



Brick Lane Patchwork

by Emanuele Monegato

*(A patchwork is a kind of) needlework
consisting of varicoloured patches of
material sewn together, as in a quilt*

[Pickett J. P. et al. (eds.) 2004]

The most effective cultural representations of London Brick Lane are explicitly or implicitly linked to the nature of a patchwork in which imaginary elements interact with contemporaneity in order to build such an unusual *assemblage* and peculiar juxtaposition of identities, cultures, places and subjectivities that is Brick Lane and its surrounding area. Many contemporary cultural representations made a vain and ambitious effort to portray the real soul(s) of Brick Lane, without taking into consideration its complexity and, therefore, delivering a distinctive image of the area as if it was a single piece of cloth, not a whole quilt. This analysis traces some of the most popular contemporary cultural representations of Brick Lane taking into consideration the way they are related, their influence on reality and their being dialogic components of a unique patchwork: Monica Ali's first novel *Brick Lane* and its filmic adaptation directed by Sarah Gavron, the poetic *memoir Salaam Brick Lane – a Year in the New East End* and the short film *Brick Lane*, written and directed by Paul Makkar are going to be privileged squared cloths to be sewn in the above mentioned patchwork. Starting from already existing cultural representations of Brick Lane, the aim of this essay is both to detect its proper cultural representations and to sew an imaginative patchwork quilt, a new and multiple image of this London area enhancing its hybrid soul(s), its blending procedure and contemporary facets.

In her bestseller debut novel, Monica Ali, the 30-year-old author judged in 2003 one of the best young British novelists by Granta, describes Brick Lane through the eyes of Nazneen, her main character. Nazneen is a young woman coming to London in 1985 after an arranged marriage with Chanu, a 40-year-Bangladeshi/Londoni living in a Council Flat in Brick Lane. In her 13-year-London experience Nazneen develops an



emancipation process culminating in the decision of staying in London with her daughters without following her husband's return to Bangladesh:

'Here are your boots, Amma.' Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there. She said, 'But you can't skate in a sari.' Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like.' (Ali 2004: 492)

In spite of such an alteration of personal conduit culminating only in the very last scene, the area around Brick Lane plays the role of a key active background in the whole book. Monica Ali describes Brick Lane as a neighbourhood made of *petits récits*, everyday details nearly motionless and unperceivable, filtered by Nazneen's view from her claustrophobic flat overlooking south Brick Lane:

Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life behind was all shapes and shadows (...). The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues beneath were Bengali. No dumping. No parking. No ball games. Two old men in white panjabi-pyjama and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. (...) The breeze on Nazneen's face was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins. (*Ibid.*: 17-18)

The peculiar reality filtered through Nazneen's gaze is smooth, linear and composed of *minutiae* noticed by the woman who is living her double condition of marginalized migrant both in a new country and in a new community, the one of Tower Hamlets. Her being an outsider in London is clearly shown even during her infrequent walking out of her Council Estate when she gets in touch with the multicultural population of Brick Lane, far from being her beloved Bengali microcosm. Once again, it is important to underline that she notices small details, nuances in common behaviours and attitudes especially for what concerns white women and their children doing the shopping in corner shops or at the Sunday Market. Nazneen's Brick Lane perception is to be considered the driving power of the whole book together with her love affair with Karim, a young second generation British-Bangladeshi, and the radicalisation of Muslim Brick Lane society after the terrorist attack of New York City 9/11. The real world comes across Nazneen's life through the screen of her TV:

Chanu slammed through the door as if he would take it off hinges. [...] 'Quick. Be quick!' he shouts. 'Put on the television.' He ranges around the room looking for the remote control, passing the television several times. Eventually, he switches it on by pressing the button below the screen. 'Oh God,' he says. 'The world has gone mad.'



Nazneen glances over at the screen. The television shows a tall building against a blue sky. She looks at her husband. 'This is the start of madness,' says Chanu. [...] The image is at once mesmerizing and impenetrable; the more it plays the more obscure it becomes until Nazneen feels she must shake herself out of trance. (*Ibid.*: 365-366)

Not fully realising the impact of what they are watching, Nazneen and her husband face reality out of their microscopic Bangladeshi world based in their London flat: although filtered by the TV screen and a female gaze, reality penetrates the novel showing a process of radicalisation carried out by some Brick Lane inhabitants. Considering this process as the development of "communities of resistance" (Keith & Pile 1993: 35), it is important to notice the overlapping areas between fiction and reality as far as the creation of groups of people sharing ideals, religious beliefs or ethnic origins is concerned. Such a process is typical in marginal communities where a high aggregation desire is perceived as long as the availability of a public space suitable to become the meeting place for, in this case study, "busy gangs of Bangladeshi youths, some radicalized by Islam, some stunned by drug addiction". Even in Ali's *Brick Lane* a group of Muslim, all E1 residents, called "Bengal Tigers" starts a process of religious radicalization facing racial segregation after the terrorist attack of 9/11: "Bengal Tigers", led by Nazneen's young lover, organizes a protest march against US violence in Iraq and the related perpetration of cruelty towards Muslim communities spread all over the world. Above all, marches and protests are organized towards all interferences in their own lives by a non-Muslim group called "Lion Hearts":

'Our Chairman is a man of peace. I am also a man of peace. Islam is a peaceful religion. But what do you do if someone comes to fight you? Do you run away?' [...] 'What shall we do, then?' called someone from the audience. The crowd rumbled a bit, as if the last words had been stolen from the tips of their tongues. The Questioner shrugged. He puts his hands in his pockets. 'The most powerful nation on this planet attacks one of the most ravaged countries in the world. We are fit young men. There are no chains tying us to these walls. With a little planning, a little effort, we can cross continents.' [...] 'Out there, right now, are people who are twisted with hatred for us and for Islam. They are planning to march right on our doorsteps, and we are not going to let them get away with it. Let's show the Lions Hearts that Bangla Town is defended. Tigers will take on Lions any day of the week'. (Ali 2004: 415-417)

Here, space is defined in broad terms: "continents" they could easily cross are their own "locations of struggle" (Keith & Pile 1993: 34), the area around Brick Lane where the Bangladeshi Community has settled from its primary flow of migration. Even in this episode of the book, reality interferes with fiction giving readers a new ideological and political element to imagine Brick Lane.



Moving our analysis away from the level of fictional representations, E1 Muslim Community played an important role in letting Ali's book emerging from the shelters of book shops: on the one hand, part of the community members recognized themselves in Nazneen's family lifestyle and experiences, while a small, but passionate, branch of the same community disapproved of Ali's portrayal through street demonstrations and acts of symbolic violence, book-burning and revenge against the young author, not fully belonging to the East End community. In 2003, Bangladeshi community leaders from The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council defined Ali's book as a "despicable insult" portraying them as uneducated and unsophisticated. The same protests reappeared in 2006, when Production Company Ruby Film and Sarah Gavron, the director of the film *Brick Lane*, had been warned both by the London Police and Tower Hamlets Council not to begin shooting scenes in the real world of E1. Gavron's film, a condensation of Ali's debut novel, has been accused of posing again the Muslim Community through offensive stereotypes exaggerating its vices and cultural behaviours. Only maintaining a constant contact with positive leaders and members of the local community involved in the film as consultants and crew, the footage was rescheduled once the media coverage of the protests had died down.

As happens in Ali's novel, most of the filmic scenes take place in Nazneen's flat, which was rebuilt in studio, while all exteriors were shot at Stepney Green and only some of the street scenes were shot directly on Brick Lane, with a fake Brick Lane Sunday Market recreated on a backyard in a deserted factory in east London. In the film, a true-like Bengali experience is given to the audience not only thanks to this alternation between mock places and real backgrounds but also thanks to the fact that Sarah Gavron worked closely with Ruhul Amin, a Bangladeshi Muslim film director, while compressing 500-page-Ali's novel into her film. Based on a screenplay by Abi Morgan and Laura Jones, the film starts in spring 2001 and then moves through the autumn (and the tragedy of New York City 9/11) ending in the following winter: Gavron's film compacts Ali's novel focusing on Nazneen's life in 2001, the year she became a truly empowered woman. Actually, Gavron's film could be labelled as a mere love story or as a film about the rose love tinted view many people might have, as happens to the main character looking at the world from beyond the curtains in her flat. Nazneen is a quiet observer in the film but she moves the narrative action thanks to her voice-over and to the frequent references to her idyllic Bangladeshi village and her miserable sister Hasina. As happens in Ali's novel, in the film everything is filtered by the young woman giving us a personal view of the area around Brick Lane, sometimes differing from the real soul of Brick Lane, sometimes integrating minor but real details of London lifestyle and places within the flow of action; the gritty world of Ali's *Brick Lane* is somehow replaced by a much more stereotyped glittering atmosphere emotionally linked to a bucolic and exotic image of Bangladesh, hot London atmospheres in which love affairs can easily develop and green sequined dresses are sewn by the piece by women in flashy saris. Such dresses play a double role both in the story and in the process of *Brick Lane* image and identity shaping: on the one hand they symbolise, thanks to their green colour, the wild nature in



Bangladesh in which the young woman grew up and at which she aspires. On the other hand they hint at the posh side of Brick Lane, a meeting place for young people, artists and chic celebrities from all over London. This peculiar squared cloth of Brick Lane patchwork is not usually taken into consideration in cultural representations of this area although it clearly exists: just to give an example, more than 20,000 artists live in the area around Brick Lane thanks to its low rent rates and hundreds of Indian restaurants, discos or cool second-hand shops are placed side by side with sweatshops and their grim women doing piecework on sewing machines.

In 2003, Monica Ali proposed as a title for her debut novel *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, which is an expression coming from a Bengali children's story (*Thakur Ma-er Juhli*) recalling remote lands with a legendary origin and atmosphere. Her UK Doubleday editor rejected this proposal turning it into *Brick Lane*, a most appealing title for a British audience which was used to the popular and emerging-posh soul of the London district rather than to seeing England or Bangladesh as stereotyped fairy countries:

Marianne Velmans, publishing director of Doubleday, said: "[...] *Brick Lane* has lots of relevant connotations, whereas *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* would be more appropriate for a book about the subcontinent. The story starts in Bangladesh, but most of it is about the experience of immigrant communities in Britain."
(Smith 2003)

Not having the possibility to rely on a direct audience experience with London *Banglaintown*, many non-UK editors decided to keep Ali's original proposal appealing to the bucolic dream-like image of an unknown country (which could be either England or Bangladesh), a land where "Once there was a prince who lived in a far off land, *seven seas and thirteen rivers* away" (Kabeer 2000: 193). After five years, Brick Lane international image is no more related to such a mythical atmosphere and therefore Gavron's film is distributed all over the world with the name *Brick Lane* and a clear subtitle reference to Ali's novel: "Based on the bestselling novel by Monica Ali". Moreover, the film production decided to deliberately exploit the posh image of the area in contrast with the meagre life of Bangladeshi immigrants, especially in the trailer thought for a non-UK audience: in a 2-minute clip, a narrative structure quickly juxtaposes elements of traditional life in Bangladesh, the arrival in posh Brick Lane (symbolized by sequins as green as Bangladeshi fields), hard piecework sewing, love, the "myth of return" (Anwar 1979) and political commitment. This sequence of images could be considered as a kind of small Brick Lane visual patchwork where all squares have the same relevance while creating a multiple and hybrid entity, although not fully reflecting the monocular view mainly broadcasted through the movie.

Apart from the female/Bengali view upon Brick Lane conveyed by both Sarah Gavron and Monica Ali, the fashionable side of the area, and the radicalized *community of resistance* both at fictional and real level, two different irremovable perspectives are commonly exploited while representing E1 district either from an internal or an external point of view, violence and poor living conditions: "Look at this



place. This is a shit town. They say that this is one of the poorest places of Europe. They. They also say that they are going to change it, regenerate the area. But if you believe that shit, I suppose you believe everything..." (Makkar 2002). Such voice-over clearly depicts a precise indigent image of *Banglatown*, the Bangladeshi ghost-city around the one-way street Brick Lane, delivered right at the beginning of the award-winning short-film *Brick Lane*, directed in 2002 by Paul Makkar. This fourteen-minute comedy of intrigue shows two different views of Brick Lane thanks to its two main characters: Bucksman, a young Bangladeshi criminal driving his convertible all through the one-way Brick Lane, and his young second-generation immigrant brother who steals Bucksman's car to conquer a "beautiful girl from the village" dancing typical Bengali music in a red sari. Bucksman personifies the view of Brick Lane as a poor violent district having its roots in the historical tradition of London East End, the area of Jack the Ripper and of the twin-crime lords the Kray's. On the contrary, his young brother embodies all behaviours and cross-generation conflicts felt by second generation immigrants, defined by Bromley Roger as a perpetual clash between "street experience and family experience" (Bromley 2000: 123). This is not the suitable place to discuss about the contradictory and problematic issues of second generation adolescents but it is important to highlight the fact that Paul Makkar, while delivering a precise image of Brick Lane, decides to convey two distinct and separate images of the area through two different points of view. Only at the end of his short-film, the audience is able to map out all the links between the two brothers and therefore is able to track down all the connections between the sphere of violence and the issues of Asian migration within the Bangladeshi community of Brick Lane. These two aspects do not only live side by side in this short-film, as a quick look to Makkar's *Brick Lane* could suggest, but they interact socially giving shape to a chain of behaviours, identities and a funny happy-ending about internal family relationships driven by both physical and psychological violence. It is only during its final scene that the audience discovers the kinship between the two characters: Bucksman chases the young westernized boy at the top of a Council Estate and, aiming his pistol at his temple, starts looking for their mother as if he was a schoolboy.

The poetic *memoir* written by the journalist Tarquin Hall derives much of his appeal from the contrast among inner and external relationships developed alongside the one-way street Brick Lane. After a ten-year experience in Asia as a reporter, Tarquin Hall and his girlfriend come back to London. Because of a temporary money shortage he decides to find a place to live in one of the cheapest areas of London and therefore he applies to Mr Ali, a Bangladeshi Landlord who rents him an attic overlooking Brick Lane. Mr Ali plays the role of the inner *fil rouge* among all the stories that the author, in a sense, lets speak for themselves: asylum seekers, leather workers, scholars looking for the real Cockney accent, prostitutes and beggars inhabit Hall's honest account on Brick Lane. The tradition of authors "retrieving literary pearls from the dark and murky depths" (Rushby 2005) is an old one and counts on writers such as Jack London and his *People of the Abyss* (1902), Israel Zangwill and his *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) or *The Anarchists* by John Henry McKay (1891): Hall situates his account within this tradition



although putting the accent on the grim corrupt conditions of contemporary Brick Lane:

The narrow, one-way street led past shopfronts guarded by steel shutters, and hoardings erected across gaps in the terraces. Slogans sprayed on the walls competed for attention – 'RELEASE REG KRAY'; 'LIBERATE KASMIR'; 'FREE ABDULLAH OCALAN'; 'BLAIR MUST GO!' – while fairytale Indian princesses with doe eyes smiled out at me from Bollywood film posters. (Hall 2005: 5)

In this preliminary description of the area Hall shows all the potentially different squared cloths of the patchwork composing contemporary Brick Lane society: urban landscape, trade and economy, violence, hybrid political issues, migration flows with a special reference to migration waves from the Indian subcontinent having 60,000 Bangladeshis settling on and around Brick Lane (37% of Brick Lane population comes directly from Bangladesh). Far from being a hotchpotch of *pars pro toto*, Hall's personal account conveys a multiple, although not fluid, surface image of Brick Lane focusing more on the darkest side of the city instead of giving a broader image of it. The journalist puts side by side many relevant elements participating in the process of shaping the real soul of Brick Lane, though he chooses not to let them speak for themselves and not to give the readers the chance to interpret, skip and make the connections. On the contrary, he decides to interfere in the flow of narration with many personal negative impressions with the result of not letting the different sides of Brick Lane interact freely and not underlining Brick Lane's dialogic sedimentation and blending process.

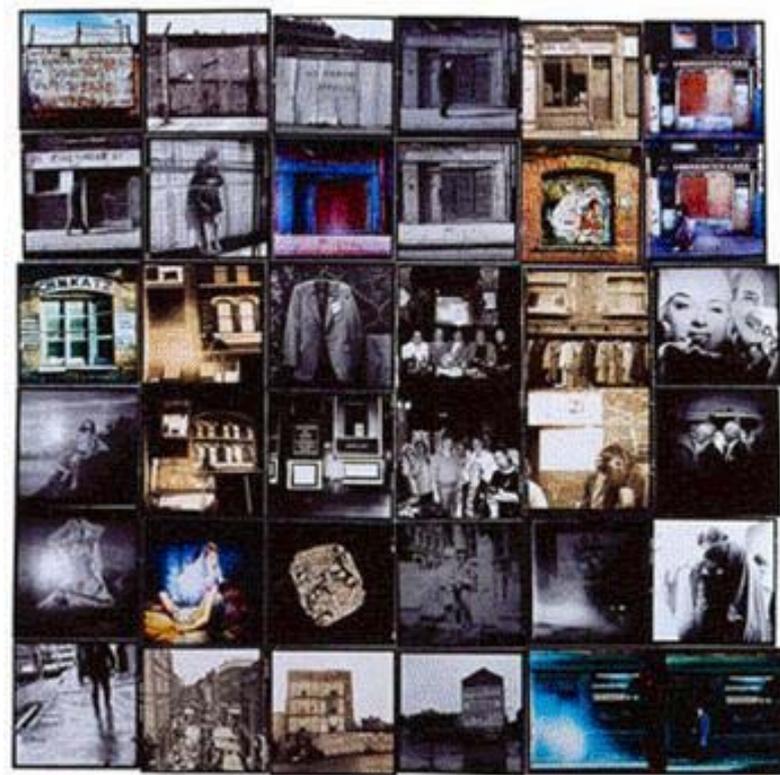
As illustrated so far, all cultural representations linked to the area of Brick Lane tend to convey a fixed image of E1 without taking into consideration, or without succeeding in portraying, its real multiple identity and the patchwork I have been referring to throughout this article. Possible exceptions to this propensity are the topographical and narrative compendium *An Acre of Barren Ground* by Jeremy Gavron and the multiple image shot by Steve Pyke, two contemporary cultural representations facing the problematic issue of conveying a non-monolithic image of the area (both in content and genre) in basically the same way, although through two different media.

Through an episodic structure and a related *collage* of stylistic approaches, the British author Jeremy Gavron traces the history of London Brick Lane crystallizing its essence in a single novel. *Novel* is the definition given by Gavron to his book, which is, in his own words, a "narrative jigsaw" (Gavron 2005: 240) where various incoherent stories give shape to a single and distinct entity that is Brick Lane. Skipping from East End Jew migrations to Asian arranged marriages in *Banglatown*, from Jack the Ripper and the researches of Scotland Yard to the fiction of Sherlock Holmes, from the Second World War to contemporary times, he presents true (or true-like) human stories against a shared topographical background. These *pétits récits*, having as a recurring theme a kind of lost trust in both human condition and present times, are punctuated by landmarks such as the Truman's Brewery, the London Jamme Masjid and a Brick Lane map, drawn in the paperback edition of the compendium with the



aim of guiding the reader not only through diachronic and/or synchronic analysis and considerations but also through the described erratic journeys along the one-way street. Landmarks are as essential while finding one's way in a city as while analysing cultural representations, especially if linked to the city of London. Throughout the streets of London, it is easy to get lost and it is often hard to establish one's position on a map as happens with imaginary maps drawn by writers, artists and musicians in their works. Proceeding from one story to another, from one point of view to its exact opposite, the author of *An Acre of Barren Ground* leads us to the shaping of a single, although multiple, entity that is Brick Lane, no more the Shakespearian wild and deserted piece of land quoted in its title from *The Tempest*.

The adjective *multiple* is a recurring qualifier while analysing the work of the street photographer Steve Pyke, especially his composite *Brick Lane 1984-1996*.



Steve Pyke, *Composites - Comp3*

In his piece of art thirty-six squared pictures (6 cm x 6 cm) – many of which from his collection *Brick Lane* – are sewn together as if they were pieces of cloth in a patchwork. In particular, these pictures, aimed in portraying the different essences of



the area around Brick Lane and their mutual influence, show buildings, Asian women in sari, homeless people, everyday life scenes from the Sunday Market, Hollywood and Bollywood film industry playbills underlining, also chromatically, as many cultural differences as possible linked to Brick Lane.

Having lived in Shoreditch for many years, the street photographer had the chance to shoot many pictures of the area photographing, and therefore immobilizing on a film, trends, unconventionalities, everyday life and citizens' behaviours. Following the rules of a patchwork and after having recollected all these pictures, the street photographer put them together in a precise order, a kind of "taxonomic symmetry" aimed at contextualisation through time and space.

Following Peter Hamilton's opinion about Pyke's assemblages, it is relevant to bring this idea of showing Brick Lane as a patchwork interacting with reality to a successful conclusion:

The one-eyed, paralysed vision of the camera [or of the writer, painter] can only be surmounted by assemblages of images which seek, like a painting, to create an overlapping set of representations, a sort of layering effect which reproduces the experience of seeing (Hamilton in Pyke).

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Emanuele Monegato is a PhD student in Anglistics and Cultural Studies at Università degli Studi di Milano. His research interests are focused on London urban geographies and representations of violent attacks and disasters in UK under a culturalist approach.

emanuele.monegato@unimi.it