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BRICK LANE BLOCKADES: THE BIOCULTURALISM OF MIGRANT DOMESTICITY

Mrinalini Chakravorty

In April of 1999, around the time of the Bengali new year, a nail-packed car bomb detonated outside Naz café on Brick Lane at dinner time. Seven were wounded. It quickly became apparent that the bombings were part of a targeted series of hate crimes later known as the London nail bombings. Just a week before the Brick Lane bombing, a similar explosion rocked Electric Avenue in Brixton, London's mainly Afro-Caribbean borough. In that event, forty-five were injured. At the end of April, another homemade device was activated in a pub in Soho, the heart of queer London. This time there were three fatalities and sixty-five injured. Soon afterwards authorities arrested 23-year old David Copeland, a self-professed Neo-Nazi belonging to the ultra conservative British National and National Socialist Parties. During and after his trial, Copeland said he targeted minorities because he believed in a "master race" and wanted to spark a "race war."¹

Despite the title of her novel, Monica Ali curiously does not directly refer to this major incidence of violence that disrupted life in Brick Lane. The antiassimilationist intent of the bombings is instead replaced in the novel with the scene of a riot between the hate-mongering white group, the Lion Hearts, and the Islamicist, Bengal Tigers (394). The riot appears at a tangential moment in which Ali's protagonist, Nazneen, is embroiled by chance because she happens

to be out looking for her missing daughter Shahana. Distracted by her domestic troubles, Nazneen only peripherally apprehends the chaos unfolding around her. The impressions she forms, however, are worthy of note. At one moment it seems to her that "All mixed-blood vitality of the street had been drained. Something coursed down the artery, like a bubble in the blood stream" (396). During a hailstorm of brick missiles and empty bottles, she becomes aware that the "multicultural liaison officer" (397) had "crumpled on the ground" (396). In the panic that ensues, Nazneen "recognize[s] nothing" (397), except a voice that intervenes saying, "Brothers, why are you fighting yourselves, Mussulman against Mussulman?" (398).

The riot episode in *Brick Lane* stands out for the exceptional way in which it eclipses the historical event of the bombing. It also coalesces scenes of Nazneen's domesticity with the political prisms of multiculturalism and factionalism through which migrants such as her are routinely stereotyped. Her inability to "recognize" herself in the midst of the turmoil speaks to one aspect of how the novel situates her as a migrant subject in London. The dubious terms of multiculturalism and the uneasy conflicts of ethnocentrism that veer from inter-racial divisiveness to ethnic in-fighting are the only cognitive lenses available to someone like Nazneen. Additionally, the representation of riots clearly invokes a biocultural topos that is distinctly different from the violent carnage of hate-motivated killings masterminded by a single perpetrator. It mobilizes notions of crowding and chaos and biocultural fears that migrants pollute or contaminate British national identity.² These fears are, as we will see, an intimate feature of British political discourse about migrant integration and citizenship. Certainly, Nazneen's sense that the riots are about "blood" coursing through Brick Lane speaks to the biocultural undercurrents of how migrant assimilation is experienced. By shying away from depicting the color-coded violence of race wars that so often rage in Britain, Ali chooses to deflect the question of migrant disenfranchisement onto the less fraught and more confused context of a riot. The question is, how well, if at all, does this slippage capture the dissolute politics of racial and cultural exclusion that is part of the migrant experience in Britain?³ How does the rhetoric of multicultural Britain and of assimilation fit into this politicized matrix? As this essay shows, the protests and debates spurred by the novel itself also grapple with these questions.

What I term the biocultural brings the notion of biopolitics to bear on the cultural practices of migrant assimilation as they occur within the postcolonial metropole.⁴ My reading of Ali's *Brick Lane* examines the ways in which strategies of cultural preservation, both dominant and minor, are simultaneously and routinely framed by

biologically inflected claims about migrant belonging in Britain. Within foundational works of contemporary cultural studies, culture has been theorized as an "imagined community," or as an "invention of tradition," where it remains abstractly disembodied, even if it is mapped onto bodily practices.⁵ At the same time, the discourse of biopolitics, from Foucault to Agamben, seeks to interrogate the biological means through which states maintain power over their subjects. Working within and against both of these paradigms, what I suggest is that the biological is always already cultural, so that public discourses about the cultural demands of citizenship for migrants to Britain are often mired in a shadow language that is irreducibly corporeal.⁶ Rather than social constructs, the uproar surrounding the publication of *Brick Lane* divulges the extent to which cultural claims about race, language, assimilation, and authenticity remain anchored in irreducibly naturalized identity claims about what it means for former colonial migrants to belong in Britain today.⁷

Brick Lane tells the story of Nazneen and Chanu Ahmed, Bangladeshi immigrants to London's East End, and their two British-born daughters. Set largely in the public housing council flats of the Tower Hamlets, the novel lays bare the wrenching desires of a migrant family caught in the frays of culture and class. Chanu, who migrated to London after completing a degree in English literature at Dhaka University, becomes increasingly disenchanted with the limited prospects available to him in England. Defeated in his professional aspirations, Chanu enters into an arranged marriage with Nazneen, a much younger woman from a village in Bangladesh. The narrative, closely allied with Nazneen's perspective, follows a small cast of characters among whom she settles. Nazneen befriends Razia, who introduces her to the trade of home sewing that leads to her many adventures both inside and outside the home: she carries on an illicit affair with the increasingly radical and disaffected British Muslim Karim, inadvertently witnesses race clashes in her neighborhood, and eventually considers the prospect of starting her own garment trade outfit. In the novel's final scene, Nazneen accompanies her teenage daughters and Razia to go ice skating, giving her a chance to experience the gliding feeling that she always admired on the television. The text closes with Nazneen protesting that "you can't skate in a sari," prompting the final words of the novel, spoken optimistically by Razia: "'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like'" (415).

Like so much of Nazneen's journey, the fulfilment of the final promise of the novel is left to the realm of fantasy. Razia's claim captures a certain belief in the possibilities enabled by assimilation, but the novel itself fails to confirm Razia's faith. The novel ends on an optimistic note, but it does not bring Razia's vision into reality.

Because the words are the final pronouncement of the text, however, they carry a heightened measure of importance. The irony of the novel's ending is that, in the final moment, it seems to leave aside the biopolitics of race and enforced domesticity that it otherwise highlights as impediments to Nazneen's easy acculturation to England. Razia's closing assurance belies the text's all too facile final gesture of hybridity. That Nazneen is able to skate in a sari does little to change the material conditions under which she continues to live, both within the British state and within the community of Brick Lane. Rather, the final words reveal the extent to which the experience of multicultural hybridity is arrested by the limits of a cultural imaginary in which the specter of a Bangladeshi woman skating in a sari can only be seen as a parody of migrant assimilation. Commenting on *Brick Lane*, Germaine Greer affirms this sort of recourse to fantasy on Ali's part as contrary to "the pledge of our multi-ethnicity."

Yet Ali's failure is not that she disregards the realities of British or Bangladeshi culture, but rather that in this final gesture she accounts inadequately for how culture intersects with other material realities (namely race, gender, and language prejudice) that immigrants to Britain encounter. But this reading is also unable to capture the complexity of the text. The final words spoken by Razia, herself a racialized subject, work to undo the hegemonic capacity of the vision of cultural assimilation that she self-consciously presents. The materiality of Razia's race in a sense needs no further articulation, and in voicing an assimilationist desire, she interrogates the limits of the turn to culture evidenced by this vision of a hybrid utopia to come. Can the cultural realm accommodate racial difference? Is the power that attaches to racial difference here biological or cultural? Beginning with the moment of Nazneen's birth and ending with a moment of hybridity, the novel, I argue traces the biocultural politics of belonging in Brick Lane.

The Bioculture of Authenticity: Who Speaks for Brick Lane?

In the summer of 2006, protests erupted surrounding the filming of the cinema adaptation of Ali's *Brick Lane*. According to a number of reports in the British media, residents of the real Brick Lane, the Bangladeshi enclave where the novel takes place, took offense at the representation of the community in Ali's text. Though the protest was very small, a point that Ali insists on in a letter to *The Guardian*, the media was quick to seize on the controversy. At stake were the newsworthy issues of free speech, cultural values, economic fallout, racial and linguistic authenticity, and ethnic pride. An article in *The Guard-*

ian references members of an unnamed Tower Hamlets community action group who "insisted that the representation of Bangladeshis was unflattering and unfair" (Lea and Lewis). According to the same article, "Community leaders attacked the book on its publication in 2003, claiming that it portrayed Bangladeshis living in the area as backward, uneducated and unsophisticated, and that this amounted to a 'despicable insult.'"

In her letter of response to the *Guardian* article, Ali minimizes the extent of the protests, noting that "As seems to be the way with these things, press coverage began with the reporting of the views of one or two self-appointed 'community leaders'" ("Outrage Economy"). She goes on to critique the racial implications of such reporting, humorously imagining the reporter "stumbling around Tower Hamlets in his pith helmet and Empire Builder shorts, waving a notebook and echoing the old colonial cry: take me to your leader." Though the attacks were ostensibly leveled at her work, Ali framed the discussion around racist media representation, rejecting what she perceived as an attempt to foment class and gender tensions within the Bangladeshi community.

Yet, even as evidence of significant protest was waning, the speculations over free speech and censorship sparked a flurry of activity in the literary world. Among the most prominent of participants were Salman Rushdie and Germaine Greer. What began as a protest over a film escalated into a war over the very essence of cultural identity. For her part, Greer was committed to supporting the protesters. In a letter to *The Guardian*, Greer wrote of Ali:

She writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British. She has forgotten her Bengali, which she would not have done if she had wanted to remember it. When it comes to writing a novel, however, she becomes the pledge of our multi-ethnicity . . . Ali did not concern herself with the possibility that her plot might seem outlandish to the people who created the particular culture of Brick Lane. As British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature. The fact that Ali's father is Bangladeshi was enough to give her authority in the eyes of the non-Asian British, but not in the eyes of British Bangladeshis.

Greer's comments bring to the fore the limits of what is imaginable under the banner of being British. For Greer, Ali is too British to write a novel about a Bangladeshi woman. In making her claims, Greer

seems to draw a distinction between being British culturally, and being British by virtue of biology. Ali's birth to a Bangladeshi father is seen as sheer biology, an accident of genealogy that fails to accord her the cultural authority with which to write a novel about a Bangladeshi woman.

Yet, biology intercepts culture in complex ways in Greer's argument. While Ali's (bi)racial claim to culture is readily dismissed, Greer seems to unquestioningly endorse what she perceives as the more authentic cultural position of Ali's Bangladeshi critics. Ali's Britishness is cultural in Greer's assessment of it: "She writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British." Yet her critics speak, as far as Greer is able to communicate, with no other authority than their own racial identity. Implicit in Greer's comments is the suggestion that Ali's Britishness is cultural, cerebral, and located in the language she writes in, whereas the protesters are Bangladeshi by virtue of the purity of their race.

In a letter of response, Rushdie takes issue with Greer's framing of the incident: "There is a kind of double racism in this argument. To suit Germaine Greer, the British-Bangladeshi Ali is denied her heritage and belittled for her Britishness, while her British-Bangladeshi critics are denied that same Britishness, which most of them would certainly insist was theirs by right" ("Letter to the Editor"). What Rushdie points to is precisely the ways in which race is double-edged in Greer's critique of Ali. If Ali is too British to be Bangladeshi, her critics are too Bangladeshi to be British. As Rushdie suggests, in Greer's comments the categories of British and Bangladeshi are racial and cultural in both instances. As a sign of national identity, Rushdie implies, the claim to Britishness extends beyond the confines of race. At the same time, particularly within the diaspora, racial and cultural identities circulate beyond the boundaries of geography or place. Neither Greer's comments, nor Rushdie's response, wholly separate the biology of race from the politics of culture. Rather, what the controversy elucidates is the intersection of culture and the biology of race in the transnational moment. In a strange irony, the text is in fact deeply concerned, quite similarly, with the mapping of cultural norms onto the imperatives of biological control.

In the case of *Brick Lane*, the struggle over agency, free will, and desire to belong in Britain while being fated with the identity of a Bangladeshi is focalized primarily through Nazneen as she seeks to define herself within her family, the community of the hamlets, through her work as a home tailor, and ultimately in Britain (3). As both John Marx and Alistair Cormack note, *Brick Lane* reproduces the conventions of a realist novel, but one that "strains against the generic

demands of realism" to address the myriad ways in which Nazneen finds herself variously defined (Marx 21).⁸ Cormack goes further to claim that in fact it is because Nazneen's migrant status constitutes her as a multiply belonging and hybrid subject that the novel's realism "is unable to map the consciousness of this central character" and thus falls short of advancing "a more radical conception of subjectivity" (Cormack 697). Yet, what *Brick Lane* most profoundly demonstrates is that "a more radical conception of subjectivity" is not available to Nazneen. Even insofar as it may be a possibility, the novel confirms that it can at best be hinted at within a work that seeks to map the biocultural limits within Britain that forcibly appropriate, foreclose, or redirect any possibility of her autonomous self-fashioning.

Natural Citizenship: The Race-Gender Languages of Assimilation

In "'The Whisper Wakes, the Shudder Plays': 'Race,' Nation and Ethnic Absolutism," Paul Gilroy explores the ways in which the trope of assimilation has been used by Conservative politicians to perpetuate the notion of a unified Britain under attack by alien immigrants. Gilroy opens his chapter with an epigraph from the now infamous anti-immigrant "Rivers of Blood" speech made in 1968 by Enoch Powell, a Conservative Member of Parliament from the Midlands, in which Powell addresses the issue of assimilation: "The nation has been and is still being, eroded and hollowed out from within by implantation of unassimilated and unassimilable populations . . . alien wedges in the heartland of the state" (qtd. in Gilroy 248). In an earlier speech, delivered in Southall, a section of London largely populated by South Asian immigrants, Powell claimed that "It is . . . truly when he looks into the eyes of Asia that the Englishman comes face to face with those who would dispute with him the possession of his native land" (qtd. in Gilroy 250). A comparison of the two speeches reveals a constitutive paradox within the rhetoric of Powell's agenda. The immigrant population is represented as both "unassimilated and unassimilable . . . alien wedges" and at the same time as engaged in a battle with the Englishman over "the possession of his native land." The double-bind of Powell's message is that immigrants to Britain are at once inassimilable and at the same moment are dangerously in threat of assimilating, taking possession of the "native land." In the first instance, assimilation is imagined as utterly impossible and therefore frightening, and in the second instance assimilation is imagined as utterly possible and therefore no less frightening. As Gilroy notes, "The process of national decline is presented as coinciding with

the dilution of once homogenous and continuous national stock by alien strains. Alien cultures come to embody a threat which, in turn, invites the conclusion that national decline and weakness have been precipitated by the arrival of blacks" (Gilroy 251).

One element of the "threat" embodied in the possibility of immigrant assimilation is the right of citizenship accorded to children of immigrant parents born in Britain, a right that was later revoked by the Nationality Act of 1981. Until 1981, anyone born on British soil was by right of birth a British citizen. For Powell and other Conservative politicians, this right constituted a serious threat to the homogeneity of the nation, encouraging a division between the British nation and the uniform race of its peoples. Gilroy rightly identifies Powell's anxiety over "the difference between the merely formal membership of the national community provided by its laws, and the more substantive membership which derives from the historic ties of language, custom and 'race'" (Gilroy 251). The difference between the "merely formal membership" based in law and the "more substantive membership" based in race, sets up the mutually constitutive paradigms of nation, nativity, and citizenship as naturalization.

At their core, both goals of national unity and racial purity depend on the exertion of control over sexual reproduction. In this sense, the shift from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis* marks a corresponding shift from the nation as constituted territorially through horizontal community to the nation as constituted genealogically through vertical kinship. As colonial expansion became increasingly unviable, and the Empire began to contract in the wake of decolonization, the British state sought legally to imagine itself as constituted genealogically rather than territorially. The privileging of blood over soil, then, secures race as a primary factor around which the nation is consolidated. While the goals of territorial expansion are served by identifying the nation with its land, in response to the wave of post-War immigration, British nationalists trained their lens on human populations rather than geographical spaces. As the global energies of Empire were realigned around a new vision of national identity, British citizenship was predicated on British blood not British soil. If the model of *jus soli* naturalizes claims to citizenship on the basis of belonging to British territory, *jus sanguinis* naturalizes ties of blood, and by extension ties of race.

In the racial conflicts in Britain of 2001, which provide the backdrop for Ali's novel, race and sexuality have been variously deployed in the service of codifying national and socio-cultural identity.⁹ On both ends of the conflict, strategies of exclusion rest on the exertion of control over sexual mingling and reproduction in order to accomplish biocultural management. British nationalists and immigrants alike in-

voked claims of cultural superiority asserted through the maintenance of biologically constituted notions of racial purity. In both instances, biological control is deployed alongside the rhetoric of culture to limit social mingling. Within Ali's novel, the biocultural alliance is made explicit when Nazneen asks Chanu's permission to attend English language classes with her friend Razia. Chanu responds by saying, "You're going to be a mother . . . Will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It's not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that" (57). For Nazneen, learning English represents the possibility of venturing outside of the confines of her small apartment. But it is her encounter with social and cultural spheres beyond the domestic that at once excites Nazneen and disturbs Chanu. The realm beyond the home is associated, for Nazneen, with the dual possibilities of social pleasure with her subversive friend Razia and forays into the external cultural world around her, each of which represents an alternative to the structured community of marital domesticity in which Nazneen is normally confined. The moment of any intercultural encounter is forestalled through invoking the imperative of biological reproduction, where the function of Nazneen's body is given as the alibi for her enclosure within the domestic space. It is precisely this biological codification of the body, gendered against any possibility of assimilation, which Chanu's invocation of maternity reveals. Indeed, it can be equally argued that what masquerades as the culturing of women is in fact the biologization of certain normative social formations that in turn determine the range of possibilities that women are able to imagine for their bodies. Within Chanu's discourse, staying at home is naturalized as is her authenticity as a proper Bangladeshi housewife through recourse to Nazneen's maternity.

Importantly, Ali's characterization of Chanu echoes earlier masculinist anticolonial arguments against the encroachments of colonial culture that resolved the women's question by making partial access to the English language a prominent critical index of cultural identity.¹⁰ For both anticolonial-era nationalists and Chanu, Bengali is the language of the home, and English is the language of the world. Yet the discussion about learning English is as much about biopolitics as it is about culture. Nazneen wants to go to college to learn to speak English, but Chanu's reaction betrays a fear of the other things she might learn: sociality outside of the home, enjoyment of English activities, independent employment, and so forth. To speak English in some sense is to be English. The equation between speaking and being, ontologically as well as biologically, establishes the central point of cohesion in the relationship between language, culture, and biopolitics. The ability or desire to speak a given language is deployed

crucially at the intersection of biology and culture. Chanu's response harnesses language to reproductive demands made in the name of Bangladeshi culture. Language, in this instance English, insofar as it emblemizes the domain of culture, is counterpoised against nature, represented as motherhood.

Words of Dissent: The Biocultural Languages of Immigrant Belonging

To what extent, then, is reproductive normativity linked to notions of assimilation and naturalization? And moreover, how do both reproduction and naturalization invoke the idea of culture insofar as it is embodied in language? Broaching these questions would involve looking at antagonisms within the Bangladeshi immigrant community, between recent and multigenerational immigrants, as well as at larger tensions between immigrants and white protectionists. Because isolationist politics are invoked from both ends of the racial divide, it is crucial to interrogate how racial identity is claimed and valorized within the South Asian community, and how it is enforced from without, so as to demarcate—culturally, legally, and biopolitically—the immigrant from the British citizen-subject.

Competing ideologies of racial separatism characterized the political terrain in the wake of the 2001 race riots in Bradford, Oldham, Leeds, and Burnley. These riots were some of the most violent racial confrontations in Britain in recent years. Despite calls from immigrant groups to recognize the overt issues of race, the government responded by proposing heightened regulations on English language fluency. Indeed, as state-sanctioned discrimination based exclusively on race became increasingly untenable, juridical action based on language and custom took on greater significance. In the year following the riots, legislation was proposed in the British Parliament to mandate language testing for immigrants entering the United Kingdom. Home Secretary David Blunkett, in response to the series of race riots during the summer of 2001, urged ethnic minorities to develop a "sense of belonging" in Britain so that "future generations may grow up 'feeling British'" ("Immigrants should try").¹¹ In order to further such sentiments, Blunkett proposed English language testing for those seeking citizenship in Britain. Speaking of the proposed citizenship classes, which would include language and cultural training, Blunkett said "A political community can require new members to learn about its basic procedures and fundamental values" ("Immigrants to take citizen classes").

Perhaps even more controversially, Labour MP Ann Cryer "called on the government to consider introducing restrictions on immigrant brides and grooms who cannot speak English" ("MP"). Such legislation would serve to target the practice of arranged marriages that result in growing numbers of immigrants from South Asia. The controversy surrounding arranged and enforced marriages is situated precisely at the nexus of cultural and biopolitical modes of control, both patriarchal and governmental working separately and in concert. Yet, the discussion is deferred to the domain of language. In an interview with the BBC, Cryer defended her position as follows:

It just happens that the Bangladeshi and the Pakistani community are Muslims and they happen to be the people who persist in the practice of bringing in husbands and wives from the subcontinent. The Sikhs and Hindus are doing extremely well both academically and economically and I think that it is due to the fact they don't pursue this practice. It would be better if they selected the partners for their children from the sort of home-grown variety of Muslim Asians—that's what I would prefer to see. ("MP")

It is important to note that while Cryer seems to be arguing for the betterment of ethnic minority communities, her strategy serves to contain the numbers of immigrants by advocating choosing from the "home-grown variety of Muslim Asians." Further, Cryer links economic and academic success to religious and social customs, indicating that in order to succeed in Britain, the immigrant must adhere to social and marital norms as they manifest in British culture. Such a proliferation of Britishness is best accomplished, Cryer seems to suggest, by keeping the number of immigrants to a minimum. Political debates over marriage, reproductive freedom, and language arise at the crossroads of biology and culture.¹²

Saving women from questionable cultural practices proves an efficient guise for implementing biopolitical strategies for containing reproduction within immigrant communities. At the same time, domesticity and normative reproduction are invoked from within both immigrant and British cultures as a demand of feminine propriety. Calling forth the metaphor of "home" in both its national and private contexts, Home Secretary Blunkett said: "We need to say we will not tolerate what we would not accept ourselves under the guise of accepting a different cultural difference. We have norms of acceptability and those who come into our home—for that is what it is—should accept those norms just as we would have to do if we went elsewhere" ("Immigrants should try").

The trope of the domestic space threatened by "cultural difference" at once reveals an ideological alliance between Indian nationalists of the colonial era and British nationalists of the contemporary moment, and quite predictably, both ideologies turn on the question of reproductive normativity in the securing of culture. Though the metaphor of the home invokes spatial boundaries, what is actually at stake are the cultural practices that threaten the unity of the imagined community of British nationalism. Blunkett's remarks target "cultural difference" as the source of these practices, so that solving the problem of cultural difference comes to stand in for solving the problem of enforced marriages, as well as immigrant proliferation through unregulated reproduction.

In addition to proposals limiting immigration to brides and grooms who speak English, there have been other attempts to enforce linguistic uniformity. The rhetoric of these calls for legislating English fluency functions on the premise that linguistic unity is the key to preventing racial unrest. The British government responded to the race riots following the 2001 elections with proposals for linguistic "reform." Speaking one year prior to the summer riots, shadow Health Minister Liam Fox complained that foreign doctors' "English language skills are not up to scratch and patients are suffering as a result" (Gillian). Once again, Fox's comment serves to center the debate about language in the sphere of biopolitics, this time through the register of health. In response, Dr. Surendra Kumar, head of the Overseas Doctors Association, noted that given the material legacies of British colonialism, most foreign-educated doctors "have been trained in English, using the same textbooks as their British counterparts" and indeed have a high degree of fluency in the language (Gillian). Nevertheless, non-European Union doctors must pass stringent language exams that, when given to 55 practicing British physicians, only two passed (Gillian). This legislation, however, involves more than linguistic coherence among medical professionals. The European Union requires that professional qualifications of citizens of all member countries be recognized equally by all member states. Therefore, doctors from other European nations are not required to sit the same language exams that other foreign doctors are subjected to. Yet, citizenship within the European Union does not demand or ensure fluency in English. Dr. Kumar says, "I have known young Spanish, German, and other European doctors walking round wards with a dictionary trying to interpret what is wrong with a patient . . . But I have no doubt [Fox's] comments were targeted at South Asian doctors" (Gillian).

In *Brick Lane* Ali writes of Dr. Azad, a physician, whom she represents as poised uncomfortably at the threshold of the East and

the West. The doctor is a recurring character in the novel who dines with the Ahmeds on occasion. Never having received an invitation in return, one evening Chanu takes it on himself to pay an unexpected visit to Dr. Azad in his home. The movement between the two domestic spaces calls forth both Bangladeshi social practices, and the metaphor of the home invoked in Blunkett's speech. In both instances, it is the idealized notion of the home as the site of cultural purity that the transgression across differently constituted domestic spheres comes to threaten. In the scene of the encounter between the Ahmeds and the Azads in the doctor's home, Chanu is perplexed by Mrs. Azad's Anglicized behavior. The Azads' daughter, who speaks irreverently in English, enters the room to ask her mother for money for a visit to the pub. While Nazneen is stunned and fascinated by the permissive exchange between mother and daughter, Chanu sees it as a "tragedy" of the immigrant loss of identity. In a conversation that ensues between Chanu and Mrs. Azad, Chanu makes an impassioned speech about the tensions of family and culture: "I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent . . ." (88). For Chanu, the struggle is primarily between what he asserts as the shared identity of Bangladeshi immigrants on the one hand and Western culture on the other. Despite his invocation of a stable Bangladeshi culture, what he fears is the disintegration of any coherent notion of collective values. The divisions he outlines between "Western values and our own" mirrors the Bengali nationalist theorization of the home and the world posited almost a century earlier. And, indeed, within Chanu's framing of the issue, the values of Bengali culture are timeless, although they are threatened by the politics of place. It is because of their residence in England that the children "don't know what their identity is." At the heart of Chanu's argument, then, is the belief that the return to Bangladesh would signal a corresponding return to shared cultural values.

Within the narrative, however, Chanu's belief is undercut by the letters describing Hasina's life in Dhaka. Unlike Nazneen, who lives a fairly sheltered life in the council flats, Hasina is forced to seek employment outside the home, working as a prostitute, a domestic servant, and a seamstress in the garment industry. Countering Chanu's fantasy of Bangladesh as the site of cultural purity, the narrative constructs a spectacular image of third-world poverty, dismantling any easy equation of home and nation through the portrait of Hasina as literally homeless. The various notions of home at play in the discourses of nationalism and domesticity are simultaneously chal-

lenged through the horrifying descriptions of Hasina's life. That the discourses of nationalism and domesticity may be undone in unison points as well to the ways in which they are mutually constitutive and interdependent.

Chanu's vehemence about the lofty ideals of culture is met with flippancy from Mrs. Azad, who, once engaged, proceeds to counter Chanu's assertions with equally strong conviction: "Why do you make it so complicated?" said the doctor's wife. "Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing . . . Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work" (88–89). The divisions that Chanu holds fast between "Western values and our own" are sundered by Mrs. Azad, who de-naturalizes the link between being Bangladeshi and sharing certain cultural values. Mrs. Azad, who importantly is only identified by her marital title and name, rejects Chanu's fixed spheres of culture in favor of a more flexible identity based on migrant cosmopolitanism.

As the scene unfolds, Nazneen is both fascinated and unsettled by Mrs. Azad's comments. The narrative draws out the relationship between domesticity, maternity, and the biopolitics of place. When Mrs. Azad rises to light the fire, Nazneen believes she is leaving the house to go to the pub, suggesting that the views espoused by Mrs. Azad, insofar as they are embodied in her physicality, are somehow inappropriate to the domestic space of the Bangladeshi home. Yet Mrs. Azad remains physically present in the home, challenging the ease with which cultural boundaries map onto spatial ones. At the same time, Mrs. Azad's rhetoric holds firm the divide between "eating curry" in her house and "working with white girls" in the world outside (89). The meal she serves to her guests, however, is described as consisting of "unidentified meat in tepid gravy, with boiled potatoes," in sharp contrast to the elaborate Bengali meals that Nazneen prepares (85). What becomes clear is that in her person, and in her behavior, Mrs. Azad is an emblem of unpredictability. She neither confirms the neat divisions set up by Chanu, nor does she refute them through any strict inversion.

Moreover, the narrative draws an explicit connection between Mrs. Azad's reference to women who "sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English," and Nazneen's response, which was to remain "focused on Raqib" (89). Looking pointedly at Nazneen who remains focused on her infant son, Mrs. Azad adds: "Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English . . . They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking

prisons." Having relinquished her desire to attend English classes at the local college, Nazneen enacts the vision of domestic maternity that Chanu has requested of her. Directing her gaze to Raqib, Nazneen typifies the equivalence between staying at home, preserving Bangladeshi culture, and raising children.¹³ In this sense, as Mrs. Azad suggests, the demands of culture take on a biopolitical force that is experienced unevenly by women. Nazneen's gaze, focused as it is on Raqib, solidifies the connection between marital domesticity and normative reproductivity. What Mrs. Azad interrogates is precisely the structure of normativity that sutures reproduction to staying at home and raising proper Bengali children. The fact that the discussion is prompted by Mrs. Azad's own eccentric parental interaction highlights the extent to which Mrs. Azad is something in excess of Nazneen's simple opposite. The interaction between the two women is complex, filled with both warmth and disgust. Following the conversation with Chanu, Mrs. Azad summons Nazneen upstairs, where she gives Raqib a teddy bear. The narrative captures a moment of silence between the two women: "Nazneen changed his nappy and put his pajamas on. He did not wake. Mrs. Azad smoked a cigarette. She stroked Raqib's head with one hand and smoked with the other. Watching her now, Nazneen felt something like affection for this woman, this fat-nosed street fighter" (89).

The narrative, like Nazneen, remains deeply ambivalent about Mrs. Azad. Although she critiques the fixed relationships between culture and the biopolitics of gender and sexuality, she, like Chanu, comes to too easy a resolution. As Nazneen's own situation makes clear, the kind of migrant cosmopolitanism that Mrs. Azad invokes is largely unavailable to those not habituated to it because of class. Further, in framing the discussion as a distinction between inhabiting "little walking prisons" and recognizing that "society is racist," Mrs. Azad suggests that racism exists only to the extent to which immigrants choose not to assimilate. In this sense, Mrs. Azad serves to naturalize the link between bodily practices on the one hand, and national belonging on the other, thus harnessing biopolitics to the goals of national unity and uniformity. That the discussion takes place around the constant vigilance over the figure of a child consolidates the centrality of birth to the discourses of both nationalism and biocultural normativity.

Domesticity of Descent: A Question of Birth?

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben traces the shared etymology of nation and nativity in order to reveal the centrality of birth to the politics of the nation. Agamben argues that it is impossible

to understand the "national" and "biopolitical development" of the modern state without recognizing that at its core is a conception of man based not on freedom, but on "bare life," which is "the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty" (128). More importantly, Agamben identifies the slide between birth and nation as the implicit "fiction" of modernity. Because biological birth and nation are coincidental, "Rights are attributed to man," Agamben claims, and "originate" in his biological conception such that man as *zoe* "is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen." For Agamben, "bare life" is constituted as and in "the simple birth" of the citizen subject. Within this framing of biopolitics, the fact of birth is taken as a spontaneous entry into life. What is missing is the specificity of sexual and reproductive politics that situate birth within an already encumbered field of cultural ideology.¹⁴ In other words, the moment of birth is deeply embedded in the politics of culture that frame the minutia of sexual reproduction.

Returning to the debate surrounding the biological imperative of political subject-formation, it is critical to think through the ways in which the domestic signification of birth is coded onto the rights of national citizenship. What is revealed by the various nationalist politics is the relationship between assimilation and naturalization, where the natural subject of the state is the biological subject of normative maternity, regulated racially and sexually. To become naturalized as a citizen-subject is to approximate the normative kinship produced by vertical genealogical community. If the demand of citizenship by birth is shared blood with a British citizen, the demand of citizenship by naturalization is enacting and adhering to British cultural practices.¹⁵ Quite materially, naturalization solidifies the link between birth, nation, and cultural identity.

Framed in this manner, culture emerges not as an ancillary concern, but as crucial to the politics of biological management that determine the rights of citizenship. Labour MP Ann Cryer's call to choose partners from the "home-grown variety of Muslim Asians" situates marital practices at the threshold of biology and culture. The biologically inflected descriptor "home-grown variety" implies a certain correspondence between location and culture.¹⁶ If the partners are selected from among the "home-grown variety," they are likely to adhere to British cultural norms, rather than bringing with them Bangladeshi ones. At issue is the relationship between domestic normativity inside the nation and domestic normativity inside the home. The notion of the domestic as home is solidified through the maintenance of the domestic as internal to the nation. The framing of the discussion around the question of marriage practices further

consolidates the pairing of national unity and vertical kinship. What masquerades as an affirmation of horizontal community, shared culture, is in fact a call for vertical kinship, so that the Asian population is contained both through the barring of further immigration, and through the perpetuation of shared British cultural values in matters of family planning. While British-born Asians are thought to be more closely allied with British cultural values, reproductive practices that are understood as unregulated or alien are seen as preventing immigrant subjects from "doing well both academically and economically."

Normativity in both senses of the domestic turns on the question of culture. If the norm of the nation is culture and citizenship, the norm of the home is cultural preservation and heterosexual reproduction. In both instances, in order to secure the normative, culture must be shared, either across the citizenry or within the home. As MP Cryer's comments indicate, one effective means of ensuring shared cultural values is through encouraging sexual reproduction between citizens, rather than between citizens and immigrants. The practice of marrying immigrant spouses presents a threat to the uniformity of national culture. At the same time, the barring of marriage to immigrant spouses hampers the preservation of Bengali culture within the domestic sphere of the home. By encouraging marriage within the "home-grown variety of British Muslims," the cultural reproduction of British values is made congruent with the sexual reproduction of British citizens. Of course, that the Muslim communities might harbor a set of cultural practices apart from a larger societal norm is glossed over in such premises. In other words, cultural difference is assumed to be located outside, and not within, the already extant body politic.

Moreover, the hegemonic force of nationalism is thus brought to bear on the most intimate of personal relationships, such that the legal apparatus of marriage functions crucially as a preeminent site of biocultural politics.¹⁷ In the transition from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis*, the construction of community shifts from horizontal to vertical and from spatial to biological. If citizenship by virtue of birth on British soil naturalizes spatial or locational communities, citizenship by virtue of birth to British parents naturalizes communities on the basis of biology and kinship. Marriage, insofar as it is the legal institution by which intimacy and reproduction are monitored and regulated, in turn becomes the foundation for biocultural strategies of management and containment.

Within the novel, and within larger cultural politics, social organization takes in both spatial and biological configurations. In the fraught cultural space of the immigrant home, the conflict between national, cultural, and biological politics becomes highly pronounced. During the nightly ritual of the recitation of Rabindranath Tagore's

poems, an antagonism builds between Shahana and Chanu around precisely the question of which cultural identity is most natural to the girls: "Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez. . . . When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was . . . the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home" (144). The argument culminates with Shahana shouting "*I didn't ask to be born here.*" The domestic aims of preserving Bengali culture within the confines of the home are at odds with the aims of extending British culture domestically within the nation. Unlike the model of flexible cultural identity articulated by Mrs. Azad, Shahana's rebellion plays out as an absolute rejection of Bengali cultural values. The conflict unfolds on the corporeal level, with Chanu "launching a flogging with anything to hand." The scene of bodily discipline secures the association between culture and the biopolitical means through which it is perpetuated. For Chanu, the form of discipline is necessarily bodily, even as "he flogged enthusiastically, but without talent." For Shahana, the justification for her refusal of Bengali cultural practices is equally embodied, existing in the mere fact of her birth in England. The argument between Chanu and Shahana enfolds the workings of culture into the logic of biopolitics.

The fact of birth, as Agamben reveals and Shahana confirms, inaugurates the political subject of the state. The slippage between birth and nation solidifies the ties of kinship that nationalism seeks to invoke. Within Agamben's discourse, the nation is constituted by virtue of biological lineage rather than any particular politics of place. Yet in Shahana's vision, it is the fact of her birth in Britain that makes inevitable her cultural identification with the West. In this sense, culture and location situate the subject as marked at birth not only by the biopolitics of citizenship, but also by the bioculturalism of place.

Living and Leaving Brick Lane

The novel opens by naming the place and date ("MYMENSINGH DISTRICT, EAST PAKISTAN, 1967") of Nazneen's birth, while also weaving a brief narrative aligning the soon-to-be Bangladeshi village with the whimsies of family and Fate. Nazneen, hovering precariously between birth and death, is placed by her mother in the hands of Fate, whose powers ostensibly traverse the bounds of geography and temporality: "We must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger" (3). In Bangladesh, the

novel suggests, life and death occur at the mercy of fate. Even as the narrative represents Bangladesh nostalgically at moments, the intrusion of "Fate" serves to destabilize any sense of security Nazneen can derive from the alternative life she might imagine in Bangladesh. As Bangladesh recedes from Nazneen's memories and desires, tropes of Eastern mysticism and fatalism collide with the representation of slums and squalor to produce a familiar stereotype of Bangladesh for the reader. By portraying Bangladesh so starkly at the mercy of fate and poverty, Ali calls into question any viability for Bangladesh to provide an alternative place for Nazneen to imagine her emotional development and indeed her desire to be free.

Similarly, the narrative as a whole works to undermine Bangladesh as a site of development, as the reader is given a harrowing portrait of third-world biopolitics that ultimately serves to minimize the challenges Nazneen faces in London. Hasina's letters to Nazneen, for instance, are replete with descriptions of the brutality and deprivation of a risky and uncertain existence. She, along with her letters, mysteriously vanishes from the novel, severing Nazneen's only meaningful tie to her place of birth. Bangladesh, in Ali's hands, is decidedly not the space of individuality, but rather is the biocultural zone of Orientalism itself: the crowded and chaotic space that forestalls independence. It is also the site of natural belonging for Nazneen that must be gradually severed for her to assume her place as a migrant in Britain.

In her portrayal of London, Ali works within the familiar paradigm of the west as a place for self-exploration, yet lacking in sociality and warmth. In contrast to the village in Bangladesh, London is less regulated by fate. Although Nazneen's life is absent of any social intimacy, her loneliness in London catalyzes her desire for social assimilation. Absent the constant distractions of the village, London forces Nazneen towards introspection and eventually towards work and action. Trapped in her flat, for instance, Nazneen becomes visually captivated with "the tattoo lady," who sits on her balcony across from Nazneen's flat, perpetually smoking (6). Although Nazneen has never spoken to the tattoo lady, she becomes part of Nazneen's imagined community, as she fantasizes a friendship with this proximal, yet culturally remote figure (7). The impossibility of making contact with the tattoo lady dissolves when Nazneen admits to herself that she "could say [only] two things in English: sorry and thank you" (7). In sharp contrast to the teeming sociality of the village, language fluency impedes social mingling between residents of the council flats. Just as Nazneen's experience of the village is located in her memory, her acquaintance with the tattoo lady is relegated to her imagination. Any possibility of material interaction in either instance

is foreclosed by the limits of time and distance on the one hand, and linguistic barriers on the other. Yet Nazneen's contemplation and desire to know the tattoo lady is suggestive of the potential for cross cultural exchange that, though not realized, creates the conditions of possibility for Nazneen's adaptation to her new life in Brick Lane. The racial, cultural, and linguistic divisions that stop Nazneen from acting on impulse fail to stifle her fantasy. What the tattoo lady provides for Nazneen is the means through which she comes to imagine an alternative to her present moment. Although she knows that she would "spend another day alone," within the realm of fantasy she has become able to imagine sharing "samosas or bhajis" with this strange figure (7).¹⁸

However, Nazneen's imaginative escapes, her fantasies of being in places other than she is, as John Marx notes, "falls short of the threshold for calculative agency" (20). The alternative she is able to imagine for herself remains conscribed to the labor she performs notably at home. As Ali makes clear, even Nazneen's sewing work within the home space is foremost conditioned on Chanu's convictions. He tells their daughters, "'Your mother is doing everything possible to facilitate our dream through the age old and honorable craft of tailoring'" (168). Aside from reaffirming Chanu's desires to return to their real homeland, Nazneen's previously reproductive domesticity is reconceived in terms of the debilitating rhythms of her new work. Ali gives us scenes of the new confinement Nazneen endures at home when she describes Chanu's relentless scrutiny of Nazneen's tailoring work as she sits working for hours at her machine:

[Chanu] ripped the thin sheath of plastic and unfurled the legs of a dozen or so pairs of men's trousers. "Hemming," he announced . . . "Test batch" . . . "All will be inspected . . . Chanu brought home holdalls of buttonless shirts, carrier bags of unlined dresses, a washing tub full of catchless bras. He counted them out. He counted them back in. Every couple of days he went for new loads. He performed a kind of rudimentary quality control . . . (166-167)

Such rigors of domestic labor are at the heart of Nazneen's new found sense of "freedom"; they speak to Ali's cautions about the biocultural nexus that continues to frame her. The novel implies that whatever sense of agency Nazneen arrives at will most likely be exercised only within an economy of transnational labor, with equally restricted biocultural presumptions. Her realization that "work in itself, performed with a desire for perfection, was capable of giving satisfaction" arises insofar as she fulfills the desires of Chanu and Karim, the middlemen who dictate the terms of her work (219). Notably, it is her ability to work that confirms her status as a woman in their eyes. In effect,

domestic garment work feminizes her in a new economy. "When I married her, I said: She is a good worker" says Chanu, and for Karim she is transformed into, "The Real thing" (382). Her final assertion of choice, "I will say what happens to me. I will be the one (301)," hints at the possibility of escaping the ways in which others "make [her] up." (382). Yet the novel never confirms this transition, relegating it to the realm of Nazneen's dreams.

From her early experiences at the beginning of the novel, to the point of Chanu's departure and Nazneen's independence at the end, the novel is concerned with articulating the new British migrant's journey towards a self-conscious claim on Britishness. Each section of the novel announces the place and date at which it occurs, and the narrative is for the most part chronological, though it shifts in geographical location between London and Dhaka. In a sense, the novel is largely about Nazneen's journey from Bangladesh to Brick Lane, but the travel in physical space and time is accompanied by a corresponding movement in fantasy and imagination. If the biocultural status of the immigrant subject is defined in relation to time and place, Nazneen comes to imagine an alternative possibility at the junction of fantasy and reality.

The climax of the novel is the scene of the riot. Disoriented by chaos on Brick Lane, Ali portrays Nazneen's stasis: "Nazneen stopped moving . . . during this sinister game of hide-and-seek. There were no white people here at all. These boys were fighting themselves. A dizziness came over her and she leaned against the glass. How long, she thought, how long it has taken me to get this far" (397). When Nazneen thinks to herself "how long it has taken me to get this far," it is uncertain whether she is referring to her movement from the house to the streets of Brick Lane, or her passage from Bangladesh to England, or her journey from the home into the world, or her transformation from one kind of domestic worker to another. Even more striking is that Ali writes the failure of British multiculturalism to adequately extend the sense of secure belonging to places like Brick Lane as a "brown" or "black" problem. The biocultural rhetoric of assimilation that governs British national discourse appears to be fully integrated into the structure of the riot that we are told implodes as much from the divisiveness within the migrant community as well as from the catalysts without. Nazneen's ability to perceive herself in the midst of such a community of difference whose presence in London remains internally and externally contested is the journey of migrancy *Brick Lane* tells.

Shortly after this moment, Nazneen gathers the courage to tell Chanu that when he leaves for Bangladesh, she and the girls will stay behind in England: "I can't go with you," she says, to which Chanu replies, "I can't stay" (402). The metaphor of travel that has

structured the movement of the novel takes on a new relationship to Nazneen's assimilationist hopes and Chanu's uncompromisingly separatist views. In a moment of shared parting, both Nazneen and Chanu embark on a different journey that could only have been shaped by their time together in Brick Lane. Rejecting the neat resolution of a shared future, Nazneen and Chanu opt instead for their isolated realities. Blending the scene of physical departure with the suggestion of more significant psychic movements, the narrative comes to a close with the blurring of arrivals and departures.

It is possible to read this separation as reaffirming an alliance between the space of the West and the developmental story of an emergent migrant subject, both modern and autonomous. For Nazneen, however, this is a predetermined itinerary from fate to free will that removes none of the shackles of her work as an unskilled, illiterate worker within a transnational frame. Razia's proclamation, "This is England . . . You can do whatever you like," would seem to solidify a reading of first world independence where Nazneen's liberation is geographically and temporally bounded by the specificity of the English nation (415). But it is also possible to read the ending as an instance of deferral. The novel's utopian end suggests that it is deeply escapist. The possibility that Razia holds out to Nazneen may be one of assimilation, but equally, it is one of an alternative sociality to the normative biocultural ways of belonging to either Brick Lane or the British state. The novel, however, can merely gesture toward such an alternative within a cautious frame of escape.

Throughout the novel, memories of Hasina haunt Nazneen. By the end of her journey, however, Nazneen's affective ties seem resituated around a new relationship with Razia, one not based in blood, and open to invention and play. If the ties that bind the citizens to the state are genealogies of race and blood, the moment of sociality at the end of the novel makes way for new modes of affection beyond the limits of kinship. Nazneen's relationship with Razia in a sense replaces her ties not only to Hasina, but also to both Chanu and Karim. Rather than choosing to move between marriages to Chanu and then Karim, Nazneen chooses instead to join Razia in her business venture, her own clothing design company. In doing so, she embraces her fraught assimilation into the opportunism and self-fashioning that Britain supposedly affords. The novel ends on these twin moments of possibility, envisioning a robust future for migrants in Britain—possibilities that, nonetheless, remain unrealized.

Notes

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1. See "David Copeland: a quiet introvert, obsessed with Hitler and bombs" and "London nail bombs: The two weeks that shattered the capital."
2. In his reading of riot culture in England, Ian Baucom makes the incisive point that the "identification of riot as a species of contagion invokes a time-honored understanding of the crowd as a social form that reproduces itself through an act of contaminated touching" (192).
3. Finding that Ali demurs on any direct engagement with the dark side of political disenfranchisement, race rage, and multiculturalism that weighs on migrant lives, M. K. Chakrabarti declares that: "This is where the cheat of the successful commercial "multicultural novel" is laid bare: for all its multicultural packaging, *Brick Lane* is a strictly monocultural, "see-they-are-just-like-us" affair.
4. Foucault originates the notion of biopolitics within his treatise on sexuality. While my use of the term biocultural borrows from Foucault's discourse, I wish to stress the embodied ways in which power is exercised culturally as well as biologically. In addition to the disciplinary force of biopolitics, I also intend to invoke the more consensual hegemonies that exert force culturally.
5. See Benedict Anderson's introduction to *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm's "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" and chapter 7, "Mass-Producing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition*.
6. In *Reproducing the State*, Jacqueline Stevens makes the forceful argument that the State originates taxonomies of belonging, authorizing some forms of kinship and social subjects, while excluding others in the interest of reproducing itself. By taxonomizing the orderly and disorderly forms of being of its populations—through the reproduction of kinship rules on birth certificates, marriage licenses, passports and so forth—the state's relation to normal and deviant forms of being is not stenographic but pornographic. The state puts on display the sexual and other outlaws and aliens who exist as such only by virtue of that same state" (xv). I point to Stevens here to both acknowledge the role of the state in maintaining the norms of cultural discourse, and to mark the biocultural turns she points to in her thinking of how the modern state operates. My interest here, however, is not on the artificially naturalizing taxonomies of state power but on how they register in culture at large as seen in the public debates over migrancy that occur in the arena of public debate between politicians, writers, and in literature.

7. Curiously, as Krishan Kumar notes, the word Britain has biocultural origins, "evidently referr[ing] to the Celtic practice of painting the body" (5).
8. Jane Hiddleston argues that the novel is guarded against proffering unmediated objective truths about Bangladeshis by self-consciously parodying Hasina's use of stilted English.
9. For more about the riots in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford in the summer of 2001, with particular attention to the racial bases of the unrest, including the criminalization, often biocultural, of Bangladeshi and Pakistani men of these areas see chapter 2 of Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain's *Riotous Citizens*. The riots that began in the targeting of South Asian communities by white youth fomented as a result of bleak economic conditions, and rising anti-immigrant sentiments in the political and social cultures of each place.
10. In "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," Partha Chatterjee provides a model to think about the relationship between gender and culture in the Indian anti-colonial movement. Chatterjee shows that nationalists countered western influence by relegating women to the realm of culture and the home. The refusal of identification with the West was critical to the anti-colonial construction of an alternative distinctively feminized cultural sphere that was authentically Indian. The domestic sphere, which was decidedly feminine, was invested with the task of protecting and advancing the cultural ideals of the nation.
11. For an extended analysis of Blunkett's speech and the cultural politics of the debate surrounding marriage practices, see Ratna Kapur's "The Other Side of Universality." Kapur situates the debate at the intersection of culture and legality.
12. In his detailed survey of English nationalism, Krishan Kumar discusses the ways in which the English language has come to stand in for cultural identity in ways that cover over racial claims. Tracing the development of English nationalism from the twelfth century, Kumar argues that English national culture is centralized around language as a strategy for exclusion, first by way of ethnicity and later by way of race.
13. Naila Kabir's study of Bangladeshi homeworkers, which provided the inspiration for Ali's novel, draws an equivalence between maternity and domestic responsibility. Citing women's reasons for choosing to work at home, Kabir claims "the third reason, and the one most widely cited, related to the demands of women's domestic roles. Around twenty-nine women referred specifically to their child care responsibilities" (234). Moreover, in *Development as Freedom*, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen frames women's agency in terms of its value not only to women, but also to children. That the discussion of children and the politics of reproduction is located in a chapter entitled "Women's Agency and Social Change" captures the extent to which biological normativity is experienced disproportionately by women.

14. For Louis Althusser, the subject is always already within ideology, even preceding the moment of birth. Though he does not refer specifically to the ideologies of sexuality and reproduction, the ways in which Althusser discusses ideology as preexisting the subject is related to what I argue here.
15. Here I am working with a notion of the cultural that is similar to Appadurai's formation of the concept as 1) marked through differences, and 2) specifically "only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities" (12–13).
16. In popular discourse, the term home-grown is typically reserved for the description of vegetables and terrorists. Dissent against the state is readily biologized, even as the biopolitical metaphor is neatly mapped onto large cultural swathes.
17. Of course, marriage is not really personal at all. Because normative reproduction takes place within the strictures of marriage, it is open to control, biologically and spatially.
18. Appadurai writes of the importance of fantasy in the era of transnationalism: "Until recently, . . . fantasy and imagination were residual practices . . . In general, imagination and fantasy were antidotes to the finitude of social experience. In the past two decades, as the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on new force, this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms" (53–54). Though *Brick Lane* is almost wholly devoid of media representation, Nazneen's capacity to live in the realm of fantasy is, I think, very much a product of the new "global ethnoscapes" to which Appadurai refers. It is notable that Nazneen is captivated by television.

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