

Banglaphone Fiction: British Sylhetis in Writing by Londoni Authors

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Abstract: *Around the time the Raj was disintegrating, Bengalis, many of them from Sylhet, were coming to Britain in large numbers. Settling in areas such as London's Spitalfields, these Sylhetis pioneered Britain's emerging curry restaurant trade, labored for long hours and with few rights in the garment industry, and worked as mechanics. Sylhetis' inestimable contribution to the fabric of British life is recognized, for example, in their association with Brick Lane, a popular road of curry houses in East London. However, too often their contribution to literature is reduced to one novel, Brick Lane, Monica Ali's novel about the famous street and its denizens. This paper seeks to broaden the debate about English-language literature from Londoni writers across the Bengaliyat. In 1793, Sake Dean Mahomed published his The Travels of Dean Mahomet. What is unique about this text is that it was originally written in English to give European readers a glimpse of India. Its creation was probably part of the author's attempt to integrate in Ireland, where he was living. Two centuries later, we are witnessing an efflorescence of Anglophone writing from the two Bengals about Britain. I discuss Amitav Ghosh's portrayals of Brick Lane in his 1988 novel The Shadow Lines as an early precursor to fellow Indian novelists Neel Mukherjee's A Life Apart (2010) and Amit Chaudhuri's Odysseus Abroad (2014), which also demonstrate a fascination with Sylhetis in London and their material culture. From Bangladesh and its diaspora, Manzu Islam's Burrow (2004) and Zia Haider Rahman's novel In the Light of What We Know (2013) come under the spotlight. What we might call "Banglaphone fiction" is, I argue, currently experiencing a boom, and portrayals of Sylhetis in London, their cuisine, and other aspects of popular culture form an enduring fascination among the male writers of this fiction, at least.*

In the 1940s, around the time that the British Raj was disintegrating, Bengalis were coming to Britain in large numbers. (Smaller numbers had travelled to the country from as long ago as the seventeenth century onwards.) Many of them hailed from Sylhet in what is now northeast Bangladesh. Some of these new residents had previously been lascars, working on the crews of ships or as cooks. Settling in areas such as East London's Spitalfields, Sylhetis pioneered Britain's emerging curry restaurant trade, labored for long hours and with few rights in the garment industry, and worked as mechanics. As Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young put it,

The East End of London is the backside of the City. As the City of London evolved over six centuries into the centre of global capitalism, the areas on its eastern fringe evolved too in symbiotic differentiation. At first they supplied food for the emerging urban community, then as the City concentrated increasingly on the pursuit of profit it gradually exported its less valuable and more polluting trades to just outside the City walls – where the benefits accrued without offending the dignity of the City itself. Leather trades, clothing, furniture, shipping and distribution were expelled in turn, and established to the east. As the City became wealthier and more important, the contrast between it and the East End grew sharper. (1)

The fact that the East End first distributed food and later clothes to the nearby City demonstrates the former area's somatic function; cooking and fashion are two important themes in the writing about this area. The deprivation and contrast between the East End and the wealthy City is so stark that Dench *et al.* use another bodily image of "backside" to describe the East End, and accordingly, poverty is another significant preoccupation.

Sylhetis have made an inestimable contribution to the fabric of British life over more than three centuries. This is most frequently recognized in their association with Brick Lane, the popular road of curry houses in East London. And too often their contribution to literature is reduced to one novel, *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali's 2003 debut about the famous street and its denizens. While I will explore Ali's text, this article seeks to broaden the debate to English-language literature from authors writing about Britain who come from across the Bengaliyat. This word "Bengaliyat" denotes national and cultural continuities between East and West, Hindu and Muslim Bengal.

As I discuss in my book *Britain through Muslim Eyes*, the first book written in English by a South Asian author was Sake Dean Mahomed's *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (Fisher). Although Mahomed grew up in Patna, he claimed to be related to the Nawabs who governed Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa between 1740 and 1854. He is often thus categorized as a Bengali-British writer. *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* is an epistolary account of his journey through northern India, drawing on conventions of sentimental fiction and Western travel writing. Written to an imaginary English "sir," these letters describe "Mahometan" habits and customs such as circumcision, marriage, and death rites.

Although his book focuses on India, Mahomed's travels took him far from the subcontinent. From 1784 to 1807, he lived in Cork, where he married a Protestant gentlewoman, Jane Daly, converted (on paper at least) to her religion, and fathered the first few of what would turn out to be a family of at least eight children. There he had a chance meeting with another traveler, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, who was on a brief Irish visit in 1799 and was also an excellent travel writer. Whereas Mahomed cast his gaze eastwards to India for the benefit of a Western audience, Khan primarily wrote about Europe in Persian for his fellow Indians. Probably because of a withdrawal of his patronage in Ireland which created economic and social pressures, Mahomed and Jane relocated to London in 1808. In the capital they set up the first Indian restaurant in Britain, the Hindostanee Coffee House, in 1810. London's high overheads and Britons' then timid taste buds meant that it went bankrupt in 1812.

Reinventing himself again, Mahomed moved his family to Brighton and began offering Indian massages, eventually being appointed "shampooing Surgeon" to George IV and William IV. Mahomed styled for himself a multi-layered identity, in which the Hindi word "shampoo" (champo, from champi, "to massage") combines with the European, scientific connotations of "surgeon." Indeed, Dean's grandson Frederick Akbar Mahomed (1849–84) was to achieve great renown as a doctor of Western medicine who pioneered "collective investigation" of diseases through the use of patient questionnaires. He also discovered some reasons why people develop high blood pressure. It was recently reported that the most popular name for a doctor in Britain is now Khan, with Patel in second place, Smith and Jones third and fourth, Ahmed coming in sixth, and Ali ninth (Kennedy n.pag). This hints at one of the many ways in which South Asian Muslims like Dean and Akbar Mahomed contributed positively to "making Britain" (Nasta n.pag). What their lives illustrate is how settled, how integrated in British life Muslims have been for several centuries, and what great contributions they have made to the texture of this nation.

Two centuries after Mahomed, we are witnessing an efflorescence of Anglophone writing from the two Bengals about Britain. In his 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines*, Calcutta-origin Amitav Ghosh was an early writer to explore

South Asian East London in fiction. Before coming to Britain, the novel's unnamed narrator imagined Brick Lane to be composed of "small red-brick houses jostling together, cramped, but each with its own little handkerchief-garden and flowers in its window sills" (Ghosh 100). When he gets to the street in the 1970s, he finds instead that the urban landscape of the imperial center is being radically altered by migrants. Few shop signs are in English, the narrator hears "a dozen dialects of Bengali" as he passes through, and the latest Hindi and Bengali films are advertised. Fly-posters adorning the "walls of aged London brick" show how this area of London is changing (100). The narrator sees a palimpsest of posters, where "stern grey anti-racism" notices — presumably posted there by the predominantly white members of left-wing organizations — are overlaid by a colorful "riot" of Hindi film posters. The narrator can almost imagine himself in Calcutta. People hurrying down the road cheerfully hiding their fingers in their jacket sleeves to keep warm remind him of "shoppers at Gariahat on a cold winter's morning." He is also amazed to see a shop that is almost an exact replica of one in Gole Park, but grafted onto "a terrace of derelict eighteenth-century London houses" (100). The intermingling of Bollywood posters with earnest Marxist publicity materials indicates that this space is socially pliant and molding to the changing composition of its residents.

The unruly collage of flyers serves as a useful metaphor for the changing face of Spitalfields, the district of London in which Brick Lane is located. Spitalfields has a history of housing immigrants and refugees, from the Huguenots in the eighteenth century and Jewish and Irish settlers in the nineteenth century, to post-war Bengali migrants. Bangladeshi now make up almost 60 per cent of Spitalfields' population. Ghosh alludes to the layers of migrant history when the narrator's love rival, the British character Nick, comments that the local mosque "used to be a synagogue when this place was a Jewish area" (101). In a review of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Sukhdev Sandhu shows that the Jamme Masjid began as a Huguenot church, next became a Methodist chapel, then a synagogue, and finally metamorphosed into the Bangladeshi-majority mosque (n.pag).

Jane Jacobs's research suggests that immigration to the Spitalfields area this has proved a far from liberatory experience for Bengalis. Overcrowding, home insecurity, and racial harassment have dogged Bangladeshi settlers since the 1970s. Gentrifying schemes to renovate the area's Georgian houses and large-scale development projects forced many Bengalis out of their homes or businesses in the 1990s, even though the same developers claimed to speak for their interests. The meteoric rise of nearby hipster area Shoreditch is contributing more to the uprooting of South Asians from the area in the 2010s (Peek n.pag).

In 1978, the murder of a Bengali clothing worker, Altab Ali, served to politicize the Bengali community. But the British National Party and later the English Defence League and Britain First made Brick Lane a target in their far-right campaigns of racial hatred. The Left has also seen the tensions in Spitalfields as representing an opportunity to consolidate local support. Socialist organizations moved in, claiming to act on behalf of the Bengalis in the face of racism and the incursions of big business. In Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, Respect leader George Galloway was elected after a dirty campaign against New Labour's MP Oona King in 2005 ("Oona King" n.pag). This year, Bengali politics in Tower Hamlets came under the spotlight when the mayor, Bangladesh-born Lutfur Rahman, was ousted from his post. He was found guilty of electoral fraud, a charge he contests. Rahman's Tower Hamlets First party, established in 2014 and popular amongst many Bangladeshi Britons, has also been removed from the register of political parties for alleged financial irregularities.

Ghosh, then, accurately depicts how space is fought over by combatants with different residential ideals and competing visions of Britain. *The Shadow Lines* may be seen as an early precursor to fellow Calcuttan novelists Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* (2010) and Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad* (2014). While they don't specifically depict Brick Lane or its environs, these novels of the 2010s also demonstrate a fascination with Sylhetis in London and their material and spatial culture. In the post-9/11 political climate, there has been much interest in the way non-Muslim, white writers like John Updike (2006), Martin Amis (2008), and Ian McEwan (2005) have examined Islam and Anglo-American Muslims in their work. With the exception of Sunjeev Sahota, in his debut novel *Ours Are The Streets* (2011), less attention has been paid to the South Asian writers from other religious backgrounds who have also examined this topic. They have done so with a greater understanding both of Islam and the pernicious effects of deprivation, racism, and Islamophobia on Muslim communities.

Amit Chaudhuri's quiet masterpiece is an often humorous, modernist slant on the everyday events of one

London day in July 1985. As fellow novelist Neel Mukherjee observes in his Guardian review of *Odysseus Abroad*, “nothing happens [...] everything happens” (n.pag). The novel is focalized through the eyes of Ananda, a dilatory student of English literature. Like Chaudhuri, he is preoccupied by twentieth-century writers’ focus on “modern man – strange creature!” (63). Ananda has a “retinue of habits, like getting on to buses, secreting the bus ticket in his pocket, or going to the dentist” (63-64). He and his uncle Rangamama contemplate getting a bus through London because they like the view of London it avails from its upper deck. For convenience, they settle on taking a tube to King’s Cross. If readers don’t quite witness the minutiae of characters’ dental check-ups, they do learn of Ananda’s frustration with European literary heroes who “had no bodily functions.” Each morning, both Hercules and James Bond “didn’t bother to brush their teeth; they jumped out of bed in pursuit” of villains (128). Nor did these giants ever have to break off their derring-do to go to the lavatory. By contrast, we learn much about the physical woes of *Odysseus Abroad*’s heroes. Rangamama once lost a tooth in a reckless altercation with some skinheads in Chalk Farm. He is putting up with the gap in his smile in anticipation of a health tourism trip to India to avoid Britain’s high dentistry costs. Even the quotidian domain of the toilet isn’t off limits for this unobtrusively experimental fiction. When Ananda goes to answer nature’s call, Rangamama expresses an interest in whether his nephew is going “for big job or small” (134). With wicked humor, Chaudhuri proceeds to depict Ananda’s “small job,” as he aims his urine stream at a cigarette butt left behind in the bowl by his chain-smoking uncle.

Ananda, who, like Ghosh’s narrator is from a Hindu background, nonetheless has “covert Sylheti ancestry” (66). His parents and uncle came from Sylhet but moved to Shillong in India after Partition in 1947. They later shift to East Bengal’s capital, Kolkata, where they “gentrify” their Sylheti accents into “standard Calcutta Bangla” (232). His parents never take Ananda to visit his ancestral district, a decision about which he has no regrets. Yet in London he feels some sense of kinship with the waiters in establishments like the Gurkha Tandoori on the edge of Bloomsbury. This is despite the fact that, as he ruefully admits to himself, there was a chasm between the two communities, at least from the perspective of upper- and upper-middle-class Bengali Hindus: “in prelapsarian undivided Bengal, [...] the Bengali Hindus were called ‘Bengalis’, the Bengal Muslims just ‘Muslims’” (232). His uncle is charmed by the fact that the inaptly-named Gurkha Tandoori’s waiter is called Iqbal, like the famous Pakistani poet. And Ananda is struck by Iqbal’s accent, with its rural Sylheti inflections and newer overlay of flat cockney vowels.

Another interesting text about Bengalis in Britain is Neel Mukherjee’s *A Life Apart*. Mukherjee was born in Calcutta and moved permanently to the UK at the age of 22. His first novel, *Past Continuous*, was published in India in 2008. It came out in the UK as *A Life Apart* in 2010, where it was well received. He became better known because of his second novel, *The Lives of Others*, which won the Encore Prize and was shortlisted for 2014’s Man Booker Prize. However, given this article’s focus, it is his first novel that mostly concerns me. *A Life Apart* is in some ways a rewriting of Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* from the perspective of the minor British character Miss Gilby. The novel’s central character Ritwik, a Hindu Indian migrant to Britain, is writing a novel about this character that we see at intervals in the text in bold type.

In the light of the appalling (but sadly not new) stories that have been broadcast all summer about Europe’s refugee crisis, *A Life Apart* seems all the more timely and important. Ritwik studies at Oxford University, about which I will write more shortly. After he graduates, Ritwik has little choice but to allow his student visa to expire and becomes an illegal immigrant so that he moves outside the “vast grid of the impeccably ordered and arranged first-world modern democratic state” (218). The novel casts light on the third world that exists within the first world, the migrant as a ghostly figure, and the chimera of the better life that supposedly exists in Europe.

A primary concern in both Mukherjee’s novels to date, and in Bengali-British writing more broadly, is education. Mukherjee explores the differences between an English- and a Bengali-medium education, and how this creates the haves and have-nots of language usage. *A Life Apart* features the hybrid proto-language Benglish, while *The Lives of Others* contains a large glossary of Bengali terms. Ritwik, an orphan from a modest background, wins a scholarship to study English literature at Oxford. His fellow students see his home country as “exotic, [...] wild [...] And all that mysticism and stuff, it’s spiritual” (34). In his turn, he struggles to eat bland English food dishes like toad in the hole, and even thinks a strongly-accented Liverpoolian classmate is speaking in German. His classmates are baffled that an Indian should study for an English degree:

He surprises them by revealing that English Literature, as an academic discipline, was first taught in India, not in England; English administrators and policy-makers thought that the study of English Literature would have an ennobling and civilizing effect on the natives. They are thrown a bit, even a little embarrassed by this. [...] ‘It’s a strange thought, isn’t it, thousands of Indians poring over Shakespeare and Keats,’ Declan says. Now that Ritwik has it pointed out to him by an outsider, it becomes unfamiliar, shifts patterns and configurations. (Mukherjee 84)

Here Ritwik alludes to the fact that in the Raj period and beyond, the British realized the importance of establishing themselves in the imaginations of their colonized peoples as being worthy of allegiance. In place of controversial religious doctrine, they used Literature writ large as a tool of persuasion. As Gauri Viswanathan shows in her pioneering study *Masks of Conquest* (1989), English Literature as a subject was closely linked to colonialism, and the study of English literary culture was instituted in Indian schools and universities before it became an established discipline in Britain. Ritwik chafes against what he calls “this business of other cultures, other countries” (154), in which the British neo-/colonizers recalibrate the world around them using their own gauges.

Unlike Amit Chaudhuri, Mukherjee doesn’t look at British-Sylhetis, but he does portray other Muslims in Britain. He describes in detail a successful British-Pakistani family, the Haqs, who live near Ritwik in a house that is “a teeming, heaving slice of the subcontinent” (205). Mr Haq has made his money in import–export, but when newly-illegal Ritwik asks him for a job, he receives an ambiguous reply. At first Mr Haq tells him they usually hire “other Pakistani families who are in England,” but then seems to change his mind, saying, “In this country, we need to stick to each other and have our own community” (210). Ritwik is unsure whether this is hopeful, or a way for Haq to say that the Hindu boy is not part of his Muslim Pakistani community. He leaves the house with a “strange, lonely feeling of unbelonging” (211).

Manzu Islam’s short story collection *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* (1998) and *Burrow* (2004) were probably the first Anglophone fictions about Britain to come out of Bangladesh and its diaspora. In the collection, four stories – “Going Home,” “The Mapmakers of Spitalfields,” “The Tower of the Orient,” and “Meeting at the Crossroads” – are about Britain. That said, they often “drift [...] into another world” (59), veering away from London locations, such as King’s Cross station and the Sonar Bangla café, to discuss the imaginary homeland, a remembered Bangladesh of tigers, *sadhus*, and water, water, everywhere. Characters are equally difficult to contain within particular stories. For example, both “Going Home” and “The Mapmakers of Spitalfields” contain an “I” narrator and characters named Badal and Shafique (Badal also appears in “The Fabled Beauty of the Jatra,” set at a folk theatre play in Bangladesh). It is striking that all the writers discussed in this essay on Banglaphone writing are impossible to confine within a purely British location. Not one of the authors discussed here (Mahomed, Ghosh, Chaudhuri, Mukherjee, Islam, Rahman, or Monica Ali, Sunetra Gupta and Tahmima Anam from among the women writers), use an exclusively British setting. Even the most British among these texts, such as Chaudhuri’s *Odysseus Abroad*, Islam’s “Mapmakers,” and Ali’s *Brick Lane* provide flashbacks about their characters’ previous homes in South Asia. These are highly transnational authors, whose characters are similarly shape-shifting wanderers.

Working-class South Asian Muslim settlers in the post-war period saw themselves as transients and were motivated by the “myth of return.” They planned to save, send money home, and go back to their home countries as soon as they had made enough. However, as Pakistani scholar Muhammad Anwar pointed out in 1979, “in reality, most of them are here to stay because of economic reasons and their children’s future” (ix). Especially as families began to be reunited in Britain, they became interested in building self-sufficient communities. Several of the academics who theorize the myth of return, such as Anwar and Badr Dahya (1974), discuss the Pakistani rather than the Bangladeshi diaspora. However, the model of migration is similar – it tends to predominantly come from particular locations (Mirpur in Pakistani Kashmir and Sylhet in Bangladesh) and to involve mostly working-class populations.

Several of Islam’s stories and his novel *Burrow* provide subtle, shaded depictions of the myth of return. Bangladeshi critic Kaiser Haq rightly points out that this is mostly a male phenomenon. He writes that in diasporic

Bangladeshi literature, “the men dream of return, but not the women, who even as second-class citizens enjoy rights denied them in the mother country” (n.pag). Accordingly, “The Tower of the Orient,” a rare story by Islam told from a female perspective, is about a reverse illusion and subsequent disillusionment. Young wife Soraya long daydreamed about “taking off from Dhaka airport for this destination of fabled fortunes” (84), a Britain in which she can buy her own home, with husband Munir, and feel a sense of belonging. Yet the poverty of “damp, creeping rot and a riot of rats” (84) and the racism that she encounters there dash her sketchy notions of T. S. Eliot and the beauty of an English April (87).

In *Burrow*, one of the angles through which Islam illuminates why return migration becomes a myth is the younger generation’s education at schools and universities. There, the changes that they undergo, such as the protagonist Tapan Ali coming to despise the Bangladeshi grandfather he had once revered, show that it would be hard to go back. Tapan’s family has made an enormous financial sacrifice to send him to study in Britain, so understandably enough they see lucrative accountancy as a better course for him than the nebulous discipline of philosophy that he loves. At a demonstration, Tapan meets British-born Nilufar, who later becomes his lover. Her parents had been proud when she began her higher education, but were eventually disappointed to the point of almost disowning her when the hard-won BA degree fails to bring her a husband. Just as Tapan becomes estranged from his grandfather, Nilufar’s parents are alienated by “the foreignness of her ideas and her feringhee style” (45).

Zia Haider Rahman’s novel *In the Light of What We Know* (2014) has a complex, metafictional architecture. To list just a few of its subjects, it packs in dialogue, stories, diary entries, intertextual references, and anecdotes about the global financial crash, the Bangladesh Liberation War, mathematics, and the British class system. (A rare blind spot is gender, which is not discussed with anything like the same precision of focus as race and class.) In the novel, a conversation between two “philosopher-carpenters” (164), Bill and Dave, with whom the protagonist Zafar works briefly as a young man, is revealing. Bill tells Dave that their new colleague, “Paki-man” (159), is adjusting well to the demands of their high-end house refurbishment business. They quickly realize Zafar has overheard the racial slur and, without missing a beat, the two intellectual handymen begin debating the term. Discovering that Zafar is from Bangladesh rather than Pakistan, Bill apologizes, instead calling him, in a coinage that resonates with this article’s title, “Anglo-Banglo” (163). Wryly looking back on this incident from the vantage point of the early 2000s, Zafar is surprised that it took place before the Rushdie affair of 1989 onwards. From this moment on, he suggests in an argument that accords with my own research (Chambers 3; 219–20), the raw nerves touched in this exchange – relating to identity, racism, and “offence” – will increasingly take center stage in British cultural life.

In a perceptive review (2014), James Wood maintains that Rahman’s novel is all about knowledge and its limitations. However, a clue is given in its title that it is equally as much about “light” – or religion, the numinous, optics, and spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Sylhet-born Zafar turns away from the Islam of his upbringing and is attracted to Christianity because he believed “meaning counted for more than the rewards of ritual” (184). He dislikes the lack of understanding his South Asian coreligionists have for their Arabic-language sacred text. Yet he also exhibits a Joycean, Forsterian skepticism about the church’s airy clarities and endeavor to make God in its own image:

here was a very local rendering of a religion that had come from a part of the world that the proud Englishman could only look down upon. The Christianity before me was English, white, with Sunday roasts and warm beer and translation into the English, the language. Even the Bible at its most beautiful, the King James version, was in a language that asserted and reassured its readers of their power. [...] The English Christ was [...] an English God under an English heaven. (187–88)

Ultimately, Zafar’s search for meaning at Oxford, Harvard, at church, or in the bed of his icy aristocratic English lover Emily proves equally illusory. Discernment of the light of religion may contain greater profundity than constructed knowledges, but each interpenetrates and contaminates the other, so that “Everything new is on the rim of our view, in the darkness, below the horizon, [...] nothing new is visible but in the light of what we know” (320).

The novel’s unnamed narrator, who pieces together Zafar’s story through his voice recordings and writings, is an

elite Pakistani, the son of highly successful academics, who attends Eton and Oxford as a matter of course. The narrator's father sees no contradiction in attending mosque each Friday, while regularly drinking and "lik[ing] his bacon crispy" (110). Such a relaxed view would be anathema to Zafar's family, who are from a much more precarious social class and do not have the cosmopolitanism of the frequent flyer set. For a while in his youth, Zafar lives in a squat where rats are a quotidian terror, and even his carpentry job, mentioned earlier, immediately marks him out as from a humbler background than the narrator and Emily. With his questioning mind, Zafar is put off Islam by a book his parents bought from an East End shop and gave him for Eid. Its title, *How Islam Predicted Science* (182), and its trite, uninformed certainties alienate the math-obsessed boy for whom Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem is akin to religious lore.

What might seem like a grab-bag set of texts on closer inspection yields to the reader overlapping insights relating to education, home and belonging, and religious practice and praxis. A somewhat different tonal palette emerges out of the women's writing I will now explore. I first examine Monica Ali who, in her novel *Brick Lane*, mostly evokes life in Britain, with only occasional and usually analeptic descriptions of Bangladesh. By contrast, Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* is at once intercontinental, urban, and stateless – often all within a single sentence. The final author Tahmima Anam deploys an alternative strategy again, choosing, in *A Golden Age and The Good Muslim*, to abjure representations of Britain altogether, in favor of a concentrated focus on the Bangladeshi nation.

Let us begin this section by looking at a resonant passage from the early part of *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali's 2003 novel that like Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize:

'This is another disease that afflicts us,' said the doctor. 'I call it Going Home Syndrome. Do you know what that means?' He addressed himself to Nazneen. [...]

'[W]hen they have saved enough they will get on an aeroplane and go?'

'They don't ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here. ... But they will never save enough to go back. ... Every year they think, just one more year. But whatever they save, it's never enough.'

'We would not need very much,' said Nazneen. Both men looked at her. She spoke to her plate. (Ali 22)

No text exemplifies more clearly the contrast between the England-returned and the myth of return migrants that I discuss elsewhere (Chambers 14–16) than *Brick Lane*. The above quotation illustrates what the medical man Dr Azad calls "Going Home Syndrome," a disease that he claims afflicts Bangladeshi migrants. This links with a strand in the novel about the migrant's sense of being out of place, which can lead to mental illness such as Nazneen's collapse due to "nervous exhaustion" (315; see Santesso 61–82).

Probably the most important means by which migrants either try to assimilate in the host country or turn away from it towards the homeland is through education. At first, Nazneen's husband Chanu imagines himself to be immune to Going Home Syndrome, and tries instead to make a life for himself in Britain. When he arrives in England, all Chanu has is the usual few pounds in his pocket, along with the significant additional item of his degree certificate. In England he undertakes classes in everything from nineteenth-century economics to cycling proficiency, and acquires further certificates. These he frames and displays on the wall of his and Nazneen's poky Tower Hamlets home, as a talisman of his hopes of promotion at work and the consequent acquisition of a comfortable life in London. Yet his dreams remain unrealized, whether because of institutional racism at his work or his own incompetence is never made clear. Chanu's aspirations then take a bitter turn towards his becoming an England-returned success story. He clings increasingly to the fantasy of returning to Dhaka in financial and social triumph. However, as sociologist Muhammad Anwar argues, this notion of return migration often proves to be a myth, especially because wives and children help men to put down roots in the new country. Nazneen and especially her young daughters Shahana and Bibi fear their father's longed-for homecoming. The rationale for going back to Dhaka is tenuously based on a saviour complex (see Abu-Lughod) – to rescue Nazneen's sister, the vulnerable ingénue Hasina whose unwittingly alarming letters to Nazneen about sexual grooming and exploitation pepper the narrative – but the three women now have roots in Britain. They decide to stay on.

Trailing clouds of defeat more than glory, the patriarch Chanu goes home on his own.

A decision in reverse, whereby the woman moves back to the subcontinent while her husband stays in Britain, is described by Sunetra Gupta. A Bengali Hindu author who writes about life in London and elsewhere in southern England, Gupta's day job is as an epidemiologist at the University of Oxford. Her most interesting work of fiction is probably *Memories of Rain* (1992). This debut novel centers on the young, dreamy protagonist Moni's furtive plans to return home to Calcutta. The choice has been made for her by her husband Anthony's passionate and drawn-out affair with a slim, green-eyed Englishwoman named Anna. Languorous, even lachrymose free indirect discourse conveys Moni's acute sense of her own beauty and intelligence and her refined disappointment in her husband's womanizing. Indeed, the narrative voice recalls that of another Bengali woman writer, American-resident Bharati Mukherjee, who in early works such as *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) expresses the similarly elitist ennui of the upper-class exile.

Gupta's Moni works as a translator for the National Health Service, interpreting the medical problems of poor Bangladeshi migrants for their health care professionals. Despite sharing a language and ethnicity with these mostly Muslim inhabitants of Britain, she feels that they have little in common. This has more to do with the British-Bengalis' modest social class and destitution than their religion. Repelled by "the pits of squalor that they called their homes" and with a Brahminical distaste for their "dense smell of spice trapped in winter wool, of old oil and fungus, poverty and filth" (170, 83), Moni exhibits significant condescension towards her co-regionalists. In the course of the plane journey back to Calcutta, she encounters a British Bengali of indeterminate religious identity who tries to engage her in conversation. Her sense of superiority is again exposed as she refuses to listen to the specificities of his potted biography:

he is going back to do his medical elective at the hospital where his father was trained, it will be an experience, he was a child of two when his parents left, she knows their story, she has heard it many times before, of how they had landed upon English soil with a mere five pounds to their name, the first difficult years, on weekends they had shared curried shad with other couples and reminisced of hilsa fish, cradling their children, they had rubbed their eyes in the damp heat of the coin-operated gas fires, and absorbed heavy texts, and now they basked in their hard-earned success, in detached suburban homes, their children amassing A-levels, she remembers a damp day... when an unmistakable East Bengal accent drifted through the spangled wire, you will not remember me, her father's distant cousin, they had urged her to spend a day with them, and the following evening [...] in the oppressive heat of their home she had met his kind wife, the smell of fried spice hung dense in the overheated hallway, the wife, her aunt, took her coat [...]. (Gupta 186)

This passage is worth quoting at length because it demonstrates how the unnamed Bengali and his family are rendered generic by her dismissive aside, "she knows their story." What could have become a novel in itself – the tale of a Bengali couple with little money overcoming the hardship and hostility of Britain through hard work and community support – is reduced to less than a sentence. Moni's aunt and uncle, Hindu migrants who presumably moved from East Bengal because of Partition, make her familiar with the narrative trajectory, so she closes her ears. Further information about Gupta's writerly concerns is made manifest at the level of the 595-word sentence, of which I have quoted only an excerpt. With their breathless, iterative comma splices and literary impressionistic intertwining of actions with memories and thoughts, Gupta's sentences engage in quasi-modernist provocation.

They also allow the novelist to convey that Moni never truly gets to know England. Each time the narrative starts to explore the country, her character's memories and tastes make it veer off into descriptions of India, more specifically Calcutta. For example, the well-worn trope of a migrant's journey on the Tube transmutes, at Gupta's hand, into reminiscences about an English teacher back in Calcutta. In the space of a single, however protracted, sentence, Moni quickly abandons London's autumnal streets for the overheated cocoon of a train. On the wall of her carriage is some verse by Keats, part of a "Poems on the Underground" promotion (146). Reading this leads the upper-class character to think, with a mixture of contempt and compassion, about a temporary lecturer who taught Keats at her Calcuttan college and whose broad Bengali accent she and the other girls had mocked. This

cognitive and spatial dissonance, which prevents the narrative from dwelling on the London Underground or Romantic poetry for long, is characteristic of much of the Banglaphone writing I have examined so far, even if it is especially exaggerated in Gupta's prose.

Another Bengali woman writer based in London, Tahmima Anam, has a different literary approach altogether. Whereas Ali uses occasional flashbacks to Bangladesh and Gupta tightly interbraids her present-day British action Calcuttan memories, Anam chooses not to represent Britain at all. Her first novel, *A Golden Age*, was published in 2007 and focused on the 1971 Liberation War which, after India's military involvement, led to Pakistan's defeat and the creation of the new nation of Bangladesh. As with *Brick Lane*, the plot is conveyed through third-person narrative interspersed with occasional letters. *A Golden Age*'s protagonist Rehana is an Urdu-speaking widow who strives to protect her teenage children while supporting the Mukti Bahini, or Bangladeshi liberation army, in its war effort.

The action of *The Good Muslim*, Anam's second novel of her planned Bengal Trilogy, mostly unfolds during the 1980s, a decade when the Islamic Right became increasingly powerful in Bangladesh. Focalization is transferred from *A Golden Age*'s Rehana to her daughter, Maya, now in her early thirties, and occasionally to her older brother, Sohail. These siblings react very differently to "the Dictator" Hussain Muhammad Ershad's military rule. Sohail joins the Tablighi Jamaat, an austere, revivalist religious movement, while Maya keeps faith with the secular, left-leaning nationalism that sustained them both during the war years, an era of political idealism she remembers with exponential nostalgia as she and her brother grow apart.

In 2013, Anam was named one of Britain's best young novelists by *Granta* magazine (Freeman). In interviews and journalism she not only focuses on Bangladeshi politics and cultural production, but also discusses "making a home in London" (Vogel n.pag), the banal details of the contents of her weekly veg box, and her earlier life as a PhD student in the US (Anam n.pag). One would not know this from her fiction, set in Bangladesh or in the case of her forthcoming novel *Shipbreaker* the Bangladeshi diaspora in Dubai (East n.pag). And this is to be welcomed, while we simultaneously welcome Anam into the fold of British literature. As with many of the writers explored here, she is a global thinker, a nationalist who is not easily confined within national boundaries.

What we might call "Banglaphone fiction" is, I have argued, currently experiencing a boom. Depictions of Bangladeshis, especially Sylhetis, in London, their cuisine, and other aspects of popular culture form an enduring fascination, among Hindu Indian as well as Muslim Bangladeshi authors. An increasing number of women writers, with heritage from Calcutta as well as Dhaka, are adding their voices to the chorus of Banglaphone fiction. Ali, Gupta, and Anam have the confidence to focus on Britain, divert away from it towards memories of the subcontinent, or ignore it altogether. What future women novelists will do with these very different models remains to be seen.

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