

Of fate and feet : Dis-memberment, Re-membering, Piecing together in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie suggests that the question which all post-colonial writers finally address is the “single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?”¹ For many of the migrants in Monica Ali's debut novel *Brick Lane*, however, the question would seem to be rather “*Where* are we to live in the world?” for the novel's Bengali immigrants are transfixed by their sense of displacement from the homeland and in search of what they refer to regularly as a “place in the world”², a “ground” to stand as well as to stand *on* (260), a territory in which to repair the psychic dismemberment which the novel's Dr Azad describes as their “Going Home Syndrome”: “They don't ever really leave home,” he says. “Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there” (32). Although the doctor himself is said to “[hold] himself like a man who knew his place in the world, and knew that the world knew it too” (67), his own anxiety about his rootlessness can be read in his collection of snowstorms from cities around the world which offer him the compensatory spectacle of their “solid foundation” (272) in the

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-91*, London, Granta, 1991, 18.

² Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, London, Black Swan, 2003, 264.

face of life's storms³. The search for a "solid foundation" is what leads one character practically to starve his family in order to buy bricks (one of the many allusions in the novel) so as to build a mosque back in Bangladesh: "I am working for bricks," he is proud to announce. "When I am gone to dust, they will be standing" (125). In such characters, geographical displacement engenders the urge for rootedness and permanence, of which the bricks of *Brick Lane* repeatedly send back the image as ironic reminders of what the migrant does not have.

The displacement of the female migrant is more radical still, not only geographical but also discursive. Uprooted from the fields and villages of East Pakistan where she is born, and transplanted to inner city London following her arranged marriage at 18 to the middle-aged Chanu, Nazneen, the Bengali female protagonist, is doubly displaced, doubly "translated", to borrow Salman Rushdie's gloss of that term, being borne not only across the world but also across language, where she is written into the pre-determined narratives of cultural and sexual identity which continue to constrain as well as to sustain her life. From the outset Nazneen is locked into a foundational narrative, "the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate" (15) which tells of how when she was born and refused to feed, no attempt was made to take her to hospital or to treat her; instead, she was "left to her fate" to live or die, and the story, having entered the family folklore, crops up throughout the novel as a repeated injunction to Nazneen "to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her" (15), a caveat to the third-world woman to submit to the oppression and suffering that will be her lot⁴. Yet if the founding narrative of How You Were Left To Your Fate works to enjoin Nazneen to inertia and a surrendering of her subjectivity, the way the novel develops resists such an inscription of the female body into the master narratives of patriarchy which "Fate" would seem to have reserved for it. This is announced proleptically right from the first pages in a passage which moves significantly from the obsessively reiterated passive voice to a tentative assertion of active agency:

³ An indication of Azad's own uncertain hold on his place is his question to Bibi: "That is like life [...] If you are strong you withstand the storm. Can you see? The storm comes and everything is blurred. But all that is built on a solid foundation has only to stand fast and wait for the storm to pass [...] And do you know how to make a solid foundation?' Again, Bibi gave her slow, negative nod. 'Then would you mind,' said Dr Azad, 'telling me just how to do it?' " (272)

⁴ The novel is placed beneath the sign of fate right from its programmatic epigraphs: "Sternly, remorselessly, fate guides each of us" (Ivan Turgenev) and "A man's character is his fate" (Heraclitus).

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge. So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (16)

Brick Lane is the story of one migrant woman's journey towards agency and subjectivity through the growing awareness of her body. I use the term "subjectivity" following Toril Moi's Beauvoirian understanding of the concept:

For Beauvoir, the body is our medium for having a world in the first place. We perceive the world through the body, and when the world reacts to our body in a more or less ideologically oppressive way, we react to the world. Our subjectivity is constituted through such ongoing, open-ended interaction between ourselves and the world. We constantly make something of what the world makes of us.⁵

The body, says Moi, "is perhaps the fundamental ingredient in the make-up of our subjectivity. Yet subjectivity can never be reduced to some bodily feature or other"⁶. Subjectivity is, on the contrary, an "open-ended interaction" with the otherness of the world. From having her subjectivity reduced to her body which is read, mis-read and figuratively "written" into the prevailing texts of cultural and sexual identity, Ali's protagonist moves towards a sense of determining *how* her displaced, figuratively dis-membered body will be read, understood and *re*-membered in and on its own terms, as she pieces together for the sake of her daughters her memories of the lives of the women of Bangladesh who also strive to "make something of what the world makes out of them".

The woman's body: an idea of home?

Unlike the male migrants in the novel, Nazneen's body is displaced not only geographically *from* her homeland but also metaphorically *as* the homeland, as her body becomes the trope of a fantasised post-imperial Bangladesh for the men in her life. Part of her fate is to have her body repeatedly associated with the country her feet have taken her away from, which she no longer inhabits, to be doubly dispossessed. For her husband

⁵ Toril Moi, *What is a Woman?* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, 391.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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Chanu she is “an unspoilt girl from the village” (22), a remark he makes preliminary to a description of Nazneen’s body which simultaneously inscribes it in the pre-written narrative of female biology: “Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied” (23). Later, Chanu has his daughters recite poems by the Bengali national poet Tagore in which Bangladesh is implicitly figured as their mother’s body: “In spring, oh mother mine, the fragrance from / Your mango groves makes me wild with joy” (179). Later still, for her lover Karim, Nazneen represents “home”, a fantasmatic place he has never been to, “the real thing”: “How did Karim see her? The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her” (454). Thus inscribed within the dual discourse of reproductive biology and post-imperial utopianism, Nazneen’s body is doubly estranged from itself by history and by fate of the “anatomy-is-destiny” type. Her sexual and maternal body becomes the homeland of her husband’s and lover’s respective Going Home Syndromes, her subjectivity entirely subsumed in the overarching assertion of an essentially masculine cultural identity. As Nazneen soon comes to realise, however, “the real thing” which she represents for Karim is no more than an essentialist fiction pieced together out of the gendered, ethnic and social dimensions of her person, a combined effect of her female body, her ethnicity and her social function as wife and mother, the whole invested by and, transformed in, Karim’s over-wrought imagination and need for a “ground” to stand: “A few times he said to her *you’ve got to stand your ground*, and it was marvellous to her that he should be so sure of where he was standing and why” (260).

Standing one’s ground or walking around?

Karim “stands his ground” by rejecting the idea of hybridity, the idea, in his words, that “to be cool, you had to be something else – a bit white, a bit black, a bit something ... you couldn’t just be yourself. Bangladeshi [...] We’re the ones who had to stand our ground” (263). On this analysis, “standing one’s ground” is predicated on an essentialist reading which conceives of cultural identity as discrete separate entities existing in unpolluted fixity and isolation⁷. Yet for a people defined synecdochically in the novel by their itinerant feet, “standing one’s ground” is not the easiest thing in the world

⁷ See Andrew Smith, “Migrancy, Hybridity and Post-Colonial Literary Studies” in Neil Lazarus, *The Cambridge Companion to Post-colonial Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

to do. Feet are regularly foregrounded in *Brick Lane* as the metonymic reminders of the Bengali immigrants' nomadic condition, bearing them over "seven seas and thirteen rivers" (26) – the title of the French translation of the novel – from the "towers of rice stalk" in the East (12) to Tower Hamlets in London. One of the activities we most often see Nazneen, the Bengali female protagonist, engaged in is slicing the dead skin off her husband's corns; the first thing she notices in her council estate neighbours, Razia and Mrs Islam, is their incongruous footwear which makes their saris look strange and underlines the jarring encounter of East and West, "carpet slippers on over black socks" for Mrs Islam (26) and "black lace-up shoes, wide and thick-soled" for Razia (27); and it is significant that the single photograph taken of Nazneen with her family during their one and only day out in Central London ends up as a mere blur of colour "and of the family together nothing could be made out except for the feet" (297). Feet sum up the itinerant nomadism of the migrant, the incessant movement which Karim would like to arrest or stabilise in the ideological "ground" of his activist movement, the Bengal Tigers. It is significant that Karim's movement can only "stand its ground" if it operates in oppositional terms, defining itself against an opposite cultural formation, the neo-fascist Lion Hearts, which alone guarantee the Tigers their identity by offering themselves as a formation against which to march. Once the opposition is removed and the Lion Hearts fail to march, the ground disappears from beneath Karim's feet ("but without the spark of the Lion Hearts the fire had gone out", 301), leading him to exclaim in despair, "You can't march for no reason. That's like – like just walking around, man" (346).

Yet rather than "standing one's ground", "walking around" may in fact be just what is required. "Make another march," Nazneen suggests to Karim. "Why you have to do it against someone? [...] make it into a celebration. Some singing, some dancing" (346). Against the linearity of the military-style and confrontational march, Nazneen imagines the non-linear, non-confrontational space of the dance and the song. Ali's narrator regularly puts forward such alternative, non-oppositional paradigms for imagining identity. Elsewhere, identity is imagined as a space of interweaving and entwining, walking and talking bodies instead of as statically indissociable from, and locatable in, the fanstasmatic fixity of a geographical "place in the world" for which the female body would be the trope. Chanu and Dr Azad, although from opposite ends of the social spectrum, are both, in their own way, in search of a "place in the world", yet ultimately they find their consolation in the kind of open space or figure suggested by Nazneen, weaving their verbal

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arabesques around one another, each pursuing his own topic of conversation – the one expatiating about the difficulty of integration and the abuses of Empire, the other about the increase of heroin abuse on the sink estates – each oblivious to the other yet respecting the tacitly laid down rules of conversation: “They did what friends do, talked. From time to time their conversational paths intersected. More frequently, they talked around each other” (247). Talking and walking around each other over the years, the doctor and Chanu chisel out a discursive space of consolation around the fictions their lives are built on – the fiction of Azad’s happy marriage, the fiction of Chanu’s project to launch a mobile library, the fiction of return to the homeland – fictions which plot out, if not a “place in the world”, then at least a space of companionship: “It no longer amazed Nazneen that these fictions should be so elaborately maintained. What worried her now was the possibility of their collapse. The fence that they formed, though rotten, was better than nothing” (246).

This precarious space in which to “live in the world” imagined by Nazneen is one sustained by the desires and wilful misreadings of the participants, an imperfect hotchpotch of longings, memories and perceptions re-membered and patched together across time and place and class. It follows that to figure her lover Karim Nazneen resorts not to the image of an original and originating territory or pure well-spring of being, but to that of a multi-dimensional quilt of her own making, an assemblage of bits of richly textured cloth, at once gorgeous and crude, resulting in a creature vaguely and disquietingly reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster:

How had she made him? She did not know. She had patched him together, working in the dark. She had made a quilt out of pieces of silk, scraps of velvet, and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything (454).

The quilt which shows the workings and the joins, exposing the stitches that suture together the identity of the beloved revealed in all its fabricated artifice, stands as an alternative paradigm for identity, less as some discrete and essential state of being than as a process which takes place at the interface of self and other in continual “open-ended interaction”⁸. Whereas previously Karim had fascinated her on account of “his certainty, how he walked in a straight line while others turned and stumbled [...] The thing that he had and inhabited so easily. A place in the world” (264), now

⁸ Moi, *op. cit.*, 391.

she realises that “[i]t was never so. Apart from where it mattered, in her head [...] Karim was born a foreigner [...] Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it” (448) and later she explains to him, “we made each other up” (455). The realisation of identity not as something always-already given, pure and intact, but as wrought imperfectly out of material(s) of one’s own choosing – and we constantly see Nazneen shopping for different kinds of fabrics to make clothes with –, is emancipatory for her, enabling her to shake off both her restless husband with his insistent plans for return to Bangladesh, and her domineering lover with his equally insistent calls for divorce and re-marriage. Instead she begins to support herself and her daughters by joining her neighbour Razia in a project to start up a dress-making business that cashes in on current Western tastes for Asian-style clothing, at first simply making, and finally designing, the clothes that will be worn by fashionable western women.

The body invested

Clothes and garment-making feature strongly if ambivalently in the novel as constitutive elements in the construction of the third world woman’s subjectivity. It is through work in a Dhaka garment factory that Nazneen’s sister Hasina, who has remained in Bangladesh, is able to flee from her abusive “love” marriage and maintain her independence, albeit in sweatshop conditions; it is through piecework that Nazneen is able to earn money to secrete back to her sister in Bangladesh. And it is through the wearing and making of clothes that Nazneen begins to re-define her “fate”:

Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopsgate [...] And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin.

For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life. (277-278)

Neither, however, are we allowed to lose sight of the historical colonial oppression associated with the textile and garment industries. Chanu reminds us that “the British cut the fingers off Bengali weavers [...] It was the British of course who destroyed our textile industry [...] The Dhaka looms were sacrificed [...] so that the mills of Manchester could be born” (316-317). Reminders of oppression and exclusion as well as enablers of expression and integration, clothes entertain an ambiguous relation to the

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body they simultaneously veil and reveal. Recalling a conversation between her mother Amma and her aunt, Nazneen remembers pondering on the enigma of womanhood which for her had always seemed to be synonymous with suffering, but a suffering paradoxically longed for and made desirable by the clothes which envelop it:

What were they suffering? [...] It was something to do with being a woman, of that much she was sure. When she was a woman she would find out. She looked forward to that day. She longed to be enriched by this hardship, to cast off her childish baggy pants and long shirt and begin to wear this suffering that was as rich and layered and deeply coloured as the saris which enfolded Amma's troubled bones. (103)

“Rich and layered and deeply coloured”, the saris which envelop her mother's troubled body invest her suffering with oxymoronic grandeur, a fraudulent signifier for womanhood. There is a sense that, as a set of signs and designs borne by the body, clothes, however trivial they may appear, are in fact unspeakably significant, double-edged and enigmatic, always potentially oppressive. (When Karim's move into fundamentalism is accompanied by a change of dress style to panjabi-pyjamas, an expensive fleece and a skullcap, Nazneen feels that he “did not want her to mention the new clothes. The matter was either too trivial or else too important to be discussed”, 376). What is more, it is clothes that allow the female body to become a vehicle for male ideological statements, the site across which the immigrant's conflict of values expresses itself, as illustrated in the conflicting ways Chanu orders his daughters to be dressed – in skirts or in trousers – according to whether he is feeling resentful of anti-Muslim attacks or contemptuous of what he calls the “display of peasant ignorance” of his more fanatical compatriots:

If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants.

If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts.

Sometimes he saw both sides of it... On these days it was left to Nazneen or the girls to decide what they should wear. (265)

The body inscribed, the body invisible

This undecidability as to how the woman's body should be made to signify is a recurring motif in *Brick Lane*, and the reader is confronted with a number of women whose bodies have been literally or figuratively inscribed and disfigured by the cultures in which they find themselves. The first of these “bodies inscribed” is that of the “tattoo lady”, one of the Tower

Hamlets council estate residents with whom Nazneen early on establishes a rudimentary form of communication: a wave from window to window. The tattoo lady's body is literally inscribed, "at least two-thirds of the flesh on show [...] covered in ink" (18), as she sits day after day on display at her window, "her big thighs spilling over her chair". Never having been close enough to "decipher the designs" (18) on the woman's body, Nazneen is unsure whether to deplore the beer-swilling, chain-smoking tattoo lady's gross inertia or to admire her stoical indifference. She is a reminder to Nazneen of the ideal state of indifference to which she herself has been enjoined as a way of submitting to her "fate", "the state [...] sought by the sadhus who walked in rags through the Muslim villages, indifferent to the kindness of strangers, the unkind sun" (18). But she also embodies the ignominious return to mere meaningless matter as she ends up wallowing in her own excrement before simply disappearing from the text to be confined in an institution (130). To the end she is an ambivalent cultural cipher, her body the site of an "unfathomable" contradiction for Nazneen for whom to be "poor and fat" as the tattoo lady is, is inconceivable: "In Bangladesh it was no more possible to be poor and fat than to be rich and starving" (53).

Back in Bangladesh, the rape and forced prostitution of Nazneen's sister Hasina following her dismissal from the garment factory, and the acid attack carried out on her friend Monju by Monju's husband are violent manifestations of another literal form of bodily inscription undergone by these female characters. These third world women, whose bodies are made to bear the physical stigmata of their powerlessness and subjection, make their appearance in the text through the letters Hasina writes to Nazneen. Written in excruciatingly bad English, the letters introduce into the heart of the novel a disfigured form of English which gives apt expression to the disfiguring brandings and burnings which are part and parcel of the female condition in Bangladesh. At the same time they also give voice to the vibrant resilience of the third world woman as embodied in Hasina, a resilience mirrored in the equally vibrant resilience of the text, as meaning and understanding emerge in spite of, or indeed from within, the gaping grammatical wounds of the hybrid pidgin which transcribes Hasina's imperfect yet energetic mastery of language. Witness this graphic description of Monju's acid-eroded body as it lies rotting in a Dhaka hospital:

Bed is push right to wall and space is left around. When I walk close is bad odour emitting from thing lie on mattress. I must put hand over nose and mouth and stomach is make threat on me. I kneel down by bed and put face very close. I see is Monju. I know by right eye alone. Left eye is narrow and stuff come out. Cheek and mouth is

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melt and ear have gone like dog chew off. [...] Mouth cavity shrinking from which she cannot shout cry or talk loud. [...] It is her husband who have done this with his brother and sister. Brother and sister hold tight and husband pour acid over head face and body. All over is infection on body and smell make it difficult for people to go near. (269-270)

Monju's acid-branded body stands as an extreme literal form of branding, whose verbal equivalent, no less damaging, Hasina undergoes when she becomes the victim of untrue rumours that she is sleeping with her landlord, Mr Chowdhury, an otherwise fatherly figure, in exchange for free rent. When as a result of the rumours Hasina is finally dismissed from the garment factory, she is forced to become the prostitute the gossip has actually accused her of being, the untrue words performatively inscribing their treacherous imprint in her very body, leaving it "damaged past repair" (171). Again, the paradox of the female condition is highlighted, translated into Hasina's broken English: "*I thinking this one thing all day. They put me out from factory for untrue reason and due to they put me out the reason have come now as actual truth*" (169).

The dangers for the female body of being branded, moulded and shaped by the collective discourse of gossip are no less present in the first world for the immigrant woman. Razia's early advice to Nazneen is to shop in Sainsbury's rather than in the Bengali shops: "if you go to our shops, the Bengali men will make things up about you. You know how they talk. Once you get talked about, then that's it. Nothing you can do" (59). Invisibility as opposed to inscription in the collective discourse of gossip has its attractions, and Nazneen delights in the anonymity of the English city which offers its spaces – supermarkets, parks, pubs where even a pregnant Bengali woman can use the toilets and remain above suspicion – spaces in which both to assert and to mask her subjectivity: "They could not see her any more than she could see God" (56), she reflects, until the subversive thought that she had "without meaning to, compared herself to God" (57) jolts her back to an awareness of her aching, pregnant body. Other women in the novel choose the invisibility and anonymity of suicide veiled as "terrible accident[s]" (27), a gesture of self-erasure which is at once one of self-assertion. Of the tower block resident who fell (or did she jump?) from the 16th floor, Nazneen reflects that she is sure the woman jumped "because with this single everlasting act she defied everything and everyone" (40). Another "fall" is the one that kills Nazneen's own mother, who is found impaled on a spear in the village store room and wearing her best sari, which is felt to be "strange. It wasn't a special day, after all" (46). Not until Hasina's final letter which

describes how she watched her mother test the spear points one after one just before she died, does Nazneen admit to herself the truth that Amma wilfully took her own life and disguised it as a fateful accident.

The body re-membered

Between suffering and self-erasure, inscription in the discourse of patriarchal censure and self-inflicted invisibility, what alternative is there for the female body? How may the third-world woman reclaim the narratives of “fate” which her body is made to tell and constantly re-enact? Hasina does so by energetically claiming as her own the responsibility for the vicissitudes of her life: *“Everything has happen is because of me. I take my own husband. I leave him. I go to the factory. I let Abdul walk with me. I the one living here without paying”* (166). Rather than a victim of Fate, Hasina holds herself accountable:

Fate, it seemed, had turned Hasina’s life around and around, tossed and twisted it like a baby rat, naked and blind, in the jaws of a dog. And yet Hasina did not see it. She examined the bite marks on her body, and for each one she held herself accountable. *This is where I savaged myself, here and here and here* (340-341).

The paradox of self-blame masquerading as self-assertion might, on the other hand, be construed as another form of self-erasure, and Nazneen’s dream of her sister laughing while ironing collars in place, then ironing her own hand and finally ironing her face (115) registers this fear, Hasina as the self-mocking agent of her own non-agency, ironing out the very creases and imperfections which are constitutive of her vitality and aliveness. Yet far from being an expression of self-censure, Hasina’s wildly ungrammatical but vibrant demotic style, which “kick[s] aside all [the] constraints” of grammar just as she “kick[s] against fate” (22), insists on being read on its own terms. “Full of mistakes and bursting with life” (93-94) in contrast to Nazneen’s own impeccably turned letters, in which, we are told, “all errors [were] expunged along with any vital signs” (94), Hasina’s corrupt and deformed words accommodate error, impropriety, imperfection and radical linguistic otherness at the very heart of her sense of self, becoming, indeed, the enabling conditions of her self-expression.

This accommodation of otherness at the heart of the self as a condition of self-preservation and freedom is also the lesson that, by the end, impresses itself upon Nazneen when she recalls the anecdote of her aunt Mumtaz’s “possession” by a jinni. Like Hasina, Mumtaz is another third-world female

figure who makes of the limited options available to her the enabling conditions of her bodily re-appropriation. Having inherited a jinni in a bottle from her father, the story goes, and released it from its imprisonment in exchange for wisdom, only to have it fail ever to show up, Mumtaz is forced to conclude that the only wisdom he appears to have imparted is “never trust a jinni” (396). Until one day, while she is pondering on the dilemma of a woman “who had three sons and five daughters and could scarcely feed so many mouths [yet whose] husband still wanted to sleep with her and make more mouths” (396), the jinni manifests itself in the form of an ingenious answer. “Tell her,” says the jinni, speaking through Mumtaz,

“that she should gather together all her children [...] before her husband. She should say to him, ‘First you must choose which one will die. Kill the child and I will give you another [...] For every child you kill, I will replace him.’” (396-397)

From then on, Mumtaz can conjure up the jinni at will, and as more and more people consult her on matters of importance, she elaborates on her performance, dressing in white and placing a veil across her mouth and nose, muttering indecipherable “charms”. Although she is seen at once as a fraud by her family, Mumtaz’s performance of allowing her body to be inhabited by a patriarchally-ordained “spirit” (397), her comical parody of feminine non-agency, of being spoken through and acted upon rather than speaking or acting, her feigned dis-possession of her female body, ironically enables the beleaguered woman in question to re-possess her own body. In this way Mumtaz re-writes, in order the better to subvert, the narrative of women’s “fate” which presents them as nothing more than passive bodily “channels” for the “spirit” of the father’s letter⁹.

If the myth of their “fate” threatens to congeal these women within the static paradigms of womanhood as spoken rather than speaking, dispossessed rather than possessing, inhabited by the other rather than inhabiting themselves, the itinerant resourcefulness and energy of Nazneen, Hasina and Mumtaz finally turn such paradigms to account, having them tell a story that puts women back in possession of their bodies. While the old paradigms of

⁹ A similar re-possession of subjectivity after temporary linguistic dispossession is performed by Nazneen when, after her nervous breakdown, she resorts to referring to herself in the third person as “she” in order the better to assert her will as “I”. Mimicking her husband’s habit of addressing his wife as “she” in order to “emphasize her fragility”, she refers to herself “at this linguistic remove” (341) in order the better to defy him: ““Oh, she is [...] listening. But she is not obeying”” (341), she declares.

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identity as static, and rooted in a particular place persist (at the end Karim disappears, having reputedly returned to Bangladesh in his quest for “the real thing”) new and different paradigms suggested by the dynamics of walking, of following one’s feet, are gradually taking their place – the open designs of interweaving paths of self and other, the wanderings around London, the arabesques and “criss-cross patterns” (492) of the ice-skaters which throughout the novel stand for freedom and endless possibility. The image on which the novel ends is that of a sari-wearing ice-skating woman (“‘But you can’t skate in a sari.’ Razia was already lacing her boots. ‘This is England,’ she said. ‘You can do whatever you like’”, 492), of Nazneen firmly on her feet but preparing to launch out onto the precarious ice of experience.

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