

# Extract from “Brick Lane”

by Monica Ali



*Brick Lane is a street at the heart of London’s Bangladeshi community. Ali’s novel of the same name follows the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who moves to London from Bangladesh at the age of 18 to marry an older man, Chanu. They live in Tower Hamlets, an area that houses a lot of immigrants.*

*At first, her English consists only of “sorry” and “thank you”. The novel explores her life and adaptations in the community, as well as the character of Chanu and their larger ethnic community.*

...

## BANGLADESH, 1984

Soon after, when her father asked if she would like to see a photograph of the man she would marry the following month, Nazneen shook her head and replied, “Father, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma<sup>1</sup>.”

But as she turned to go she noticed, without meaning to, where her father put the photograph.

She just happened to see it. These things happen. She carried the image around in her mind as she walked beneath the banyans<sup>2</sup> with her cousins. The man she would marry was old. At least forty years old. He had a face like a frog. They would marry and he would take her back to England with him. She looked across the fields, glittering green and gold in the brief evening light. In the distance a hawk circled and fell like a stone, came up and flew against the sky until it shrank to nothing.

---

<sup>1</sup> Amma - mor

<sup>2</sup> banyans – bengalsk figentræ – Indiens nationaltræ

## TOWER HAMLETS, LONDON, 1985

Nazneen waved at the tattoo lady. The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life beyond was all shapes and shadows. But the tattoo lady had no curtains at all. Morning and afternoon she sat with her big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair, tipping forward to drop ash in a bowl, tipping back to slug<sup>3</sup> from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window.

It was the middle of the day. Nazneen had finished the housework. Soon she would start preparing the evening meal, but for a while she would let the time pass. It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the glass. A red and gold sari hung out of a top floor flat in Rosemead block. A baby's bib and miniature dungarees lower down. The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues<sup>4</sup> beneath were Bengali. No dumping. No parking. No ball games. Two old men in white Punjabi-pyjamas<sup>5</sup> and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated<sup>6</sup>. The breeze on Nazneen's face was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins.

It had been six months now since she'd been sent away to London. Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish*. And then she opened her eyes and saw Chanu's puffy face on the pillow next to her, his lips parted indignantly<sup>7</sup> even as he slept.

---

<sup>3</sup> slug - at drikke i store slurke, bælle

<sup>4</sup> curlicues – kruseduller – her indiske skrifttegn

<sup>5</sup> punjabi-pyjamas - påklædning til traditionelle eller religiøse begivenheder

<sup>6</sup> defecated – at have afføring

<sup>7</sup> indignantly - harmfuldt