkilöt ovat hyvin sidottuja omaan vähemmistöryhmäänsä Lontoossa ja kontaktit isäntämaan kulttuuriin vähäisiä. Tutkimukseni taustatiedon pääpaino on monikulttuurisessa tutkimuksessa. Olen selvittänyt myös erityisesti maahanmuuttajanaisten kokemuksia oman ja isäntämaan kulttuurien vaatimusten ristitulella ja sitä, millaisia Nazneenin ja Hasinan kokemukset ovat näihin verrattuna. Tutkimuksestani käy ilmi, että nämä vaatimukset ovat hyvin voimakkaat ja asettavat haasteita sekä Nazneenille että Hasinalle.</p> <p>Postkolonialistinen kirjallisuus on nykyään suosittu tutkimuksen aihe. Silti nimenomaan naisnäkökulma jää yhä melko vähälle huomiolle. Tutkielmani antaa tietoa Islaminuskoisten maahanmuuttajanaisten elämästä, vertaa heidän kokemuksiaan sekä selvittää mitkä ovat suurimpia haasteita heidän sopeutumisessaan uuteen yhteiskuntaan.</p> |  |
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this Pro Gradu is to examine the lives of two sisters in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). Ali is a Bangladeshi-British author living in Britain. In her book Ali tells the story of Nazneen, a young Muslim girl migrating to Britain in the 1980s. Nazneen's father arranges her to marry a man, Chanu, who is considerably older than her and has already lived in London for a long while. Nazneen arrives to a very tight Bangladeshi community in London's borough of Tower Hamlets and in the beginning has very little contact with the outside world. In the course of the story she becomes a mother of three children of which she devastatingly loses one. She is not happy in her marriage and ends up having an affair with another Bangladeshi man. She begins working at home as a garment worker and gradually finds her way out from the role of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife under her husband's rule.

Nazneen has a sister, Hasina, who makes a love marriage and escapes their home as a young girl. By doing so she brings shame on her family and can never go back home. She ends up migrating to Dhaka and lives as an outcast from Bangladeshi society trying to find shelter and protection. She is married twice, but both marriages fail and her life appears to be nothing but survival from day to day. These two parallel stories in *Brick Lane* give the reader an opportunity to see two different stories of women from the same background. They begin their journey from a small village in rural Bangladesh, but both end up living in big cities, Nazneen in London and Hasina in Dhaka. Yet, their lives turn out to very different from each other, but not necessarily in a way one might expect.

Nazneen and Hasina have the same background, but they end up living far away from each other in different cultures, yet remaining important parts of each others' lives through letters. The sisters are both immigrants living in unfamiliar surroundings and societies with a very small safety-net and seek security, for example, from their Islamic faith. Often their lives seem to consist of constant

struggle and survival, especially Hasina's, and they both carry the notion of fate with them. Their mother always taught them to leave everything to Allah and fate. Are they supposed to trust their lives simply to fate and Allah and accept what comes their way or can matters be taken into own hands and are they able to affect on their own life? Are they put on earth simply to suffer or could they perhaps both find happiness by taking action?

Hasina's life is presented through letters. The reader receives a view of both societies, namely the Bangladeshi society in London and Dhaka. One may assume that the contemporary British society will be introduced, since Nazneen lives in London and faces the challenges of an immigrant woman there. However, British society is not described in detail, but is in the background at least in the beginning of Nazneen's life, which is very sheltered and distant from the host society. She stays at home and socializes only with members from the Bangladeshi society. She shows signs of wanting to adjust herself more to the host society, for example by asking her husband's permission to take English lessons, but is denied this. Gradually she begins to connect more with the surrounding society, especially when her children go to school and become parts of the host society. They know the language and also teach Nazneen. Gradually she begins to step out from the role of an obedient housewife who lives by the strict laws of the Bangladeshi society. Nazneen has had three children and experienced the devastation of losing one of them. She has been married to a man twice her age and fallen in love with a young man with a Bangladeshi background and committed adultery. All this matures Nazneen in the course of the book. In the end she is able to make up her own mind and take fate into her own hands after whole life of doing the opposite: always following some one else's rules and meeting their expectations, always a step behind her husband. In the end she breaks free from the role of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife and becomes an independent woman who still carries her inheritance and religion with her, but now on her own terms.

The parallel story of Nazneen's sister, Hasina, is presented from the first-person point of view, whereas Nazneen's story is told from third-person point of view. This

way the reader sees straight to Hasina's mind, whereas in Nazneen's case there is more room for interpretation. However, Nazneen's thoughts and feelings are presented in a way that the reader has access to her mind too and sometimes the text is like a flow of thoughts from Nazneen's subconscious. Hasina's letters are fairly short and occasional and therefore her story is more vague than Nazneen's. Still, one is able to form an idea of her life and the challenges she faces.

As morality and male protection are very important features in Bangladeshi society and a woman on her own is considered as 'drifting' without safety and often linked with extreme poverty (Kabeer 2000:63), it is immensely important for Hasina to find a man to protect her. As a girl she went against the norm by marrying for love and escaping home and by that brought enormous shame on her family. The marriage did not work out and left her drifting from one relationship to another, from garment working into prostitution. In the book Hasina seems to be more free than Nazneen, who lives inside a society, whereas Hasina is an outcast. Still, in the end Nazneen is free and does not need a man to define her, whereas Hasina has once again escaped with a man perhaps in the hope of finally having a family of her own. From this view the British society, more than the Bangladeshi one, better enables an immigrant woman to make a life of her own. However, it requires strength from a woman to go against the expectations of her own minority group and, in addition, face the possible hostility and racism of the host society. Still, the option of independence is more readily available.

This thesis will analyze the two societies, the Bangladeshi in London and the Bangladeshi in Dhaka, from an immigrant woman's view as presented in *Brick Lane*. My main focus is on how do the sisters respond or do not respond, to these societies, and how the societies respond to them, in terms of family life, work, religion and romantic love. In my view these are the themes that stand out in the book, as well as in life in general, in defining how the characters' identity is formed. After giving background information on the British Empire, Bangladesh and postcolonial literature, I will analyze the chosen themes. I will give evidence of the fact that family is the greatest feature defining Nazneen and Hasina's lives, beginning with

their childhood family's impact and then with the marriages they have. The affect of children on Nazneen's life is also compared with Hasina's lack of them.

The surrounding societies have a great impact on each of the characters. The British host society is also present in the book, but more in the background and not dealt with in detail. However, it naturally has an effect on Nazneen's life and therefore it is also touched upon, but mostly from an immigrant's point of view. I will discuss how the ability to speak the host society's language and having an education or work gives one a better opportunity to integrate into the society and gives more freedom of choice. The meaning of religion will also be dealt with and how it affects the women's lives. Further, I will discuss the juxtaposition of arranged marriage and love marriage and what each of them caused for the two sisters.

I will concentrate on the *female* experience in the book. Naturally, since the sister's lives involve several men, also the male view becomes evident. However, this is not analyzed as such. The proportions of analysis on Nazneen and Hasina's life are not perhaps equal, since Hasina's life is not described in as much detail in the book as Nazneen's. However, I find it important to analyze both lives to be able to compare the challenges they face in different surroundings while having the same culture, and that way to achieve a deeper understanding on the subject. Women's stories have not been as popular in the tradition of literature in general as men's have, or in other fields of research for that matter. Kabeer (2000:36) points out that "Research on gender relations in Bangladesh really began after its independence in 1971, a period which coincided with a time when women were being 'discovered' in the international development agenda and research funding being made available for this topic for the first time". Thus, this area of study, however popular these days, is still fairly recent and any addition to women's experience should be welcomed.

Post-colonial literature is a widely studied and analyzed field and there are numerous commonwealth authors today whose books are researched and analyzed. It has not always been the case, but today the commonwealth literature seems to be "in fashion". Ania Loomba (2002:2) states that "colonialism was not an identical process

in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history". The subject is vast and there are uncountable amounts of different stories of the colonial experience. Perhaps the field has become popular only fairly recently because enough time has passed from the often traumatic experiences. Today also the voice of the colonized people is heard and their stories read eagerly. *Brick Lane* too has been immensely popular and, for instance, scholars like Jane Hiddleston (2005) and Michael Perfect (2008) have published articles analyzing it. However, to my knowledge no study has been made on the book from the perspective I have chosen. I find *Brick Lane* to be a very fruitful source for comparing the women's experiences in two very different countries. Namely the Muslim *women's* experience is a valuable topic of research especially in today's multicultural world of racism and islamophobia.

Monica Ali, the author of *Brick Lane*, comes from a multicultural background with a British mother and a Bangladeshi father and being born in Bangladesh, but having lived most of her life in Britain, has gained knowledge of both cultures. *Brick Lane* is her first book of three and was received by the Bangladeshi society with mixed feelings. She was accused of presenting the Bangladeshi society both in London and Bangladesh, in a negative way and not having authentic knowledge of its culture, for example, because she does not speak Bengali. However, her book became popular and was discussed a great deal in newspapers. Further, it was filmed later, which also caused objection from the Bangladeshi society in London. Ali has been compared to Zadie Smith, another popular writer with a commonwealth background. In addition, the negative attention Ali's book received is similar to that of Salman Rushdie when he wrote *The Satanic Verses* (Appleyard 2007).

Despite the fact that *Brick Lane* is such a popular book and Ali has already published two books in addition, I was able to find only one Pro Gradu thesis on the book published in Finland by Jaana Tapio: *Miten Sukupuoli Käännetään? Esimerkkinä Monica Alin Romaani Brick Lane Suomennos ja Saksannos* ( How to Translate Gender? The Finnish and German Translations of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as

examples). Tapio's paper deals with the language aspects in the book, whereas I am going to take a more sociological and cultural approach to it by examining the features of the societies. There is an ongoing project in the University of Helsinki about diaspora literature and its website states that the researchers believe a thorough, comparative study of literature written in cross-cultural areas can give knowledge of the processes where adjusting to a foreign culture either succeeds or fails (University of Helsinki 2010). As *Brick Lane* (hereafter BL) is written “from the middle”, it is a valuable source of information of specifically female immigration and women's position in the process of integration. This thesis will add to the knowledge of how it is to be a Muslim immigrant or a migrant woman, trying to find her place in life. It will also shed light on the expectations young women of minority groups face when trying to juggle between several different cultures. Ali deals with issues concerning first- and second-generation immigrants and the challenges and difficulties they face in sometimes racist and hostile host societies. There are several levels of stories of women's lives such as Nazneen's mother's, herself's and her sister's, and her daughters', giving the reader a possibility to “see” a life of a Bangladeshi woman for three generations. I believe that studying books like this, however fictional, can shed light to women's position in a multicultural society and background. Nazneen and her daughters live in between two cultures and they must form identities consisting of both in order to adjust to their surrounding societies. Something must be lost and something gained instead, and the struggle of knowing what, I believe, is the hardest.

I will first introduce British history in terms of the Empire, Commonwealth, and immigration issues. Then I will briefly look at the history of Bangladesh, as well as Bangladeshi culture and gender roles. I will discuss the situation of Bangladeshi people living in Britain and introduce Monica Ali's life and work in the wider context of postcolonial literature. After this I will move on to the core chapters and deal with the major themes of family life, society and economy, religion and romantic love vs arranged marriage.

## **2. THE BRITISH EMPIRE**

### **2.1 From Empire to Commonwealth**

What is now called Great Britain has always had a special situation due to its geographical position. It has been isolated from the European continent and the sea surrounding it gave it a feeling of safety among other things. According to Leinonen and Lyytinen (1993:9) the location meant indeed isolation, but in a positive way for the English, because it made them feel special and different from the other Europeans. They were able to develop their economy and politics often in a more peaceful atmosphere than countries in the European continent. In addition, the English were wealthier than many other countries because of their wool and textile industry and overseas trade that they practised and the colonies they had conquered. One major factor that gave Great Britain a huge advantage was the Industrial Revolution, which began there in the 1700s.

The first phase of the British Empire expanding was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when according to Black (1997:157) “possibly 200,000 people emigrated from the British Isles to North America”. In addition, the British developed a sugar economy in West Indian Islands using slave labour brought from West Africa. The first British Empire was mainly white. Black (1997:185) explains that “in 1775 the majority of British subjects outside Britain were white (though the population of the West Indian colonies were predominantly black slaves), Christian, of British or at least European origin, and ruled with an element of local self-government. By 1815 none of this was true”. In North America there were growing resentment towards the British rule and after a fight with heavy losses for the British, the Americans declared independence in 1776. Canada was the only colony that remained under British rule (Black 1997:179). However, in 1867 Canada was the first colony to gain self-governance and become a dominion, “a newly constituted status that implied equality with Britain” (Commonwealth Secretariat n.d.).

The second phase of the expansion of the British Empire began gradually, when Britain had gained naval power due to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that crippled Danish, French, Spanish and Dutch naval powers (Black 1997:185). The British established commercial ports overseas and acquired land to secure the routes there. Gradually the Empire reached Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand and India and this fundamentally changed the world both in the ideological and economical sphere (Leinonen and Lyytinen 1993:11). The First World War initially seemed to strengthen Britain's power, because it gained, for example, Germany's colonies as a result of it, but in reality it was a severe cut to British army's manpower and to Britain's economy. Finally between the two World Wars the British Empire changed into the Commonwealth of Nations. After the World War II many of Britain's colonies became independent, including India, which had had a great significance to Britain. Britain's imperial power, after 163 years, finally ended in India in 1947.

According to Cain and Hopkins (1993:286) historians have explained the fall of the Empire with varying emphases: “the decline of British power, the rising costs of the Empire, the loss of imperial will, the irresistible force of colonial nationalism and the pressures of international opinion”. In their own explanation to the fall of the Empire Cain and Hopkins link all these reasons together. Lloyd (1984:379) states that the 500 years of expanding of the British Empire had “undoubtedly spread westernization, ended slavery and increased life expectancy, but it had also aroused hopes for the future which were unlikely to be met”. The white men with their “white man’s burden” had spread an idea of a better life quality, which they were often unable to deliver.

Today the Commonwealth of Nations consists of fifty four countries who voluntarily want to “support each other and work together towards shared goals in democracy and development” (Commonwealth Secretariat n.d.). The Commonwealth is committed to national sovereignty and racial equality and is involved in many different activities “all feeding the greater goals of good governance, respect for human rights, and peace and co-operation in the member countries and beyond”

(ibid).

## **2.2 The British Commonwealth citizens and the Immigration Acts**

The British Empire was dismantled but the people of the former colonies were granted a right to freely migrate to Britain after the British Nationality Act of 1948. They could acquire Britain's citizenship after residing in the country for some time. According to Parekh (2000:206) “all people of the Commonwealth countries and the remaining British colonies were British subjects and had an unrestricted right to access to the UK. Subsequently, as countries became independent, this right of entry was restricted”. No restrictions were issued to Commonwealth immigrants to migrate until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which said that only people with specific skills needed in Britain were allowed in. Further restrictions were issued with the 1968 Commonwealth Act that granted a free entry for UK passport holders that had at least one British (white) grandparent. In addition, the family members' rights were limited by allowing only the wife and children under 16, and sometimes grandparents, to enter (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:233).

The Immigration Act of 1971 restricted the migrants' right to settle, making it obligatory to apply for citizenship, which previously had been taken for granted. Often the applications were refused. While the 1971 Act confirmed the earlier requirement of at least one white British grandparent for the non-white immigrants, it simultaneously granted almost unlimited white immigration possible for people, for example, from Ireland and elsewhere from Europe. The British Nationality Act of 1981 left thousands of people without the right to enter Britain as nationals. In addition, being born in Britain did not automatically mean citizenship. The Immigration Act of 1988 required British and Commonwealth citizen marrying a non-British citizen to prove the authenticity of the marriage and that they could provide for their spouses. Further, visa requirements were extended for the citizen of the Commonwealth while the EU citizen and their families, also dependant relatives, had guaranteed rights in the country (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:233-234). This fact clearly shows the British preference for certain kind of immigrants.

According to Sevaldsen and Vadman (1997:233) the citizens of the Commonwealth came to Britain in the hope of a better life. Often their home countries had problems with deteriorating economic and social conditions and the highly industrial economy and better employment situation in Britain was very tempting. However, after a while when there were fewer jobs available and the racial and social problems of the immigrants became visible, the situation proved to be quite challenging. However, this was not true for all immigrants, since the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Ireland, America, Europe and Australia presented much less problems. It was assumed by the white people that “less black immigrations meant fewer problems” (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:234).

In addition to the Immigration Acts, Race Relation Acts were also passed. The first of these acts in 1965 tried to protect the rights of the new non-white citizens, but ended up in dealing with discrimination in public places only, despite the widespread discrimination in several areas, such as housing, education and health. The next Act of 1968 included discrimination in these other areas as well, but had no significant affect. Finally, the Race Relations Act of 1976 changed the definition of discrimination and made the whole matter more official. It was now possible for the new Commission for Racial Equality to make investigations and summon witnesses in cases of discrimination suspect (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:235).

## **2.2 Ethnic minorities in Britain**

Britain's non-white population is about 5.5 per cent of the whole population, which in today's Britain is some three million. The non-white population is not the same as the immigrants, since 40 per cent of Britain's non-white population is born there. White immigrants from the Old Commonwealth and Europe have increased in numbers but mostly the new arrivals are asylum seekers and dependants of people already living in Britain (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:232). The largest groups of minorities are Indians, Caribbeans and Pakistanis. Black Africans and Bangladeshis

are among the second largest groups as are the Chinese and other Asians (Sevaldsen and Vadman 1997:41).

The minorities all undoubtedly face similar difficulties and are targets and victims of racism. However, according to Julios (2008:5) “British citizens come in all shapes, ages, genders and colours; they belong to various social strata and economic backgrounds; speak hundreds of different languages and self-ascribe to a wide spectrum of cultural and political traditions, faiths and religious beliefs”. In such a situation no one experience is exactly the same. Different minorities in Britain face different degrees of prejudice and racism. Tariq Modood (2005:28-29) talks about biological racism and cultural racism and he defines the biological as: “the antipathy, exclusion, and unequal treatment of people on the basis of their physical appearance or other imputed differences, saliently in Britain their non-whiteness”. He goes on by explaining that the “cultural racism builds on biological racism a further discourse that evokes cultural differences from alleged British, civilized norm to vilify, marginalize, or demand cultural assimilation from groups who also suffer from biological racism”. A person’s colour is perhaps the first issue that raises prejudice and discrimination and their cultures, which differ greatly from the majority's culture, are unknown and therefore perhaps frightening and thus there is a demand for assimilation.

We need to bear in mind the differences between assimilation and integration. Colin Crouch (1999:289) explains assimilation as: “members of the minority gradually lose all distinguished characteristics, drop their original cultural practices at all points where they differ from the host society”. He also explains the other extreme, segregation, as the ghetto model where the minorities live almost entirely separate from to host society (Crouch 1999:288). The third option, integration, is when “the minority retains key aspects of its distinctive culture and a sense of its identity, but in all other respects mixes freely with the host society and takes advantage of the opportunities it provides” (Crouch 1999:289). This naturally would be the ideal option for everybody, but often in real life it is quite impossible to point out where the key aspects of ones culture end and where should they be combined with the host

culture, especially when the habits and key aspects often contradict each other. In most cases it seems to be that the host society's demand for assimilation leads to the minority's segregation, from its own will or the fact that there is not much choice. The host society does not often actually provide opportunities for the minority groups, and if it does, they are not the same for all the minorities, as we will see below.

The minorities often face social problems in terms of housing and employment. However, they vary in degree for each minority group. According to Sevaldsen and Vadman (1997:239) and Modood (2005:61) the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are disadvantaged compared to white people and other minorities. While Sevaldsen and Vadman state that people from India and Caribbean face fewer disadvantages than the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and African Asians ("members of the South Asian diaspora in East Africa who fled as refugees to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s" Modood 2005:212) and Chinese people are somewhat "equal" with the white population, Modood makes the division a little differently. He argues that Chinese, African Asian and Indian men are on the "better side" and Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi on the more disadvantaged side. However, interestingly, he claims that if both women and men are taken into account the result is that: "the Chinese and African Asians are in broad parity with whites, the Indians and Caribbeans are somewhat disadvantaged, and the Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are extremely disadvantaged". What makes the Indian women change the situation of discrimination is not explained by Modood.

Health issues are also a factor where serious disadvantage can be found. Although in this area all the minority groups seem to face same degree of problems. Parekh (2000:184) explains that "a disproportionate number of children living in poverty are members of African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Irish, Pakistani or refugee communities". Parekh goes on by explaining that these children, who live in overcrowded conditions, also more often suffer from poor health, particularly respiratory illnesses. This does not involve only children, since also among adults of the minority group's health problems are more common than among the white

population. Parekh (2000:177) points out a paradox in the National Health Service's twin roles as a provider of services and an employer:

The NHS depends, and for several decades has depended, on the contributions of Asian, black and Irish doctors, nurses, managers and ancillary staff. At the same time, patterns of mortality and morbidity are more serious in Asian, black and Irish communities than in the population as a whole, and there is much insensitivity in the NHS to their distinctive experiences, situations and requirements.

This is indeed striking. Even if the health care staff was white, such inequality is difficult to comprehend. Racism has its roots very deep in the soil. Making improvements is rather challenging in such a situation, especially when the disadvantaged position of the minority groups covers the whole spectrum of life in terms of health, housing, education and employment.

This chapter briefly looked at the development of British Empire and the history and situation of the minority groups in Britain. The next chapter will introduce the situation of Bangladesh and Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain, as well as the life and work of Monica Ali.

### **3. BANGLADESH**

#### **3.1 History of Bangladesh**

It is different for the people of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, formerly India, formerly Bengal. They live under the invisible finger of random disaster, of flood or cyclone, hurricane and mud-slide. Half the time half their country lies under water; generations wiped out as regularly as clockwork; individual life expectancy an optimistic fifty-two, and they are coolly aware that when you talk about apocalypse, when you talk about random death en masse, well, they are leading the way in that particular field, they will be the first to go, the first to slip Atlantis-like down to the seabed when the pesky polar ice-caps begin to shift and melt. It is the most ridiculous country in the world, Bangladesh (Smith 2000:211).

The above description of Bangladesh is from Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000). It is a fictitious book, but it still presents an image not far from the truth,

since Bangladesh is a poor country with, for example, heavy rains and floods. One would have to be Bangladeshi born to truly know how it is. Yet the constant threat of a natural catastrophe must have an effect on the people's outlook on life in general. Nothing is ever sure, as it is not anywhere in the world. It is simply easier to be lulled into the delusion of safety in a place where one is not constantly reminded of the fragility of life.

According to Höfer and Messerli (2006:11) “Bangladesh is known as a rather small country in South Asia with a very low average income, high population density, and a low literacy rate”. In addition, most of the population depends on agriculture, which offers challenge since floods and cyclones are frequent. This naturally affects the crop, which is often ruined. The history of Bangladesh is also quite eventful and I am going to give a brief summary of it next.

Bangladesh used to belong to India's province of Bengal under British rule. The eastern part of the province parted from the western part and joined the new state of Pakistan in 1947. However, the relationship of East and West Pakistan was always complex due to many factors. One major difficulty was the fact that they are geographically very distant from each other. There is approximately 1600km between the two parts. Naturally the feeling of unity is challenged in such a situation. Further, the eastern part had a bigger population and yet the civil government and the military were centred in the western part. There was a growing resentment towards the western part leading the East Pakistan demanding independence. Civil war broke out in March 1971 and approximately 10 million refugees fled to India. India then invaded East Pakistan and ended the war in December 1971. The new state of Bangladesh was proclaimed (Johnson, 1996:221).

### **3.2 Bangladeshi culture and gender roles**

Today's Bangladesh has a high poverty rate and is the seventh most populous country in the world. It is mostly a Muslim country. 83% of its people are Muslim

and 16% are Hindu. The rest are either Buddhist or other religions (U.S. Department of State 2009). Islam is not simply a religion but often a way of life and a strong tradition. In Muslim countries in addition to the state law there is the Islamic family law, Sharia, which has a great impact on people's lives. Bangladesh, however, is a secular state offering its citizens freedom of religion (U.S. Department of State 2009). According to Robinson (1997:94) Sharia is often misunderstood by the West as a strict set of rules, which must be followed by all Muslims. Sharia, or 'Path', in fact "aims to provide all guidance to in fulfilling the religious duties which qualifies you as a Muslim". In addition, the Sharia also gives advice, for example, about people's private life, marriage, divorce, death and women's position. However, the Sharia is also criticized. Chowdhury (2009) claims that it "has become further and further out of touch with later social, economic, technological, cultural and moral development". He goes further suggesting that the Sharia law is actually an instrument used by the political Islam to control the Muslim world. There are naturally different views on the law, but it seems evident that it does not give the Muslim women equal rights with men. Bangladesh is a traditional and patriarchal society, where women's working possibilities are not very good. Altogether women's position is often quite low and Hashmi (1999:2) states: "Although the Bangladesh constitution has granted equal rights for men and women in every sphere of the state and public life there has been a substantial rise in the number of violent acts against women in the post-independent period". She explains further that even though several laws have been issued to establish equality between men and women in civil law, "social norms and customs based primarily on religious laws discriminate against women in practise" (Hasmi 1999:4).

### **3.3 Bangladeshis in Britain**

The first generation of Bangladeshis who settled came to UK from the district of Sylhet, in north-east Bangladesh in the 1960s and early 1970s. They were predominantly men and their families joined them in the 1980s (Eade 1997:148-149). Often the men returned to Bangladesh to marry and brought back with them

wives that were considerably younger than themselves (Phillipson et al. 2003:25). The Bangladeshis who came to Britain “had started out as 'sojourners' rather than 'settlers', hoping to make their fortune in the UK and return home as rich men of high status” (Carey and Shukur 1985, cited by Kabeer 2000:198). However, often the jobs they ended up getting, and still do, are low paid manual jobs making the dreams of returning home quite distant. In addition, the attitude of the host society towards the Bangladeshis has not always been positive and, as stated before, they, along with the Pakistanis, are often the minority groups facing most problems. Furthermore, the Bangladeshis have a very tight community and set of rules they live by, and their tendency to form “ethnic villages” does not make the situation any easier. On the contrary, it raises even hostility in the white host society, which expects and demands the minorities’ assimilation into the main culture. Modood (2005:38) argues that minority groups:

have distinctive cultural identities or a community life defined as 'alien' will suffer an additional dimension of discrimination and prejudice. The hostility against the non-white minority is likely to be particularly sharp if the minority is sufficiently numerous to reproduce itself as a community and has a distinctive and cohesive value system that can be perceived as an alternative, and a possible challenge, to the norm. It is particularly important to recognize that racism constitutes opposition to, discrimination against, not just individuals but, above all, communities or groups.

The Bangladeshis especially seem to be caught in a vicious circle. The attitude towards them does not allow them equal roles in the host society and they are left with bad housing, employment situation, and health issues. They also tend to keep to themselves and often do not mix with the host society. Simultaneously there is a demand from the host society to assimilate. The result is difficult to define and perhaps there is prejudice from both sides. The situation for the younger generation is a little different because they go to school as children and become parts of the society. Still, they are in between two very different cultures and demands. As Eade (1997:149) points out: “recent educational statistics suggest that the disadvantages experienced by the Bangladeshi first generation may well be extending into the second and third generation, albeit expressed in different ways”.

### 3.4 Monica Ali, the author

#### 3.4.1 Monica Ali's life

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Bangladesh, East Pakistan at the time, to a family with a Bangladeshi father and an English mother and a two-year-old brother. Her parents had met in Britain where her father had come to study engineering. They fell in love and moved to Bangladesh where they started a family. Ali was two when the civil war broke out. Her father was working as an inspector for technical colleges and his position along with the fact that he was married to a foreigner, drew attention to him (Brown 2006). Life was very uncertain and frightening then:

If in one of those murderous nights, the knock came at our door we knew what to do. I was three years old. My brother was five. Next door to our apartment building in Tejgoan was an orphanage, and in the grounds was an orchard. It was the big mango tree that would save us. We slept with our parents on the balcony, fully dressed, my father with a roll of *takas* in his sock. The week before my father had been summoned, along with fifteen of his colleagues, to a meeting at the Dhaka university campus. 'Don't go,' said my mother. Eleven went to the meeting. None came back (Ali 2003).

For young children of that age it must have been a very confusing and frightening experience and it must have left its marks on them. Ali explains: “You know if you're born in a certain situation you always expect your life to run on a steady trajectory? I've never really had a sense of that. I assume that life is going to go up and down” (Brown 2006). Perhaps her early life with these dramatic events, along with the difficulties she faced when her family finally managed to leave Bangladesh and come to Britain, have moulded her into the writer with a deep understanding of living a life in between cultures.

As a young girl Ali lived in Bolton with her family. Her father had to do menial jobs despite his education. The attitude towards immigrants was often racist in 1970s Britain. Bolton was a mill town and many immigrants from Asia at that time arrived to work in the mills. When Ali's parents had left Britain, there were not many Asians,

but as they came back the situation was altogether different. Attitudes had changed and racism lifted its ugly head. Even Ali's English grandparents had a difficult time accepting their daughter's husband and children. According to Ali, having the grandparents talking of 'them' and 'us' was particularly hurtful. There were times when the family was not in any contact with the grandparents. However, as Ali states, her grandmother became to like her father in the end (Brown 2006). Their initial plan, as so many immigrants', was to go back home one day, but they never did. The children settled in school and gradually forgot the Bengali language. Ali's father "just got stuck here, that's all. And home, because it could never be reached, became mythical" (Ali 2003).

Ali entered Wadham College, Oxford, where she studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Wikipedia 2010). After years of running a knick-knack shop, her father did a degree in history and began teaching, and her mother became a counsellor (Brown 2006). Ali married a management consultant, Simon, and has two children, a boy and a girl. Having lived her childhood in poor surroundings she now leads a fairly different life in Dulwich, southeast London.

Ali has been criticized for writing a book of a Bangladeshi immigrant woman and not even speaking the language herself. She often faces the question: "What gives you the right to write about 'us' when you're clearly one of 'them'?" (Ali 2003). For all her life Ali has never truly belonged anywhere except in the 'middle'. She has always been in between cultures and faced the expectations of both. Her father wanted her to be a "good Bengali girl...something I was not and could not be". She was "always an outsider, always standing outside, observing and trying to figure things out" (Brown 2006). Ali states that a literary work should never be judged by the author's gender or colour and as to what comes to being able to write her book from "between" she says:

How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, the answer is I can write about it *because* I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things but rather in a shadow of the doorway is a good place from which to observe. Good training, I feel, for a life as a writer (Ali 2003).

Ali may not be a Bangladeshi woman migrating to Britain as a young girl and she may not be a Bengali mother, but in order to write a book about it, one does not have to be. Most importantly Ali is a mother and a woman with two cultures and that, if anything, gives one at its best a deep sense of culture, inheritance and difference and its impact on a human being.

### 3.4.2 Monica Ali's writing

*Brick Lane* was Monica Ali's first book and even before she had finished it she signed a contract for Doubleday. She received an advance payment that enabled her to hire childcare help and that way finish her book within eighteen months (Macdonald 2004). The book was immensely popular and has been translated to at least 30 languages. Ali was included on Granta's 2003 list of Best Young British Novelists and received several awards (Ellam 2007). The book was also filmed and that also created tension and objection within the Bangladeshi society of London. Ali's second book is said to be very different from the first one. She wrote *Alentejo Blue* about a Portuguese village and states that both books are about village life and both are preoccupied with "agency - the degree to which we act upon the world and the world acts upon us" (Brown 2006). The third book, *In the Kitchen* (2009) is a book about a hotel kitchen in London, or more precisely, of its chef, Gabriel. Despite the many different nationalities in the book, it does not tell so much about immigration and the challenges in adjusting in a foreign culture. These issues are present but somewhere behind the scenes. Mainly the book is about Gabriel's mental health and how he turned into something unexpected. As perhaps often is the case in real life, the story is ugly. The book left me irritated with the thought of the pointlessness of it all. I wanted to finish the book quickly to find some hope in it, but there was none. *Brick Lane* is a book about finding hope in the end, whereas *In the Kitchen* is the opposite of that.

### 3.4.3 Autobiographic features in *Brick Lane*

Monica Ali does not write from her own experience, “yet, there is something there” (Ali 2003). She states that the inspiration for her book came, for instance, from the conflict she has experienced between first and second generation immigrants and the stories her father told her about village life in Bangladesh (Ali 2003). Further, the story of Nazneen is like her mother's, only in reverse. She, like Nazneen, travelled to a far-away foreign culture without any acquaintances or safety-net to back her up. She could not speak the language and was quite isolated. Ali explains that: “it was not only her seeing a new world but also being seen as something other” (Brown 2006). When Ali was a child her mother often talked about that “experience of utter social and cultural dislocation”, making Ali to think about it a great deal (Ali 2007).

The character of Shahana, Nazneen's rebellious teenage daughter, has similar qualities as Ali claims to have had as a teenager. They both grew up in between two very different cultures and tried their best to form identities from pieces of both of them. Shahana too, like Ali, refused to speak Bengali as a teenager. Ali did thorough research for her book about the lives of Bangladeshi women in Britain as well as in London by going through books, articles and academic research. Especially Naila Kabeer's (2000) study on Bangladeshi women's working possibilities was a source of inspiration to Ali (Brick Lane 2003:493) and gave her valuable information of the Bangladeshi situation, since she never herself visited Bangladesh. In conclusion, her book originates from imagination, but also importantly from her cultural inheritance in between cultures. She states writing her book from “my inherited memory, my internalized folklore that tells me that life hangs by a thread” (Ali 2003). It is from that viewpoint where cross-cultural literature is being born. In the next chapter I will place Ali's work into a wider genre of postcolonial literature.

## 4. POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

### 4.1 Theory of postcolonial literature

Ania Loomba (2002:XII) states that “postcolonialism has become so heterogeneous and diffuse that it is impossible to satisfactorily describe what its study might entail”. It is a vast area of study that can include research on, for example, economic theory, archives of colonial governments, critique of medical texts and of course literary analysis. At the time of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, the main themes of writers, artists and intellectuals were nationalism and the triumph of decolonization (Thilakarathne 2010).

Colonial literature has been written for a long time and both by the people of the colonizing countries as well as the colonized. Postcolonial literature is not a new phenomena either, although it has become “fashionable” only fairly recently. Loomba (2002:14) states: “we might ask not only when does the postcolonial begin, but where is postcoloniality to be found?” According to Loomba (2002:7) it can be found everywhere, because once-colonized people are today everywhere in the world. Thus the whole world is postcolonial. This idea makes the whole concept of postcolonialism to sound vast and in all its simplicity makes it more difficult to comprehend. I agree that we live in a postcolonial world, but the affect it has does not reach all the people on the same scale. Despite generalizing the idea of postcolonialism, Loomba explains that the experiences of 'third world' peoples and the peoples living in the West cannot be merged, because despite the similar history, they are not the same.

A great deal can be learned from postcolonial literature because it functions as, what Mary Louise Pratt (cited by Loomba 2002:70) calls, a “contact zone”. Literary text are not merely reflections of the ideologies within the cultures, but “encode the tensions, complexities and nuances within colonized cultures”. Further, Loomba argues that literature written from “both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs,

appropriates and inscribes aspects of the 'other' culture, creating new genres, ideas and identities in the process” (Loomba 2002:70). Postcolonial literature written from “both sides” gives valuable information on the experience of the people between different cultures and further, gives a voice to people with oppressed history, who have historically had difficulties in being heard. According to Kanitkar (1999:192) also social researchers have recently began to “turn to these writings as sources of information and as aids to understanding other cultures, as well as their own”. However, as Loomba argues, today even in the boom of postcolonial studies, some critics have become more important than the field itself and “students feel the pressure to 'do' Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak or Homi Bhabha or read only the very latest article” (Loomba 2002:2). Boehmer (2005:215) points out the fact that until the early 1970s the writings of women with colonial pasts were quite unknown to the critics of the field. Therefore the colonial experience in a literary form through woman's eyes is still more rare than that of a man's. Not that they have not existed before, they simply have not been valued as much. Monica Ali is one of the women authors with colonial pasts, who have made themselves known to the public with their writing.

#### **4.2 Critical approaches to *Brick Lane***

Michael Perfect (2008) claims that *Brick Lane* is a multicultural Bildungsroman. Abrahms (1999:193) explains about the latter term: “The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and often through spiritual crises – into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world”. It is easy to agree with Perfect, since Nazneen grows from a naive young girl into a woman with good self-esteem and understanding of herself and place in life. This does not happen over night and indeed is a passage from childhood into maturity. Nazneen matures into adulthood, but also into a multicultural identity, or at least closer to it. She is a barefooted Bangladeshi, but in order to adjust, gradually grows into her multicultural surroundings. Further, Perfect brings into discussion Ali's use of stereotypes in her book. In Perfect's (2008:109) view this is done in order to

emphasize “the protagonist's final integration into contemporary British society”. However, he argues that the major concern of the novel is the celebration of integration, not the stereotyping of the characters (Perfect 2008:109-110). In my view, Ali's supposed use of stereotypes does not necessarily have a role in emphasizing Nazneen's integration. These colourful and thought-provoking figures may simply be in the story to make it more interesting.

Jane Hiddleston (2005) also brings up the stereotyping of the characters. She discusses Ali's way of describing Hasina as a naïve and vulnerable character. Especially the way Hasina writes emphasizes this according to Hiddleston (2005:62). Hasina's letters are indeed written in incorrect English. Obviously Hasina did not know English, but the bad grammar reflects her knowledge on her own language, Bengali, in general. Hiddleston (2005:60) states that the book can be read in two levels: as a realist novel that is concerned with whether the text succeeds in giving an accurate depiction of the people in it, *or* as a work of fiction.. Hiddleston discusses further that writers that do not belong to the traditional national canon are often given the role of a spokesperson of the minority group they seem to belong and their works are read as description of the group's experience. This is true in Ali's case also, since she, as mentioned earlier, faced critique from the Bangladeshi people who disagreed with the view Ali gave of them. They did not receive Ali's book as a work of literature, but rather as description of themselves.

I have now introduced background information to the subject I will next move on to analyze the book and the chosen themes in it. In the following core sections I will introduce concepts of family life, society and economy, religion and romantic love vs arranged marriage. As family or the lack of it is the foundation of both Nazneen's and Hasina's life, I will begin the analysis by that theme.

## **5. FAMILY LIFE**

### **5.1 Features of family life in Western and South Asian societies**

Family life is a very broad subject and my intention here is not to go into detail about the differences in it in western and eastern societies. Since there is a rather great variation in family structure if considering the whole world, I am going to focus only on very general factors.

In contemporary Western society, family usually means the parents and their children, whereas in many Southeast Asian cultures the family is a larger concept. According to Crouch (1999:226) however, the decline of extended family in Western societies is fairly recent. For example, he states that there was “considerable experience of elderly widows living with their married children and of unmarried children staying in the families of ageing parents until the latter died”.

Richard J. Gelles (1995:10) defines family as: “a social group and a social institution that possesses an identifiable structure made up of positions (e.g., breadwinner, child rearer, decision maker, nurturer) and interactions among those who occupy the positions”. For instance, in Southeast Asian families the impact of the extended family is much greater than in British families. Marriage is the foundation of the family and the arrangements for it are considered to be a concern of the extended family too. This, according to Bhopal (1999:121) “indicates a concern with family values rather than individualistic ones”. Families are not formed from an individual's point of view, but rather from the larger family's, whereas in contemporary Western cultures one rarely makes a decision on marriage from any one else's view but from one's own. Marriage and arranged marriage are going to be dealt with in more detail in chapter 8.

Since in South Asian cultures women are considered to be the maintainers of the family honour, they need to be under constant surveillance to ensure that they “do

nothing to bring *sharam* (shame) on their kin” (Kabeer 2000:34). This is a very controversial responsibility. How can one be responsible for something she/he has no power over? The only way to keep the family honour is for the women to obey their family's orders. That does not give the women real power to make decisions on their lives. Tradition and family values are considered stronger in Southeast Asian cultures than British and Western cultures in general, but as Okin (1999) argues, from the Western point of view, often the maintenance of traditions is almost synonymous with women's servitude. Most traditions are based on patriarchal values and women are considered to be the ones to maintain them. She discusses further, that often the cultural features of a minority group have a greater impact on women than men since the women spend more time and energy on “preserving and maintaining the personal, familial, and reproductive side of life” (Okin 1999:13). These factors are often the ones that traditions and cultural features are most concerned with. Okin goes on by stating that the more time women are required to spend on domestic sphere, the less time and opportunity they have to invest on their public life, for instance, work outside home.

The difference between South Asian and British family life is not as simple as the size of the family, gender roles or the degree of individualism in them. Yet, those are some of the most visible ones. These themes also stand out in *Brick Lane* and next I am going to deal with the family features of Nazneen and Hasina's lives.

## **5.2 Nazneen and Hasina's childhood in Bangladesh**

Nazneen and Hasina were born to a fairly wealthy family in Bangladesh, and their father was the second richest man of the village. Their childhood seems to have been more or less carefree at first. The reader is presented with happy flashbacks from the girls' past and introduced to their childhood through them. Nazneen and Hasina both remember events from the past that bring back happy memories but, also some things that have left a great negative impact. Their mother's death is naturally the most serious one and casts a dark shadow on both of their lives. The mother does not

seem to provide much safety for the girls even when she is still alive. Their father's sister, aunt Mumtaz, is more calm and sensible, and perhaps came closest of being a mother to the girls. However, neither one of the girls seem to miss her in the course of the book. For Hasina it would be perhaps impossible to return to her home village. Nazneen does not even think of visiting her childhood family. Initially this seems rather odd. Still, Ali is presumably aware of the Bangladeshi custom that Kabeer (2000:160) explains: “the practices of marital exogamy and patrilocal residence in Bangladesh meant that women were generally cut off from their own families and their childhood friends after marriage”.

The beginning of Nazneen's life was quite dramatic. She was born two months prematurely and was thought to be a stillborn child, but as her aunt accidentally dropped her on a mattress she made “A yowl! A cry!” (BL 2003:13) and lived after all. For the first few days Nazneen would not feed, but her mother refused to take her to the hospital because of her strong faith in God and fate: “Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal”. Nazneen's life began in a very uncertain way and as she grew up she heard the story of “How You Were Left To Your Fate” (BL 2003:15) many times. Nazneen's father's reaction to his first daughter's birth was quite indifferent when the mother told him it was a girl “I know. Never mind [...] What can you do? (BL 2003:14). He most likely had hoped for a boy. For Muslims marriage is a contract, in which dowry is agreed and the husband pays it to the wife's family (Robinson 1997:97). However, in Bangladeshi culture the birth of girls meant that in order to get them married the parents had to pay dowry to the groom's family. Before it had been the other way around but now, according to Kabeer (2000:60-61), there had been a shift in the direction of marriage payments and therefore parents considered daughters as major economic liabilities. Van Schendel states (quoted by Kabeer 2000:61) “As it was out of the question to leave a girl unmarried, girls were viewed as liabilities to their parents, while boys were viewed as assets”. Having a boy meant security for old age as it was common that the sons took care of their parents. When daughters married they often had very little contact with their own family. This, and the fact that the event took place in 1960's Bangladesh, one of the worlds most patriarchal societies,

makes it perhaps a little easier to understand why Nazneen's birth was not the happiest one for her parents. All this was the beginning of her becoming “a comically solemn child” and moulded her into the unselfish, insecure and fairly passive young woman that she became. She had been taught never to question her fate and always “treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her” (BL 2003:15). It took her a long while before she dared to drop the indifferent attitude, which was never really indifferent inside, and make her own life as she wanted.

Hasina's character is very different from her obedient sister. She did what she wanted and took no advice from anybody. She ended up marrying for love and escaped from her home. She could never go back because she had brought so much shame on her family. According to Goldthorpe (1987:196) the idea of family honour in the cultures of Indian sub-continent is especially strong and what Hasina did cannot be forgiven by her father. Would she have left her home in search for love and acceptance if she had received it from her parents? Perhaps she would, but she never found out her father's true feelings towards her and wondered in several letters to Nazneen whether their father would forgive her in the end. Also Nazneen lived her life unaware of whether her father cared about her or not. He did not come to say goodbye to Nazneen the morning she left for England by aeroplane. “Was it because he cared too much or because he cared too little?” (BL 2003:24) Nazneen would most likely never know. All this uncertainty and especially the mother's violent death must have had an impact on the girls' self-esteem. She was found dead a spear piercing her heart. She had committed suicide, but this was never explained to the girls and therefore the death of their mother remained as something secretive and mysterious. Although never really talked about, the mother's death followed both of the girls and for Nazneen she appeared in dreams on many occasions. The father was very distant to the girls. Perhaps their relationship was at the time normal but never having a boy to secure the parents future and instead having two daughters must have had an impact on it. What happened to the father in the end or whether the daughters met him again, is not explained in the book.

Soon after Hasina's escape their father made the arrangements for Nazneen to marry a man he had chosen for her. Nazneen was only eighteen but that was a normal marrying age for girls in Bangladesh and her father wanted to avoid the risk of a love marriage for her elder daughter. This way Nazneen became the saviour of the family honour. Nazneen's husband had migrated to London and was considerably older than she was. It was common for male Bangladeshi immigrants to first go and work in Britain and then come back to select a wife to bring with them. According to Phillipson et al (2003:25), as the Bangladeshi girls tended to marry in their mid to late teens it was natural that there was an age gap between them and the men. Older brides for the immigrant men were simply not available.

### **5.3 Nazneen's early life in London**

Nazneen arrived in London in the early 1980s. She lived with her husband Chanu in the borough of Tower Hamlets. Life was very sheltered in the beginning as it is for women of Bangladeshi culture in general. Women were expected to maintain the purdah and stay indoors. If they had to go outside they had to wear a burkha, an outfit covering the body (Wikipedia 2011), or at least a scarf. Purdah means several things. According to WSOY's English-Finnish General Dictionary purdah means 1) women's seclusion from public life, 2) veil, 3) curtain separating the women's side of the house. Kabeer (2000:34-35) finds broader meanings for purdah and claims, as quoted before, that at the core of it is the notion of family honour. Further, purdah has a meaning in the economic side of life as well since it limits women's working possibilities and ties the women to home. Purdah is an abstract idea that in practice becomes real. By this I mean that purdah in a sense is nothing real or visible, but instead a state of mind that women are required to maintain. Burkha, the outfit covering most of the body that many Muslim women wear, is an actual thing demonstrating that the women are maintaining the purdah, the state of mind. This way the act of wearing a scarf is a practice of showing the abstract, the thought behind it all. The most extreme form of the head scarfs is the niqab. It covers the whole face too, leaving only the eyes on sight (sometimes they are partly covered too). In the book Nazneen apparently wears the burkha. This is not stated, but can be

read in between the lines, for example, when she surprised herself on several occasions not covering her hair in front of Karim, the middle man for the clothing company Nazneen works for, and her lover-to-be.

In the beginning everything was very new and frightening to a young girl from a small Bangladeshi village, who was suddenly brought to a huge city of London. She did not understand the language and had no contacts of her own. She arrived in an already existing Bangladeshi immigrant society that faced different challenges than the one she was used to. However, as Phillipson et al (2000:10) point out, the Bangladeshi society also in Bangladesh was going through changes at the time. As a result of the decline of family-based farming and economic and political crises of the 1970's the gender roles were changing there as well. In Britain it was possible for the immigrant families to maintain their gender-specific customs and traditional settings. Especially in the beginning of their stay it was easier because without, for example, the language abilities the women had very little choice. Getting a job outside home would have been difficult. Often the men would not have wanted their wives to have jobs. Women were needed to take care of the children and other domestic matters.

Also Nazneen's life consisted of cooking, cleaning and washing and, although she tried her best to find reasons to be grateful, her mind wondered off from time to time and she dreamt of something else. It is not evident from the book what this something else would be. Was it a life with more freedom? A more meaningful job outside home? A more romantic relationship? Had the life in England affected her idea of how a woman's life should be? She had naturally seen glimpses of the western way of life and how women had more freedom there. However, she was a member of a very traditional Bangladeshi society with very little contact with the British society. I believe she would have felt the same feelings even in Bangladesh, without the so-called Western gender equality. Her life in a loveless marriage, working more or less as a maid, must have been extremely boring, was it in London or anywhere else in the world. She was taught from her childhood that "what could not be changed must be borne" (BL 2003:16) Days were lonely but tolerable and she did her best to accept her fate in silence. Scholar Islam (1979, quoted by Kabeer

2000:38) states that a Bangladeshi woman is: “Brought up from childhood to believe that she exists only as a daughter, wife and mother to some men, her whole existence is oriented to serve and please men”. This could be argued to represent all patriarchal societies' view of women, and as Okin states: “virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts” (1999:16). Further, Gelles (1995:154) claims that Asian families (although he describes the ones in America) “are rigidly patriarchal. Men are the wage earners, decision makers, and disciplinarians. Women are expected to stay at home and care for the children”. This traditional role division is represented also in *Brick Lane*. However, when Nazneen matures, she begins to understand that she does not exist only to please her husband or men in general.

### **5.3.1 Nazneen's husband and children**

Nazneen's husband Chanu was an educated man. He had a degree in English literature from Dhaka University and he had taken different courses in Britain as well. He worked for the council in Tower Hamlets and was expecting a promotion, which never came, but instead he was fired. What he actually did for the council is not described in the book, but after it he ended up driving a cab. With his education he must have been frustrated. A man with his pride and ambition had set a goal much higher than that. He was very disappointed with British society that treated him the same as the uneducated immigrants. He explained to his wife: “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” (BL 2003:34). This was probably said with irony. Nevertheless, his plans were big and he had a great deal of faith in himself and naturally the disappointment was as great. Chanu was so full of knowledge and information that if he had not been able to educate his own family he would have probably felt like he was exploding. He shared his views on all kinds of matters with Nazneen and loved to talk. “He talked and she listened. Often she had a feeling he was not talking to her, or rather that she was only part of a larger audience for whom the speech was meant” (BL 2003:42). Frustration, pride but also shame

made Chanu the man he was. He was frustrated at not being able to use his education for anything and ashamed too. However, the pride in him kept him going on.

Nazneen and Chanu's first child was a boy, Raqib. Naturally they were both very happy about him but in different ways and "For Nazneen, the baby's life was more real to her than her own" (BL 2003:83). A mother has to put aside her own needs and wants when taking care of a baby. Especially with the first child the whole world changes and everything is by the baby's rules. The mother is there only to take care of her child and it is all very overwhelming. For Chanu the baby meant something different: "For him the baby was a set of questions, an array of possibilities, a spark for debate and for reflection. He pondered on Raqib. He examined, from a distance, his progress and made plans for his future. The baby opened up new horizons and closed others; he provided a telescope and a looking glass" (BL 2003:83). For both parents the baby was something completely new and amazing, but in different ways.

However, the baby became ill and was taken to a hospital and just as Nazneen and Chanu thought they could take him back home he died unexpectedly. The life after Raqib's death is not described in the book but the reader is presented a series of letters from Hasina and several years pass by in this way. The tremendous loss and sorrow are in a way made easier for the reader because they are not dealt with. One can only imagine the pain beyond words and comprehension with the loss of a child. The baby had given meaning to Nazneen's otherwise empty days. Now her life must have been extremely empty and meaningless. Maybe she draw strength from her faith and maybe Chanu concentrated on his vast knowledge of books, but nevertheless the death of their child changed them a great deal. Nazneen matured naturally also over the years, but losing a child made her grow up very quickly. She also once again came face to face with the notion of fate and whether matters should be left in God's hands or something should be done about them. When the baby was still alive Nazneen thought of her own mother who chose not to take her to a hospital and her own actions: "all she had done for Raqib was nothing. God decided. She thought about How You Were Left To Your Fate. See! It made no difference. Amma

did nothing to save her. And she lived. It was in God's hands". However, after a while her thoughts were somewhat different: "At once she was enraged. A mother who did nothing to save her own child! If Nazneen [...] had not brought the baby to hospital at once, he would have died" (BL 2003:137). The baby did die after a while of fighting for his life. Nazneen had taken him to a hospital and it seemed to have saved his life, but in the end nothing could be done. Much later Nazneen's mother appeared to her in a dream and criticized her actions: "You thought it was you who had the power. You thought you would keep him alive. You decided you would be the one to choose. [...] When you stood between your son and his Fate, you robbed him of any chance. [...] Now say this to yourself, and say it out loud, 'I killed my son. I killed my son'" (BL 2003:432). Nazneen must have always wondered if her son would have lived if she had simply left the matters to fate. Her mother had done so with her and she had lived. Naturally it is clear that most mothers would do anything to save their child. So had Nazneen done, but unfortunately, was it fate or something else, no one and nothing could save poor little Raqib.

Chanu seemed to have changed from a fairly gentle man into a quite aggressive one. When the daughters were born, first Shahana and then Bibi, Chanu was a very stern father giving beatings to his daughters. In general "There was always tension between them. They could never get over their disappointments. If Shahana had been a boy, would it be different? Bibi he barely noticed. He talked to her, but how surprised he would be if answers started coming back" (BL 2003:193). Chanu had lost a son, generally considered as an asset in Bangladeshi culture, and now he had two daughters, who probably did not represent same things to him as his son. Perhaps the existence of his daughters constantly reminded him of the loss of his son and made him angry all the time. Chanu had never raised a hand at Nazneen but she has always assumed he would. Although "He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle. Even so it was foolish to assume he would never beat her"(BL 2003:22). Perhaps that is why she did not say anything to Chanu to make him stop beating the girls because she had always expected that Chanu would use violence. Still, it was not easy on Nazneen: "She had to concentrate hard to get through each day. Sometimes she felt as if she held her breath the entire evening. It

was up to her to balance the competing needs, to soothe here and urge there, and push the day along to its close” (BL 2003:205).

The girls and Chanu behaved as they wanted to and especially Shahana and Chanu often ended up in situations where he gave her a flogging. Nazneen felt that it was up to her to either prevent the clash or fail in stopping it. In the end it and all the other things became too much for her and she had a nervous breakdown. That seemed to be a turning point in Nazneen's life. It forced Chanu to get along with his daughters and let Nazneen off the role of a constant peacemaker. All her life she had tried her best to bear everything in silence and never make a fuss of herself or her needs. She had been taught to always leave everything up to fate and never question it. The nervous breakdown seemed to be the beginning of the rest of her life when she was going to be the one making decisions on her own life, not her parents, not Chanu, not even fate. This was not clear immediately after the incident, but nevertheless, the individualistic side of Nazneen's thinking arose from then on. When she considered what was best for her daughters, she did not think how the Bangladeshi society would react. She made the very bold decision to stay in London when her husband would move back to Bangladesh to make a better life over there. It was a hard choice for Nazneen because it meant that she would not see her sister. As an obedient wife and a devoted sister she should have gone with her husband. In addition, she risked being an outcast of Bangladeshi society by not going with her husband. Still, she chose the other way and stayed to make a life for herself and her daughters. She cared for her sister but could not put her life over those of her children. She knew her daughters would never adjust in Bangladesh and also she had had taste of the independence that was only possible for her in Britain, where the state provides the protection. In Bangladesh she would have needed her husband's protection.

#### **5.4 Hasina's search for family in Bangladesh**

Hasina's life in Bangladesh was quite different from Nazneen's, however, perhaps

surprisingly, not in the way one may expect. Considering from a so-called Western view one might think that surely life in London would mean more freedom to a woman than life in Dhaka. However, as Kabeer (2000:354) points out in her study “Bangladeshi immigrants into Britain sought to reconstitute family and gender relations in the London context as closely as possible to the model they had been accustomed to in the past. It was migration within national boundaries, into Dhaka, which proved to be more disruptive of past patterns of gender constraint”. Hasina's life was in a sense more free than Nazneen's but it was not necessarily what Hasina had hoped for. In Bangladesh male protection is very important. First a woman lives within the shelter of her childhood family with the father or brother or other male relative as the head of the family. When a woman gets married she becomes a part of her husband's family and is not necessarily in contact with her own family from then on. Thus, Hasina was constantly looking for male protection and occasionally managed to find it too, but it never came without a cost.

Hasina married for love and escaped with her husband and in the beginning life was good. She wrote to her sister “I so happy now I almost scared. Hardly dare opening my eyes” (BL 2003:25). It turned out that her fear was not in vain. In the course of time Hasina's husband began to beat her and in the end she left him. She did not stay even though that meant she had no shelter or protection. She had always been the one to walk her own path and “kicked against Fate” (BL 2003:22). She did not stay to find out what would happen to her but instead took matters into her own hands and left for a new life in Dhaka. At first she got a job in a garment factory. She lived in a shared flat with several men but she was under protection of Mr Chowdhury, a wealthy business man who owned the house. No one bothered her because they were probably afraid of the landlord. Her living conditions were poor. Nevertheless, Hasina was happy because she had found some safety and substitute for a family in her neighbours and Mr Chowdhury who was “like a father” to her (BL 2003:146) and only charged small rent from her. He also called himself Hasina's father and was very jealous of the men that lived with her. Hasina wrote to her sister “

Two days past Mr Chowdhury come here. He ask to comb hair. I did it and massage feet. Much tension in feet but with me he say he can relax. [...] He can never be alone

because of all day people want something. Even in spite he feel alone. He in actual fact lonely like hell. He trust no one. Everybody cheating. Wife is dead for long time. Sons have gone. [...] He tell me 'You are my daughter. I like to bring you to my house. But what people will say? We are not related. I have no wife.' Then he sigh and rub his feet and when I look up there is water in the eyes. 'If a girl comes to a mans house as servant there is no trouble. She must come as servant. Or as wife. Then all is well.' Sister can Mr Chowdhury mean to take for wife? It keep going around in my mind but it is a foolish thing Is it a foolish thing? (BL 2003:162-163).

However, Mr Chowdhury never married Hasina, as becomes evident below. If he had, Hasina's life would not have been that different. She would have still been a maid to someone that did not really love her.

Hasina became friends with a boy called Abdul at the factory. Naive as she was she let him walk her home and since it was not appropriate for the men and women to even work together this walking was interpreted that they were having an affair and people started to gossip. Hasina only found protection and company in Abdul but in the Bangladeshi society the reputation of the factory was very delicate matter and thus this kind of gossip could not be allowed. As Kabeer (2000:73) points out there were rumours that the garment factories in Bangladesh were “hotbeds for sexual scandal” and therefore the owners did everything they could in order to restore the factory's good reputation. This was also true in Hasina's case when she was fired for an untrue reason. She was accused of having an affair with Abdul and since Abdul did not deny it she was let go. Abdul, on the other hand, was able to keep his job. According to Mernissi (1975, cited in Kabeer 2000:35) One Islamic view on female sexuality is that it is “active and dangerous, threatening moral chaos and disorder (*fitna*) if not properly regulated”. Kabeer (2000:35) points out further that women must lower their gaze when meeting strange men. Therefore, it is up to women to maintain their virtue. Also Mr Chowdhury told Hasina that “boys are like wax around a flame. They come close and they melt. How they can help this thing? It is you who must take care” (BL 2003:158). It is the woman's, not the men's, responsibility not to endanger the factory's reputation.

Mr Chowdhury found out about the incident at the factory and became furious. He raped Hasina and kept coming back once or twice a week. The dreams of a marriage between them vanished at this point and Mr Chowdhury began charging rent again.

To make money, Hasina began to take other customers as well and that way became a prostitute. As she wrote to her sister “they put me out from factory for untrue reason and due to they put me out the reason have come now as actual truth” (BL 2003:169). She was treated like a low woman and was therefore left without protection and had no choice but to become a prostitute in order to survive. However, the hope for a family once again raised its head when a customer gave Hasina a marriage proposal. Hasina accepted it and kept it a secret that she was still married to her first husband. She had very few options and tried her best to please her new husband with strange habits. He was an albino and since Hasina was an exceptional beauty they shared the feeling of being stared at all their lives. The most important thing for Hasina was being a wife and having the shelter of a home and her husband's protection. Who the husband was or whether she loved him or not, was not important at this point of her life. Hasina longed for the traditional role of a house-wife under her husband's rule while Nazneen in the end longed for freedom of it. Hasina wrote to Nazneen that although she understood that Nazneen enjoyed being able to leave her flat, she had come inside now, “How I love the walls keep me here” (BL 2003:173). Inside the walls of her home she was safe from all the staring and gossiping. This state of matters was new to her and she found it comforting, not restricting. What restricted her was the society, and as a single woman she could not live up to its expectations. However, after a while her husband wanted a divorce when Hasina's beauty was not enough to cover the fact that she had been a prostitute. She was “damaged past repair” (BL 2003:171). Now the husband claimed that Hasina had put a curse on him and that is why they had married.

After the divorce several years passed before Hasina found shelter again and there were no letters to her sister. A wealthy family took her under their wing from a “House of Falling Women” (BL 2003:220). She worked as a maid in their house taking care of their two children and domestic work. This was probably the closest she ever came to having a family and she very much enjoyed the company of the children who also grew very attached to her. She was very fond of especially the little girl, Daisy, but always had to bear in mind that they were not her children. She explained in a letter to her sister: “I feel like hold the breath sometimes when I look

at Baby Daisy. Is like soap bubble on the hand catch light with thousands beautiful colour” (BL 2003:335). Hasina knew that the baby was not hers. To be part of her life was as fragile and as easily broken as a soap bubble. To be part of this family, even as a maid, gave Hasina an illusion of a family, but it could also be dangerous to her, because she could lose it in a minute. As Zaid, the family cook, said to Hasina about Baby Daisy: “Don't make the mistake. She is not for you” (BL 2003:335). Hasina was living a life that had no meaning other than to survive and take care of someone else's children and home. Maybe that was one of the reasons why she decided to escape with Zaid, the chef, and leave the shelter of the house and company of the children: the hope for finally finding happiness and a life just for her and her needs.

For both sisters family provided the frames to live in, but in different ways. Nazneen's life was nothing but her family and she was anxious to have something more too in the end. Hasina, however, never had a real family after escaping her childhood home. She had a constant and very powerful longing for a family, which made her to take directions in her life that did not always end up well. Namely the lack and search for a family framed Hasina's life. The surrounding societies had a major impact on both of the sisters and the actions they took and next I will analyze the meaning of society and economy on their lives.

## **6. SOCIETY AND ECONOMY**

### **6.1 Features of Bangladeshi society in London in *Brick Lane***

The Bangladeshi society in London's Tower Hamlets is presented in *Brick Lane* as quite separate from the host society. There are no characters from the host society and often the other people are presented as “them”, making the Bangladeshi society “us”. The division is quite deep both in real life and in the book. The vicious circle

of racism and the demand of assimilation, as discussed earlier, are not dealt with in the book a great deal, but they are there. The characters are trying to live their lives in between the surrounding cultures and societies with their many challenges. Parekh (2000:45) states that: “Britain [...] contains many conflicting traditions and is differentiated by gender, class, region and religion as well as by culture, ethnicity and race. Assimilation is a fantasy, for there is no single culture into which all people can be incorporated”. It is true that British culture consists of several different cultures. Yet, the host society's culture is the one that the minority groups are expected to assimilate into, not the other cultures. Assimilation is indeed perhaps a fantasy, because it would be absurd to expect a member of a minority group simply to forget their own traditions and customs over a short period of time. What is needed instead is acceptance from both or all sides and room for different cultures to exist without harming one another, in other words, what Crouch (1999:289) called, integration, discussed in chapter 2.2.

However, as immigrants tend to form so called ethnic villages and are kept or keep separate from the host society, it is very difficult to form relationships with other nationalities. Mrs Islam, a very powerful figure in London's Bangladeshi society, who “knew everything” (BL 2003:28), gave a good example of this: “Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old fashioned, [...] But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs” (BL 2003:29). This was a strong message to Nazneen from an elder member of the society to keep to her “own kind”. In general, women of the Bangladeshi society are expected to stay at home and take care of the children. This way they rarely learn the language which further keeps them separate from the host society. In the book women did make social calls on each other and also Nazneen got to know, for example, Mrs. Islam and Razia, who became her friend. Razia was not a traditional Bangladeshi housewife and, especially after her husband's death, she stopped wearing traditional clothes and began running a garment business. The notion of having to give up one's own culture simply by “mixing” with different people seems to be quite common among any groups of people. In my view it is the fear for the unknown that keeps up the separation and hostility on all sides.

Kabeer (2000:323-324) explains some of the factors affecting the Bangladeshi's tendency to form a tight community in Britain:

the origins of the community from a restricted number of villages in one district in Bangladesh; the voucher system which reinforced the selectivity of the migration stream by encouraging migrants from the families and kinship networks of those who had already settled in the UK; the geographical concentration of the community in East London, reinforced over time by recession-related redundancies among those who had taken jobs in other parts of the UK and their gravitation to London; and finally the institutionalized racism of British society which gave these processes of geographical concentration an added impetus

The racism of the host society reinforces the immigrants separation from it and strengthens the minority groups own sense of not belonging to it. Thus, maintaining their own culture becomes increasingly important. In addition, Phillipson et al. (2003:55) talk about the significance of transnationalism. They cite Glick Schiller (1992) when explaining that the process of transnationalism involves the immigrants building social fields that “link together their country of settlement and country of origin”. Jan Blommaert (2010:7) talks about the idea of spatial organization. He explains that often immigrants' spatial organization is local as well as translocal. Therefore it is real as well as virtual. Anyone who has lived abroad can surely agree with this. Sometimes combining these two worlds can be a challenge. It is like living in different places simultaneously.

The immigrants keep in tight contact with their relatives in their home countries and often send money to them. In *Brick Lane* too, Nazneen kept in contact with Hasina and sent her money, and also planned to go back to Bangladesh. Thus, she can be considered as what Schiller calls, a transmigrant. Transnationalism is significant to many immigrants as it helps them retaining “a sense of belonging and support when relocated to a foreign country” (Phillipson et al. 2003:58). Also for Nazneen writing with her sister kept her in contact with her homeland.

Her friendship with Razia helped her to adjust to the surrounding Bangladeshi society. However, their friendship also helped Nazneen to break free from the

society's tight grip and make a life of her own. Razia represents a strong-minded woman, who did not obey the rules of the Bangladeshi society. She made her own life despite the problems she faced. She was brave enough to start a business and that way enabled Nazneen to earn her own living and become more independent. However, even Razia was not able to do all this before her husband died, because he would not have approved of her working. Razia explained to Nazneen: "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" (BL 2003:123).

This seemed to be a problem to Bangladeshi women interviewed by Phillipson et al. (2003:39-42) as well. They wanted to contribute to the family income, but it was difficult for them to get jobs. The women in the survey did not mention their husband's disapproval as such, but the responsibility of taking care of the household and children often gave them very little chance of even applying for a job. The men were many times unemployed and could have taken care of the children, but that seemed to be out of the question. I will elaborate on the issue of women working in chapter 6.2.

Racism and the British culture are not the strongest themes in the book. Hiddleston (2005:68) discusses the fact that Ali has indeed "spent surprisingly little time examining racial hatred in London's East End". Here Hiddleston's own two ways of reading the novel become relevant. Is *Brick Lane* simply a literary text or does it depict the realism of the Bangladeshi minority of the real Brick Lane area? Racism is a true factor in contemporary British society and also in *Brick Lane* there is a strong division of "us" and "them". Several characters compare the British culture to their own. In Chanu's view his "own culture is strong. And what is their culture? Television, pub, throwing darts, Kicking a ball. That is the white working-class culture" (BL 2003:254). He considers himself as having a higher culture than that but is not considered very highly by the host society and as he explains to his wife: "These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an

aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off boat possessing only the lice on their heads” (BL 2003: 34). The first Bangladeshi immigrants that came to Tower Hamlets in the 1960s and 1970s worked, for example, in the garment industry, cafes, restaurants (Eade 1997:138), in other words in jobs that did not require much education. Chanu had a relatively high education, but was still unable to get a job to match it. In conclusion, racism is not one of the major themes of *Brick Lane*, but is there behind the scenes and has an effect on the characters' lives.

Why did Ali choose to avoid racism as a major theme in the book? Was she afraid of the reaction it might cause in the white society? Or did she in fact avoid it as a theme? Perhaps she did not choose racism as an obvious theme, because it is a matter that often goes without saying. Further, *Brick Lane* is a book about an immigrant woman living within a tight Bangladeshi society. The contacts with the host society are quite limited in the beginning, so there is not really material for racism as such. The racism that is dealt with is that of from the immigrants' side towards the English culture.

The “gossip network” that Goldthorpe (1987:198) claims to be “a persistent feature of south Asian societies” is present in the book as well. People cannot do anything without the society knowing about it. Gossiping is common for the women, but also for the men in the book. As Razia, put it: “We love to gossip. This is the Bangla sport” (BL 2003:125). Further, Chanu was concerned about what people might say if they saw Nazneen walking in the street, or even more so, if she would begin to work outside home. “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” (BL 2003:45). Even in a big city, where usually one would think of being more or less anonymous, Nazneen was under the gaze of the Bangladeshi society, even though she did not really know anybody. However, for British society, she is virtually invisible. This is evident also from Razia's view: “if you go out to shop, go to Sainsbury's. English people don't look at you twice. But if you go out to our shops, the Bengali men will make things up about you. Once you get talked about, then that's it. Nothing you can

do” (BL 2003:59).

### **6.1.1 The importance of language and education**

Language is essential to human beings, whether verbal or non-verbal. When immigrants do not learn the language of the host society, it is only natural that they do not become part of it. Knowing the language would be the first key for them to open the doors to the surrounding host society, for example, in terms of education and employment. Often women, like Nazneen in the book, want to learn and take language lessons, but their husbands disapprove. Chanu was not keen on Nazneen learning the language and reminded her that she was going to be a mother and would not need the English language. Gradually Nazneen learnt some words and especially after her daughters were born when they taught her. According to Phillipson et al. (2003:49) only 32% of the Bangladeshi women they interviewed could read and write English. Many of the women had attended language courses, but had dropped out because it was too difficult for them to take care of their children and families at the same time. One of the interviewed women stated: “My husband wouldn't let me go to classes, he would tell me off and say, 'why do you want to do that? What are you going to do with English?' But what could I do with it now? I couldn't get a job now, could I? Now there are so many young girls looking for jobs. Why would they want to give me a job?” (Phillipson et al. 2003:50). If she had learnt the language, she would have a better possibility to get a job, but her husband, like Chanu in the book, wanted to keep his wife within the shelter of the home and not risk the maintenance of the household. This way the women are left outside the society and very few of them have the courage to do against their husbands' wishes. The women of the Bangladeshi society do not seem to stand a chance in these circumstances. Firstly, they do not have the necessary language skills, which would enable them to attend education, and after that seek for employment. Secondly, as seen above, their husbands often will not let them even try to learn the language, which makes the dream of ever having a job with proper income quite distant.

What could or should be done to help women like Nazneen? Would it help if language school was made obligatory and childcare provided to enable the women to attend? I believe that these women are kept tightly within their minority's grip and under their husbands rule, that obligation would make little difference. The answer lies in children's education. Nazneen's daughters go to school, which gives them a chance to learn the language from an early age and that way have better access to employment. Parekh (2000:146) states that even though Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils in school "achieve below the national average", they "steadily close the gap between themselves and others in course of their education". Still, as Parekh (2000:146) explains further, they are over-represented in the statistics measuring poorest qualifications among school pupils aged 16.

I have now introduced the Bangladeshi women's language and employment situation in Britain in general and will next look at Nazneen's working possibilities in closer detail.

## **6.2 Nazneen's way into daylight from the shelter of home**

As mentioned earlier, Nazneen was a house-wife in the beginning of the book. Work outside home was out of the question for her. As Kabeer (2000:63) points out, women working outside home were considered to be extremely poor. Very few men wanted the shame of the society seeing them as incapable of feeding their family and therefore denied their wives from working. However, as Chanu became unemployed later, he allowed his wife to start working at home as a garment worker. Working at home Nazneen was safe from the society's gaze and not many people had to know about it. Kabeer (2000:14) discusses her amazement by the vast contrast between "the high visibility of the Bangladeshi women workers whom I had observed on their way to and from work on the streets of Dhaka, and the near-invisibility of the Bangladeshi women who worked as domestic outworkers for the industry in London". One would expect the opposite, since Bangladesh is considered far more traditional and patriarchal society than the British one when it comes to the working possibilities for women. Kabeer (2000:14) explains further that officially it was only

men that were employed by the garment factories in Britain, but in reality many women worked for them at home. In conclusion one could argue that the social change for women's roles as workers and breadwinners was happening faster in Bangladesh than in Britain for the minority group. However, this needs to be looked at from several perspectives and I will do that in chapter 6.4.

In the beginning Chanu was the middleman, who delivered the garments to Nazneen from the factory and back again. This way he was aware of how much she earned and she was not able to save for her sister's benefit. Later when he got a job as a taxi driver he had to give the task to a man called Karim. Karim changed Nazneen's life permanently, because they fell in love and had an affair. Working and earning money gave Nazneen new kind of motivation and she was happier. Most of all she had something to do while her daughters were at school.

Earning money for most women means more freedom of choice. When a woman works and earns wages, she often also gets more to say when it comes to family purchases. For Nazneen earning money meant that she could send some to her sister and that way help her at least a little. Kabeer (2000:301) points out that for Bangladeshi women who worked at home the earned income also meant having more respect within the family. One of the interviewed women explained: "Money is the root of everything. Women have an independent income when they work and they should have the right to spend it...The husband treats them with more respect and the money is of assistance to the family". However, this was not always the case for all women, because some of the husbands took the money and it had no affect on the women's power in the family. Also for Nazneen it was difficult sometimes to secretly put money aside to be sent to Hasina. Chanu knew how much she had earned and expected the money to be saved up for the tickets back to Bangladesh. Kabeer (2000:306) also states that women's home working activity did not have a great impact on the gender relations in general. They were still working inside their homes and under the surveillance of their husbands. Working outside the home would have probably meant a greater difference in the women's situation.

### 6.3 The impact of the society on Hasina in Dhaka

Hasina had no family to protect her in Dhaka. She lived in different places but not out of her own choice. She went where she could find at least some protection. In the beginning she lived in a house with other people, mostly young men, and worked in a garment factory. Kabeer (2000:80) explains about the garment worker women seeking to create fictive kinship networks in order to avoid the social isolation they faced in big cities. Hasina too did this by clinging into her landlord and the people she lived with. This is understandable on two levels. One the one hand, by bringing shame on her family Hasina had lost connection with her father and was a young, lonely girl who missed a parent to take care of her. On the other hand the real physical danger threatened her. Hashmi (1999:3) claims that in contemporary Bangladesh rape, murder and trafficking of women into slavery are common features. If she does not have a man to protect her, she can be in danger. Further, should a woman get raped, she brings shame on her family. Hashmi (1999:4) goes on explaining that during the civil war in 1971 thousands of Bangladeshi women were raped by Pakistani soldiers. After this the women were not accepted by their own families. They became “damaged goods” as Hasina after entering prostitution. The society often fails to protect the women from violence and rape, but it is sadly the women who not only pay the price, but also get punished for it by being excluded from their families and the society.

Further, domestic violence is a common feature in Bangladeshi families according to several sources. Hashmi (1999:4) claims that most Bangladeshi women have very little protection against domestic violence. The police consider domestic violence as a marital problem rather than a law and order issue. The options for women facing violence are not very broad. Women can either stay or escape or ultimately commit suicide, which a large number of women do out of desperation.

Hasina chose to escape her first husband because of his violent nature. Before she did this, she tried her best to endure the situation. She too was brought up to believe

she existed to serve a man and had very little rights as is clear from her comment: “I do not let my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say. Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat” (BL 2003:25). She believes that if women would only shut their mouths there would be no domestic violence. Hasina is clearly quite naive, but more importantly she is a product of a very patriarchal culture. If women in so-called western equality still subconsciously, at least, believe themselves to be worth less than men (e.g. economically), so how can we expect anything more from a woman like Hasina? She did, however, go against the norm by choosing her husband herself and she left him to enter a world with no protection. She did not simply accept her fate but affected it by her own actions. After those bold decisions she ended up drifting from bad situation to worse and never seemed to find happiness again.

The society's gaze was on Hasina too, although she did not really belong anywhere. When working in the garment factory it was important to her to maintain her honour and not get gossiped about, as some others did, and were shut out of the society. The gossip network, discussed earlier, was present in Dhaka context as well. First, Hasina was close with some women in the factory: “We all talk together in lunch break. Four in my row stick like sister” (BL 2003:150). She compared friendship with a love marriage: “Sewing pass the day and I sit with friends. As actual fact it bring true friendship and love. Love marriage maybe is better call something else than love. In real marriage it grow slow slow. Habit. Sit together. Give bit there take bit there. That is how it come at work” (BL 2003:152). Despite Hasina's strong affection and feeling of friendship her friends abandoned her as quickly as the rumours started circling around about her having an affair. The girls were mean to her and an older woman consoled her: “Never mind these girls they just think they ripe fruit. Don't want to go near a bad one because they know how quick quick they going to rotten their own selves” (BL 2003:159). Honour was such a strong factor in the society that Hasina's friends did not risk their own reputation by staying friends with “a rotten fruit”. Especially for garment workers maintaining their honour was important because in real Bangladeshi society as well, they were considered with suspicion.

Kabeer (2000:82) claims that they were disfavoured by the public for being a threat to morality. Men and women working together were not considered a good mix.

After losing her job and experiencing another failed marriage, Hasina ended up in a “House of Falling Women” (BL 2003:220). From there she was taken by a wealthy family to work as their maid. The existence of such a house is a sign that there was some effort from the society to take care of its women with no protection. Hasina seemed to need saving and was indeed saved all the time in the novel. However, this was actually the first time she was saved by the society and not men. In the beginning it had been Hasina who had resisted fate by the love marriage. However, everything that happened from then on, she seemed to simply accept. Her “career” as an independent woman, who would do what she wanted, ended before it even began. The society's impact was so strong that Hasina had no choice but to survive. There were not many options for a poor girl with a bad reputation.

#### **6.4 Working possibilities for women in Bangladesh presented in *Brick Lane***

The working possibilities for migrant women are not very broad in Britain. They face limitations from their own culture and the role expectation of a house wife, as well as from the host society in the form of racism and prejudice. Hence, it is very difficult for a Bangladeshi woman to get a job outside home on several levels. Naturally, if one does not know the language or have education, as often is the case for the first-generation women migrants, there are fewer jobs available. The situation for second-generation migrants is different, since they often have education. However, they too face racism. Parekh (2000:193) explains how especially individuals from the Asian and black communities have to be even better than their competitors to get jobs. There is “an 'ethnic penalty' to be paid by everyone in these communities, regardless of their qualifications and their position in the jobs hierarchy”. Further, according to Parekh, that applies to both first- and second-generation immigrants, and the problem is not disappearing. Despite the education and qualifications of the minorities, discrimination is a persistent feature in the

British labour market.

In *Brick Lane* the possibilities of employment for women in both London and Dhaka are quite narrow. In Nazneen and Hasina's childhood village the traditional gender roles were present and women did not have much to say. Hasina's professions were a housewife, a garment girl, a prostitute, and a maid. These are probably the only ones a woman can get without an education. There was a job, however, that Hasina considered worse than her own: brick breaking. Hasina explained to her sister:

Breaking bricks you see this thing it no joke. Sometime I walk a way down by railway line to work. Few minutes is peaceful good house coconut trees wild rose magnolia. Then the brick breakers. All day squatting over red bricks with little stone hammer. So huge pile wait for this little hammer. Like you take teaspoon to empty lake. Most woman and they look hungry. Children help. Swell belly children and still laughing hitting breaking laughing. Most days I walk on back roads it is longer and there are no flowers bit I like better (BL 2003:153).

At that point of the novel Hasina was yet to enter the profession of a prostitute and was still working at a garment factory. She could choose another route and forget the existence of such poor women who had no choice. As long as she had her job she belonged to another group than the low brick breakers. She came close to brick breaking herself when she lost her job, but was allowed to stay in Mr Chowdhury's flat. Had she been kicked out, her options would have been scarce. Having a room enabled her to work as a prostitute, arguably even a lower job than brick breaking. Still, it probably paid a little better. Hasina did not decide to become a prostitute. One thing led to another and she found herself selling her body for rent and items that she needed. She was simply surviving. Her next professions, a housewife and a maid, were the only professions, along with the already mentioned ones, that were presented in Dhaka context.

Hasina and Nazneen were often faced with challenges from the societies they lived in. One thing they always had was their religion. It helped them get through good time as well as bad and next chapter will look into the meaning of religion for them both.

## 7. RELIGION

### 7.1 Muslims in Britain

Out of Britain's total population of approximately 58.8 million, 1.6 million are Muslims (Muslims in Europe 2005). Often non-Muslim people see them as a uniform group. What we have to bear in mind, however, is that an Islamic identity is quite problematic to define and “Muslims [are not] an ethno-cultural group by virtue of being Muslim. Islam is not per se a culture rather it may give rise to cultures, or be a fundamental root of culture, but it is not, nor has it ever been a culture in and of itself”(Hellyer 2005, cited by Hussain 2008:xvi). Islam and the cultures of minority groups are often seen as synonymous. Religion and the traditions are perhaps difficult to separate from each other. Sometimes it even seems acceptable that in the name of religion, in this case Islam, minority groups are allowed to maintain traditions that are often very discriminating against women. Mixing religion and tradition is not a specific feature only in Islam. Also in other religions it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint whether certain traditions originate from religion and vice versa. There are people from several countries and cultures in Britain's 1.6 million Muslims and naturally several different forms of Islam. In addition, within a minority group there are also several different ways to identify oneself. Next chapter will look in to this factor, mostly from women's point of view, in more detail.

#### 7.1.1 Bangladeshi or Muslim first?

Sarah Song (2007) divides the structure of social identity into three factors. First, some *criteria of ascription* must be available in public discourse. She explains that “before there can be 'blacks' or 'Mexican Americans' there must be a social conception of blacks or Mexican Americans” (Song 2007:29). Secondly, the *treatment by others* is a feature of social identity. Other people’s perception of us shape our own regard as well. The third dimension shaping social identity is

*individual identification*. Song (2007:30) explains that “Certain attributes may mark me as a member of group X, but this third dimension is missing unless I internalize the labels associated with X available in the public discourse”. Thus, all these factors are linked together when forming a social identity. Song states further, that usually people identify themselves with several identities and “within the range of identities we can have, we can choose to some extent what priority to give to one or another” (Song 2007:30). Modood (2007:108) gives an example of prioritizing identity. He states that in a survey done in June 2002 by Guardian/ICM 500 Muslims in Britain were asked whether they identified themselves as Muslim or British or British-Muslim. Fifty four per cent of the people said they were British-Muslim. Modood was surprised by the fact that these people were able to identify themselves with only two identity elements. In my view, if the people are given only these three options to choose from, the result is not surprising. If given the option to state the elements freely and still get fifty four answers of British-Muslim, then I would be surprised.

Phillipson et al. (2003) found out in their study of Bangladeshi women in the borough of Tower Hamlets, London, that especially for the younger generation the question of identity remains quite complex. They presented the women with descriptions of themselves that were Bengali, Sylheti (Sylhet is a region of Bangladesh, where large part of Britain's Bangladeshi population originates from, Kabeer 2000:269) and British and asked the women to use the terms in describing their identity. Seventy-nine per cent said they were Muslims and many of the women identified with being Muslim first and foremost. One of the women describes her thoughts: “Islam is the basis for everything. Everything comes back to that. Allah puts us on this earth as Muslims. We have to remember that all the time and follow the teachings of the prophet. Allah takes us through each day”. Two thirds of the women mentioned being Bengali, but did not make much distinction between the two terms as is evident from one of the woman's comment: “They are both the same. I am Bengali because of where I was born, and Muslim because of who I was born to” (Phillipson et al. 2003:44). Others mentioned the importance of adapting to the host society and acknowledge the significance of taking its customs into

consideration. This, however, sometimes brought other challenges to the women.

One woman's view on the difficulty of maintaining purdah in Britain is a good example of problems facing Muslim women:

“Your faith is everything. We have to live by our faith as long as we are in this world. As long as we are living. You have to do as much as you can. It's very hard to do what Islam asks us to do. I do as much as I can. Imagine...in this country I have to go shopping...so I have to go out. Our religion says that we shouldn't go out too much, and when we do, we should be properly in purdah. But I don't always do it properly. I go to the banks and to the shops. I am aware of what I am doing...how much I am doing”  
(Phillipson et al 2003:44)

These women identify themselves strongly through their religion, and are brought up to obey certain rules. They often want to maintain purdah and follow their religions instructions, or are expected to. They are however challenged in everyday life, because it is very difficult to combine two very different cultures. Religion played a part also in Nazneen and Hasina's life. For Nazneen the part was perhaps greater than for her sister, or at least there is more evidence for it in *Brick Lane*. Next I will introduce the meaning of religion in Nazneen and Hasina's lives.

## **7.2 The meaning of religion in Nazneen's life**

Nazneen was brought up in an Islamic society where religion had a great impact on every aspect of life. She was used to the routines of prayer and it was a factor in her life that gave her feeling of safety. As often in life, everything else may change, even quickly, but religion and the ways to practice it, many times stay the same, creating a feeling of continuity and safety. Nazneen flew across the world leaving all she knew behind her, everything but her thoughts, memories and feelings and her religion.

The days were dull and empty and Nazneen must have been also frightened of the unknown world she was entering. A good example of religion's soothing impact on her was when she was preparing a dinner for Chanu's friend Dr Azad. She was very nervous that she would ruin the meal. She took her Qur'an and began to read:

*“To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you, as We have exhorted those to whom the Book was given before you, to fear God. If you deny Him,*

*know that to God belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. God is self-sufficient and worthy of praise*". The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased. Even Dr Azad was nothing as to God. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. She said it over a few times, aloud. She was composed. Nothing could bother her. Only God, if he chose to (BL 2003:20).

She was more powerful and peaceful after reading the Qur'an. She cited the suras of the Qur'an she had learned in school in Arabic and even though "she did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her" (BL 2003:21). A memory from childhood that felt safe brought her calmness in this new frightening situation. She did not need to understand the words to find them useful.

It seems that over time Nazneen's relationship with her religion changed: "She began to pray five times each day, rolling out her prayer mat in the sitting room to face east. She was pleased with the order it gave to her day" (BL 2003:41) That suggests that she had not prayed as much before, but now began. She prayed whenever her mind drifted to restless thoughts. She was not satisfied with the life of cooking and cleaning but there was not much else to do about it at that point but to accept it. The praying and reciting the Qur'an helped her in that.

Chanu was not a religious man but, however, had advice to give about it: "rubbing ashes on your face doesn't make you a saint. God sees what is in your heart" Nazneen did not comment to this but in her mind she "hoped that it was true because Chanu never to her knowledge prayed, and of all the books that he held in his hand she had never once seen him with the Holy Qur'an" (BL 2003:41). The events after Nazneen's son's death are not described in the book, but one assumes that religion must have been the factor that saved Nazneen in the immense grief. At a time of losing a loved one there is a tendency for even a nonreligious person to turn to some higher power for help. For Nazneen, her religion must have been the only thing that kept her standing. How else would she have survived the most horrible thing to imagine to any parent?

The life that came after the son's death was not easy for Nazneen. She enjoyed her daughters, but what exhausted her was:

the eternal three-way torture of daughter – father – daughter. How they locked themselves apart at this very close distance. Bibi, silently seeking approval, always hungry. Chanu, quivering with his own needs, always offended. Shahana, simmering in – worst of all things – perpetual embarrassment, implacably angry. It was like walking on a field of snakes. Nazneen was worried at every step (BL 2003:205).

She remembered her son, but when it along with all the trouble with Chanu and her daughters, got too much, she prayed and “squeezed Raqib from her mind. That way lay the abyss. So she swallowed hard and prayed hard, and she used prayer, in defiance of her vows, to dull her senses and dull her pain” (BL 2003:206). She used religion as an escape from her reality. Although her belief was an essential part of who she was, it was also a route away from herself, away from the pain. She dulled her senses with prayer the same way someone might do with alcohol or drugs. The familiar rhythms from her childhood took her to some place where no pain could touch her.

Nazneen met Karim and found his strong religious faith fascinating. As her husband was not religious and they had never shared their faith, the feeling of the importance of religion that she shared with Karim, draw them closer to each other. The intimacy of him praying in front of her and even using her prayer mat had a great affect on Nazneen. She was excited about this young, passionate man with so much energy, when she had been used to Chanu, who was indeed very different. Karim did not wear traditional clothes at first, but as the tension grew between the “Bengal Tigers” (the radical group he belonged to) and white people after the terrorist attack of 9/11 in the U.S.A in 2001, and when “a pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled in Dogwood estate” (BL 2003:368), he became more radical and began to dress in a punjabi-pyjama and a skullcap.

Phillipson et al. (2003:46) claim that Bangladeshi women in London gain some degree of continuity from faith and religion. They had their religion in their home country and they still had it in London, even though much else had changed. For Nazneen too, her faith was something she always carried with her. It was an essential part of who she was. Even though in the course of the story she went through major

changes in her life and in herself and had to figure out her identity in the middle of it all, the one thing she always had, without that much alteration, was her belief. Sometimes she had less time to practice her religion and sometimes she prayed regularly, but she never lost her faith, not even when she lost her child. She would lose people and meet new ones, but her faith remained to keep her on track and give her hope. Butler (1999:136) explains about Bangladeshi immigrant women that: "it is clear that they are maintaining their commitment to Islam but modifying and adapting many of their parents' traditions and customs". According to her, religion is a key factor here because the women use their religion "as a guide to adopt a new role for themselves in British society, one which gives them more freedom of choice, yet at the same time, supports and strengthens their commitment to Islam". Religion provides a feeling of safety but simultaneously enables the women make changes in their traditional roles. In this light Islam is quite flexible for these immigrant women and does not define who they are, but rather is there for the women to mould into what suits them best. Also for Nazneen her faith was something that changed over time and she found peace with it in the end. Still, Nazneen was fairly free to decide how she wanted to practice her religion. For many Muslim girls the situation is not that simple. Butler's view on freedom of choice for these women is not entirely, if at all, true in every case. Sadly, many young women face pressure from their families and that leaves very little place for modifying the traditions.

Hiddleston's (2005:67) frames Nazneen's new view on religion as a return to Islam. In my opinion it is not so much a question of returning to anything, since Nazneen has always been a religious person and never left it. Hiddleston goes further explaining the return to Islam as a symbol of reassurance of hope, rather than political or a religious move. According to Hiddleston (2005:67) Islam is significant for Nazneen because "of it is a structure that provides her with stability". This is easy to agree with. Indeed the main meaning of religion throughout the book seems to be providing stability, routines and safety for Nazneen. In the beginning of Nazneen's life in London religion isolates her from the surrounding society. She can practice religion within the shelter of her home and does not have to go outside to be able to serve God. If it would be part of the rituals to meet other people, or at least

women, and pray together, for example, she would have had more contact with the Bangladeshi society. However, religion for Muslim women is a very private matter. In general, one does not need a mosque to pray the daily prayers. Still, it is important that the place where one prays is clean and one is facing Mecca (Robinson 1997:66). Would religion be a private matter for women if given a real choice? I believe they are, like Nazneen, brought up to consider worship a private matter, while men often gather in mosques to pray. In other words they do not have a choice if they want maintain the family's and their community's acceptance.

### **7.2.1 Broader meanings of Islam to Nazneen**

When Nazneen met Karim and they shared their religion more than she had ever been able to with her husband, the meaning of it changed a little. There were no major changes, as mentioned earlier, but her religion became somehow more significant when she could share it with someone as passionate as Karim. He asked her to come to the Bengal Tigers' meetings and there she was introduced new thoughts. She was embarrassed by her ignorance of matters around the world. She found out about other Muslims and “how many there were, how scattered, how tortured” (BL 2003:243). There was also this other, new meaning to Islam. It was no longer just personal Islam, but also a shared cause. Karim explained to Nazneen that “It's a worldwide struggle, man. Everywhere they are trying to do us down. We have to fight back. It's time to fight back” (BL 2003:243). She could not understand the martyrs and said to Karim that Allah does not allow it. Karim explained his view to her “It's not *suicide*, yeah. It's war” (BL 2003:243). Whether this explanation was enough or not to convince Nazneen of the righteousness of the matter, is not explained in the book. Perhaps she wanted to understand the martyrs as an unavoidable part of the cause or she did not dare to oppose Karim's view. Often, if one has a low self-esteem or is deeply in love, one may adopt the other person's views and dreams without considering what is one's own opinion on the matter. This probably happened to Nazneen too, because she was so overwhelmed by Karim's devotion and attention to her. The fact that Karim brought her Bengali newsletters to read made her feel special. She compared Karim to Chanu again “Chanu had never

given her anything to read” (BL 2003:243). She felt that Karim considered her as an intelligent person, while Chanu treated her as an inferior not capable of understanding the same as himself.

These new thoughts on wider problems of the Muslim world made Nazneen's own problems seem insignificant for a while and “It gave her pain. Now when she walked the anxious tightrope between the children and their father, when she was disquieted by her undisciplined mind or worried about her sister – now she felt the smallness of it all. So she mistook the sad weight of longing in her stomach for sorrow, and she read in the night of occupiers and orphans, of Intifada and Hamas” (BL 2003:244). Nazneen was not happy in her life, but had now found an outlet for her sadness. The emptiness of her life and hope for something else could now be disguised as sorrow for the Muslim people in distress and she could truly feel the sorrow without the perpetual feeling of guilt. What was the real reason for her sorrow was naturally more her own dissatisfying situation, but she could not admit that even to herself. Still, the feelings had to come out one way or another and grieving for the Muslim people gave her that way.

However, Nazneen never became very passionate about the Bengal Tigers and it did not affect her life a great deal. Still, she gained knowledge from Karim and the meetings and that in its part moulded her perception of the world around her, as well as herself, because she realized there was a bigger world out there than just her home country and the borough of Tower Hamlets.

Ali describes the Bengal Tigers' meetings as quite peaceful. However, within the group there are different views as to how to promote their cause. Some are more radical in their thoughts than others. Karim seems to present the less radical side. He does not approve of the aggressive leaflets that are circled around by both the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts (white people's radical group against them). In a meeting where the members of the Bengal Tigers argue about the leaflets, Karim states his view: “We came together to get radical, man. But what are you going to do about all these things? I say, let's get our own neighbourhood straight first” (BL 2003: 283).

The aggression within the Muslims and between the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts build up and finally there is a riot on the streets. When Nazneen asks Karim what it is all about he says “It is a revenge. And revenge for the revenge.[...]’Man, what it is, it’s a mess! It’s not even about anything anymore. It’s just what it is. Put anything in front of them and they’ll fight it” (BL 2003: 475). The idea of improving Muslim peoples position in the society had turned into mindless violence. Religion seemed to have nothing to with it, even though it had been the starting point for it all in the beginning.

### **7.3 The meaning of religion in Hasina's life**

Hasina's relationship with religion seemed to be a little more indifferent than her sister's. That may be due to the lack of description of Hasina practising her religion, or it was simply more in the background in her life in general. She did pray but the reader does not get a sense of Hasina having a deep relationship with her religion, whereas in Nazneen's life religion played a bigger and more essential part. In addition the notion of guilt was more present in Nazneen's thoughts when Hasina did not seem to battle with that at all. Nazneen felt guilty of her thoughts sometimes if she, for example, dreamt of a different life. In addition her baby's death caused her feelings of guilt.

Hasina's attitude towards life and its consequences was lighter in general than that of her sister's. She mentioned Allah in her letters and occasionally sounded also quite passionate: “How much I have to praise for him! How much He have given me! All times I making mistakes, all times I going off from straight Path and He is giving chance again and then again” (BL 2003:220). She seemed to realize the effect her going against her fate might have on her. She trotted off the Path, the Sharia law, occasionally, but God forgave her and gave her a new chance after another. She did not seem to repent of her actions very deeply but rejoiced at the new opportunity (being saved by the wealthy family from the House of fallen Women) that was given to her by God. On another occasion, when her customer wanted to marry her, she sited the Qur'an in a letter to her sister: “Do not despair of the mercy of God for

Allah forgives all sins. He is the Compassionate and the Merciful” (BL 2003:172). She gave the credit to God and was happy about this new positive turn her life took, but in general her God seemed to be more merciful and forgiving than her sister's. Praising Allah may have also been something that Hasina had learned to do without actually pondering on the content that much.

Why did Ali make Hasina a less religious person than her sister? Perhaps she did it to enhance the image of Nazneen's religious faith getting even stronger in Britain. By the lack of description of Hasina's way to practice religion, Nazneen's strong faith is in a way underlined. This notion could be interpreted that Nazneen, who did not go against her fate and obeyed her father, also maintained her religion and practised it as a proper Muslim should, whereas Hasina, who took matters into her own hands, was not a very devoted Muslim. She made bad choices, which were followed by bad consequences. Nazneen was struggling with guilt, made good choices and ended up happy. However, Nazneen was not altogether a good Muslim, because she had an affair, which is a grave sin in Islam. Next chapter will look into this and in general the love lives of the two sisters.

## **8. ROMANTIC LOVE VS. ARRANGED MARRIAGE**

### **8.1 Views on love and marriage**

Defining love is not an easy task for anyone as there are as many ways to love as there are people. Further, different cultures have different features in them when it comes to romantic love. However, for instance, Gelles (1995) has attempted to define different types of love. He discusses different social scientists' views on the subject and states that Elaine and G. William Walster (1978, cited by Gelles 1995:168-169) claim that there are several types of love and more than one definition. They have identified two different types of love: passionate and companionate love. Passionate love is “a wildly emotional state, a confusion of feelings: tenderness and sexuality, elation and pain, anxiety and relief, altruism and

jealousy”; whereas companionate love is: “a lower-key emotion – friendly affection and deep attachment to someone” (Gelles 1995:168-169). Gelles states further, that even though these types of love are often considered as the opposite to each other, they are better seen as complementary to one another. Passionate love wears out over time and companionate love “becomes the basis for the more enduring permanent relationship” (Gelles 1995:169).

The Bangladeshi society's view on love seems to be somewhat more pragmatic than in the Western world. That is not to say that people of the Bangladeshi society fall in love less than the people who live in the world of Hollywood love stories. In an arranged marriage the odds for love are perhaps the same as in a marriage tied in love. The divorce rates in today's Western world are extremely high. Thus, who is to say what is the best? As discussed in chapter 5.1, in the Bangladeshi society the basis for the family formation is considered from the whole family's point of view, whereas in the Western society the choice of a spouse is made individually. This is based on a person's free will, when sadly, very often arranged marriages although seemingly based on free will, are actually forced. Phillipson et al. (2003:50) introduce a young Bangladeshi woman's summary on different types of marriage:

“I see it as three categories. There is the love marriage, the arranged marriage and the Islamic marriage. The love is where you find somebody, do what you please and have a relationship with them before you marry. The arranged marriage is where the girl just turns up on the day, the man just turns up on the day and they are married off. And then there is the Islamic one where...before the wedding the boy and girl get a chance to talk with the permission of your guardian. And you can talk to him and go out with him with the permission of your guardian. That's the Islamic marriage to me, and that's the one I go with. Where you have the choice, you get to know them...your family get to know them. Whereas I think arranged is where you are completely separated from the man, you don't know him, you don't know his family, you don't have the choice.”

Here the woman sees the “Islamic marriage” as the one with the choice. From a Western viewpoint choice is not the first thing that comes to mind here. One has choice of some options, but not a true choice. The spouse is still chosen for the young people by someone else than themselves. This tradition is old and the girls and boys of these cultures are brought up knowing they will be married off by their parents' choice. It is difficult to go against the tradition or the parents' will and if

someone does make a love marriage, like Hasina, she/he is often excluded from the society and has to live with the burden of shaming her family. It also perhaps feels safer to do what one is told because it can be frightening to suddenly make up one's own mind if one is never been allowed to do that before. Further, the young people are not perhaps allowed to spend that much time together in their spare time and thus the opportunities of meeting a suitable person to fall in love with are not that common.

Bhobal (1999:120) states that “The influence and opinion of family members, (both nuclear and extended), are fundamental to the arranged marriage. Women's choices are made not only by their parents but by the extended family”. Thus, women do not actually make choices, or are not expected to, but the family decides for them. However, according to Bhobal (1999:121) the young people are in fact allowed some freedom of choice in the arranged marriage by having the right to refuse a spouse. Still, it concerns more the men than the women. He states further that “as the family is the primary support system individuals must expect to give support to all family members; particularly parents and siblings should expect to consider family interests before their own” ( Bhobal 1999:122). Individual feeling of love is thus not the most important factor when a marriage is formed in these cultures. The family comes first.

Nazneen was married without love but over the years grew to care for Chanu and therefore she perhaps had some form of compassionate love with him. It was not until she met Karim that she experienced passionate love. Hasina, on the other hand, made a love marriage that failed in the end and never really experienced compassionate love, but was rather dependent on the men in her life for safety. Both of them had beliefs and hopes for love and marriage that came to disappoint them. Nazneen grew up with the help of her marriage and love affair and gained independence and a sense of the larger society around her in the end, whereas Hasina seemed to gain nothing and was drifting from one relationship to another pressured by the community's views on women's position, even though she was an outcast of it anyway.

## 8.2 Nazneen's marriage

As stated before, Nazneen's marriage was an arranged marriage. After Hasina had escaped and by so doing brought shame on the family, Nazneen was the only one left to save the honour. As traditionally the family honour rests on women's shoulders in Bangladesh, Nazneen too had to bear the consequences by marrying quickly by her father's choice. The common term for this type of marriage arrangement is indeed arranged marriage. However, in my view, it is not a great deal difference from forced marriage. Bhopal (1999: 118) talks about the typology of arranged marriages among Asian groups. He mentions the traditional, modified traditional and cooperative traditional patterns of marriage arrangements. These patterns differ in the degree the women are allowed to give their opinion. Still, none of these examples mean that a young woman could make a choice by herself, and thus, I argue that they are all forms of forced marriages. Bhopal (1999:121) states further that: "obedience to parents and family members is important. It indicates a concern with family values rather than individualistic ones". The choice of a spouse is not made individualistically and therefore not by a woman's free will. Children obey their parents and rarely go against their will. What choice did Nazneen have as a young girl either? Her father arranged for her to marry an older man and by doing so sent her to a faraway country. She did not question her father's action as she had never questioned anything that had happened to her. She was, after all, always left to her fate. What would have happened to her if she had refused to marry Chanu? She would have brought even more shame on her family and her life would not have been very pleasant then. Thus, she was forced to marry, because she had no real choice.

Life with Chanu was not as bad as it could have been. There was no domestic violence, what seemed to be a common factor in *Brick Lane*. Still, Chanu's view of his wife was not very romantic, but rather pragmatic, when he explained to a friend that "a blind uncle is better than no uncle" (BL 2003:23). A less beautiful wife was still better than no wife at all. Nazneen's view of her husband was not altogether

positive either: “He had a face like frog” (BL 2003:17). Naturally, because they were strangers to each other, there was no love from either side in the beginning. Still, Nazneen was disappointed overhearing her husband talk about her that way to a friend of his:

What had she imagined? That he was in love with her? That he was grateful because she, young and graceful had accepted him? That in sacrificing herself to him, she owed something? Yes. Yes. She realized in a stinging rush that she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. Such high notions. What self-regard (BL 2003: 23).

Despite the unromantic way the couple was formed, she had still had romantic hopes as any young person would. She experienced getting married to Chanu as a sacrifice. Perhaps it was Nazneen's sacrifice to her father in attempt to save the family honour. In addition it was a sacrifice to Chanu, this older man, who had very few qualities in him to attract younger brides. Nazneen had imagined getting something in return, at least admiration. However, these hopes crumbled to nothing. For Chanu, she appeared to be someone to do the housekeeping and procreate offspring.

Later, when they got to know each other better, Nazneen's feelings changed to something that could almost be called affection. She also often felt sorry for him because of his crushed hopes for a better life and profession. Further, sometimes she was ashamed of him when he talked too much to other people. These feelings took their turn and changed quite a bit. Her thoughts are well described in the following: “She wanted to go to him and stroke his forehead. She wanted to get up from the table and walk out of the door and never see him again” (BL2003:34). She would not leave for real in the beginning, but she often thought about it. Sometimes she thought that her father had made a good decision:

Abba did not choose so badly. This was not a bad man. There were many bad men in the world, but this was not one them. She could love him. Perhaps she did already. She thought she did. And if she didn't, she soon would because now she understood what he was, and why. Love would follow understanding[...] Her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. For the first time she felt that he was not so different. At his core, he was the same as her (BL2003:120-121).

This citation well describes Nazneen's feelings towards her husband. Although at the time of these thoughts they were in a crisis situation with their son hospitalized, still the feelings and the way they change are present in the rest of the book as well. As in life in general, *understanding* the other person's views and actions is crucial in order to form a life or even a relationship with her/him, be it friendship, companionship or a love affair. Here Nazneen understood that deep down Chanu was a feeling creature like herself and although he had his flaws, he was not that different from her. The tragic event of their son's illness and death brought them closer together. As mentioned before, the events between the son's death and the daughters' birth are only dealt with through Hasina's letters. The reader is left with an image of Nazneen and Chanu's relationship getting closer. When Nazneen and Chanu "come back" in the book after a series of letters from Hasina, Chanu seems like a changed man. The daughters were born and grew older. Chanu gave corporal punishments to the girls and Nazneen tried her best to prevent this from happening. It must have also changed her feelings towards him. She had began to understand him, but now this all disappeared and perhaps made her long for something else even more than ever. Perhaps Chanu's change of character made it a little easier for Nazneen to fall in love with another man.

According to Azizah and ElHabt (2006:177) the Qur'anic view on ideal marriage is that it is created from tranquillity, mercy and affection. Nazneen and Chanu's marriage had all these features from time to time. However, towards the end they all seem to disappear. Tranquillity is based perhaps on Nazneen's adjusting to the situation and not having very high expectations. Mercy is a little more challenging term to interpret here. Depending on the meaning one chooses, it either means God's mercy on the marriage or the spouses' mercy for each other in terms of understanding and forgiving each other. It can mean both, but nevertheless Nazneen and Chanu seem to have, at least occasionally, mercy for each other. Affection is naturally a crucial part of a marriage. The degree of it, however, varies a great deal from a relationship and time to another. In Nazneen and Chanu's case the affection grows in the course of time but never reaches the form of passionate love. That

Nazneen experiences with her lover, Karim.

### **8.3 Nazneen's love affair**

Nazneen had never been in love before meeting Karim, a young man of Bangladeshi origin, who was born in Britain and never even visited Bangladesh. Karim was a passionate person and appealed to Nazneen on many levels. Karim was the middleman who brought her clothes to sew and often stayed at her home while she was working. This would have probably been strongly disapproved by the Bangladeshi society, not to mention Chanu, if they had known about it. The more time Nazneen and Karim spent together, the more they naturally got to know each other and on several occasions Nazneen realized that she had even forgotten to cover up her hair when he was present. These familiar surroundings made it easier for them to begin the affair. It was never their plan but day by day they became closer and more fond of each other. This homelike arrangement where she worked by the table and he sat on the sofa or by computer was like a married couple's. Further, he prayed, using Nazneen's praying mat and this made the situations even more intimate. In addition, Karim listened to Nazneen and urged her to speak: "Talk to me. Leave it" (BL 2003:261), he said when Nazneen was working. Nazneen constantly compared Karim to Chanu. Karim seemed to know a great deal whereas her view on the husband was somewhat different: "Chanu and all his books. How much he knew and how baffled he seemed" (BL 2003:262). On the other hand the affair made her life in general look different in a positive way also concerning Chanu:

But much of the time she felt good. She spent more time talking to her daughters, they surprised her with their intelligence, their wit and their artless sensitivity. She served her husband and she found that he was a caring husband, a man of integrity, educated, and equipped with a pleasing thirst for knowledge. She did her work and she discovered that work in itself, performed with a desire for perfection, was capable of giving satisfaction. She cleaned the flat and even wiping the floor after the toilet had flooded was not so tiresome if it was done with a song on the lips and in the heart. It was as if the conflagration of her bouts with Karim had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight. It was as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense (BL 2003:301).

Nazneen's whole life changed. She began to see her daughters, and even Chanu, in a

different light. Even dull housework felt different. After years of living a life that felt senseless and grey she now finally found meaning to her life. This passionate love with this passionate man made her whole life passionate and it all started making sense.

However, it was not all that simple. She still had a husband who wanted to return to Bangladesh and two daughters who did not. The guilt of the adultery, although not a very visible factor in the book, must have been in behind there. Azizah and ElHabt (2006:207) state that according to the Qur'an, both premarital and "extramarital sex (zina) are considered grave sins, are subject to condemnation, and both men and women are severely and equally punished for engaging in them". It must have had an impact on both Nazneen and Karim because they were strongly religious. Perhaps a major factor in Nazneen getting a nervous breakdown was the guilt. It, along with being torn between the idea of going back to Bangladesh and being able to help Hasina or doing what she thought was best for her daughters and staying in London, was all very overwhelming for Nazneen.

In the end Nazneen decided to stay in London for her daughters, and Chanu travelled back to Bangladesh. One is not sure whether Chanu knew about the affair or not, but somehow he must have known something was different. Despite Karim's offer of marriage, Nazneen chose not to divorce her husband and marry her lover. She explained her thoughts to Karim: "But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? It wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up" (BL 2003: 454-455). Falling in love with Karim was something she needed in order grow up or even become a woman, for example, in the sense of sexuality and passion. She needed some sense in her life and felt she achieved it with him at first. However, eventually she came to realize that their love was not real. Or perhaps the love was real, but they were not. They were something to each other that they both needed at the time: an escape from reality. That escape gave Nazneen the courage to change her reality into something new for herself. She gained self-confidence and in the end did not need any man to define her or allow her existence. She broke free from the

traditional setting of a Bangladeshi family and took a step towards a more free life.

#### **8.4 Divorce for a Muslim woman from Nazneen's point of view**

Could Nazneen have divorced Chanu if she had wanted to? And why did she not want to? There was no romantic love in their marriage. Why did not Nazneen go all the way with her newly-found freedom? Is Ali's message here that for a woman like Nazneen, only certain amount of freedom is possible? Several answers could be suggested for these questions. To begin with, the guilt of adultery, although not mentioned in the book, was perhaps so intense that Nazneen could not divorce her husband. According to Benn and Jawad (2003:5) a study has shown that more and more Asian Muslim women are filing for divorce. However, it is more difficult for a woman to get a divorce than for a man. Men have the right for an instant divorce, whereas women have to make applications and justifications to get one. These applications are addressed to a voluntary organization, The Muslim Law (Shariah) Council, MLSC, based in London. The council consists of "imams (authoritative religious figures), and fuqaha (jurists) from the whole of the United Kingdom" (Benn and Jawad 2003:5). Benn and Jawad do not mention how many Asian Muslim women file for a divorce through the official system based on the law of the United Kingdom, which is the only official law there. Islamic divorce is not valid in Britain, or in other Western countries, if it is not taken to the official court.

Even if the divorce would be granted by the MLSC, "Muslim women find themselves isolated with virtually no support from their family or community" (Benn and Jawad 2003:6). In Nazneen's case, however, this would have made little difference, since she had already taken steps away from the Bangladeshi society and had friends like Razia, who would not have abandoned her, and thought even more liberally than herself. Further, she had no family of her own, besides her daughters, and there is no evidence in the book that Chanu had any relatives in the United Kingdom either. Nazneen's life would not have been anymore lonely, had she divorced or not. So, why did she not divorce? The society's impact could still be part

of the reason despite the lack of its presence in Nazneen's life. In addition, Nazneen was compassionate towards Chanu and felt sorry for him. The last conversation Nazneen and Chanu have before they parted, describes their relationship and feelings for each other rather well:

'You see', he said, and mumbled it inside her palm. 'All these years I dreamed of going home a Big Man. Only now, when it's nearly finished for me, I realized what is important. As long as I have my family with me, my wife, my daughters, I am as strong as any man alive'. He rested his forehead on her shoulder. A sigh shook his body. She pulled him a little closer. 'What is all this Big Man? She whispered in his ear. Sadness crushed her chest. It pressed everything out of her and filled the hollows of her bones. 'What is all this Strong Man? Do you think that is why I love you? Is that what there is in you, to be loved? His tears scarred her hand. ' You're coming with me, then? You'll come?' 'No', she breathed. She lifted his head and looked into his face. It was dented and swollen, almost out of recognition. 'I can't go with you,' she said. 'I can't stay,' said Chanu, and they clung to each other inside a sadness that went beyond words and tears, beyond that place, those causes and consequences, and became a part of their breath, their marrow, to travel with them from now to wherever they went. (BI 2003:478)

This description in the book is very powerful and makes the reader truly feel for Nazneen, but especially for Chanu. This is the kind of writing that one would have wanted to read on Raqib's, their son's, death. As mentioned earlier, Nazneen and Chanu's feelings were not described in the book after their son was dead. Here the understanding of Chanu's character and his point of view are felt not only by Nazneen, but the reader as well. They were both sad to part, but had no other alternative. If Nazneen had divorced Chanu, it would have crushed him. He had already given up hopes going home a 'Big Man'. He still had his family, although not physically with him. He could go back to Bangladesh and cherish the idea of his family reuniting once again. By not divorcing her husband for several reasons, Nazneen could better maintain an emotional tie to Bangladesh. She had chosen her children's happiness over the possibility of seeing her sister again. Now Chanu was in Bangladesh and could help Hasina. It would also be easier for Nazneen to travel there, if she wanted to, when Chanu was already there.

In the beginning of the book Nazneen was enchanted by ice-skating on TV and in the end of the book her daughters and Razia took her ice-skating as surprise. To her the ice smelled of limes (BL 2003:491). Earlier in the book Karim had smelled of limes too (BL 2003:244). The smell of limes represents the smell of freedom, first

introduced to her by Karim, and in the end the ice-skating rink. By that time Chanu had left for Bangladesh and Nazneen had heard that also Karim had gone there for the first time in his life. She had stayed in Britain with her daughters and was now a working mother on her own. The last sentences of the book are very descriptive of Nazneen's new beginning: "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 her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like'" (BL 2003:492).

Ali ends the book with no hints of either Karim or Chanu's return. The reader is left with an idea of a free Nazneen, who can do whatever she wants to. This is a lovely thought, but in real life the options for a woman like Nazneen remain quite narrow. However, in the end of the book Nazneen was still more free than her sister. Nazneen had fought her way into freedom from a tight grip of her Bangladeshi community, while Hasina, despite seemingly more free, had actually ended up in the circle of a constant search for acceptance.

### **8.5 Hasina's rocky road from love marriage into prostitution**

Hasina was not lucky in love. She had spent her childhood with a father who was not very affectionate and this in its part made her to search love and acceptance all her life. She escaped as a 16-year-old girl with a man that she had fallen in love with. Had she been aware of the consequences she probably would not have done that. It led her to a road of poverty and shame and made her an outcast of the Bangladeshi society.

After the first marriage, Hasina never fell in love. Zaid, the chef who worked for the same wealthy family as she did, may have been an exception. However, there is not much evidence of this in the book. In the end they did escape together, but knowing the turns of Hasina's life, it is easy to imagine that she could have followed Zaid simply to find protection once more. Maybe the first husband's violence had damaged Hasina's trust in men in general. Still, she was very naive and got into

situations where she was taken advantage of. She had no real choice but to seek for male protection. Hasina was ready to take it from anyone who would provide it.

When Hasina finally got settled in the wealthy family, she once again met a man who would change her life. Zaid was in the background of her letters to Nazneen so the reader does not get an image of them falling in love. It surprises the reader also that Hasina was ready to risk safe surroundings and escape with Zaid. He told Hasina that he had saved money and was planning to leave and make a new life for himself somewhere. Perhaps that fascinated Hasina and all the options he mentioned: “He have many idea. One idea is food stall for office worker. Good standard. Other is restaurant for family dining. He is also look into possibility of train for kung fu actor. Another idea is set up as fixer for sending people to foreign country for working there” (BL 2003:338). There were several possibilities but none of them seemed to be thought through carefully. Still, the plans must have made the future sound exciting and worth waiting for. They could make a life for them and stop serving others with low pay. However, the plans were Zaid's, not Hasina's. She simply followed him and took his dreams as her own. On one hand she went against her fate by taking action and leaving the safe surroundings of the family protecting her. On the other hand she did not listen to *her* hopes and dreams, but was perhaps so used to being on other people's mercy that she never even realized the option of having her own dreams and trying to make them happen. Shelter was what she was now looking for and protection, not independent life. Perhaps it would have been impossible for her, especially without income, to do as her sister who in the end did not need a man to survive. This was possible for Nazneen because in Britain the state provides the protection that in Bangladesh is up to the men.

### **8.6 Taking action or leaving matters to fate?**

Hasina married for love initially and went against her fate whereas Nazneen obediently married the man who her father wanted and followed her fate. What followed for the sisters from their actions was that Hasina ended up childless and

poor with a bad reputation and Nazneen gained a family and independence and was finally able to do what she wanted. Is the message here that one should not go against the norm or otherwise they might end up badly? Is this a celebration of an arranged marriage rather than a marriage based on love? Perhaps there is no message. Both sisters went against their fate at some point in their life and took matters into their own hands ending up in different situations. Was it bad luck in Hasina's case or was her fate to be unhappy? Perhaps she did fall in love with Zaid in the end and finally found her happiness. In my view, it is impossible to live ones life leaving matters entirely to fate. Nazneen's mother, who wanted everything to be left to fate, did not do so herself. She took her own life and did not let God decide her destiny. Nazneen made decisions and took actions to improve her life, but nearly always felt guilty of something. Perhaps it was this notion of leaving it all to fate she got as her mother's legacy, what always troubled her. I think Ali's mission here was not to give answers to questions of fate. In my opinion she wrote a book about Bangladeshi women in different situations with the same background describing the challenges they both met on their way to find peace of mind. By doing so Ali gave us a valuable view to female immigrants' lives. Ali's book raises questions of which some are answered, and some, like the question of fate, is left in the air, unanswered.

## 9. CONCLUSION

In this Pro Gradu thesis I have looked at the lives of two sisters, Nazneen and Hasina, presented in *Brick Lane* by a British-Bangladeshi author Monica Ali. I have compared the way they respond to their surrounding societies: Nazneen in London's Bangladeshi society and Hasina in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The two women kept in contact with letters and although their background was the same, their lives ended up being very different from each other. First I gave background information and briefly explained the development of the British Empire, as well as the situation of minorities in Britain. I introduced the history of Bangladesh, explained general features of the Bangladeshi culture and gender roles and looked at the life and work of Monica Ali. In addition, I explained some theory on postcolonial literature. After

these background chapters I moved on to the core analysis. I chose family, society and economy, religion and romantic love vs arranged marriage as the main themes for my thesis. I felt that these themes stood out in the book and also in reality they often define people's lives and how their experience of it.

How did the sisters respond to the societies then? They were both taken away from their safe childhood surroundings and had to find a way to make a meaningful life for themselves. Nazneen was taken to an entirely foreign culture, which language she did not know, and Hasina was an outcast of the society and constantly seeking for protection. Family is something that frames people's lives very powerfully, whether the lack of it or the quality of it. For Nazneen her family was something that was present through the book, both her childhood family and her husband and children. In contrast, Hasina had lost her family. She chose to leave her childhood family when she made a love marriage and escaped her home and ended up searching for love and family throughout the whole book. Family would have given Hasina a better position in the society and also a meaning to her otherwise drifting lifestyle.

Society's impact was very strong on both of the sisters. Nazneen, who lived in a Western country, in a city of millions of people, was still under the surveillance of a very tight Bangladeshi community. One could assume that an immigrant woman in London would be able to lead a fairly independent life and would have many opportunities in, for example, labour market. This, however, seems to be only true for immigrants arriving from other Western countries. The contemporary British society is a mixture of several different minorities. Also historically, Britain has always been a home for many different nationalities, such as the Scottish, Welsh, English and Irish, and therefore has a long history of cultures clashing and trying to fit in together. Still, the attitude towards foreign cultures remains suspicious. For the minorities with Commonwealth origins, the degree of discrimination differs. Bangladeshis are consequently among the ones facing most discrimination. Nazneen lived in the Bangladeshi society that closely inspected her doings and the British society that seemed to have no room for her. First she stayed within the shelter of her

home, and like any obedient Bangladeshi housewife, took care of the domestic matters. However, in the course of time, when she became more aware of the surrounding society and gained more self-esteem, she began to break free from her traditional role. She had an affair and although it ended, she was never the same again. She could not go back to Bangladesh because her daughters' home was in London and they would never adjust to life in Bangladesh. In addition, Nazneen had obviously already had a taste of the life she could lead in London alone with her daughters. She earned her own living and was not in the tight grip of either her husband or the Bangladeshi community anymore. She was free to do what she wanted. Thus, I argue, *Brick Lane* in the end represents an image of an immigrant woman being able to make a more independent life in Britain than, for example, in Bangladesh. Whether this is true in real life, however, is entirely a different matter. British society gives frames for independence, but racism and the pressure of one's own community will still be present.

Hasina in Bangladesh, on the other hand, was on the mercy of other people. Although she was able to work, or rather she had no choice, she had no independence or freedom of choice in the sense that Nazneen had. The Bangladeshi society in Dhaka presented in *Brick Lane* had very strict rules. One should live by them and avoid giving any reason to be gossiped about. Having a man in one's life as a provider and protector was very important for Bangladeshi women. Without a man Hasina too was without protection and spent her life in search for a husband and family, trying her best to survive.

Religion was important to both of the sisters and especially for Nazneen it was the force that kept her going in the chaos of life. She was often torn between the notion of fate and her own activity on matters. Should she continue the legacy of "How You Were Left To Your Fate" as her mother would have wanted or should she be in charge of her own life? In the end she chose to take action but never lost her faith in God. Karim introduced a new world of Islam to Nazneen by inviting her to Bengal Tigers' meetings and giving her Bengali leaflets to read. This world was bigger than the one she was used to, and full of people in distress. Nazneen's problems seemed

minor compared to the larger concept. Still, they did not disappear however small they may have felt in comparison. For Hasina religion seemed to have a smaller role. This may be due to the lack of description in the book, but the image one gets of Hasina's faith is not as strong as Nazneen's.

Romantic love is often juxtaposed with arranged or forced marriage. In *Brick Lane* too these two are contrasted. Hasina made a love marriage and ended up fairly unhappy, whereas Nazneen obeyed her father and married a man of his choice and in the end found some happiness. However, there were no men involved for her happiness. She could have gone to Bangladesh with her husband or she could have divorced him and married her lover, Karim, but she chose not to. Perhaps the reasons for this are a mixture of several issues. She had courage in her, but to divorce her husband was still too much for a woman of strong faith. She cared for Chanu and could not take his family away from him. In a way she still made a sacrifice. Or perhaps she wanted to wait and see whether she would miss Chanu and one day they would meet again. However, she did not divorce her husband, but became an independent woman with a life that seemed to be full of possibilities once the chains of the Bangladeshi society in London had been cut off. Love was an important factor for the sisters. However, for Nazneen in the end it had no defining power, whereas for Hasina it was a distant illusion that she spent her life chasing.

Did the way the sisters responded to their surrounding societies change in the course of time? For Nazneen it certainly did, and gradually she began to find her place in the multicultural society of London. Having been hidden away in her home, out of the reach of the British culture in the beginning, she had no knowledge of the language, for example. Language is, as we know, essential in understanding any culture's ways and customs. Knowing the language of the host society ideally does not take away pieces of your own culture and identity. It certainly adds to it, but at its best never steals anything in return.

In the beginning Hasina took the matters into her own hands at an early age and ended up living a life that she seemed to have no control over, whereas Nazneen,

who followed her fate and never questioned it, ended up as a free woman in a modern society, making her life into what she wanted. Is Ali's message here that an arranged marriage can lead to a better life, when a love marriage ultimately leads to chaos? It is not that simple, even though one cannot help seeing this connection. Is the message then the matter of the society? Is the impact of it less in the Western world that in the end one is able to break free from its conventions?

Here again Hiddleston's (2005) notions of the different ways of reading the novel become relevant: are we to read the text as a representation of an authentic Bangladeshi society or is it just a work of literature? I believe it is both. When books like *Brick Lane* are written "from the middle" it means that as readers we get the view from both sides. Monica Ali has roots in Bangladeshi and British cultures, which enables her at its best to experience and understand both cultures very deeply. She has not just one view point, but two, making the story more interesting. Studying diaspora literature can give us valuable information of the immigrant and minority experience that often are not considered important and are forgotten under the problems of immigration in general. Today, with people moving all over the world and many different nationalities and cultures trying to live side by side in peace, it is especially important to understand the experience of all people. In the world of terrorism or the fear of it, which is often towards Islam and Muslim people, stories of ordinary Muslim people are important. Books written by authors with diaspora background can shed light on what it is like to be a member of a minority group within a Western host society. Not only do books like *Brick Lane* give people from the host culture an entrance into a life of an immigrant, but also to people inside the community of which the book is written about. Often namely the experience of immigrant women is ignored. However, *Brick Lane* evoked quite controversial feelings in the London's Bangladeshi community and was received even with hatred, because it represented the community as something else than it identified itself as. Still, a voice of a young Bangladeshi immigrant woman was heard through the book, regardless of the way it may have been received.

Recently there has been much debate over whether head scarves should be banned in

many European countries. Islam and the rights of namely Muslim people are a topic of conversation. Often the lack of knowledge can make things appear quite simple and black and white. I feel that in order to make statements on the issue of head scarves or any other culturally related matters, one has to have *knowledge* of the cultures involved. *Brick Lane* and my study of it add to the knowledge of the challenges the immigrants often face. However, one has to bear in mind that the book is still fictional and a piece of art and cannot be taken as an authentic representation of all the Muslim women's lives. Each life is different, but fiction or fact, one thing is for certain: young Muslim women of Britain need to have louder voice and need different channels through which to be heard and seen. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is one of those channels.

I have looked at *Brick Lane* from a sociological perspective rather than linguistic one. Language is an essential part of the book, but my interest has been to interpret the lives of the women rather than their use of language. However, another way to analyze the story would be to concentrate on the language used in it. The difference between the correctness and style of language the two sisters use would be interesting. Also the voices of men and women could be compared. Further, it would be interesting to compare the writings of Monica Ali's and, for example, Zadie Smith. Another fruitful study would be to compare Nazneen's story with a male immigrant's and analyze how the responses and reactions might be similar to each other or if they would differ a great deal. In addition, the experience of the different generations could be compared in both London and Dhaka. It would be interesting to study whether the younger female generation is actually more free and faces less prejudice or not. These possible studies would all shed light on the lives of immigrants and perhaps be even helpful when we try to find ways to live in harmony with all different cultures in the world.

In my study I have shown the different lives and challenges that two women from the same background, but different environments, can face. I have come to a conclusion that although we often seem to consider the Western world a more free place to live with more opportunities, the truth is not always as simple as that.

Especially immigrant women often face many obstacles in between the demands of the host culture and their own minority group. They both expect certain behaviour and often leave very little space for the women to actually experience the alleged freedom of the Western world. In *Brick Lane* Hasina was the one with more freedom and ironically she was the one who longed for the “walls to keep her in”. She craved for the acceptance of the society in the form of a family. For Nazneen, however, the ties of the Bangladeshi society in London became too much and she broke free from them. What happened after, we do not know, but we can imagine that the world of freedom and opportunity did not simply open up for Nazneen. The racism of the British society did not disappear. Therefore the skating on ice, the freedom to do what she wished (discussed in chapter 8.4), most likely remained a distant dream for Nazneen. Still, with her actions she may have laid the road for her daughters' freedom from the tight grip of the Bangladeshi society.

With my study of *Brick Lane* I have shown the differences and similarities in Nazneen and Hasina's lives. I have given evidence on the importance of family to them. Nazneen had a family and the choices she made in her life, were strongly affected by it. This was contrasted with Hasina's lack of family and the desperate search for one. I compared romantic love and arranged marriage with each other. Nazneen experienced both, whereas Hasina fell in love as a sixteen year old and severely burnt her wings even then. In addition, the Bangladeshi society's impact on the women's actions was at times significant. They both made choices based on the expectations the societies had for them. I have given evidence that minority groups' women experience different degrees of restrictions and freedom depending on where they live and what is their economical situation. Having income of ones own often gives more freedom of choice. Nazneen too could live on her own because she had a job. For Hasina, there was no choice. Without a job she would have starved. I have also studied the role Islamic faith had in the two sisters' lives. Religion played a great role, especially in Nazneen's life. By analyzing the lives of these young Muslim women I have added to the knowledge of Muslim communities both in Bangladesh and in Britain. Today, when racial and religious prejudice and even hatred are increasingly common features of many societies, studies of ordinary people with

ordinary lives and faiths are immensely important.

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