

Slow Violence and Gendered Survival: Trauma, Precarity, and the Ethics of Endurance in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

Breaking away from traditional forms of trauma studies that conceptualize trauma as an event, this paper aims to re-examine the representation of trauma in Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) through the lens of "slow violence." By foregrounding its gendered dimensions and its inscription in everyday life, the article suggests that trauma, as depicted in the novel, is not an event but a process, normalized by migration, gendered forms of survival, and postcolonial marginality. Building on the work of leading trauma theorists, like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, along with more recent theories from Rob Nixon and Stef Craps, this study shows how Nazneen's experiences of domestic confinement, linguistic alienation, and economic vulnerability reveal the cumulative effects of structural violence. It also illustrates how Ali's narrative strategies of silence and fragmentation, and Hasina's epistolary voice clearly indicate the invisible nature of slow trauma across different geographical and social contexts. Finally, the paper argues that Nazneen's development and empowerment redefine agency as a form of endurance, emphasizing negotiation and persistence rather than rupture. Hence, it offers an ethical reading of survival that resists prevailing narratives of trauma and recovery in postcolonial studies.

Keywords: slow violence; trauma; postcolonial literature; gender; precarity; diaspora; agency

Introduction: Beyond Catastrophic Trauma

While trauma is seen as an event of sudden disruption that shatters the subject and requires narrative reconstruction, many postcolonial and immigrant subjects do not experience trauma as a crisis, but rather as a process of endurance. In *Brick Lane* (2003), trauma is not represented as an isolated crisis but unfolds as a continuous process impacted by everyday constraints. This article argues that the novel reconfigures trauma as a form of slow violence, one that is gradual, normalized, and deeply embedded in gendered and postcolonial structures.

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* has become an important work of contemporary British postcolonial fiction, the subject of extensive critical analysis for its exploration of migration, gender,

and identity. Born in 1967 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, Monica is a bestselling writer whose work has been translated into twenty-six languages. She has written five books, and *Brick Lane* is her debut novel.

Set in London's East End, the story revolves around Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman who moves to the United Kingdom after an arranged marriage to an older man who aspires to upward social mobility but remains professionally frustrated. Initially confined to the domestic sphere and unable to speak English, Nazneen experiences profound isolation and dislocation. The narrative traces her gradual transformation as she navigates the challenges of migration, motherhood, economic hardship, and shifting cultural expectations. Alongside Nazneen's story, the novel incorporates letters from her sister Hasina, who remains in Bangladesh and recounts her own experiences of exploitation and survival. This dual narrative structure highlights the transnational dimensions of gendered struggle and challenges any binary division between "home" and "diaspora."

Existing scholarship on *Brick Lane* has largely relied on post-colonial theories to investigate hybridity, identity construction, and cultural negotiation. At the same time, several studies have examined the gendered dimensions of the novel, highlighting the ways in which domesticity, marriage, and labor shape Nazneen's subjectivity, while others have analyzed the novel through the lens of religion, thus depicting *Brick Lane* as a diasporic narrative concerned with female empowerment and constraint. There have also been attempts to explicitly address trauma in the novel, which proved effective in the exploration of the psychological and emotional aspects of Nazneen's trauma as an oppressed immigrant female. But very little attention has been given to the temporal and structural aspects of trauma in the novel, in which trauma is seen not just as an event, but as a continuous process embedded in routine, repetition, and social constraint.

This study, therefore, adds to existing literature on the subject. However, by bringing together trauma theory (Cathy Caruth; Judith Herman) and postcolonial critiques (Rob Nixon; Stef Craps), it proposes a shift from event-based trauma to slow violence. This article then asks: how does *Brick Lane* represent trauma not as a singular event, but as a gradual process of endurance and negotiation shaped by migration, gender, and postcolonial marginality? More specifically, it examines how Nazneen's experience of domestic confinement, linguistic exclusion, and economic dependence contributes to a form of trauma, which is reproduced through repetition rather than rupture.

The article argues that *Brick Lane* re-conceptualizes trauma as slow violence that is both gendered and deeply implicated in the routines of everyday life. Instead of offering a model of trauma as a moment of psychological crisis, *Brick Lane* suggests that trauma is an ongoing process of endurance that is shaped by various forces of patriarchy, migration, and socio-economic conditions. It also argues that Nazneen's story redefines agency not as a moment of rupture or freedom but as an incremental process of negotiation. In its narrative strategies of silence, fragmentation, and juxtaposition of voices, *Brick Lane* renders visible the unspectacular nature of trauma while highlighting its ethical and political implications, particularly in relation to gendered forms of agency.

This research paper is divided into four sections. The first is devoted to the theoretical

framework, which builds on classical trauma theory, postcolonial critiques, and the concept of “slow violence.” The second sheds light on the role of migration and spatial dislocation in Nazneen’s trauma. The third section highlights the themes of gendered domesticity, language, and narrative forms by analyzing the novel’s use of silence and fragmentation in terms of slow trauma. The last section analyzes agency in labor, love, and everyday decisions. Finally, by showing that Nazneen’s life has not been marked by a single traumatic incident, but by a series of incremental pressures, the research reveals how *Brick Lane* goes beyond the usual understanding of trauma and proposes an alternative model grounded in endurance, adaptation, and subtle forms of resistance.

Theoretical Framework: From Trauma to Slow Violence

To understand how *Brick Lane* reconfigures trauma, it is necessary to revisit the assumptions underlying classical trauma theory. Traditionally, trauma has been defined as a sudden, deeply upsetting event that upends a person’s emotional framework and alters how they see the outside world. However, as an interdisciplinary field, trauma studies focuses on the psychological, rhetorical, and cultural aspects of the complex effects of traumatic experience in literature and society.

The beginning of trauma studies as a field of study can be dated to the 1990s, a decade marked by the theorization of the relationship between trauma, memory, and identity. This was a period marked by a strong influence from the theoretical work of Freud on trauma and memory. Freud’s work on trauma and memory can be seen to suggest the idea that trauma cannot be fully grasped or understood at the moment it happens, but rather through a kind of belatedness and compulsive repetitions that fragment the psyche and challenge traditional forms of memory (Mambrol 2018). In this sense, traumatic events do not exist as fully felt events at the moment of their occurrence but rather through a kind of retrospection and involuntary narrative re-enactments.

The 1990s saw the publication of several key works that pushed trauma to the center stage in literary and cultural theory, “as a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities (Craps 2015, 45). Thinkers such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman were key contributors to what can be called the “first wave” of trauma theory. Their work conceptualized trauma as an unrepresentable event that exposes the limitations of language and points to the instabilities of meaning and experience. In this context, trauma is not only a psychological state but also an epistemological one, one which upsets the boundaries of knowledge.

A classic example of this traditional view of trauma and its theories is offered by Cathy Caruth, for whom “trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11). In this context, trauma is a psychological state characterized by its belatedness and its unrepresentability. It is an unassimilated experience that upsets the continuity of consciousness and defies representation. The event of trauma, thus, cannot be accessed through memory but only through its intrusive and often unpleasant manifestations.

However, this event-based model of trauma, with its emphasis on unspeakability and fragmentation, was soon followed by a more pluralistic and nuanced understanding. Researchers within this later model of trauma, including Dominick LaCapra and Judith Herman, have critically re-examined the foundational premises of early trauma theory. They argue that, under certain conditions, trauma can be mediated, articulated, and even narrativized in complex and culturally situated ways. This later model of trauma, with its emphasis on a range of possible representations, increases the scope of trauma studies and suggests that a greater emphasis should be placed on history, culture, and narrative.

Judith Herman, in particular, plays a pivotal role in this reorientation through her influential work, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), in which she emphasizes the possibility of healing through narration, testimony, and social recognition. Rather than viewing trauma as permanently inaccessible, Herman highlights the importance of reconstructing a coherent narrative as part of the recovery process. Her work foregrounds the interpersonal and political dimensions of trauma, especially in contexts of gender-based violence, and underscores the role of community in enabling survivors to reclaim their voices. More recent developments in trauma studies have further expanded this framework by incorporating historical, cultural, and structural dimensions.

Expanding on these changes, postcolonial and transnational theorists, such as Rob Nixon and Stef Craps, continue to advance trauma studies by interrogating its Eurocentric assumptions. By “slow violence,” Nixon means “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). Moreover, in any traumatic experience, there is violence that leaves lasting physical, psychological, and emotional impacts. In contrast to “violence” that is event-based, immediate in time, “explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (Nixon 2011, 2), “slow violence” is imperceptible, operates through accumulation, repetition, and normalization, often inflicted on marginalized groups over long periods of time.

In a similar vein, Stef Craps proposes a decolonization of trauma theory, which, he argues, has traditionally prioritized Western experiences, particularly the Holocaust, while ignoring the traumas of colonialism, slavery, and global injustice. “With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, [...], listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community” (Craps 2015, 46). Craps thinks that “the founding texts of the field (including Caruth’s own work) largely fail to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement [...]. [But] rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities” (Craps 2015, 46). Craps proposes a trauma theory that includes a variety of cultural expressions of trauma and prioritizes voices from the Global South. With these changes, the field of trauma studies expands significantly, shifting from a focus on individual psychic disruption and unspeakability to a more nuanced understanding of trauma as a historically, culturally, and politically complex phenomenon.

Examining *Brick Lane* through the lens of trauma initially places it within this well-established

critical framework, but what *Brick Lane* exposes is a form of suffering that does not conform to the logic of rupture. “Trauma in *Brick Lane* is not a singular event but a cumulative force, deeply embedded in the characters’ histories and environments. [...] It is multi-layered, encompassing pre-migration legacies in Bangladesh and the complex challenges of diasporic life in London” (Khan and Umar 2025, 692). So, rather than presenting migration as a singular moment of rupture, *Brick Lane* foregrounds the slow, often imperceptible processes by which subjectivity is shaped by migration, patriarchy, and economic precarity.

Nazneen’s experience is not structured around a singular catastrophic event, but around a series of constraints so gradual and normalized that they resist identification as trauma altogether. To borrow Çelikel’s words, “*Brick Lane* traces the story of a trauma that has migrated to Britain [...]; it is not only the story of a traumatized immigrant but the story of a migrated trauma” (Çelikel 2022, 180). This disjunction reveals the limits of classical trauma theory when applied to postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

Within this shift, Nixon’s concept of slow violence becomes particularly productive. This reorientation has important ramifications. *Brick Lane* forces us to consider what happens when trauma is no longer recognizable as trauma, rather than how it is portrayed. In this way, the book shows how violence is maintained precisely through its normalization rather than simply by depicting slow violence. As a result, trauma becomes a condition to be lived with rather than an event to be remembered.

Migration and Dislocation: Spatializing Slow Violence

If trauma in *Brick Lane* is not event-based, it must be located in the spatial and temporal conditions of migration. In the novel, migration produces a prolonged state of dislocation that is both physical and existential, rather than functioning as a moment of transformation. Nazneen’s migration from Bangladesh to London is often framed as the novel’s central transformative moment. Nevertheless, Ali resists portraying this transition as a singular rupture. Nazneen’s arrival in London does not inaugurate a new beginning but rather initiates a process of gradual estrangement through which displacement emerges as a prolonged, diffuse experience rather than a completed event.

“In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 1992, 141). Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the “unhomely” provides a useful framework here, as it captures the unsettling collapse between private and public space. However, *Brick Lane* pushes this concept further because domestic space does not merely blur the boundary between home and world; it becomes a site where immobility itself is enforced. Upon arriving in London, Nazneen is confined almost entirely to the domestic space. She observes the outside world from her window, experiencing the city as both present and inaccessible. This spatial limitation reflects a deeper psychological condition: “She looked and she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity” (Ali 2004, 78). The accumulation of enclosures

(body, flat, building) transforms space into a structure of confinement rather than habitation.

Nazneen's apartment, which she sees as a "box," embodies this paradox as it is both a place of safety and confinement, shielding her from the unfamiliar outside world while simultaneously restricting her agency. "Everyone in their boxes. [...] In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she [...] came to London to sit day after day in this large box with furniture to dust" (Ali 2004, 26). What initially appears as privacy becomes, instead, isolation. In this context, space does not offer stability but produces a condition of suspended belonging, in which Nazneen inhabits London without fully accessing it. Migration, therefore, operates not as a transformative rupture but as a mechanism of slow dislocation. Trauma is not located in the moment of arrival but in the ongoing experience of confinement, repetition, and spatial exclusion. In this sense, Nazneen's displacement is best understood not as a singular break, but as a sustained condition of disorientation.

This condition extends to Nazneen's early attempts to navigate the city: "Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination" (Ali 2004, 58). The accumulation of negations underscores her acute awareness of the absence of belonging, visibility, and social legitimacy. The urban environment, rather than offering liberation, produces a heightened consciousness of difference that is both alienating and destabilizing. This is further reinforced by the description of her physical and emotional state: "She was cold, she was tired, she was in pain, she was hungry, and she was lost" (Ali 2004, 60). While these terms register immediate bodily discomfort, they also carry a broader symbolic resonance. "Coldness" suggests emotional deprivation, "tiredness" reflects the exhaustion of repetitive domestic life, and "hunger" signals a desire for experience and self-realization. Similarly, her sense of being "lost" resonates not only spatially but existentially, echoing the parallel trajectory of her sister Hasina, whose different choices do not lead to fulfillment. In this sense, Nazneen's experience is not defined by a single moment of displacement but by a sustained condition of disorientation, in which psychological violence emerges through the continuous reinforcement of difference and exclusion.

Furthermore, migration constitutes a continuous state of displacement, a condition exacerbated by linguistic barriers. Nazneen's limited English proficiency does not merely impede communication; it constrains her understanding, autonomy, and mobility. Consequently, it not only heightens her isolation, thereby restricting her social interactions, but also strengthens her reliance on Chanu. "Her struggle to reach an independent identity and grasp of the new culture that surrounds her is limited by how much her husband introduces her and how well she can pronounce the words." (Çelikel 2002, 173) Therefore, language acquisition does not function here as a useful skill, but as a locus of power, mediated by patriarchal structures. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in a seemingly mundane exchange between Nazneen and Chanu over ice-skating on television:

'What is this called?' said Nazneen.

Chanu glanced at the screen. 'Ice skating,' he said, in English.

'Ice e-skating,' said Nazneen.

'Ice skating,' said Chanu. 'Ice e-skating.' 'No, no. No e. Ice skating. Try it again.' Nazneen hesitated. 'Go on!' 'Ice es-kating,' she said with deliberation.

Chanu smiled. 'Don't worry about it. It's a common problem for Bengalis. [...] I have conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case. (Ali 2004, 38-39)

Chanu's reluctance to let her acquire English reveals his desire to maintain his control over her, a characteristic of the traditional masculine mindset. "Chanu possesses an exalted notion about his manliness" that enables him to humiliate and control Nazneen in every possible way. (Afhea 2021, 164-165). Even when she shows assertion to learn the language, "I would like to learn some English," "Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat the air out in a *fuff*" (Ali 2004, 39). His reaction conveys both exasperation and resistance, revealing an unwillingness to relinquish the control he exercises over her. Nazneen's desire for linguistic competence is thus framed as a challenge to the power dynamics that secure her subordination. Language, then, functions as a barrier that reinforces Nazneen's confinement, ensuring that her experience of the city remains partial and mediated.

To conclude, Nazneen's migration does not represent a moment of rupture, but a mechanism through which slow violence operates. It produces a condition that perpetuates dislocation, limits her access to space, interaction, and self-expression; hence, inscribing trauma within the repetitive and cumulative experience of exclusion.

Gendered Domesticity and the Normalization of Trauma

While migration establishes the conditions of dislocation, gendered domesticity ensures their continuity. Nazneen's experience is shaped not only by her status as a migrant but by her position within a patriarchal structure that regulates her movement, speech, and time and that since she was born. "Nazneen's foundational trauma is established long before her physical displacement. Her identity is forged in a crucible of fatalism and gendered powerlessness. Her very birth is framed as an uncertain survival" (Khan and Umar 2025, 692). "As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate" (Ali 2004, 15). Her mother's fatalism "becomes a coping mechanism that paradoxically stifles her will: women have to endure whatever fate imposes, which is "the by-product of a specific gendered form of Muslim patriarchy" created to subjugate women (Afhea 2021, 163).

More importantly, Chanu's ability to exert control over Nazneen is reinforced by her internalization of this fatalistic worldview. (Afhea 2021, 166). So, domination operates not only through external control but through the subject's own accommodation to it; in other words, the internalization of constraint naturalizes and sustains slow forms of structural violence. "This learned helplessness is a classic symptom of what Herman (1992) calls 'complex trauma,' resulting from prolonged, repeated subjection" (Khan and Umar 2025, 692).

"Nazneen's first trauma occurs when her mother commits suicide. [...] [which] leaves her helpless against her destiny. She can neither be a part of her traditional female identity, nor develop her own independent role as a young woman" (Çelikel 2022, 172). The second trauma occurs when

she finds herself obliged to marry a man who will take her to England. As she grows up in a traditional Muslim family where daughters are supposed to be relatively passive and docile, she cannot argue with her father's decision to marry her to Chanu, a man of his choice, in his forties and as ugly as a frog (Ali 2004, 19), hence finding herself "stuck in a loop of patriarchal power structure" (Arefin and Naz 2022, 6).

Nazneen's relationship with her husband is not defined by overt physical violence but by subtle and pervasive forms of control. Despite living in a foreign land, the traditional values from her homeland prevail. He keeps her confined in her apartment: "She did not often go out. 'Why should you go out?' said Chanu. 'If you go out, ten people will say, 'I saw her walking on the street.' And I will look like a fool'" (Ali 2004, 47). This confinement impacts her psychologically to the point of dreaming that "the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered, but nobody heard" (Ali 2004, 26). These images underscore the enduring nature of her entrapment.

He also restricts her access to education and discourages her desire to learn English. When she asks if she can go to college for English classes, he says, "What for?" "You're going to be a mother" (Ali 2004, 70). Chanu's conventionally masculine response reflects a form of hegemonic masculinity that constrains her agency. Chanu's desire to regulate her exposure to English culture stems from his fear that it might destabilize his patriarchal authority. As Herman (1992) suggests, trauma often develops in contexts where autonomy is systematically restricted. Chanu is not physically abusive, but his authority shapes Nazneen's daily life. Chanu's authority exemplifies a subtle yet pervasive form of control, meaning Nazneen's subordination is not exceptional but routine.

One of the most striking features of their relationship is the imbalance between speech and silence. Chanu not only controls the household finances and dictates Nazneen's movements, but also dominates the couple's conversations. Chanu frequently engages in long, self-important monologues. At the same time, Nazneen remains largely silent: "He talked and she listened. Often, she had the feeling he was not talking to her, or rather that she was only part of the audience for whom the speech was meant" (Ali 2004, 44). Nazneen's silence is not merely a symptom of oppression, but also the condition through which trauma becomes normalized. Nazneen's lack of speech does not register as absence but as compliance, reinforcing a system in which constraint is rendered invisible. This dynamic reinforces her marginalization within the domestic sphere. Thus, Nazneen's silence reflects both her lack of confidence and her constrained position, while Chanu's language becomes a tool of power.

More importantly, Chanu's language also functions as a source of trauma. Chanu's critical gaze and comments on Nazneen's body function as forms of emotional abuse, undermining her self-perception and reinforcing her subordination. Chanu's description of Nazneen's physical appearance to his friend on the phone objectifies Nazneen's body (Afhea 2021, 165): "Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children." (Ali 2004, 25). When she heard her husband say, "Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad,

big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together” (Ali 2004, 24-25), she put her hand up to her head. “It was true. The forehead was large. But she had never thought of her eyes being too close” (Ali 2004, 25). Here, Nazneen is abused emotionally via humiliation, which makes her lose her self-confidence. So, domination operates not through violence but through discourse. Such moments illustrate how slow violence operates not through spectacle but through accumulation. Additionally, the absence of overt conflict between them allows violence to remain invisible, embedded in the rhythms of everyday life.

Equally significant is the temporal dimension of domestic life. The repetition of daily routines produces what may be understood as temporal enclosure, a condition in which time circulates without progression and becomes oppressive.

Life made its pattern around and beneath and through her. Nazneen cleaned, cooked, and washed. She made breakfast for Chanu and looked on as he ate, collected his pens and put them in his briefcase, watched him from the window as he stepped like a band leader across the courtyard to the bus stop on the far side of the estate. (Ali 2004, 42-43)

Within this structure, change becomes difficult to imagine, and endurance becomes the default mode of existence, which further contributes to her sense of entrapment. Trauma, in this context, is not a rupture but a continuous process sustained by repetition.

Ali’s narrative structure also reflects the diffuse and accumulative nature of trauma. The novel alternates between third-person narration and Hasina’s letters, creating a fragmented and multi-voiced narrative. “Hasina’s subsequent letters, [...] become a chilling chronicle that underscores the unspeakable nature of her suffering” (Khan and Umar 2025, 692). Written in non-standard English, they resist linguistic normalization: “I can go sister? I run away for my husband. And I run away from him also. Now I afraid to run again” (Ali 2004, 168). The grammatical irregularities in these letters are not simply stylistic; they reflect the constraints of language and the difficulty of articulating traumatic experience. At the same time, they challenge the authority of standard English, offering an alternative mode of expression. Both sisters experience loneliness and forms of gendered oppression, but their circumstances differ significantly. This juxtaposition of Nazneen’s relatively controlled narrative voice with Hasina’s fragmented letters highlights the multiplicity of trauma along with its cumulative nature. Trauma is not singular or unified; it is dispersed across voices, spaces, and experiences.

Read through this framework, Nazneen’s early acceptance, “what could not be changed must be borne” (Ali 2004, 18), does not signal resilience but the internalization of structural constraint. Trauma here does not interrupt life; it organizes it. It is rooted in daily life, repetition, and expectations, thereby normalizing suffering.

Desire, Labor, and the Reconfiguration of Agency

If trauma in *Brick Lane* is sustained through normalization, agency must be understood not

as rupture but as reconfiguration. The novel does not offer liberation in the conventional sense; instead, it traces the emergence of agency within constraint. Nazneen's relationship with Karim, which initially appears to disrupt her passive existence, has often been interpreted as a moment of liberation. Nazneen's "affair with Karim [...] is a space where she confronts her own buried desires, allowing herself to experience a spectrum of emotions that had long been suppressed" (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). More importantly, her attraction to Karim is tied to a longing for recognition and autonomy: "When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash force so strong?" (Ali 2004, 302). "This confrontation with her own interiority, however messy, is a necessary step in processing her deep-seated losses." (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). However, this relationship remains entangled in another system of constraint by revealing itself as another structure of expectation. Karim represents a different form of authority—one rooted in diasporic identity and political consciousness. His involvement in nationalist movements introduces a new set of expectations and constraints. Karim's political identity introduces new forms of pressure, suggesting that resistance itself can become prescriptive.

"Nazneen begins to live a double-sided life that makes her really happy. Yet, at the same time, she feels sinful and regretful (Celikel 2022, 502). Consumed by remorse because this relationship "ruins her social chastity and transforms her into an infidel wife" (Arefin and Naz 2022, 7), she had a nervous breakdown. When Nazneen recovers from her sickness, she decides not to end her relationship with Karim abruptly. "She becomes more passionate [...], loses her former softness [...] [and] starts arguing with Karim and sometimes orders him to leave her home" (Afhea 2021, 173). Her eventual decision to end the relationship is significant, as it marks a shift from passive endurance to active decision-making. Even though Karim offers marriage, she refuses because he also embodies another system of control. Rather than moving from one structure to another, she refuses both. This refusal constitutes a form of agency that is neither dramatic nor absolute, but situated, partial, and self-determined. It reflects the broader instability of her subjectivity.

Similarly, her engagement with labor transforms her relationship to both time and space. Nazneen's engagement with paid labor is one of the most important developments in the novel. Sewing garments for local businesses provides her with a source of income and a sense of purpose. Sewing is not simply an economic activity that enables her to contribute financially to the household; it is a means of re-entering the world, allowing her to interact with others outside the domestic sphere and to develop a sense of self-worth. Her increasing mobility is also significant. As she becomes more confident navigating the city, her relationship to space changes. The streets of London, once intimidating, become accessible.

In sum, Nazneen's changes are gradual and often subtle, but they represent a shift in her subjectivity. Rather than a dramatic break from her past, Nazneen's transformation is incremental. So, agency does not emerge through rupture but through accumulation—mirroring the very logic of slow violence. Just as trauma unfolds gradually, so too does resistance.

Rethinking Recovery: Trauma Without Closure

If traditional trauma narratives offer closure, *Brick Lane* does not follow suit because Nazneen's life at the end of the novel remains marked by limitations and uncertainties. The novel resists the expectation that trauma must culminate in resolution and presents instead a model in which trauma persists even as subjectivity evolves. This lack of closure is not a narrative weakness but a deliberate theoretical intervention. Building on Judith Herman's tripartite recovery framework, which emphasizes "the restoration of connection" rather than the erasure of suffering (Herman 1992), Nazneen's recovery does not imply the elimination of pain but rather the capacity to develop new relationships with it. Nazneen's trajectory can be understood as a gradual movement through phases of stabilization, confrontation, and reconnection. However, these phases do not lead to the erasure of suffering. Instead, they reconfigure Nazneen's relationship to it.

Nazneen's entry into the first phase, "Safety and Stabilization," is triggered by the death of her son. "Grief compels her to establish a new sense of order. This initially manifests as a retreat into ritual" (Khan and Umar 2025, 693-94). This is reflected in Nazneen's turn to prayer: "And she squeezed Raqib from her mind. That way lay the abyss. So she swallowed hard and prayed hard, and she used prayer in defiance of her vows, to dull her senses and dull her pain" (Ali 2004, 208), a "classic attempt to create safety in a chaotic internal world" (Khan and Umar 2025, 692-93). At the same time, material practices reinforce this stabilization. "More concretely, the sewing machine becomes a tool for establishing financial stability and a modicum of control.... Earning her money ... is a tangible resource that enhances her sense of safety" (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). Through ritual and labor, Nazneen begins to reconstruct a fragile sense of agency.

The second phase, "Remembrance and Mourning," involves confronting traumatic memories. For Nazneen, this starts when she reads about her sister's account of the acid attack, which forces her "to confront the brutal realities she had tried to suppress" (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). The letters become a catalyst for self-reckoning, causing a critical re-evaluation of her mother's philosophy of fatalism. The idea of being "Left To Your Fate" transforms from a comforting narrative to a source of rage as it is reinterpreted as abandonment: "At once she was enraged. A mother who did nothing to save her own child!" (Ali 2004, 137). This anger, as Herman (1992) notes, is a vital part of mourning, allowing the survivor to grieve the loss of safety and trust. This reinterpretation is not merely an intellectual realization but an affective upheaval. Questioning her mother's fatalism signals her movement from passive acceptance to critical awareness, thus destabilizing the philosophy that had justified her suffering. In this sense, anger becomes an act of reclamation: it enables her to assign responsibility rather than internalize blame. "Her affair with Karim, while problematic, also operates within this phase. It becomes a space in which she confronts her own desires and suppressed emotions, engaging—however ambiguously—with her interior life as part of this process of reckoning." (Khan and Umar 2025, 693).

Finally, in the "Reconnection" phase, where the subject is supposed to "rebuild relationships and forge a new identity," Nazneen's reconnection is evident in her deliberate choice to engage with

the world on her own terms. Her decision not to go back with her husband to Bangladesh, “I can’t go with you” (Ali 2004, 480), is a clear reflection of the change that occurred in her relationship with Chanu, as she is no longer the passive, submissive woman. Her daughters become central to her sense of belonging, and her decision to remain in London is grounded not in fatalism but in maternal commitment and self-determination. (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). At the same time, she engages in building a supportive female friendship with Razia while decisively ending her affair with Karim, asserting her own desires over his, for example, saying, “I don’t want to marry you” (Ali 2004, 453). This ability to distinguish between genuine, reciprocal connections and exploitative ones is a hallmark of this final phase, which signals her movement toward autonomy.

The novel ends with Nazneen ice-skating, a dream that has become true. The ice itself serves as a metaphor for her transformed subjectivity: “The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath” (Ali 2004, 494). “She is not magically cured or returned to a pre-trauma state. Rather, she has integrated her scars into a new, complex, and beautiful whole” (Khan and Umar 2025, 693). So, Nazneen does not recover completely from her trauma by erasing it, but integrates it into a new, complex identity. The final declaration, “You can do whatever you like” (Ali 2004, 494), highlights her hard-earned autonomy and reclaimed agency.

Khan and Umar’s analysis of Nazneen’s recovery through Herman’s framework illuminates how Nazneen’s “small insurrections” do not portray rebellion but the reconstruction of a shattered self (Khan and Umar 2025, 693–694). By choosing not to follow Chanu, she demonstrates agency that does not depend on escape but on repositioning herself within existing structures. Her work, the friendships she makes, her relationships with her daughters and other women, and her refusal to marry Karim hint at a movement toward self-determination anchored in everyday practice rather than dramatic rupture.

To conclude, *Brick Lane* redefines recovery as an ongoing process rather than a resolution. In the novel, Nazneen does not transcend or resolve her trauma but copes with it and integrates it into her newly framed identity. Therefore, by advancing a model grounded in the ethics of survival, the novel challenges the dominant narratives in which trauma comes to a closure.

Conclusion: Toward a New Language of Trauma

As can be seen in the analysis presented above, *Brick Lane* not only offers a depiction of trauma but also calls for a revision of the concept of trauma itself. By analyzing Nazneen’s traumatic experience through the prism of Nixon’s slow violence, the novel draws attention to incremental, normalized, and structurally embedded forms of suffering that are actually disregarded in traditional trauma theory. By following Nazneen’s trajectory, Monica Ali provides a new interpretation of both trauma and agency. As trauma ceases to be perceived as a sudden event and transforms into a condition of endurance, agency becomes an achievement of constant negotiation rather than freedom. In this respect, Ali’s novel makes a significant contribution to the development of a new

postcolonial approach that shifts the focus from events to structures, from crises to routines, and from recovery to survival. Thus, it expands the scope of trauma studies and challenges us to develop a new language capable of articulating the lived realities of slow, everyday violence.

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