**"Suffer in Silence": Unequal Marriage and Its Consequences for Women in Two Postcolonial Novels**

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In a modern context, the practice of arranged marriage, which is common in Muslim countries and communities, can, to a Western eye, often appear oppressive and restricting for women. For centuries, Western women have fought hard for the right to be equal participants in the public sphere so that many Muslim marriages, which are largely restricted to the private, domestic sphere, appear to them conservative and retrograde. In many cases – often within communities of strict Islamic states such as Syria and Afghanistan – married women are not allowed to leave the house without male accompaniment, are required to cover completely in burqa in public, and are required to remain strictly obedient to their husbands (Azizah Y. al-Hibri, 19). A number of these marriages are oppressive, physically and emotionally abusive, and deprive wives of the means of self-expression, independence, and critical methods of development and self-definition. In this project, I aim to explore the effects of arranged marriage on the psychic wellbeing of women not only in the Western context of late 20th century London, but throughout the decades of continuous political upheaval in Afghanistan. The two novels that will be focus of my attention are Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). I will first address Ali's challenging critique of male imperviousness to the suffering of their wives – a critique that itself drew criticism from male readers such as Hasan Saeed Majed – then I shall turn to the more tolerant representation offered by Hosseini's novel.

**Arranged Marriage as a Social Contract in Muslim Communities**

Rather than a sacrament comparable to Christian marriages, the Muslim perception of marriage is that of a contractual agreement between a man and a woman with the potential for mutual love, (Marriage and Tradition in Bangladesh, 51). In many communities, where respectable women are unable to work, having a female child is a financial burden and worry for parents. Finding their daughter a stable, socially acceptable situation in marriage is therefore often a top priority for parents. A woman is able to marry into a wealthier family and class because her social status "is derived from that of her husband"; men, however, cannot use marriage for social mobility (Azizah Y. al-Hibri, 17). When entering into the process of proposal and marriage with this mindset, participants in the arrangement are "not concerned with whether or not the couple [is] 'in love'"; rather, they focus on maintaining social standards such as "caste hierarchy" and "considerations of class, status and standing" (Mody, 225, 226). As we shall see in the two novels, parents often act with their own interests and their own status within the community at the forefront of their minds. In both *Brick Lane* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* we see girls entering into forced arrangements conceived by their fathers. In Muslim marriages, the father, often the designated *wali,* or guardian, will contract his daughter's marriage on her behalf, since she is legally unable to do so herself in accordance with the Islamic codes of diverse countries such as Syria and Jordan. This requirement is "similar to the Western traditional approach under which the father 'gives away' the bride, but in this case it is a legal requirement (Azizah Y. al-Hibri, 10). The concern behind the requirement is reportedly for protecting "innocent and naïve Muslim women who may be victimized by designing men" who can spin stories of love and lead her to ruin her reputation in the community, and as a result, that of her parents too (15).

*Brick Lane* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* provide conflicting – but nonetheless representative – examples of marriages rooted in love. Though such marriages are romanticized and encouraged in Western cultures, the novels depict the ways in which marrying for love does not necessarily guarantee a lasting love or a companionable marriage. Love marriages are often taboo, with the idea of love as the basis of a relationship "seen as a dangerous sentiment capable of destroying the ties of obligations between individuals and their larger social groups." They are viewed as representing "the deconstruction of the group or community" because of the couple's disregard for "the obligation to marry the person of [their parents'] choosing." In some such cases, during the courtship the child's choice would eventually be revealed to the parents. They would then "be placed in a position of either forcing the child into an arranged marriage, or making the child's 'choice' into their own." Largely for appearance's sake, the parents will "eventually decide that they have no other option but to accept the person that the child has 'selected'." However, though the common perception is that "love should never precede marriage," the union itself "does not preclude the possibility of a loving and intimate relationship" (Mody, 225-227, 248).

Within the realm of Muslim custom, just because a marriage is not a love marriage does not mean it is a forced marriage. There is often confusion between arranged marriage and forced marriage; unfortunately, the two are often equated, when in fact they may denote completely different situations. Since what each partner considers to be "forced" versus "arranged" is subjective and can change over time, and since romance and arrangement are not necessarily incompatible, it would appear, then, "that 'love', 'arranged' and 'forced' marriages are best seen not as discrete categories, but as points along a spectrum" (Kraler et al., 87). Between enlightened arrangement and force are a number of coercive behaviors that vary in severity.

These range from "emotional pressure, exerted by close family members and the extended family, to the more extreme cases, which can involve threatening behaviour, abduction, imprisonment, physical violence, rape and in some cases murder." However, in the majority of cases, pressure on the part of the parents can be described as "loving manipulation," where they truly believe they are "acting in their children and family's best interests". Additionally, though the marriage is arranged, it is often not without input from the children. It is often seen that in "apparently conventionally arranged marriages, the young people may have suggested the marriage or at least influenced the decision that led to the proposal" (88-89). We will see in the two novels how the line between arrangement and force is frequently toed and how those relationships, though they may have potential to be companionable, can just as easily turn toxic and threaten the psychic wellbeing of the women involved in them.

With this information in mind, I turn now to the novels themselves, first discussing Ali's *Brick Lane.* Though it does not take place chronologically before Hosseini's novel, it was written earlier and offers harsh criticism of the conservative end of the spectrum. *Brick Lane* focuses largely on the adverse effects of arranged marriage on the wives' mental health. These effects arise in large part from a general male failure to recognize the underlying causes – i.e. lack of self-expression, self-sufficiency, and agency within the public and private spheres – and consequently dismissal and delegitimation of the consequences. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers a more liberal but equally complicated perspective on Muslim women in marriage; it provides more opportunity for exploring underlying issues of education that influence traditionalist behaviors among men towards their wives. These can then connect back to Ali's novel as well.

**Silent Suffering and its Depressive Consequences in *Brick Lane***

*Brick Lane* follows Nazneen, a woman violently uprooted from her Bangladeshi village life and relocated to London for her arranged marriage to Chanu Ahmad, a man more than twice her age, whom she has never met. Transplanted into a foreign country where resentment runs high against immigrant Muslims, Nazneen is forced to face a set of challenges beyond the normal hardships of entering a new community. Confined physically and culturally within the Bangladeshi neighborhood of Tower Hamlets, Nazneen is not able to participate in the modern, capitalistic, consumer-driven culture in which she is forced to reside. Her sister, Hasina, who elopes in an attempt at finding companionship through a love marriage to her childhood sweetheart Malek, is her only connection with her family and her former village life in Bangladesh. Haunted by memories of her mother's memory and the latter's mantra that it is the task of women to "suffer in silence" and accept the hand that fate has dealt them, Nazneen attempts to build a life for herself and her family. Disappointed with her husband, she begins to venture out of her cultural confinement where exposure to the liberal Western ideals of 1980s and 1990s London has a more significant influence on her than she could have anticipated.

Going into the marriage, all Nazneen has is a photograph of Chanu's frog-like face (6) and only a vague idea of what her future will entail in a new country. While her father arranges her union to Chanu with an abruptness and force prompted by Hasina's elopement Nazneen puts up no fight; rather, she is humbly grateful that her father has "made a good marriage for her" (9). Chanu is an educated man with a degree from Dhaka University in English literature, and he prides himself on his ability to "quote from Chaucer [and] Dickens [and] Hardy" (24). Though Chanu's lofty career aspirations fall disappointingly short, only achieving a low-level office job, their home is still comfortable. Nazneen is "proud" of the excess her new living space contains,

and drab as it may be – the sofa and chairs are "the color of dried cow dung" – she is sure that nobody in her home village has anything like it (9). She is left alone during the day while Chanu is at work, her daily tasks of cooking and cleaning only mediated by short visits from neighbors and, as she gets more comfortable in her home, increasing trips out into the foreign community in which she has been placed.

Being forced into marriage at such a delicate age seems, to the Western reader, to rob Nazneen of numerous choices critical to her self-definition. She loses the opportunity to form and break relationships with men that she may like or even love. She loses the ability to choose where she lives. In marrying at eighteen, Nazneen is deprived the opportunity to develop a sense of self that usually accompanies that period of adolescence, being thrown immediately into domesticity. She is left no time to develop aspirations, instead having to embrace a life of consistently compromising and unquestioningly accepting monotonous mediocrity. She essentially becomes property – an assistant to tend her husband's house, produce his children, preferably male, and then tend them too. The personal challenges facing her are enormous: in the beginning of her time with Chanu, "her head was…spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept" (15).

One avenue of expression and release Nazneen contrives for herself is watching televised ice skating, which she pronounces as "ice e-skating" and associates with strong, independent women. The sport is one of controlled grace – of bodily expression in one of its highest forms. Nazneen sees the female skater's confidence and poise on the television and envies it. It is no wonder that in Nazneen's reality, where once she turns off the television she is obliged to return to her drab domestic life, washing and cooking and razoring her husband's corns, that she would ponder "if the ice e-skating woman went home and washed and wiped. It was difficult to

imagine" (24). In her house, especially before she has children, Nazneen ostensibly has nothing of her own; not even her time is fully her own when she has to spend most of it cleaning up after her endearing but foolish husband.

The first time Nazneen watches ice skating is also the first time she attempts to obtain a new outlet: expressing herself in English. Her friend, Razia, has been taking night classes to learn the language and encourages Nazneen to join her. Nazneen recognizes the importance of learning English as the logical next step towards assimilation in her new country and is eager to begin. Chanu – although himself a great advocate of education broadly conceived – quickly dismisses her appeal to learn the language, ensuring her that proficiency would come on its own (23). The juxtaposition between this immediate rejection and the still-playing program of the enviable ice skater is profoundly meaningful for Nazneen, and she makes a strong connection between ice-skating and the fantasy of leading a different, fuller life in which she is "whole and pure." As Ali puts it, "The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory" (27). However, when she is again required to recognize the reality of her situation, "the old Nazneen return[s]," and we see her hopelessness. She "hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap, and dropped the pottery tiger and elephant as she dusted them and was disappointed when they did not break" (27). A physical rupture such as breaking the pottery animals might be would constitute for her a figurative break in the monotony of her life. As long as those small yet infuriating figurines stay intact, so the bleakness of her future remains intact too. This small thought is mirrored later when Nazneen imagines that if she could just change her clothes, she could change her life as well (228). These little manifestations of self-expression (skating, pottery, and clothes) symbolize for her a greater agency to which she does not have

access, and it is painful to sit idly by as they exist around her. And yet, Nazneen largely says nothing, dutifully ceding the floor to her voluble husband.

Chanu is apt to talk continuously without any prompting, his mouth "always on duty, always moving" (25). He regularly reads and translates choice extracts from his favorite works of literature for Nazneen – including selections from Hume's theories on "Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact (29) – and is prone to entering into long-winded soliloquies on subjects such as politics, racism, and community relations. And though Nazneen is content to let him chatter on, she often remains silent even when she does have strong opinions or desires, in order to avoid conflict regarding sensitive issues, including opportunities for her to assert her autonomy. In one particularly cutting example, toward the beginning of their marriage, Nazneen and Chanu are discussing her going out into the community. Chanu argues against it as if anticipating resistance from Nazneen, yet she remains silent. He makes four separate points, all of which could have been disputed, but time after time Nazneen "never [says] anything" or "[carries] on with her chores" as if he is not speaking at all (30). This repression of her own feelings in order to avoid conflict is likely that it is one of the behaviors from which Nazneen's depressive symptoms stem.

The forced nature of Nazneen's marriage with Chanu and the coping methods she uses to assuage the potential for conflict are problematic arising from her arranged marriage and the time she moves to London, gradually erodes her psychic wellbeing. She endures her fate with the strength of her mother, Amma, who establishes herself as an authority on female suffering within Nazneen's home village in Bangladesh. Nazneen herself does not show signs of breaking down mentally in the first half of the novel; she suffers silently as Amma taught her. However, hints of mental distress in Tower Hamlets break through the narrative occasionally. Sadly, she is simultaneously receiving signals from the surrounding community and from her culture that

work to deter her from seeking help. As this realist novel reflects, Muslim culture is largely dismissive of mental health, especially in women, who are viewed as prone to over-sensitivity in general.

In the novel, the community's disregard for and unwillingness to discuss psychic wellbeing becomes evident quite early. The first time we meet Nazneen's neighbors, Razia and Mrs. Islam, they are gossiping about a woman in the community, a wife, who has fallen from a sixteen-story window. At first, they speak implying it was suicide: "'And at sixteen floors up, if you decide to jump, then there's the end to it'" (14). However, shortly after, they censor their own hints at dissatisfaction within the marriage. In a quick attempt to neutralize their slippage, they vehemently add that of course her death was "a terrible accident," setting a precedent at the beginning of the novel that suicide is taboo and mental health is simply not talked about. Interestingly, though her friends gossip and pass judgment on this scandalous news, Nazneen seems to admire the agency enacted by the decision to jump.

Late that same night, after an uncomfortable dinner with Chanu's friend, Dr. Azad, who is also their family doctor, she stands by her window and ruminates on the decision to jump and the act of the woman's fall. Ali's choice to show Nazneen pondering the act of suicide at night is critical for conveying nighttime's importance in Nazneen's attempts at developing independence and making time for herself. In due course, nighttime becomes one of Nazneen's makeshift outlets, when she allows herself to eat and indulges in her own thoughts. During this time she reserves for herself, Nazneen replays the conversation that took place in her living room earlier that afternoon, knowing in her heart that the wife had jumped willingly. The community cannot know the inner workings of the woman's marriage, but they do know that the couple does not have any children, "after twelve years of marriage" (14). In this hushed fact, Ali introduces an

issue that Hosseini's novel will depict with immediacy and in detail: namely, the feelings of worthlessness and helplessness that come from a woman's inability to give children to her husband, when child-bearing is one of the few means of creative expression available to her. The decision of this woman to end her life with a jump becomes the one public assertion of selfhood, defining her in a world where her very namelessness indicates her erased subjectivity.

Nazneen fantasizes about the jump itself, imagining it as "a big jump, feet first and arms wide, eyes wide…and a big smile on her face because with this one single everlasting act she [defies] everything and everyone" (26). Nazneen aches for a chance to enact her own will as this woman did, lest she end up like the tattoo lady, an enigmatic and obese woman, defined by copious tattoos, who lives in the apartment complex. Nazneen sees her, every day, sitting alone in her living room with a beer and a cigarette, and imagines a camaraderie forming between the two of them – if only Nazneen were to take the first step and say hello. However, Nazneen remains quietly in her home, and she hears a while later that the tattoo lady has been taken "to an institution," and we learn from Razia that "at the end she was sitting in her own [defecation]." Razia, an earlier source of the unnamed woman's suicide, condemns the community for not "[having] got to her sooner…Did no one see?" (102). Razia's compassion for the woman and frustration with the community's inaction in the face of individual crises is indicative of the need for a social environment which accepts and acknowledges mental wellbeing and allows for the creative and emotional expression before it becomes too late.

We see Nazneen turning to her faith as another outlet, and though the religion encourages its believers to lean on Islam when they need help, she uses it instead as a distraction. She scolds herself for using prayer as a way to "stupefy herself like a drunk with a bottle, like a fly with a lantern" (103). She is praying but not engaging with the prayer; she uses it as a tool for her own

escape from her uninteresting life, where she rarely leaves her flat and her days are dedicated to housework and taking care of her children. Amber Haque's "Religion and Mental Health: The Case of American Muslims" offers one of the few insights available into Muslim – particularly immigrant Muslim – communities and how they value religion within a Western society. Nazneen's religion is very important to her; it is one of the things she retains from her home, and the values it teaches remain often in the back of her mind. Haque describes the Islamic faith as one of accountability; if followers do not adhere to their "*fitrah*," a conscience-like "source of guidance" that is "centered in the soul, telling humans when they are wrong," their selfish actions "can lead to mental health problems" (49). There are almost karmic reactions to following whims and selfish desires – while virtuous actions "preserve mental health," vices "can bring various mental health problems" (49). The only cure, it seems, is to change one's actions so that one's soul can be at peace and be free from the "illnesses of the heart" that can afflict a sinful person (48). Nazneen's leaning on religion begins as an outlet for her, but based on the guilt it instills in her, it becomes a source of additional stress.

Shortly before Nazneen's breakdown in the second half of the novel, we see the monotony of her existence weighing on her mind: "When she opened her eyes…she had the sensation…that the day had finally arrived. Then she strained to remember what day it was, its significance, and she realized that it was a day like any other" (223). She becomes weary of being the plain, dutiful housewife that she has become, especially after having seen so many interesting people – for instance, Mrs. Azad— the assertive wife of the timid doctor—the businesswomen on the street, or the photographer in trousers and underwear – representing the choices Western culture offers them. Nazneen is not given much opportunity to integrate herself into her new Western home, an alienation Haque identifies as one of the more significant

stressors for immigrant Muslims. She says that for "newer immigrants, even the dress, weather, and language can cause adjustment problems…Muslims may not feel themselves to be a part of the mainstream society" (51). The women Nazneen sees on the street are acting of their own will, deciding their own fate. She too longs to change her fate,

The novel confirms this chain of consequences, with most of Nazneen's unsettling thoughts crystalizing in the second half of the novel, triggered by an adulterous relationship she begins with a local Muslim rights activist, Karim. What begins as a business relationship—Nazneen is one of a network of stay-at-home seamstresses who complete sewing assignments delivered by Karim, soon turns into a full-blown affair. The affair exhilarates Nazneen, as this is the first time she takes control of her body, her marriage, her sexuality, and her own fate itself. Karim represents everything she is not getting from her husband, and she eagerly accepts him without thinking of the consequences; before their first encounter she waits "just by the door" for him "so that she [opens] it before Karim even [knocks]" (209). However, the adrenaline does not hold her up for long. Feeling that she has betrayed her family as well as her religion, guilt weighs down on her.

Hiding the affair from her husband is a strain, but Nazneen also has the weight of her religion and the memory of her Amma pressing down on her mind and heart. She constantly feels "angels at her back," watching and judging her. Whenever "Karim came into her mind," the angels "noted it" (185). The anxiety she feels about her soul and her selfishness oppress her until she finally breaks. One night, as she is thinking about it all, "the horror [comes] to her" and she "[vomits] over the clothes she had washed," an act which is immediately followed by a particularly scalding conversation with an apparition of Amma (266) who castigates her severely.

After this traumatic conjuring, there is a significant shift in Nazneen's state of mind. She allows herself to break down, and "for several days she stayed in bed and clung to her collapse. She pushed down into it like a diver, struggling against buoyancy, fighting her way into the depths...For several days, awake or asleep, she had kept her eyes closed" (268). It is fair to assume that Nazneen has had a depressive episode brought on by severe anxiety. She lets her sewing work fall by the wayside, and it piles up as the days go on. She mentions frequently during her recovery that "there was something she ought to be thinking about," but she is unconsciously blocking it from her perception (272). As soon as she remembers everything that has happened with Karim, anxiety rushes over her once more. She is diagnosed with having had "a condition known as nervous exhaustion," which implies that it is non-recurring. According to Haque's research, "in Muslim countries, it is generally the imam…who treats mental health problems," but Dr. Azad is the only health professional available to the family (53).

Dr. Azad and Chanu's response to Nazneen's psychic breakdown is distinctly illustrative of Ali's criticism of males – and, further, the nature of forced marriages – as both men remain impervious to the primary roots of Nazneen's distress. Chanu, though tender towards his wife's affliction, displays an incredulity based in ignorance of the restrictions Nazneen faces in her daily life. He reassures Dr. Azad that Nazneen is "very, very calm" and that "no one is more calm" than her, because she "has nothing to get excited about" (271). This statement vividly illuminates Chanu's obliviousness in terms of what his wife thinks and feels on a daily basis. She is prescribed to rest, a patronizing solution that implies a natural and harmless infirmity in women, and further exemplifies the male obtuseness sitting at the heart of women's suffering. For two men who pride themselves on their intellectual prowess, their attitudes towards women remain uninformed.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* we will continue to witness women's circumscription within the private sphere through their marriages as well as through rigid political regulations. While the focus of Ali's novel targeted arranged marriage, in particular the coercive and possibly forced nature of Nazneen's marriage, Hosseini's novel withholds criticism of one type of marriage, instead highlighting the central issues of male ignorance and how when those men are allowed to hold power over women – either politically or within the home – those women lose rights of expression and independence that are essential to their identity.

**Education, Independence, and Abuse in *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Though *A Thousand Splendid Suns* takes place in an environment vastly different from that of *Brick Lane*, we continue to witness the disenfranchisement of women not only politically, but in terms of freedom of expression, education, and opportunities to participate in the public sphere individually and collectively. Political instability and constant changes in leadership, whether communists, rebels, or the Taliban, leave the women of Afghanistan with virtually no rights. The novel begins in following Mariam, living in an isolated hut, or *kolba,* with her mother, Nana. Mariam and Nana have been forced to live there by Jalil, Mariam's father. Mariam grows up under constant criticism from her Nana, who blames her daughter for their misfortunes because she is a *harami,* an illegitimate child. Nana ultimately commits suicide and Mariam is left under Jalil's care. Out of shame, Jalil forces Mariam to marry Rasheed, a shoemaker in Kabul – hundreds of miles from her home in Herat. Just as Mariam is adjusting to her husband's strict regulations and capricious temper, her inability to have children pushes Rasheed to take another wife, Laila – a much younger girl from in their neighborhood. A rogue explosive from within the rebellion against Afghanistan's communist regime has destroyed

Laila's home, leaving her orphaned. The two women begin their relationship with tension and animosity, as Mariam resents Laila's youth and fertility. However, their eventual friendship becomes a critical mutual resource as the political turmoil comes to a head with the Taliban takeover and Rasheed's hostility towards both women reaches new levels of violence. Hosseini's individual and then combined tales of the two women demonstrate the power of education, independence, and female companionship in working to empower women in a patriarchal and oppressive environment.

The coercive nature of Mariam's marriage to Rasheed is a revealing example of the ways forced marriages can often disguise themselves as thoughtful arrangements. While the reality of the pair's union is that Jalil and his wives are desperate to be rid of the stain of illegitimacy and in turn pressure Mariam to enter into marriage against her will, the situation is presented under the guise of a reasonable timeline for a girl of her age. The wives rationalize their arrangement by reassuring Mariam that "'nine-year-old girls [are being] given to men twenty years older than [her] suitor'" and that her own age, 15, is a "good, solid marrying age for a girl'" (47). Mariam has already been shaken by the trauma of her mother's suicide; her hasty marriage to Rasheed then robs her of her home, her family, and her independence in one fell swoop.

Though Mariam has no choice in the nature or timing of her marriage, Rasheed does not, in the beginning of their relationship, give any indication that he will be any different than any other husband within any other married-at-first-sight relationships. Though often lacking in feelings of love and affection in the beginning, there exists potential for a companionable, contented relationship. To his benefit, he has a stable job as a shoemaker and a house with two floors, a yard, and electricity, which is a "mansion" compared to her *kolba* in Herat (58). And after the amount of time Rasheed deems an appropriate mourning period for her mother and for

the life she has known until this point, Mariam falls quickly into the pattern of domestic subservience Rasheed values so highly. Her first test, the first meal she makes for Rasheed, goes smoothly, and "a flare of pride [catches] her off guard. She [has] done well – *maybe better than good, even* – and it [surprises] her, this thrill she [feels] over his small compliment" (69). Ali, in giving readers this taste of satisfaction, creates a vividly cutting contrast as Rasheed becomes more restrictive and volatile.

Rasheed vocalizes his traditionalist standards early on – such as only allowing Mariam to leave the house with his accompaniment – but Mariam accepts his requests willingly, driving herself to identify the care behind the restrictions and find contentment in her situation. Rasheed requires Mariam to wear a burqa in public as he will not be like some of the "modern" men who come into his shop, and let him touch their wives' bare feet, "spoiling their own *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride" (70). In time, though, Mariam notices that she is not as bothered by the burqa as she expects to be. Instead, she finds comfort in its invisibility – it acts as a "one-way window" which shields her from "the scrutinizing eyes of strangers" (73). When she is made to stay upstairs while Rasheed visits with Eid guests, she is "flattered" because Rasheed sees "sanctity in what they [have] together" (81). During Mariam's first pregnancy, Rasheed is almost affectionate towards her. If the substance of their marriage had remained that innocuous, Mariam might have found happiness, or at least comfortability, in her life with Rasheed.

The tone shifts dramatically when Mariam fails in the singular most defining act she is tasked with as a Muslim wife – that is, giving her husband a child. Following Mariam's miscarriage, Rasheed grows bitter and actively hateful towards her. The façade of a companionship is stripped away as with each new "disappointment, Rasheed [grows] more remote and resentful," finding fault in everything Mariam does for him (99). She miscarries

seven times over four years, and every failure acts as an etching on her forehead of her own worthlessness; her worth is directly associated with her ability to bear children, even though it is something completely out of her control. Having children has, at this point, become the only opportunity for creative expression in a life that seems to lack meaning.

Without a child, Mariam realizes she is "nothing but a burden to [Rasheed]" (100). Her own body becomes the undoing of her marriage. She now "[dreads] the sound of him coming home in the evening", and begins to see the truth in the suspicions she had dismissed in the beginning. Over time, we see Mariam learn to "harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding" (240). She has no other option but to endure. Her Nana makes sure early on that if Mariam learns nothing else in her life, she would learn to endure: "'There is only one…skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school…And it's this: *tahamul.* Endure'" (18). Mariam carries this mantra from her mother with her into her marriage. She avoids conflict – and rightly so, based on Rasheed's penchant for violence, which often involves the end of a belt – by constantly brushing off his verbal abuses and submitting to the submissive lifestyle to which he demands she adhere. When Laila, Rasheed's youthful second bride, observes Mariam later in the narrative, she sees "a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured" (249).

Rasheed's violence and the stifling emotional environment in which he keeps Mariam could easily lead Hosseini's readers to condemn arranged marriages. That is certainly what *Brick Lane* accomplishes. However, Ali's novel is restrictive to the reader in that it does not provide enough perspective to allow for an informed judgment on arranged marriages. As was mentioned before, there is a wide spectrum upon which marriages can be defined as "arranged", and though we do get a sufficient representation of the more strictly arranged, conservative end, Hosseini

gives readers a diverse selection of relationships throughout the spectrum, each with its own host of problems. Hosseini's characters reveal to us that just because a marriage is entered into as an expression of love between two willing people, it is far from perfect. Each marriage, each pairing and the resulting relationship, is situational.

Laila, the novel's other main character, grows up amidst the tumultuous relationship of her parents, Hakim and Fariba, who are known in the community to be more progressive. Fariba refrains from dressing conservatively in public, often "wearing nothing on her head but a scarf." Rasheed reproaches the couple, saying it embarrasses him "to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (70). However, we see that during Laila's childhood, their marriage isn't what it once was, when they would sneak into the orchard to be together and would go on trips to the Bamiyan Buddhas (120, 149). Laila only sees the mother that forgets to pick her up from school, who lies in bed all day, from whom she feels the need to hide razors and aspirin pills after news comes of her brothers' deaths in the rebellion, led by the Mujahideen, against communism. Fariba mourns the loss of her sons long before their eventual deaths, and she often blames Hakim for allowing them to go (110). In this marriage, Fariba has a loving husband, an educated man that knows the value of women. Yet, she clearly suffers greatly and lashes out at her husband for it, behavior that would not be tolerated in Rasheed's household. Here, the wife's mental stress and collapse stem not from the marriage itself, but from her sons investing in the *jihad* against the ruling power that, ironically, allows the most freedom for women out of the various parties we encounter in the novel.

Laila, having been born on the night of the communist coup and acquisition of control within Afghanistan's government, grows up with examples of strong, independent women, which, along with guidance from her father, greatly influences her understanding of equality.

Under the communists, Afghanistan allows women in politics, as teachers, as businesswomen. At school, her teacher does not allow the girls to cover, teaching them that "women and men [are] equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't" (111). Her father, Hakim, follows her education diligently, making it "clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in this life…was her schooling" (114). He tells her, "*Marriage can wait, education cannot…a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated*" (114). She grows up a happy, confident girl at the top of her class with a bright future ahead of her.

Because of her parents' progressive ideals, Laila was not subject to the anxiety of being given away to a stranger in marriage. In her relationship with Tariq, her first and only love as well as her childhood friend, Hosseini cultivates an example of another type of arrangement, one that is encouraged and fed by communal urgings but is not explicitly guided or forced. Mariam let her relationship with Tariq blossom in secret; even so, it yields raised eyebrows all over the community. Laila could hear "the whispers in the neighborhood that the two of them were a couple" (163). Her mother even picks up on the potential relationship in her reclusive state. If Laila were to marry Tariq, even though their closeness since childhood implies a certain degree of arrangement, it would still clearly be a love marriage. Though the community has been loosely involved and Tariq's parents encourage them to continue their friendship, their relationship is genuine and authentic in its mutual attraction and respect. Laila has potential for a happy, loving future with Tariq. However, Tariq's relocation to Pakistan, her parents' deaths, and the startling realization that she is pregnant with Tariq's child force Laila to act out of desperation and take the first opportunity presented to her. When she is informed of Rasheed's desire to marry her, Laila jumps at the security of a husband and home.

Rasheed's personal motivations for taking a second wife are rooted in dissatisfaction with Mariam's performance as child-bearer, and he seizes new opportunity when it comes before him However, his almost sinister method of persuading Mariam to comply with the situation are a disturbing illumination of the desperation women face in a country devastated by war and devoid of opportunities for women's independent advancement:

> "Think of it this way, Mariam. I'm giving *you* help around the house and *her* a sanctuary. A home and a husband. These days, times being what they are, a woman needs a husband. Haven't you noticed all the widows sleeping on the streets? They would kill for this chance. In fact, this is…Well, I'd say this is downright charitable of me" (216).

By accepting Rasheed's offer of marriage, Laila accepts the terms by which he leads his life and that of the women in it. We have seen already the various challenges his values pose on an uneducated, meek woman who grew up hearing she is worthless. The outcomes change when Rasheed brings in a girl who was raised to value herself and believe she is equal to the men around her. This upbringing poses a threat to Rasheed, and he does his best to snuff it. He criticizes Laila's parents in death, voicing his "reservations" about "their leniency with [Laila]" (223). As Laila's defiance begins to influence Mariam through their friendship, the power of female companionship and support give them the strength they need to be agents of their own independence in an environment that does not permit it.

As the novel comes to its climax, the Taliban has claimed rule over Afghanistan, and with their regime comes an extensive list of restrictions for citizens, primarily for women. As they impose theocracy on the country, the laws they impose are all supposedly rooted in Islam and the Quran. Women are not allowed to wear makeup, jewelry, or "charming clothes;" they are not allowed to "wander aimlessly in the streets," under consequence of being "beaten and sent home;" they are not allowed to make eye contact in men or laugh in public (278). The most

critical tragedy of the new statutes, however, is that women are now restricted, by law, from attending school and holding jobs. Violence against women is permitted and encouraged, and "Rasheed's brutality receives official support"' (Sentov, 281). Rasheed is emboldened by the Taliban, and his resentment towards his wives grows as they grow increasingly insurgent. The women continue to fight against him, yet leaving him could prove deadly. During one argument, he spits at Laila:

> "…you thought you were so clever, with your books and poems. What good are all your smarts to you now? What's keeping you off the streets, your smarts or me? I'm despicable? Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me. They would *kill* for it." (283)

Though the two wives hate Rasheed and do not try to hide their animosity towards him, they are obligated to rely on him for protection from the chaos and desperation the ongoing war has incited.

Despite Rasheed's personal resentment of Laila's education as well as the Taliban's strict ban on it, education becomes one of the most important practices of the underground network of dissent. When, in an effort to avoid starvation, Laila is forced to put her daughter, Aziza, in an orphanage, the kind owner makes "a point to teach [the children] something every day" to keep them from falling behind. Aziza, through the orphanage, is able to learn "reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of history or science, something about plants, animals" (321). Zaman, the owner, does this at great risk to himself, and during their classes the girls need to keep yarn and needles under their desks so in the event of an inspection, they can "put the books away and pretend to knit" (321). In this persistence to keep women educated, Hosseini gives his readers assurance that there are still people in the country who have not been indoctrinated by the Taliban's primitive worldview.

The Taliban's restriction of women's education indicates the power they see in it, and consequently their fear of it. If women are kept uneducated, they are forced to remain subservient and rely on men for their livelihood and for protection. If women are uneducated and out of power, there is no one to challenge the patriarchal and oppressive policies that are put in place by men. Educated women develop autonomy, and they threaten the social order which depends on their remaining ignorant. Educated women realize that they desire and deserve more than the confines of the private sphere and become unsatisfied with domesticity. Laila's upbringing, rooted in equality and the value of education, influences Mariam through their friendship and gives her the strength to defend Laila as Rasheed chokes her at the apex of his anger. As Mariam swings a shovel down onto his head in a fatal blow, she realizes that this act is "the first time *she* [is] deciding the course of her own life" (349). This final act of heroic agency is not, like the number of female suicides we've seen, an escape rooted in submission to the social and cultural realities that women face; rather, it is a defiance that enables women to move forward as opposed to ending their story.

**Conclusion**

Issues posed by arranged marriage are deeply explored and particularized in the context of these two novels; however, I have found that the fault – and, consequently, the catalyst for women's suffering within these marriages – lies not in the practice itself. Rather, it is the uneducated insecurity of patriarchal values and powers that insists on maintaining control by weakening women. Groups like the Taliban do this by corrupting the Quran and citing it as the source of their validity. If analyzed closely, the policies are contradictory – for example, Audrey C. Shalinksy notes that "at the ideal level the Pashtun [Afghan ethnic group] emphasize the

Islamic notion of status equality of partners to a marriage, yet they also apparently stress the superiority of men over women (134)". Men are socialized from a young age to learn their power over women. However, enlightened and progressive education can remedy that complex, allowing men to see the equanimity that can exist between both sexes and avoid the consequences in indulging their socially constructed instincts. We see examples of such enlightened men in characters such as Hakim, who raises his daughter to believe that she is equal to men. Additionally, if women are educated to acknowledge their equality, they are less likely to find themselves in situations of oppression and individual repression of their own creative expression. They have the courage to assert their individuality and engage in relationships with men that are mutually respectful, companionable, and, in marriage, eventually affectionate and loving. Education is the problem and the solution; socialize male and female children early as equitable partners, two sides of the same human coin – neither superior to the other.

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