

# NOT READING *BRICK LANE*

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**Abstract** *When someone becomes or does not become a reader - and how we make a claim to or refuse these kinds of identity - clearly matters within globalised cultures, where the challenges of literary representation quickly become problems of cultural misrepresentation. Yet precisely because not reading would appear to amount to nothing, its significance remains unexplored. In order to trace the conjunctural and multiple meanings of not reading, this essay explores the embattled reception surrounding Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) and its adaptation into film (2007), and locates not reading within a longer history of book controversies that is overshadowed by the Rushdie Affair. Our paper argues that, far from mere negation, not reading is an intensely productive site of cross-cultural negotiation and conflict without which the contemporary significance of global readerships and reading acts makes only partial sense.*

**Keywords** Not reading, book controversies, Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, Rushdie Affair, hierarchies of reading

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I look at the bewildered faces of male children, the fanatic faces of the igniters, the dull faces of the media men and ask: Do they read? In the name of that most philosophical religion whose opening injunction is 'read'? (Gayatri Spivak responding to images of the burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford, 1989)<sup>1</sup>

Half of them haven't even read the bloody book! (anonymous 'Bengali media executive from East London' responding to protesters against the filming of *Brick Lane*, 2006)<sup>2</sup>

Common sense tells us there are many ways to read a book, but cultural critics have proved themselves poorly equipped to make sense of the different practices of reading that emerge when books become controversies. During times of trouble, undeclared hierarchies of reading and readers surface that leave recent advances in the study of cultural production and consumption at an impasse. Conjectures on world literature, wandering audiences and nomadic critics, the rapid extension and increased efficiency of print and digital technologies, the much touted decline of the book, the rise of the global literary marketplace: all pose important new questions around reading. But within these debates, discourses and acts of 'not reading' and the accompanying concern about 'non-readers' have yet to be adequately explained. Recent book controversies oblige us to answer questions about the meaning of not reading because it is through this category that their significance is frequently produced, explained or dismissed. When someone becomes or does not become a reader, making a claim to this kind of identity (and indeed the refusal to recognise it) clearly matters within globalised cultures, where the challenges of literary representation quickly become problems of cultural misrepresentation. Yet precisely because not reading would appear to amount to nothing, its significance remains unexplored. Contrary to this logic, we argue below that, far from mere negation, not reading is an intensely *productive* site of cross-cultural negotiation and conflict without which the contemporary significance of global readerships and reading acts makes only partial sense.

In order to trace the conjunctural and multiple meanings of not reading, this essay explores the embattled reception surrounding Monica Ali's novel, and its adaptation into film, between the years 2003 and 2006. To make sense of the controversy that emerged around this text and to understand the circumstances under which it arose, we look first at the recently emerging meanings of 'not reading', and then, following Igor Kopytoff's wish for 'the cultural biography of things',<sup>3</sup> we consider the social life of Ali's *Brick Lane*, and its prefigurement in the Rushdie Affair. We move from here to pursue more precisely the conflicted articulations of 'not reading *Brick Lane*' within the national and international print and electronic media. Finally, we locate not reading within a longer history of book controversies that is overshadowed by the Rushdie Affair. Throughout the essay we argue that considering how one mass-produced book becomes the subject of contestation within a globalising multi-media context demands two forms of analysis - reception studies and biographical approaches to texts. In tandem, these modes of study offer an opportunity to move beyond the book and to understand the cultural processes of not reading that transform a book into a controversy. Further, we will show that it is only when we redefine our notions of modes of reading that we catch a glimpse of the multiple and clashing ways that we learn to live with books today. Our discussion begins by considering what is at stake in the elusive term 'not reading', and why this term might be meaningful to a broader political conception of reading within the current conjuncture.

## NOT READING

We know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them<sup>4</sup>

According to the latest UNESCO statistics tracking book production across seventy-eight countries, just over one million new books appear annually.<sup>5</sup> Within this context Gabriel Zaid has argued that:

Books are published at such a rapid rate [a new book every thirty seconds] that they make us exponentially more ignorant. If a person read a book every day, he would be neglecting to read four thousand others, published the same day.<sup>6</sup>

If Zaid's statistics ask us to accept the necessary and inevitable rise of readerly 'ignorance' - of not reading - the controversial cultural flash points created by individual texts force us to question the nature of that ignorance. Pierre Bayard takes Zaid's provocation a step further when he suggests '[t]his encounter with the infinity of available books offers a certain encouragement not to read at all'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, if somewhat less whimsically, Franco Moretti has proposed that within academic contexts, not reading might be a solution, rather than a problem, when faced with the abundance of world literature:

Many people have read more and better than I have ... but still, we are talking of hundreds of languages and literatures here. Reading 'more' seems hardly to be the solution ... there are thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand - no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will. And then there are French novels, Chinese, Argentinian, American . . . Reading 'more' is always a good thing, but not the solution.<sup>8</sup>

Abandoning the notion of the well-read literary specialist, Moretti proposes 'distant reading' as a means of learning how not to read books, so that the production of novels as a world system might be comprehended. Abstinence from (close) reading will allow critics to stand back so that a more complete, planetary picture of literary production can emerge. While Zaid suggests not reading is an inevitable by-product of literary overproduction, and Bayard that it is an end in itself, Moretti's counter intuitive argument offers not reading as a positive strategy for making sense of books.

We share Moretti's sense of the need for a more systematic understanding of how novels circulate, but depart from his pursuit of literary form, in order to pursue what Tony Bennett calls 'reading formations', formations we suggest are irreducible to literary aesthetics alone.<sup>9</sup> If Moretti's distant reading offers innovative strategies for the contemporary literary critic consumed by close textual analysis, it has little to tell us about the more mundane, less 'disciplined' instances of not reading beyond the academy. His assumption that 'we know how to read texts' seems premature in certain respects, unless we accept it speaks solely to a trained readership of literary critics. This is not a criticism of Moretti, who was clearly in no doubt as to the audience for his epic five volume, *Il Romanzo*.<sup>10</sup> But it helps us to clarify the fact that, where Moretti calls for us (academics) to 'learn how not to read', we are more precisely interested in the meanings and uses of not reading as they circulate in daily discourse, and the forms of readerly identity that emerge in these contexts. For all its breathtaking scope, the positivism of Moretti's *Maps, Graphs, Trees*<sup>11</sup> cannot calibrate these other meanings of not reading because such activity appears to be beyond measure so far as empirical, quantitative data is concerned.<sup>12</sup>

If reading itself constitutes an irrecoverable act amounting to what Diane Elam calls 'nothingness',<sup>13</sup> then how is *not* reading to be registered? What does it look like?<sup>14</sup> Why might it be significant? Given its less-than-nothingness, its apparent negation of *any* kind of response, it is not surprising that not reading has tended to slide below the radar of reception theory and audience studies.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we would argue that not reading is more usefully thought of as a particular *kind* of discursive engagement with cultural objects that is always meaningful, productive of meaning, in excess of nothing. Our concern in what follows is with the way the terms 'reading' and 'not reading', and 'readers' and 'non-readers' get discursively mobilised during the controversies that surrounded them. In short, the distinctions we make below are not ultimately about who is a reader and who is not, but how and why forms of engaging with these texts come to be labelled in this way. This approach is not only analytically necessary if we accept the less-than-nothingness of not reading, it allows us to speak about these controversies without merely reproducing the either/or and us/them situations that have characterised such disputes.<sup>16</sup>

One way to understand our argument here is to recognise that not reading should be seen as a relational label that is ultimately inseparable from reading. It is also a hotly contested site that is used by both sides in the generation of hierarchies and distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate responses or positions. When the terms 'reading' and 'not reading' are invoked they are never spontaneous, or innocent terms, however heated the context in which they occur: they carry with them a heavy freight of prior connotations that are closely bound up with 'cultural capital' and the reproduction of social divisions between 'endowed' and 'unendowed' spectators.<sup>17</sup>

Reading - both the ability and the practice - is not a value-free way of getting information,

but instead is highly esteemed. Unlike most ways we receive cultural information - listening, viewing - reading is a respected activity in and of itself (a fact that undoubtedly leads to considerable over-reporting of reading) ... the United States boasts about being 'a nation of readers'. Reading is a highly respected activity over and above utilitarian uses.<sup>18</sup>

For the same reasons, not reading is a taboo or stigmatised subject that has become bound up with wider cultural anxieties in recent years.<sup>19</sup> The last decade has seen a growing concern in Europe and America over the apparent decline of reading and rise of ignorance. The number of books borrowed from UK libraries dropped by 36 per cent between 1993-2003, while the use of other library media grew, prompting events such as the 'National Year of Reading' in 2008.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, in the United States, the publication of a series of 'National Endowment for the Arts' reports<sup>21</sup> articulated, and helped to promote, a broader national anxiety about the rise of the non-reader:

The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates.<sup>22</sup>

The recent proliferation of reading groups and book clubs (a formation, incidentally, that heartily embraced Ali's debut novel) in Anglo-American culture has been presented in this context as an attempt to shore up national readerships against the prospect of not reading.<sup>23</sup> Yet, evidence we have gathered from discussions among book group members themselves serves to complicate any straightforward division between readers and non-readers along the lines already suggested.<sup>24</sup> Listening to these book group discussions supports Bayard's demand that 'in the case of books we have supposedly read, we must consider just what is meant by *reading*, a term that can refer to a variety of practices'.<sup>25</sup> Here, practices of reading cannot be described as comprehensive, and book group discussion often shows members accounting for their reading practices.<sup>26</sup> For example, an unusually common response is to acknowledge not having read the selected text, or having read it only partially, as do these following participants in book group discussions of *Brick Lane*: 'I just skipped over pages because there was such a lot of description'; 'I enjoyed it better second time, first time I think I just skipped through it'; 'I'm afraid I skipped a lot of them [referring to Hasina's letters in *Brick Lane*]'.<sup>27</sup>

What these 'skipping' readers begin to reveal is a set of discourses relating to not reading that are strategically deployed in book group talk and, we would hazard, in contemporary culture at large. As the words 'I'm afraid' in the quotation above suggests, book group members inadvertently highlight the largely implicit value judgements, distinctions and hierarchies with which reading and not reading are bound up. Not reading in all its guises is a practice which is frequently accompanied by the discursive production of morality - through value judgements that constitute what we call the moral accountability of not reading. What Harvey Sacks calls 'the moral groundings of ordinary discourse'<sup>27</sup> have been elaborated by a number of researchers investigating 'the reflexive embeddedness of the moral, the conceptual and the practical in each other'.<sup>28</sup> When we turn to book group discussions, our corpus of data shows how participants locally manage the

act of 'not reading' as a morally accountable behaviour. 'Not reading' in a book group context is arguably an activity which is at odds with the identity category 'book group member' and for this reason is invariably accompanied by *accounts* which either involve apologies or justifications for the practice of 'not reading' and which are therefore suggestive of what the normative obligations of a 'book group member' are seen to be. This morally implicative membership identity is explicitly articulated in the following two quotations from book group participants who have been struggling to complete Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (a novel frequently twinned with *Brick Lane*):

I forced myself to read that book; had I not been reading it for the book group, I would have packed it in long ago. It took me a solid month of just labouring and I never enjoyed one little bit of it.

yes I just finished it and it was out of a sense of pure duty that made me read to the end.

Across these accounts, a distinction can be made between non-readers who simply don't complete or read only partially, and therefore whose accounts are accompanied by apologies or 'confessions' ('*I must confess White Teeth* I still have to get beyond page 1'; '*I only* got to 108 to be honest' [emphases added]), and those readers who make a positive choice not to read based on their judgement of the artistic worth or engaging qualities of the text ('I read it a year ago, started reading it a year ago, read about half of it, just thought mm no I just it's too dreary is their life. I like escapist stuff'; 'I just thought she was trying too hard to be clever and it was quite rambling. I didn't actually finish it ... and I was like it didn't inspire me to sit up late and try and finish it'). Interestingly, some of these *justifications* are also prefaced by *apologies*, signalling the awareness of the speaker that 'not reading' at some level breaches the moral order of the event. In these accounts of 'not reading', speakers invoke two kinds of discourses that accomplish moral 'work', both of which in their separate ways help to define the shared understanding of what it means to be a 'good reader'. The first assumes that the act of belonging to a book group carries with it certain responsibilities to the group including the thorough reading and completion of texts, which then bestows upon members the right to discuss these texts with authority. The second assumes that books have a moral burden to prompt continued interest in the reader, and that the critical ability to recognise their failure to do so also constitutes one of the moral responsibilities of being 'a book group member' and by extension a 'good reader'. The two moral inflections of this discursive trace of not reading can, we shall see, also be encountered, albeit in more vigorous, emphatic and political terms, in a variety of discourses surrounding the reception of *Brick Lane* (and also the Rushdie 'affair'). For critics of the Brick Lane protesters, sympathetic both to Ali's work and to the principle of freedom of expression, not reading is an act of ignorance and irresponsibility. For the protestors themselves, the moral burden is placed on the book itself and failure to recognise the primacy of this fact is 'bad reading'.

Like 'doing nothing', 'not reading' is in fact many things: a label that conceals 'intense activity' but which contains no fixed value or prescribed political content.<sup>29</sup> Not reading might take varied forms (e.g. a lack of purchasing power, or a display of bibliographic cultural capital), have differing symptoms (e.g. illiteracy, or wilful rejection) and have contradictory effects (e.g. resistance, or apathy). Within book controversies these discrepancies often take distinct shapes. Detecting acts of not reading can become a means of identifying extreme and unreasonable

behaviour, a connection identified in this Leader from *The Guardian*:

By their own admission, most of the angry marchers did not read the novel [*Brick Lane*] from which it [the film] is (faithfully) adapted. Like the Satanic Verses book burnings nearly 20 years ago, this appears to be the ignorant getting outraged about the artistic and the acclaimed.<sup>30</sup>

Alternatively making a claim to not read can become an expression of a desirable and principled identity, for example Benizar Bhutto's claim during the Rushdie Affair: 'Because I am a Muslim, I have not read it'.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Bhutto's refusal - made as a particular kind of believer distancing herself from the sacrilegious - is only one articulation of the complicated relationship between reading and the religious. While religiosity has historically been a powerful force for the expansion of literacy and reading (such as in the development of Islamic education, or the translation of the Bible into European vernacular languages), religions have also encouraged particular forms of reading available to their believers, most conspicuously in emphases on group rote learning in contrast to reading for subjective comprehension.<sup>32</sup> In this latter respect, opposition to reading can become aligned with religiosity (whether Christian or Islamic), as against liberal secularism's tradition of critical reading. Since the late 1980s, one connotation of not reading can be found in the emergent discourses used to understand relations between Islam and the West. For instance, a reference to not reading might be said to operate euphemistically as another word for Muslim intransigence, irrationality, extremism. Not reading, in other words, functions on one very important level as an index of fanaticism within contemporary discourse, a fact supported even in quite recent histories of reading.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, and mainly beyond the media fanfare surrounding the fanatical figure of the non-reader, some Muslim commentators have understood not reading as a marker of capitalist excess, (neo)colonialism and racism. As we will see below, these 'extreme' connotations of not reading were solidified during the years of the Rushdie Affair and re-activated during the *Brick Lane* controversy.

However, what follows is not an account of two different reading camps, with Muslim non-readers on one side and Western readers on the other. The picture is much more complex than this. Nor is it the case that a clear line can be drawn in the sand between readers and non-readers: as Moretti's identification of non-reading as a form of reading implies, such distinctions quickly become untenable. Not reading might be best understood as part of a continuum of reading, rather than reading's opposite: partial reading, selective reading, sectional reading, readings based on extracts, reviews and second hand information - these activities have all been labelled 'not reading' in book controversies. As it was played out during the reception of *The Satanic Verses* and *Brick Lane*, not reading was understood either as an elected or an extreme response to the work of art deemed distasteful, insulting, or blasphemous. Not reading here does not appear from nowhere, but is, like more conventional reader response, premised on value judgements. In this context, we share Daniel Allington's sense that not reading and non-readers need to be taken more seriously within the context of book controversies: 'to focus exclusively on the pronouncements of those who read books carefully would entirely misrepresent the place of literature in the contemporary world; indeed, as so many comments on *The Satanic Verses* suggest, non-readers and the non-reading of works are at least as important as readers and reading and as much in need of theorization'.<sup>34</sup>

Available literary criticism on *Brick Lane* tends to suggest that a closer (sometimes corrective),

more detailed and rigorous reading of *Brick Lane* is the best way to resolve the current stalemate over the novel's notably divided cultural reception, which has tended to be premised upon its credentials as a realist novel. Thus Jane Hiddleston, Alistair Cormack, and John Marx expose how the narrative genre of realism reveals its limits (Cormack), is 'interrupted' (Marx) or is staged as contradictory (Hiddleston) in *Brick Lane*.<sup>35</sup> Albeit in very different ways, these critics expose the rhetorical (as opposed to the 'real') foundations of the novel and its literary self-consciousness. For example, and while Hiddleston is unusually alert to the fact that understanding literature 'as a process of formal experimentation belongs to a very particular reading community', she nevertheless persists with this approach because *Brick Lane* as a 'social phenomenon' has already been dealt with.<sup>36</sup> While Hiddleston is therefore aware that *Brick Lane* might be 'read on two levels', this is ultimately explained by the novel's *formal* rather than social complexity: it is the text's 'ambivalent call to the reader to interpret it on two seemingly incompatible levels' that ultimately explains the divided reception of the novel.<sup>37</sup> Existing readings, that conceive the text either as uniquely revelatory or as grossly misrepresentative, can be counterposed with the literary critic's awareness of its implications as a literary experiment, a space where different discourses and rhetorical strategies are juxtaposed and realigned.<sup>38</sup>

As productive as such readings might be when viewed on their own terms, as examples of specialist literary criticism, they evoke an ideal reader suspiciously similar to their authors: a reader whose task is 'interpretation' upon an apparently level playing field; a reader with 'literary competence';<sup>39</sup> a reader invested in embracing ambivalence, multiple meanings and incompatibility. Implicitly or explicitly, these readings foreclose further discussion of the 'burden of representation' (that is, the tension between representation as artistic *depiction* and representation as political *delegation*<sup>40</sup>) that came to surround the novel among mainstream audiences, and which frame the text in realist terms.<sup>41</sup> While the individual interpretations of these critics are plausible, we suggest their logical outcome is to underestimate the cultural significance and complexity of the reception of *Brick Lane*. Through their vigilant accounts of the novel *itself*, attention is diverted from its wider 'biography' and circulation, to a forensic examination of the text's formal qualities. What if the slippage that Hiddleston evokes above between the real and its rhetorical construction in the furore over *Brick Lane* was not premised on 'misreading', as available literary criticism seem to assume, but had its basis in conceptions of not reading?<sup>42</sup> Accounts of the extent to which *Brick Lane* reproduces or departs from realism are less urgent in this context than an understanding of the uses to which the text was being put. Monica Ali seems acutely aware of this fact when she seeks to establish the veracity of her novel, less at the level of the text itself, than through its fraught location between both readers and non-readers:

People sometimes ask me if I have been saddened by the reaction to the novel of people with a Bangladeshi heritage. I explain that I have, over several years, had an overwhelmingly positive response from people of Bangladeshi descent who have read *Brick Lane*, both in London and around the world. I have a boxful of letters in which people tell me how this character reminded them of that relative, and a number in which young women confide their experience of arranged marriage.

These are people who have read the novel. But the majority, including perhaps most of the protesters, haven't. And I am aware that given the nature of the press coverage, and the



rumours circulating that, for example, the film would show a leech falling into a curry pot in a Brick Lane restaurant (which doesn't happen in either novel or film), people who haven't read the book are now much more likely to feel hostile towards it. Those who don't share that feeling, given the reported undertone of violence in the campaign, are now all the more unlikely to speak up. It was interesting to note in the press cuttings that any local residents who questioned the demonstration's importance were 'unwilling to give their names', though the couple of 'community leaders' were entirely delighted to trumpet their own.<sup>43</sup>

Ali explicitly contrasts the attributes and activities of readers with non-readers, describing the comments of readers as 'positive', and detailing their well-informed and 'authentic' responses to the text. Non-readers, by contrast, are furnished with 'rumoured' and false contents of the text (the responsibility for which resides with 'the press'), which by implication fuels their 'hostility' and implicates them in a 'violent' campaign of protest in which they 'trumpet' (rather than simply 'give') their names. Once again, the correspondences that emerge in Ali's account, between non readers, hostility and violence, are suggestive of the way not reading might be operating euphemistically within the discourses around *Brick Lane* in the early years of the twenty-first century. Unconsciously or otherwise, the kinds of fanaticism, rage, irrationality and intransigence that not reading conjures, coincides with broader cultural concerns around the Muslim circulating more liberally within contemporary public discourses. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to chart the full imbrications between not reading and emergent discourses of terrorism, the co-incidence between the years of the *Brick Lane* furore and a series of other historical events (the invasion of Iraq, (20 March 2003), Madrid bombing (11 March 2004), Murder of Theo van Gogh in Netherlands (2 November 2004), 7/7 bomb attacks (7 July 2005), the Danish cartoons Affair (30 September 2005)) suggests a wider 'regime of value' is at stake in distinctions between readers and non readers.<sup>44</sup> We would argue this regime of value is ultimately less embedded in the form of the novel than it is in the biography of the book

#### A BIOGRAPHY OF *BRICK LANE*

An engagement with the biographical journey of *Brick Lane* reveals that the controversial status of the book (from its precocious success based on the submission of an incomplete manuscript, to the offence it caused to the Bangladeshi community) was deeply embedded in representations and discourses of reading/not reading.<sup>45</sup> Tracing the full life cycle (to date) of this controversial fiction reveals two key moments - or events - in the life of the book: its publication and its adaptation into film, both of which created a controversy the British press named 'the battle of Brick Lane'.<sup>46</sup> The second 'battle' was reported repeatedly by the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, and BBC online news, and generated significant national coverage. In its international form, reporting debunked the scale of the controversy: Aseem Chabra, writing for the *Mumbai News* deflated its significance describing the sequence of events as a 'Brick Lane brouhaha'.<sup>47</sup> If it was a *media* controversy, it was one that flashed up and then disappeared. Nevertheless, the cultural, aesthetic and political ramifications of 'the battles of Brick Lane' should be taken seriously because of what they signify in a wider set of meanings about reading and not reading, including about 'not reading' as a marker of Muslim identity (in wider protesting contexts). These ramifications are part of a set of emergent cultural and religious discourses that were



perhaps initiated by *The Satanic Verses*, but have come to have a distinctive character. The range of positions that were adopted in response to the *Brick Lane*/Brick Lane stand-off is instructive, if difficult to resolve. This is because to make sense of the social life of the novel we are led to questions about representation as an apolitical act of imagination, the role books might play as quasi-political documents, the debate on the burdensome cultural duties of 'minority' writers, charges of ethnic stereotyping, and the nature of public debate.

In the name of an object titled *Brick Lane*, lines were drawn about how to define, debate and defend literary and cultural identities. Igor Kopytoff reminds us that 'the hallmark of commoditization is exchange', earlier observing that '[w]hat is significant about the adoption of alien objects - as of alien ideas - is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use'.<sup>48</sup> Although this emphasis on the 'alien' is potentially distracting - erasing the ways that commoditisation (of even the most apparently foreign of objects) depends on possibilities of cultural common ground for exchange - the stress on commoditisation as a 'process' of cultural redefinition and reuse is instructive for our discussion of the changing status of books. *Brick Lane* may become a commodity at the moment money changes hands for a copy, but, following Kopytoff, we find that identifying this exchange alone cannot yield a satisfactory narrative for the redefinitions and reuses of this multifaceted work. It is when we view *Brick Lane* as a cultural object being reproduced within an extensive social framework of cultural exchange that its controversial status comes most clearly into focus. Kopytoff offers a model for his biographical approach:

The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.<sup>49</sup>

Although we do not present here the cultural data to follow the life of a single copy of *Brick Lane*, it is in the spirit of this model that we offer a biography of the cultural artefact, *Brick Lane*, hoping, as Kopytoff does, that 'biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure'.<sup>50</sup> Our biography of *Brick Lane* exposes some of the multiple lives of this text as its copies and versions were adopted, redefined, and put to use in the early years of the twenty-first century.

In its pre-publication infancy, the story of *Brick Lane* was dominated by publishing price wars. Reputedly having earned its author a £200,000 advance from Doubleday/Random House, the yet-to-be published novel was linked to notions of newness and the author's position as the next literary sensation. To be named by *Granta* as one of the 'Best Young British Novelists' of the decade on the basis of the manuscript of *Brick Lane* positioned the novel and the novelist as operating within the norms of an elite literary culture.<sup>51</sup> But even before the novel's publication, the status of the novel and its author were being contested. Maya Jaggi, a journalist for the *Guardian*, reported that Ali's publicist had rejected Jaggi as Ali's interviewer for a feature in *Guardian Weekend*, due

to what Jaggi described as 'a genteel, twenty-first-century colour bar'.<sup>52</sup> The publicist stated that Ali 'would like to be seen as a writer who is naturally concerned about issues surrounding race, but who would also just like to be seen and judged as an interesting writer too'.<sup>53</sup> By the first two months of 2003, the story of *Brick Lane* - still unpublished - had become over-determined: it was the tale of an unpublished mother of young children who had enthralled her publishers; it was the tale of a savvy, media-connected writer accruing wealth and status within a London literary establishment; it was the tale of a Bangladeshi-born author refusing to be determined by an ethnic identity; it was the story of a publisher 'anxious to safeguard authors from pigeonholing' by refusing to position Ali alongside black and Asian media.<sup>54</sup>

When the novel was published in June 2003, it was reviewed positively across the UK's national media. However, behind the marketing trail two further stories were emerging: one engaged with the novel's topographical title and the second engaged with the modern reading practices of book groups. Set predominantly on an anonymous housing estate in Tower Hamlets, albeit within walking distance of Brick Lane, the title's (non) correspondence to a particular locale, and the subsequent wrangling over the name of the book, became part of the press coverage of *Brick Lane*.<sup>55</sup> Ali originally submitted her debut novel under the title *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*. Her UK publishers, Doubleday, renamed it *Brick Lane*, a title that was nearly rejected in favour of Ali's original by the US publishers, Scribner, who feared it would not translate to a North American audience likely to ask 'Brick where?'.<sup>56</sup>

Although it did not emerge in the press until later in the year, on Brick Lane in the east end of London, some residents and traders were beginning to complain about *Brick Lane*'s apparent claims to represent the area and the people who lived and worked within it. The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council (GSD&WC) sent a letter to Ali's publisher outlining its opposition to the book, and when *Brick Lane* was shortlisted by the Booker Prize panel, the letter was sent to its head judge, John Carey. Larry Finlay, managing director of Transworld Publishers, a Random House company, was reported by the BBC in December 2003 as having said: 'A representative of The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council in UK wrote to us earlier in the year expressing objections to certain passages in *Brick Lane*. As we replied to him at the time, *Brick Lane* is a work of fiction. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a novel that we are enormously proud to have published - we find both the accusations against it and any demand for censorship ludicrous'.<sup>57</sup> The content of the eighteen-page letter sent to Random House and John Carey was never made publicly available in its full form, only ever minimally cited in the press. Notably the quotations focus on the GSD&WC's moral outrage, rather than the specific details of how they might be reading the novel, despite the fact that Finlay's defence of it relies on an agreement about how to respond to 'a work of fiction'. Rather, the reporting established two clear sides to the debate: those who defended the commitments of artistic freedom and those who held to the commitments of social identity. Notably the British media view the letter as a document whose existence is valuable in sociological terms - its existence as a form of social protest was more important than its content. In this respect, the GSD&WC were afforded a very narrow role of 'critic' of the novel - they were positioned as opponents rather than readers of the text (a situation we will suggest is challenged by the contents of the letter itself).

What cultural commentators in Britain could agree on was that in 2004 'Everyone's reading *Brick Lane*'.<sup>58</sup> Sarah Gavron, the director who would later take on adapting the novel for the screen, remembers: 'I read it when everybody was obsessed with it in the UK; it was a huge

best seller. I remember travelling on the London underground seeing four or five copies of it being read by different people of different ages, which shows its appeal across cultures and generations'.<sup>59</sup> Ali noted her publisher's sales figures to a reporter: '892,163 copies sold in all formats in the UK alone as of Dec 05'.<sup>60</sup> Sales of almost a million copies clearly do not constitute a readership of 'everyone', but that it was a best selling novel is without doubt. At the same time that the GSD&WC was voicing its concerns, there was a growing consensus that Ali's novel was a contender for literary prizes in the UK and USA. Although it did not win the Booker Prize, Ladbroke's bookmakers made it their 2/1 favourite from the shortlist; it won the WH Smith People's Choice award for a debut novel, and was shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the US National Book Critics Circle award, as well as being long-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction.

The considerable hype surrounding the book led to its inclusion on the first list of books in the Richard and Judy Book Club, which started in 2004. This book club, tied to a chat show, mirrored the successful Oprah book club in the USA.<sup>61</sup> Looking back on her choice of *Brick Lane*, Amanda Ross, the show's producer remembers:

*Brick Lane* was making an enormous amount of noise at the time. So I thought what will people think if I don't pick it ... My producer had the instinct when she went to film her that she wasn't interested at all in being part of the book club. And actually said to me that she didn't think that she would be turning up at the awards and wouldn't be supportive. And she didn't. Monica Ali didn't need us. She didn't need us to pick it. It was a phenomenal success anyway. And it's the only time I've picked a book that I don't absolutely believe in. And it was a big lesson.<sup>62</sup>

As the book became more popular, Ali's ability to fulfil or not fulfil the expectations of her multiple readerships became more pronounced. For Ross, it seems Ali was not the accessible author willing to engage the show's viewers. What was becoming clear was that Ali's novel, and Ali herself, were being called upon to play various roles within both a multicultural stage of conflicting social values, and a twenty-first century publishing world that connected books and authors to several media formats at once. Notably for Ross, Ali refused to operate within the norms of reading, response and discussion determined by this new publishing world. As a result, the book failed to fulfil the multi-platform requirements demanded by the programme. The norms of a new media book group might be considered culturally distant from the norms defended by the GSD&WC, but in both instances the novel and its author were seen as transgressing an important set of standards, and thus failing to fulfil the requirements of moral accountability placed on them.

*Brick Lane*'s value as a commodity depended on and complicated its status as (in Kopytoff's words) an 'alien object'.<sup>63</sup> To be 'alien' in these circumstances incorporates notions of cultural incommensurability in its many guises - *Brick Lane* was too different from the GSD&WC's values to be seen as describing a shared world and it did not fit the requirements of a new media vision of popular publishing. But its popularity was also premised on its difference. Arguably this was a *familiar* difference, one that served to confirm readers' expectations about a local Bangladeshi community, but it was nevertheless a difference rendered compelling by reviews of the novel which privileged Ali's ability to describe the hidden world of Bengali London to a largely uninformed readership.<sup>64</sup>


As the book was exchanged between different kinds of readers, the various forms of its alienness - its cultural incommensurability - became apparent, and even more so when it led to the screen. The UK's Channel 4 had optioned the rights to the film in 2004, but two years later, when Ruby Films sought to film in the Brick Lane area objections flared up again. By July 2006 the GSD&WC had mobilised local protests, and by the end of the month Ruby Films had moved their filming away from the area. In this short time the controversy had engaged media commentators, news reporters, local shopkeepers, residents, online forums and the letters pages of the press. PEN quickly came to the book/film's defence on anti-censorship grounds, just as it did during the Rushdie Affair over a decade before. Community leaders, by contrast, were quoted as saying: 'It [*Brick Lane*] painfully reminds us of the insulting name of prophet Mohammed as 'Mahound' given by Salman Rushdie in his controversial *Satanic Verses*'.<sup>65</sup> *The Satanic Verses* and *Brick Lane* were repeatedly, insistently, articulated within the global media at this time. The adjectives used to attack Ali's novel - 'despicable', 'shameful', 'filth' - ventriloquise those of the Rushdie protestors fifteen years earlier, reiterating its 'politics of offense'.<sup>66</sup> Newspaper headlines re-circulated the incendiary imagery associated with the Bradford book burnings,<sup>67</sup> whilst the plotting of the event by its protagonists and the press seemed to make the connection inevitable. Germaine Greer controversially asked 'Do the Brick Lane protesters have a point?', prompting Salman Rushdie to reply in a letter to the *Guardian*.<sup>68</sup> Greer summarised the insult as she saw it: 'Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more'.<sup>69</sup> For Rushdie, Greer was advocating 'pro-censorship twaddle', but for others the fears of misrepresentation posed other problems.<sup>70</sup>

While the *Guardian* and Greer report an Islamic context to the protesting, critics in Tower Hamlets (to our knowledge) did not identify themselves as Muslims, or cite religion as a motivating factor.<sup>71</sup> Clearly religious identities are significant for understanding the controversies surrounding Ali and Rushdie, but unlike in the Rushdie Affair, the Brick Lane protestors mobilised publicly as Sylheti or as part of a Tower Hamlets or Brick Lane community. Paul Lewis from the *Guardian* reported a meeting on Brick Lane on 24 July where 'community leaders expressed horror at a scene rumoured to show a leech falling from the hair of a Bangladeshi woman into a curry pot in a Brick Lane restaurant. 'What will this do to our businesses, our reputation?' said Mohammed Tahir Ali, a trustee of Shadwell Garden Mosque'.<sup>72</sup> Its rumoured existence was enough to encourage anxiety, and the question of who owned *Brick Lane*/Brick Lane was clearly framed as economic as well as cultural. On 26 July, the Campaign Against Monica Ali's Film *Brick Lane* was launched by Abdus Salique, future Mayor of Tower Hamlets (2008-9) and then chair of the Brick Lane Traders' Association, local businessman, and Labour Party member, as well as the most prominent protagonist in the *Brick Lane* furore. The next day, filming was pulled from the area. The planned protest against the film and book still took place, and although Abdus Salique was reported to be planning to burn the novel, this did not happen. In the event, the book was binned rather than burned, in what Hasan Suroor in *The Hindu* described as a pale imitation of the Bradford furore, a 'damp squib', rather than 'Rushdie Affair Mk II'.<sup>73</sup> Salique's rationale, however, was published: '[If] she [Ali] has the right to freedom of speech, we have the right to burn books'.<sup>74</sup> By the time the film premiered, the battle seemed to have ended. Its first screening at the Toronto Film Festival in 2007 drew no protesters, but the sense of controversy did not vanish completely. Somewhat incongruously, the final group to engage with the book/film furore came from the UK's royal family: Prince Charles pulled out

of attending the Royal Gala screening of *Brick Lane* scheduled for October as part of London Film Festival 'over protest worries'.<sup>75</sup> 'The outrage economy' (to use Ali's words) had reached the country's supposedly non-political aristocracy.<sup>76</sup>

The rejection of the film and book, and the film company's departure from the area might seem a clear example of cultural incommensurability in action. On this view, *Brick Lane* remains alien to Brick Lane to such a degree that there is no common ground on which to stage any dialogue or debate. But this was not the case, and the uses to which *Brick Lane* was put - as material object, as textual content, as film, as autobiography, as social document, as commodity - reveal in detail the negotiated demands of everyday cultural contact and clashes. Padraig O'Brien, reporting for BBC London News suggested that the filming controversy raised the following questions: 'Who owns Brick Lane, for starters? And also what happens when artistic expression comes head to head with community pride?'<sup>77</sup> The echoes established across these questions, between ownership and artistic expression, are symptomatic of what Sarah Brouillette has recently called 'the politics of gentrification' in Brick Lane literature (including Ali's *Brick Lane*). For instance, Brouillette cites Salique's concern that local residents' own attempts to turn the vicinity into an 'an icon of east London' have been hijacked, before going on to suggest:

Ali's reception is in part the product of concern that those newly arriving with more elite forms of cultural and economic capital may displace, undermine, or otherwise weaken the forms of currency held by existing local spokespeople. As I've suggested, in this field of competitive interaction, the various players, all in their own ways engaged in producing 'Brick Lane', attempt to delimit who projects images of the area and accrues capital based on their circulation to disparate readers, tourists, or homebuyers - all consumers who may have values and interests that do not align with the image of the local population that critics of *Brick Lane* were working to perpetuate in their protests.<sup>78</sup>


The biography of Brick Lane reveals a complex and competing circuit of consumers and commodities, a book and a film, readers and real estate. But if the competing distinctions and values that emerged in the battle over Brick Lane concerned the concrete currency of bricks and mortar, where does this leave the notably *immaterial* act of not reading? Not reading might appear on one level part of a blunt, if ironic and ill-fated (given the furore attached to it doubtless increased sales) refusal to buy into a book that is also a *brand* (and we might also be reminded here of the *backlash* that has accompanied Oprah Winfrey's book endorsements, encapsulated in the famous refusal by the American novelist Jonathan Franzen to appear on her show after she had picked his novel *Corrections* for her book club, a decision that 'blurred the well tended line separating high and low culture in the United States'.<sup>79</sup>) However, as we have already argued, not reading is more than simple negation, but an intense and multi-dimensional activity involving, to adapt Brouillette's vocabulary, a particular engagement with and production of 'Brick Lane'. Within this context, pt reading (as productive engagement) was bound up with questions of value and distinction (in Bourdieu's sense of cultural hierarchies, as opposed to literal gentrification) not dissimilar to those accounted for by Brouillette.

'Reading' in these accounts thus becomes a morally-invested term, not only in the way it attaches value to a range of competing practices, but also in the way that the discourses of reading, not reading or partial reading are deployed to perform moral work in defending or

attacking Ali's text. In a comment piece in the *Guardian*, Fareena Alam represents protesters who have 'not read' as misguided and unreasonable: reliant on the hearsay of others, unappreciative of the benefits that an association with Ali might bring to their community, and volatile and uncontrolled in their response to the book:

Most Bengalis I spoke to - from the waiter at my local Indian restaurant to social workers and politicians - have not read the book, but they have heard that Ali makes insulting remarks about certain segments of the community. Never mind that one of their own is this year's most celebrated writer. A Bangladeshi politician visiting London could barely control his temper as he demanded to know why I was reading the book: 'She calls all Sylhetis rickshaw drivers! What does she know? I tell you, someone paid her to write this rubbish!'<sup>80</sup>

Alam's unnamed Bangladeshi politician recognises *Brick Lane* in terms of a controversy in which books should not be read, or at the most they should be read for the purposes of censorship. According to Alam's reckoning of 'the burden of representation', she needed to account for her own decision to read the book in a debate that was quickly pitching how to be a good reader against how to be a good Bangladeshi.

In letters sent to the national press in the wake of the protests, many questioned the protesters' claims to have read the text. In this letter to the *Guardian* from an east London bookseller,  the writer asserts a further hierarchy of reading: good reading (which prompts 'thoughtful' and 'lively' debate) and poor reading, which fails to distinguish between documentary realism and 'imaginative fiction', and which is conducted, not objectively, but in order to have 'blind prejudice' confirmed:

As an east London bookseller, I am astonished at your report about *Brick Lane* ... Have those who protest actually read the book as a work of imaginative fiction? We should not allow blind prejudice to censor works of art. We were delighted to welcome Ali to talk about her book on publication and there was a lively and thoughtful discussion at this well-attended event. A lot of us in Newham thought she should win the *Guardian* First book award.<sup>81</sup>

Archer's association of not reading with 'blind prejudice' points to the contested and multi-accentual character of the term: if not reading for some protestors was a reaction to *Brick Lane*'s prejudiced depictions, Archer and other advocates of the book associate not reading *itself* with prejudice. In widely reported media accounts of the 'Brick Lane' protests, 'not reading' is assumed to characterise the activity of 'protesting against a book' and at the same time to undermine the protesters' right to protest. Two 'counter-protesters' for instance, are described as challenging the Sylheti protesters during the march with the charge that they had not 'actually read the book'. In a comment piece responding to the same protest, the moral deficiency of 'not reading' is again highlighted in the way in which Nick Cohen represents the protesters as exposed or 'caught out' as non-readers:

Their bluff was called during one demonstration, when a young Asian man stepped forward to ask if the protesters had actually read the book. Their furious reaction suggested they hadn't.<sup>82</sup>



A second counter-protester, Dan Simon (who was taken aside by police) justifies his challenging behaviour in terms of the ignorance and misapprehension under which the protesters labour as a result of their 'not reading' the text: 'A lot of these people will not have read the book and it's really not that inflammatory'.<sup>83</sup> The moral account of 'not reading' or 'partial reading' expressed by the writer of this article and attributed to one of the protesters, Shochall Salique (the son of the leader of the protests), bears notable similarity to the confessional accounts of non-reading by book group members: 'Shochall *admits to* not having read the book, but says he has read 'bits and pieces' of it while having other sections explained to him by others' (emphasis added).<sup>84</sup> This 'partial' reading practice, whereby a text is filleted selectively for passages pertinent to the concerns of protesting communities, can, however, be seen as another form of 'reading' along a broader continuum of public consumption.

A selective or 'partial' reading of *Brick Lane* can be observed in the following online message forum, Britbangla, in which a passage from the novel (approximately 200 words) is quoted, concerning a description of Sylheti by the character Chanu. This section was also part of the extract that appeared in the *Guardian* when *Brick Lane* was short-listed for the *Guardian* First Book Award in 2003, and tended to be invoked in almost all public debates around the novel.

Sylheti

Posted: Jul 21 2006, 04:34 PM

Quote

Newbie

Excerpt from *Brick Lane*:

Group:

Members

Posts: 6

Member No.: 117

Joined: 26-March 06

Mrs. Islam was the first person who called on Nazneen, in those first few days when her head was still spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept. Mrs. Islam was deemed by Chanu to be 'respectable.' **Not many people were 'respectable' enough to call or be called upon. 'You see,' said Chanu when he explained this for the first time, 'most of our people here are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. That's how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like little rats in the hold.'** He cleared his throat and spoke to the back of the room so that Nazneen turned her head to see who it was he was addressing. **'And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.'** He sat back and stroked his belly. **'I don't look down on them, but what can you do? If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?'**

How many Sylheti posters reading this are illiterate, dirty little monkeys whose parents stowed away upon British ships like rats?

If Ali had written in such a manner about the Jewish people or blacks, I doubt she would find much succour. Yet Sylheti's seem to be fair game in the name of multiculturalism.



Here, Newbie highlights the ‘offensive’ text that supports his/her judgement of the novel’s treatment of Sylhetis as a whole (a practice of offering supporting ‘evidence’ of an *a priori* thesis that is in many ways identical to the practices of literary criticism, political essayism and journalism).<sup>85</sup> S/he then appeals directly to the supposed reader of the post (‘Sylheti posters’), positioning them as the recipients of Chanu’s insults, with a gloss of Ali’s text before concluding with a speculation that certain other races would be more immune to such negative representation. Drawn from an early part of the novel, this poster does not quote the next paragraph: ‘Nazneen wondered about Mrs Islam. If she knew everybody’s business then she must mix with everybody, peasant or not. And still she was respectable’.<sup>86</sup> This quotation begins Nazneen’s deliberations over her husband’s values, and even the presentation of Chanu’s opinions register irony: should we trust the opinions of a man who complacently ‘sat back and stroked his belly’, and who Nazneen recognises as incongruously grandstanding in his own home?<sup>87</sup> However, this more ‘contextualised’ reading of the passage is only one form of engaging with the text. It is a practice which relies on ‘cover-to-cover’ reading, on the reader making theoretical distinctions between narrator, author and character, on reading ‘ironically’ and dispassionately. It is also a regime of reading associated with the academy and thus invested with forms of literary authority. The poster here has a particular reading *purpose*: s/he is isolating evidence which supports or even came to define a community consensus over the novel’s depiction of a particular ethnic group (no matter that this was channelled through the voice of an apparently snobbish, prejudiced and unreliable character - for protesters, this distinction was irrelevant). Such reading practices need to be contextualised within the broader debate concerning documentary realism and the ‘burden of representation’, both of which discourses were ostensibly prominent in the media and publishing promotion of Ali’s novel.<sup>88</sup>

Easily the most notorious narrative of (not) reading in the *Brick Lane* controversy was the letter circulated in September 2003 by Kalam Choudhury, chairman of the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, to Random House (copies were also sent to John Carey, panel chair of the Booker Prize in 2003, and to the literary editors of the *Guardian* and *The Times*). This was a letter that seemed at once too long (the press constantly referred to its being ‘eighteen pages’ in length) and too short (its citation and circulation in the media reduced the epic epistle to a handful of extracted and repeated words).<sup>89</sup> The question of length seems important here, because a reading of the entire letter reveals its extended form was on one level an ironic response to the accusation of not reading. The letter, which is addressed to Ms Monica Ali, begins by referring back to a piece of correspondence a month earlier in which Nicole Aragi (Ali’s agent) responded to a prior complaint about *Brick Lane* from the GSD&WC:

as advised by Ms Aragi I, along with a number of prominent members of our community, ‘took the time to read *Brick Lane* in its entirety’ to dispel the ‘incorrect impression’ as allegedly received by us of your ‘fine novel’. Ms Aragi’s advice has turned out to be a blessing in disguise, otherwise we would not have come to know all the most offensive and slanderous invectives against Sylhetis in your book (p1).\*

The sheer length of the much-cited ‘eighteen page letter’, with its meticulous, and detailed attention to the text was on one level a parody of the agent’s exhortation that the Council read the book in its entirety. Moreover, it seems a response deliberately designed to be commensurate

with the length of the novel: 'with profound regrets and utter disappointment, we are constrained to say that, having gone through this 413-page work we find it thematically an anti-Sylheti venomous volume' (p1). The form by which the letter proceeds, and which generally involves a list of quotations and page numbers from *Brick Lane*, followed by proportionately much *longer* and extended accounts of the contexts surrounding them, seems, at a textual level, to repeat the desire to reclaim the area from outsiders, that Brouillette earlier observed at a geographical level. More than just a parody of the not reading label then, the letter might be read as a territorialisation of text through a process of *over writing* or *out writing*. Significantly, in his cover letter to Booker chairman John Carey, Choudhury speaks of the Sylhetis as a 'prestigious community', an adjective more commonly used to describe property and real estate rather than people or communities.

Choudhury thus appropriates the 'moral' discourse of complete and 'cover-to-cover' reading proposed by Nicole Aragi as a means of supporting his judgement of the novel. The letter's use of direct quotation and overall tone is palpably ironic in the initial paragraphs, his account of his and the Greater Sylhet Council's response to the text is framed by an appeal to the moral authority of a practice of close and complete reading in a broader hierarchy of reading practices. Choudhury cites in full, and with page references, the six passages from the novel which refer directly to Sylhetis or Sylheti customs.<sup>90</sup> He then goes on to refute the factual content of these passages by providing counterfactual, historical 'evidence'. For instance, in response to Chanu's claim that 'most of them have jumped ship', he argues that of 200,000 Bangladeshis living in Britain in 1985, 'not more than 10,000 were ex-seamen' (p4). The novel's focus on the 'uneducated' status of the Sylheti migrants is challenged by a reference to the British education many high-achieving Sylhetis received before returning to Bangladesh to take up prominent professional posts: 'By the year 1985, when Chanu was narrating the fictitious stories to his newly wed wife in Tower Hamlets hundred of our educated Sylhetis had returned home having successfully completed their studies in British universities...' (p6). Choudhury cites a passage in which Nazneen attempts to contradict Chanu's view that Sylhetis do not represent 'the best face of our nation' by mentioning two prominent Bangladeshis who are also Sylheti, 'Colonel Osmani and Shah-Jalal'.<sup>91</sup> Although for many critics, this passage might offer the most persuasive evidence that the narrator does not share Chanu's point of view, Choudhury dissects the detail of the passage to point to an ambiguity in Chanu's response: 'What did he mean by saying, 'I know who they are'. It could be good or bad' (p12). Chanu's hurried retort does not reassure Choudhury that Chanu shares Nazneen's view of the exalted status of these two historic 'heroes'. Whilst it is tempting to assume, as some commentators did, that the failure of protesters to acknowledge the 'flawed' or 'unreliable' voice of Chanu was testimony to their failings as readers,<sup>92</sup> it is worth noting that Choudhury *is* able to acknowledge the status of Chanu as a flawed character in the broader context of the novel, whilst simultaneously objecting to the book's power to represent a particular community negatively by any means: 'This is history and not any fictitious 'story' as narrated by Chanu, the ignorant character of your book' (p5). In this way, Choudhury, complicates the status of Ali's fiction and alludes to its 'burden of representation'.

This kind of close textual analysis, whilst selective and partial, bears clear comparison with practices of literary criticism in the academy. Choudhury's reading of *Brick Lane* is thus informed by, and has consciously adopted, a particular version of 'reading' which is usually

invoked to dismiss protest against controversial fiction. What Choudhury's letter and the online analysis challenge are simplistic dichotomies between 'literary' and 'non-literary' readings which tend to inform critical accounts of the reception of controversial texts. Daniel Pipes, for instance, writing about the reception of *The Satanic Verses* states that 'assessing the accusations against the book require that it be looked at in a literal, and very unliterary manner, for this is the way it is understood by those who protest it'.<sup>93</sup>

Whilst Choudhury's literalism might be deemed by many to be evidence of an unsophisticated mode of reading, his microscopic and comprehensive unpacking of the textual representations of the Sylheti community could be described in many ways as 'literary'. Choudhury's mode of analysis arguably replicates the hierarchy of reading already dominant in British cultural life, but he departs from literary criticism's refusal to engage with 'unfashionable' ideas about the 'burden of representation' or the responsibility of a text to particular constituencies of readers:

may we suggest that the literary critics would make a positive contribution if they openly admit that Sylheti readers are justified in finding *Brick Lane* offensive. To argue that the novel is a work of literature and therefore incapable of giving offence is not a view that is reasonable to expect Sylheti readers to accept it (p3).

For Choudhury there is no contradiction between the fictional status of the text and its responsibility to portray a real community based in historically accurate facts. In this way, it is possible to read Choudhury's letter, and other similar forms of protest, as a challenge to the way in which text-centred literary criticism traditionally neglects readers. And by our own analysis of a range of competing practices of consumption surrounding a particular text, we also begin to engage with a broader cultural politics of reading which re-centres the voices of 'real readers' and revives the importance of reception to a full analysis of a work of fiction. As Aamir Mufti writes about the Rushdie affair '[a] reconceptualization of reception appropriate to the cultural realities of the present global conjuncture . . . must account for forms of 'mass consumption' other than 'reading' in the narrower sense of that word'.<sup>94</sup>

#### A SUPPLEMENT: THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR AND RECEPTION BY PASTICHE

Mufti's broader conception of reading involves accounting for popular consumption whereby controversial books are read erratically and intermittently through their circulation by media reports, photocopied passages, rumour and hearsay. It is this kind of 'piecemeal', 'fitful' and 'filtered' reading of *The Satanic Verses* that constitutes, for Mufti, reception by pastiche.<sup>95</sup> Reception by pastiche helps us to re-think a variety of responses to *Brick Lane* considered above, as more than merely not reading. Moreover, the term takes on a special significance within the context of *The Satanic Verses*, with the controversy around Ali's novel playing itself out as a further 'pastiche' of the controversy around Rushdie's in the form of a series of discursive returns.

It is not merely that the Rushdie Affair serves as a complement to the reception of *Brick Lane*, it functions rather, in Derrida's sense, as a 'supplement': both replacement and addition, essential and exterior to the primary narrative.<sup>96</sup> *The Satanic Verses* not only made *Brick Lane* seem possible, it in many ways made it seem inevitable. In this final section we trace some of the echoes and repetitions across the two book controversies in order to establish a wider discursive context

for not reading, before drawing some tentative conclusions about their broader implications for reading formations.

If, as Daniel Allington argues, being offended by *The Satanic Verses* became a new way of doing 'being a Muslim' in the late 1980s, being offended by *Brick Lane* in 2003 and 2006 was on one level a repetition of this same process of identification: a performative act, learned and repeated for a new context. Allington's comment supports our more general sense in this essay that not reading became identified as a specifically 'Muslim' response to texts around and after the years of the Rushdie Affair.<sup>97</sup> For some Muslims, it became part of a radical rejection of texts they disapproved of, for some non-Muslims, a pathological sign of Islamic intolerance and closed-mindedness, both to the novel and by extension, to the alternative perspectives of others.

It is striking then that what structures the reception of *The Satanic Verses* and *Brick Lane* most firmly as homologous, is precisely an insistence on the distinction between reading and not reading. Rushdie himself was central to the production of this distinction in his earliest reactions to the reception of *The Satanic Verses*:

It's very simple in this country [Britain]. If you don't want to read a book, you don't have to read it. It's very hard to be offended by *The Satanic Verses*, it requires a long period of intense reading. It's a quarter of a million words.<sup>98\*</sup>

Surprisingly, given the connotations it came to acquire within the context of the two book controversies, Rushdie evokes 'not reading' alongside 'intense' reading, as a democratic choice, a right of all British readers. If readers do not want to be offended by a book, they do not have to read it: simple as that. Not far from this liberal, secular freedom of the non-reader, resides another, 'extremist' version of not reading, which was a central figure in Rushdie's passionate defence of his novel. In October 1988, in an open letter to Rajiv Gandhi, Rushdie mocks the Prime Minister for allowing the Finance Ministry to 'decide what Indian readers may and may not read'.<sup>99</sup> What Rushdie finds 'profoundly disturbing' is that the decision to ban the book in India was prompted by 'extremists, even fundamentalists' who 'have attacked me and my novel while stating that they had no need actually to read it'.<sup>100</sup> Rushdie goes on to patronise the PM by offering a brief précis of his 'quarter of a million words': 'Like my zealous opponents, you will probably not have read *The Satanic Verses*' (p35). Underpinning Rushdie's position on not reading in this letter is a distinction between the philistine decision to ban the novel, and support for it from 'eminent writers' including Kingsley Amis, Harold Pinter, Stephen Spender and Tom Stoppard (p35).

Writing in response to this open letter, Syed Shahabuddin (MP), one of the 'extremists' it names, mimics Rushdie's satirical tone by invoking a very different type of non-reader: 'the sahibs themselves - all pukka Sahibs, mind you' who have conspired to shortlist *The Satanic Verses* for the Booker Prize, 'the highest literary award in *Vilayat*':

Perhaps it is just the sort of aphrodisiac needed to suit their perverted tastes. Not that many have read the book yet - they do not have to - from cover to cover - to boast about possession of a pirated edition or a smuggled copy. To have it is the thing, just the thing.<sup>101</sup>

Shahabuddin's mimicry/mockery of colonial discourse adds race and empire to the already

overdetermined hierarchy between reading and not reading explored in this essay, and is reminiscent of Choudhury's ironic tone in his letter to Ms Ali. If to read *The Satanic Verses* amounts to a perversion of taste, not reading it (and in contradistinction to the more usual constructions of not reading), is a sign of First World materialism and prejudice. Writing in *The Spectator* in the summer of 1989, the conservative commentator Roy Kerridge claimed:

A bookshop in an out-of-the-way part of London is doing a roaring trade in *The Satanic Verses*, fresh boxes arriving every day, and selling almost as quickly as they are unpacked. Many of the bookshop's new customers are *very* unliterary-looking people, who appear to regard the *Verses* as a tract in 'Paki-bashing'.

'Have you got your *Verses* yet?' a huge Irishman in a trench coat roared to his friend.  
'Sure, I'm just getting them now!'<sup>102</sup>

Leaving aside the question of what an unliterary person looks like, and what sort of race-class distinctions are invisibly at stake in such an anecdote, this image of the consumerist non-reader for whom *The Satanic Verses* is a sort of logo, seems close to Shahabuddin's English non-reader, for whom 'to have it is the thing'. In contrast to this racist mode of not reading, Shahabuddin invokes a subaltern implicitly Indian non reader who is nevertheless modern and democratic, drawing on the collective, anonymous and freely available narratives of mass communication to produce a compellingly popular mode of (not, or partial) reading:

The elite do not understand the dynamics of mass communication - how reports spread and how rumours, sometimes exaggerated and wild, fly and take possession of the minds of men. Translations, excerpts in various languages, comments in the local press, editorial reviews and above them all, interviews ... percolate down to form a torrent ... For me, the synopsis, the review, the excerpts, the opinions of those who had read it and your gloating were enough.<sup>103</sup>

Although Mufti does not cite this passage (perhaps because like us, he is keen to move beyond the divided camps of reception associated with the Rushdie Affair), its powerful image of the partial reader working by rumours, reports, excerpts and opinion, would appear to inform his theory of reception by pastiche. Mufti notes, for example, how in India, low literacy levels, along with high access to popular media formats (video, television, radio) were central to the creation of the gendered public sphere within which the book was received. While Mufti is particularly concerned with a distinctively Indian-based, Islamic, as opposed to metropolitan sphere of reception, his theory holds for the emergence of the Affair in both Brick Lane and Bradford. For example, earlier in this essay we saw Monica Ali draw on press stories circulating in the media, which foreground the consumption of *Brick Lane* by hearsay and rumour.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, according to the Chair of Bradford Council of Mosques, the city's Muslim leaders first encountered *The Satanic Verses* when '[w]e received letters from Hixb-ul-Ulama in Blackburn ... enclosing extracts from two Indian magazines; we also received cuttings from a Bradford man who had read the articles in India ...'<sup>105</sup>

The pastiche of reading that surrounds both *Brick Lane* and *The Satanic Verses* reveals a

distinctive and overlapping 'regime of value' that cannot be straightforwardly 'read off' at the level of discrete social groups, or at the level of the book as an immanent entity.<sup>106</sup> Not reading emerges across this essay as part of a reading formation that is both defiantly adopted and emphatically rejected, is both imposed and elected, and that has been used to describe both intransigent and extreme Muslim reception and decadent or racist Western reception. To describe these varied practices as part of a singular reading formation is to assert how any engagement with a book creates a system of connections. However, this is not to suggest that every reader or reading act is the same. If we have proposed that ways of reading are never rigidly reducible to ethnic difference, we must remain alert to the very real differences and asymmetries in social position between alternative kinds of reader, and the varied social impact of their reading practices. What gives not reading its collective coherence and resonance is less the social identity of those presumed to stand behind the act, than the wider set of cultural hierarchies that allow discursive distinctions between readers and non-readers to become coherent, consistent and meaningful, as constitutive of 'controversy', at particular historical conjunctures. In terms of *Brick Lane*, these hierarchies have their basis in, for example: the residue of interpretive traditions which place a particular value on autonomous artistic judgement as the product of intense, close, cover-to-cover reading; current Anglo-American anxieties around the emergence of the non-reader that underpin the moral accountability of not reading; as well as the seemingly disproportionate cultural and economic capital that came to be invested in and attached to the proper names 'Monica Ali' and *Brick Lane* since 2003. In terms of the latter, not only does *Brick Lane* come to demand 'serious' (which is to say 'complete') reading, it comes into conflict with the gentrification of Brick Lane itself, where not reading was on one level a refusal to buy into a particular brand. Further, we have suggested that the values attached to reading, not reading, and the choices between them were variously attached to notions of freedom, tolerance and democracy, violence, fanaticism and intransigence, that were never far from media constructions of the relations between Islam and the West since the late 1980s, constructions which peaked around the years of the Brick Lane furore. While such evaluative regularities cannot exhaustively explain the furore surrounding Brick Lane as it has been examined in this essay, they suggest the need to pause before evaluating 'not reading' as merely nothing. Not reading is a fertile and contested site of meaning production that still has much to teach us about the significance of recent book controversies.

## NOTES

1. Gayatri Spivak, 'Inscriptions: Of Truth to Size', *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp201-216.
2. *AIM Magazine*, 'Monica Ali's Brick Lane film hit by protests', *AIM Magazine* (Asians in Media), 18 July 2006, <http://www.asiansinmedia.org/news/article.php/television/1395>.
3. Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp64-91.
4. Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1\* (2000): 57.
5. <http://www.worldometers.info/books/>
6. Gabriel Zaid, *So Many Books*, Natasha Wimmer (trans), London, Sort of Books, 2004, p22.
7. Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, Jeffrey Mehlman (trans), London, Granta, 2007, p6.

8. F. Moretti, 'Conjectures', op. cit., p55.

9. See Tony Bennett's 'Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and their Texts' in Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington and Robert Young (eds), *Poststructuralism and the Question of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp63-81.

10. Franco Moretti (ed), *Il Romanzo*, Turin and Princeton, NJ, Giulio Einaudi and Princeton University Press, 2001-2003.

11. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, London, Verso, 2007.

12. See Moretti, *Il Romanzo*, op. cit.; and *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, op. cit.

13. Diane Elam, 'Voyage Pad?' in Culture Machine Vol 2 (2000), <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/308/293> [no pagination]

14. Ibid.

15. Perhaps ironically, given reception studies' preoccupation with resistant and subversive audiences, the neglected figure of the anti-book protestor would appear in many ways that field's ideal reader.

16. As Paul Weller has recently noted in terms of *The Satanic Verses*: 'The Rushdie Affair' became a matter of taking sides, defending positions and erecting barricades'. See Paul Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times: The Rushdie Affair and the Future of 'Multiculturalism'*, London, Continuum, 2009, p2.

17. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, R. Nice (trans), Harvard UP 1984 p170.

18. Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p94.

19. See P. Bayard, *How to Talk*, op. cit., pxxi.

20. Angus Phillips, 'Does the Book Have a Future?' in Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (eds), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p551.

21. National Endowment for the Arts. 2004. 'Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America' <http://arts.endow.gov/pub/RaRExec.pdf>; National Endowment for the Arts. 2007. 'To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence' <http://www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.PDF>

22. Dana Gioia, 'Chairman's Preface', *To Read or Not to Read*, op. cit., p5.

23. These book groups are exemplified by America's 'Oprah's Book Club' (1996-present) and Britain's 'Richard and Judy Book Club' (2004-present). In the United States Winfrey aimed 'to get the whole country reading again' (cited in Daphne Read, 'From Clinton to Bush, literacy to war: The political contexts of Oprah's Book Club', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 21, 4 (2005): 40), while in the UK a mass book group event such as 'Small Island Read' (2007) listed as its primary aim: 'To develop standards of literacy through the promotion of reading'. See Fuller and Procter (2009) 'Reading as "social glue": Book Groups, Multiculture, and Small Island Read 2007' in 'Region Writing Home: Relocating Black, Migrant and Diasporic Writing in Britain.' Special Issue *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 9.2: pp26-40.

24. This book group data was collected as part of an AHRC-funded research project into the activities of a transnational range of groups reading the same series of novels, including *Brick Lane*. The data examined in this paper is a sample of a much larger corpus (around 90 hours worth of transcribed book group discussion, taking in 16 different groups - each with up to twelve members - from seven different countries, and examining nine different 'diasporic' texts). For more details see <http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com/>

25. P. Bayard, *How to Talk*, op. cit., pxxi.

26. A number of texts exploring the sociology of book groups have emerged in recent years. See Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and The Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003 and Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005. See also the following forthcoming titles: Jenni Ramone and Helen Cousins (eds), *The Richard & Judy Book Club Reader*, Farnam, Ashgate, 2011 and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (ed), *Reading Communities: From Salons to Cyberspace*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

27. Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, vols 1& II, edited by Gail Jefferson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992, p237.

28. Lena Jayyusi, 'Values and moral judgement: communicative praxis as a moral order', in Graham Button (ed), *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p242.

29. Paul Corrigan, 'Doing Nothing', in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London, Routledge, 1976, p103.



30. *Guardian*, 'Leader: The trouble with Brick Lane', *Guardian*, 27 October 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/27/books.immigration>

31. Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West*, 2nd ed., New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2009, p113.

32. See Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1968, p216; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Second Edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p333; Philip Foster and Alan Purves, 'Literacy and Society with Particular Reference to the Non-Western World', in Rebecca Barr, Michael L. Kamil, Peter B. Mosenthal and P. David Pearson (eds), *Handbook of Reading Research*, vol 2, White Plains, NY, Longman, 1995.

33. See, for example, Steven Fischer's *A History of Reading*, London, Reaktion Books, 2003, which has a tendency to make distinctions between 'intensive' Muslim readers and the 'extensive' readers of Western modernity (p255). The former Fischer associates with literalism, and a mode of reading blinded by devout attention to the Koran, a text which colours and confines responses to all other texts. Such sacred reading is itself a form of not reading for Fischer, depending upon an unthinking reading by rote, rather than the curious, critical and 'writerly' reading of real readers. We are particularly grateful to Sarah Brouillette for this reference and her insights upon it, and for her thoughtful reading of an earlier draft of this essay.

34. Daniel Allington, *Discourse and the Reception of Literature: Problematising 'Reader Response'*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2008, p518. Similarly, Ruvani Ranasinha argues, 'the vocal non-readers who constitute a significant interpretive community remain routinely sidelined in literary and sociological discussions of the Rushdie Affair'. See Ruvani Ranasinha 'The Fatwa and its aftermath', in Abdulrasak Gurnah (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p46. Practices of not reading, it should be noted, have received patchy attention across English Studies: see Leah Price, 'Reading (and Not Reading) Richardson, 1756-1868', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, 29 (2000): 87-103; Graham Huggan, '(Not) Reading Orientalism', *Research in African Literatures*, 36, 3 (2005): 124-136; and Liedeke Plate's discussion of Pierre Bayard in 'Unreading, Rereading, and the Art of Not Reading', *sympleke*, 17, 1-2 (2009): 261-266.

35. See Alistair Cormack 'Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*', *Contemporary Literature*, 47, 4 (2006): 695-721; Jane Hiddleston, 'Shapes and Shadows: Unveiling the immigrant in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 40 (2005): 57-72; and John Marx, 'The Feminization of Globalization', *Cultural Critique*, 63 (2006):1-32.

36. Hiddleston, 'Shapes and Shadows', op. cit., p60.

37. Ibid., p60, p58.

38. Ibid., pp60-61.

39. See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, second edition, London, Routledge, 2002, p141.

40. Note that this phrase was used to describe the dilemmas prompted by Ali's novel. See Fareena Alam, 'The burden of representation', *Guardian*, 13 July 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/13/fiction.features>

41. See Yasmin Hussein, '*Brick Lane*: Gender and Migration', *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*, London, Ashgate, 2005, pp91-110.

42. This is a thesis that grows in credibility when situated alongside another notoriously contested novel with which *Brick Lane* has been twinned: *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's novel also attracted a readership insistent on referential reading, despite its supposedly manifest magic realism.

43. Monica Ali, 'The Outrage Economy', *Guardian*, 13 October 2007, np, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/13/fiction.film>

44. For a discussion of 'regime of value' see John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

45. While the biographical approach of this section draws primarily on Kopytoff, we are conscious of important related work, such as Rita Felski's notion of publics and counter-publics, which encourages a move away from 'textual analysis' to an understanding of literary form 'in relation to the conflicting needs of different sections of the women's movement rather than simply assigning an abstract political value to particular techniques'. See *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Harvard University Press, p164. See also Kathy Davis's *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007 - a text which accomplishes a similarly biography-of-the text approach by taking up Edward Said's notion of 'travelling theory' to pursue the transnational 'travels' of the feminist classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Similarly there is a rich ethnographic tradition within audience research which has privileged the conversational networks and relationships which surround the viewing and reception of texts. Mary Ellen Brown's *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1994, for instance, explores communities of women viewers whose discourses about soap operas operate as modes of resistance to dominant modes of meaning and cultural value, noting that 'the sense-making that

people engage in when they talk about television may be as important as their actual viewing of the television program', p2.

46. Johann Hari, 'The Battle of Brick Lane', *Independent*, 30 July 2006, <http://www.johannhari.com/2006/07/30/the-battle-of-brick-lane->; Jonathan Heawood, 'The Battle for Brick Lane', *Guardian*, 27 July 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jul/27/noskatinginsaris>



San Suroor, 'Battle of Brick Lane fizzles out', *The Hindu*, 2 August 2006,



<http://www.hindu.com/2006/08/02/stories/2006080205071100.htm>

47. Aseem Chhabra, 'Brick Lane brouhaha', *Mumbai Mirror*, 30 September 2007, <http://www.mumbaimirror.com/index.aspx?Page=article&sectname=Columnists%20-%20Aseem%20Chhabra&sectid=54&contentid=20070930200709300254059352f5f549>

48. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things', op. cit., p85, p67.

49. Ibid., p67.

50. Ibid.

51. See *Granta 81: Best of Young British Novelists*, 81, 2003.

52. Maya Jaggi, 'Colour blind', *Guardian*, 7 February 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/07/fiction.race>

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. As Ian Jack noted in the *Guardian*, the title 'raises some interesting questions': 'Brick Lane does exist, both as a tourist attraction (curries, 'multi-cultural London') and as the high street for the Bengali community who live in the neighbourhood. Does the reality of the name heighten the reality of the novel for the reader? One has to say, probably'. He also notes that the publishers' launch party was held in Brick Lane, but 'so far as I could tell, very few (or possibly none) of [the people who live in Brick Lane] had been invited to the party'. See Ian Jack, 'It's only a novel', *Guardian*, 20 December 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/dec/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview3>

56. David Smith, 'It's Brick Lane by any other name', *The Observer*, 14 September 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/sep/14/bookerprize2003.usa>

57. BBC News, 'Ali's Brick Lane upsets community', 3 December 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/3287413.stm>

58. Robert McCrum, 'A decade in books', *Guardian*, 25 May 2008,



[www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/25/fiction](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/25/fiction)

59. See Bijan Tehrani, 'Sarah Gavron talks about *Brick Lane*', *Cinema Without Borders*.



<http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/news/127/ARTICLE/1607/2008-06-13.html>

60. Mick Brown, 'Voice of experience', *Telegraph*, 27 May 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3652679/Voice-of-experience.html>

61. These book clubs generated massive sales for the novels chosen by the presenters - a cultural and economic phenomenon that came to be defined as 'the Oprah effect'. See Cecelia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005; Cecelia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker (eds), *The Oprah Effect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Bookclub*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2008; Rita Barnard, 'Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalization of Suffering', *English Studies*, 47, 1 (2004): 85-107; and Catherine Burwell, 'Reading Lolita in Times of War: women's book clubs and the politics of reception', *Intercultural Education*, 18, 4 (2007): 281-296.

62. Amanda Ross interview, *Front Row. Radio 4*, 16 June 2008: authors' transcription.

63. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things', op. cit., p67.

64. As Margaret Forster has it on the back cover of the UK edition: 'It gave me everything I crave in a novel, taking me into a life and culture I know so little about ...' Ian Jack rationalised the selection of Ali as one of *Granta's* Best Young British Novelists in similar terms: 'I also think we liked the book because we (none of us Bengalis from east London) felt that it showed us a glimpse of what life might be like among one of the largest and least described non-white communities in Britain. See I. Jack *Guardian*, 'It's only a novel', op. cit, p7.

65. Matthew Taylor, 'Brickbats fly as community brands novel <sup>1</sup>despicable<sup>2</sup>', *Guardian*, 3 December 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/dec/03/books.arts>

66. On the politics of offence in the Rushdie Affair see Aamir Mufti, 'Reading the Rushdie Affair: <sup>1</sup>Islam<sup>2</sup>, <sup>3</sup>Cultural Politics, <sup>4</sup>Form', in Richard Burt (ed), *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp307-339. In one of the first local press stories covering the Rushdie Affair prior to the infamous book burning, the Bradford-based *Telegraph and Argus* quotes local Muslim leaders. See Jim Greenhalf, 'Muslims declare holy war on book', *Telegraph and Argus*, 9 January 1989: 'the most filthy and abusive book ever to be written against Islam ... distorted, unfounded, imaginary and despicable ...'

67. See, for example, Hasan Suroor, 'Battle of Brick Lane fizzles out', *The Hindu* August 2006, <http://www.hindu.com/2006/08/02/stories/2006080205071100.htm>

68. See Germaine Greer, 'Reality bites: People in Brick Lane are in uproar about a plan to film Monica Ali's novel. Do they have a point?' *Guardian*, 24 July 2006,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books> and Salman Rushdie, Letter to *Guardian*, 'Letters: Brickbats fly over Brick Lane', *Guardian*, 29 July 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/29/comment.letters>

69. Greer, 'Reality bites', op. cit., np.

70. Rushdie, 'Letter', op. cit., np.

71. In contrast to this, Shazia Merza's review of *Brick Lane* focused on its representation of female Muslim identity: 'There are few novels that capture the experience of a young Muslim woman. I've read books that speculate on what it must be like to be an Asian Muslim woman and how oppressive our religion must be, but rarely have I read a moving, honest account, which is also very entertaining'. See Shazia Merza, 'Like looking into my own life', *Observer*, 15 June 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/15/fiction.features3>. See also footnote 72 below.

72. Paul Lewis, 'Brick Lane protests force film company to beat retreat', *Guardian*, 27 July 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/jul/27/film.books>

73. Suroor, "Battle of Brick Lane" fizzles out', op. cit., np.

74. Abdus Salique quoted in P. Lewis, 'Brick Lane protests force film company to beat retreat', op. cit., np. On the burning of books in the late twentieth century, Kenan Malik writes in *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy*, London, Atlantic, 2009: 'The burning book became an icon of the rage of Islam. Sent around the world by a multitude of photographers and TV cameras, the image proclaimed, "I am a portent of a new kind of conflict and of a new kind of world"' (p1). In this respect we could view Salique's claimed intention to burn *Brick Lane* as implicitly linked to a declared Islamic, media-orientated protesting strategy.

75. *AIM Magazine*, 'Royal pulls out of *Brick Lane* premiere over protest worries', *AIM Magazine* (Asians in Media), 25 September 2007, <http://www.asiansinmedia.org/news/article.php/television/1750>.

76. See M. Ali, 'The <sup>1</sup>Outrage <sup>2</sup>Economy', op. cit., np. The unpublished letter from the GSD&WC references Charles' ongoing relationship with the Council, which may partially explain this decision.

77. Pdraig O'Brien, BBC London News, 18 July 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid\\_5190000/newsid\\_5193100/5193154.stm?bw=bb&mp=wm&news=1&bbcws=1](http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_5190000/newsid_5193100/5193154.stm?bw=bb&mp=wm&news=1&bbcws=1) (authors' transcription).

78. Sarah Brouillette, 'Literature and <sup>1</sup>Gentrification on Brick Lane', *Criticism*, 51, 3 (2009): 26. Salique continues: 'The book, and the film of it', he said, 'sully the identity of those Bengalis from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh who made Brick Lane part of the London tourist circuit and centre of Bangladeshi culture', quoted in Alan Cowell, 'In London, a <sup>1</sup>New East-West <sup>2</sup>Skirmish', *New York Times* (late ed), 5 August 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/05/arts/05bric.html>.

79. C.K. Farr, *Reading Oprah*, op. cit., p4.

80. Fareena Alam, 'The burden of representation', *Guardian*, 13 July 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/13/fiction.features>

81. Vivian Archer, Letter to the *Guardian*, 'Letters: Brickbats fly over Brick Lane', *Guardian*, 29 July 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/29/comment.letters>.

82. Nick Cohen, 'Let's not bow to the book burners of Brick Lane', *The Evening Standard*, 26 September 2007, <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23413910-details/Let's+not+bow+to+the+book+burners+of+Brick+Lane/article.do>

83. Quoted in Mario Cacciottolo, 'Brick Lane protesters hurt over 'lies'', BBC News, 31 July 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/5229872.stm>

84. Ibid.

85. BritBangla Forum, 'The Brick Lane Controversy, Should Filming go ahead', 20 July 2006, <http://www.britbangla.net/forum/index.php?s=642c7ac24d07b3ac2bed813baec5cc9d&showtopic=124&hl#>

86. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, London, Doubleday, 2003, pp28-29.

87. Ibid.

88. Kalam Choudhury, in the letter of complaint sent to Ali via her publishers, makes this point negatively: 'History is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation' (p3). His account of the anthropological curiosity of 'non-white readers' is, however, framed by an orientalist rather than 'realist' interpretation of their motives: 'It is evident that you have turned to a subject very much to the taste of an English readership - for it seems that big books about Indian subcontinent are popular with the English - a Western taste for the exotic lands of mysteries, myths and marvels' (p17). See Kamal Choudhury, letter sent on behalf of Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council to Random House, John Carey, *Guardian* and *The Times*, 23 September 2003, held in The Booker Prize Archive, Oxford Brookes University. All further citations appear in the parentheses.

89. The BBC news website for instance reported that 'Bangladeshi community leaders have called Monica Ali's acclaimed debut novel *Brick Lane* a despicable insult'. The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, representing many Bangladeshis in the UK, wrote to the book's publishers Random House and said the book was 'shameful'. See 'Ali's *Brick Lane* upsets community', BBC News, 3 December 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3287413.stm>.

90. See M. Ali, *Brick Lane*, op. cit., p21, p26, p86, p152, p299, p390.

91. Ibid., p152.

92. For example, see Johann Hari, 'The Battle of Brick Lane', *Independent*, 30 July 2006, <http://www.johannhari.com/2006/07/30/the-battle-of-brick-lane->.

93. Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West*, 2nd edition, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2009, p53.

94. Aamir Mufti 'Reading the Rushdie Affair: 'Islam,' Cultural Politics, Form' in Richard Burt (ed.), *The Administration of Aesthetics* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp307-339, p309.

95. Ibid., p327. Local commentators in David Bowen (ed), *The Satanic Verses: Bradford Responds*, Bradford, Bradford and Ilkley Community College, 1992, also make the point that 'some of its [*The Satanic Verses*] chapters are detachable, and can appear to stand readily on their own. Those detachable parts are pregnant with material potentially highly offensive to Muslims', p15.

96. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, Gayatri Spivak (trans), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp144-145.

97. See Daniel Allington, 'How to Do Things with Literature, Blasphemous Speech Acts, Satanic Intentions and the Uncommunicativeness of Verses', *Poetics Today*, 29, 3 (2008): 473-522.

98. See Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, *The Rushdie File*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1990, p35. Rushdie made a similar statement during a BBC interview: 'a lot of the people it has allegedly offended are people who haven't read it. It's very easy not to be offended by a book. All you have to do is shut it'. See 'Face to face: Salman Rushdie and Jeremy Isaacs' (1994), in Pradyumna S Chauhan (ed), *Salman Rushdie Interviews: A Sourcebook of his Ideas*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2001, pp157-158.

99. Salman Rushdie, 'An open letter to the Indian Prime Minister', in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1990, p34.

100. Ibid. Another open letter to the Indian PM headed by author Don Moraes and Editor Adil Jussawalla, also express similar 'pointment' that Ghandi refuses to lift the ban 'without having read the book . . . a sop offered to a handful of people, who themselves have not read the book'. See Appignanesi and Maitland, *The Rushdie File*, op. cit., p41.

101. Syed Shahabuddin Letter to *Times of India* [13 October 1988], in Appignanesi and Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File*, op. cit., p37.

102. Roy Kerridge, 'Verses and worse', *The Spectator*, 26 June 1989, p19. A related story regularly repeated in the national press at this time concerned the use of Rushdie's name as a white racist slogan in street graffiti, taunts and chants in the city of Bradford. For another reading of Kerridge's article see Daniel Allington, *Discourse and the Reception of Literature: Problematising 'Reader Response'*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stirling (2008), pp279-290.

103. S. Shahabuddin, Letter to *Times of India*, in Appignanesi and Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File*, op. cit., p38.

104. This was also reported by the press at the time. See P. Lewis, 'Brick Lane protests force film company to beat retreat', op. cit., np: 'tensions appear to have been stoked by rumours circulating the area's restaurants and market shops, rather than direct extracts from the book'.

105. Quoted in Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1990, p84.

106. John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.