

Brick Lane: Immigrants in East London

By Joanne Laurier
18 July 2008

Brick Lane is currently showing in North America. This comment on the film was originally posted as part of the coverage of the 2007 Toronto film festival.

Sarah Gavron is a British director of considerable artistic ability. Her first full-length drama in 2003, *This Little Life*, about the life of a prematurely born infant, is a work of unusual depth and sensitivity.

Her latest film, *Brick Lane*, based on Monica Ali's debut novel, is carefully constructed, lyrical and visually sumptuous. But despite its beauty, it is marred by its apparent lack of interest in the political events it references.

The film's production notes describe East London's Brick Lane district as having "offered refuge to immigrants into London for 400 years and these communities have all left their distinctive mark on the area over the centuries. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s, the street has become the center of the biggest Bengali community outside of Bangladesh, mainly from the Sythet region.... It was to work in the clothing factories around Brick Lane that the young male Bengali workers arrived in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. As they prospered, many brought over their families and established a new community in Brick Lane."

Brick Lane centers on a young woman, Nazneen (Tannishtha Chatterjee), who is torn away from her beloved sister in a Bangladeshi village after their mother commits suicide and is sent to England in an arranged marriage.

Sixteen years later, she is settled in Brick Lane, now dubbed "Banglatown" by its residents, with two daughters and an intellectually frustrated, pot-bellied husband, Chanu (Satish Kaushik), who has trouble with life in general and with earning a living in particular. Nazneen's custom-stifled world ("The test of life is to endure") is blown open when a young British-Bangladeshi man, Karim (Christopher

Simpson), offers her a way out of a joyless existence.

But as the Bangladeshi community is forced to contend with the fallout of September 11, Karim and others become attracted to Islamic fundamentalism. Nazneen distances herself from Karim and draws closer to Chanu. In the end, her destiny is with neither. She realizes that "the world is changing and me with it."

Brick Lane attempts to address the difficulties of life for Britain's immigrant community. The longing for home, the harshness of trying to get one's bearings economically and culturally in a foreign land and the gap between parents and their children who more easily integrate themselves are perceptively presented. Mrs. Islam, the neighborhood's ruthless moneylender, is a well-drawn character who brings out the intra-community strains. The way in which the film deals with its background story of escalating ethnic and political tensions, however, is where Gavron falls short.

During a question-and-answer session at the Toronto film festival, the filmmaker said she was interested in exploring two kinds of love: "One that takes your breath away and one that grows day by day." She used the September 11 events to investigate how "the outer world impacted on the inner world" of her characters.

Unfortunately, the impact of these events is not really worked through in a convincing manner, and they become the occasion for a rather formulaic conclusion. Karim's foray into Islamicism is crude, as is that of the community. Chanu's repudiation of fundamentalism and Nazneen's eventual "empowerment" and independence seem to emerge from a certain (wishful) social schema rather than from an accurate and painstaking look at the reality facing immigrants and British society as a whole since the events of 9/11 and the unleashing of the "war on terror." One senses that Gavron's heart is in the right place, but that alone generally proves inadequate.

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