

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

Brick Lane by Monica Ali

- The first story this novel tells is of Nazneen's birth, which later becomes the story of "How She Was Left To Her Fate". What is the role of fate in Nazneen's life? How does she shape her fate? What do you think of the two epigraphs?
- How does Nazneen change in the course of the novel?
- Why is Nazneen fascinated by ice skating?
- Nazneen and her sister Hasina make very different choices: Nazneen has an arranged marriage and Hasina has a "love marriage". What are the advantages and disadvantages of arranged marriages? (p. 361, p. 250)
- How effective was the dialect in Hasina's letters? What did that add or take away from the impact of the letters?
- How does Nazneen's relationship with her mother effect her decisions? What about Hasina's?
- What is the author saying about the role of feminism? Think about Nazneen, Hasina, their mother Ruphan, Razia, Mrs. Islam. How do the men in the novel react to these women?
- Mrs. Islam has a unique role in the Bangladeshi community. How does she effect the other women's lives?
- How does Nazneen's relationship with Chanu develop in the story? What kind of husband and father is he?
- Why did Chanu leave Bangladesh to go to London? Why does he contract with Nazneen's father to marry her, "an unspoilt village girl"?
- Dr. Azad is Chanu's only friend, if you can call him that. What is his relationship to the Ahmed family? To his own family? To the community?
- What is the "Going Home Syndrome"?
- Chanu often remarks that he is an educated man, and is proud of how "Westernized" he is. He scorns the other inhabitants of Tower Estates as peasants. How does Chanu preserve his heritage?
- How important is education in this story? Chanu's many degrees don't seem to help him, and Nazneen's lack of education doesn't seem to hurt her.
- Work is also important. (Hasina, p. 120) (Chanu's frustrations, p. 164) Does work (and income) bring freedom for any of the characters in the novel? Is paid work different from unpaid?
- Where is religion in Chanu's worldview? (p.158) In Nazneen's?
- Food plays an important role in this novel. Why does Nazneen eat standing up in the middle of the night? When does Chanu's skill as a cook become apparent?
- Why are Chanu and Shahana always at each other's throats? How is Bibi effected by this? Is this part of the immigrant experience, or just part of growing up? (p. 265)
- Is this a typical immigrant story? How is this different from others you have read?



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- Dreams and folklore play a significant part in the story. On p. 331-338 Nazneen tells her daughters a story about the good jinni, and remembers a story about the bad jinni that she never tells her daughters. What other stories and dreams can you remember?
- What do Karim and Nazneen see in each other? How does she justify her affair? How does he?
- Does Chanu know about the affair all along?
- Politics play a part in Nazneen's awakening. Why does she go to that first meeting?
- What does Nazneen think of the warring political factions on the estate? What does Chanu think?
- The factions argue about whether it's more important to fix local problems first or to think about the larger issues. What do you think is more important? Do the Bengal Tigers have any way to fix any problems, local or global?
- How did things change because of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States?
- What about the ending? Why does Chanu have to go, and Nazneen have to stay?
- On age: on p. 312 Chanu says, "The thing about getting older is that you don't need everything to be possible anymore, you just need some things to be certain." Your thoughts?
- This is a first novel; many critics praised Ali's writing. Do you think the writing was particularly vivid or insightful?
- Critics have compared *Brick Lane* with Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Jhumpa Lahira's *The Namesake*, and Thrity Umrigar's *Bombay Time*. How do you think it compares?