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Nothing was orderly

Monica Ali's gloriously entertaining tragicomedy of everyday London life

By Tash Aw



Bedford Park, London | © English Heritage/Heritage Images/Getty Images

111 January 28, 2022
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LOVE MARRIAGE
512pp. Virago. £18.99.
Monica Ali



Yasmin Ghorami is twenty-six and enjoying a thriving career as a junior doctor at Saint Barnabas hospital in London, a job full of pressures - overbearing superiors, staff shortages, a lack of funding - that she generally handles with aplomb. Studious, responsible and tactful - “the biggest appeaser since Neville Chamberlain”, according to her wayward younger brother, Arif - Yasmin had to negotiate far trickier issues during her upbringing in an immigrant Bengali family in a leafy South London neighbourhood. Her kind but stern father’s obsession with medicine has clouded her thinking about career choices, while her eccentrically-dressed mother’s devotion to Islam and failure to grasp British social norms have contributed to the ambivalence Yasmin feels towards religion and family obligation, not to mention towards her own conventionality and troubling (to her at least) chasteness.



Yasmin has slept with three men, a tally she has never paused to consider until now, on the verge of her marriage to the third of them, Joe Sangster, a fellow doctor at Saint Barnabas. As Yasmin begins to question her sexual and cultural identity, the flawed but apparently solid scaffolding of her life begins to feel more rickety. “Nothing was orderly any more”, Yasmin observes as her father Shaokat’s relationship with Arif breaks down irreparably. Meanwhile, the man Yasmin is engaged to is incapable of freeing himself from his mother’s clutches, her father admits to having had lifelong extramarital affairs, her brother is flirting uncomfortably with hardline religion while having a child out of wedlock with his white working-class girlfriend, and her dutiful mother may be having a lesbian affair with a performance artist. It is 2016, and in Brexit Britain all the elements of Yasmin’s personal life are spinning wildly in the air. We have no idea whether they will land gently or come crashing down around her.

Monica Ali’s rich, sensitive and gloriously entertaining novel - her fifth, and possibly her best - juggles so many questions and plot lines that we keep expecting one of them to break free and become detached, like the crazily orbiting fragments of Yasmin’s new life; yet everything remains utterly coherent and convincing. Weighty topics, such as race, class, cultural identity and immigration, surface as part of the tragicomedy of everyday life, such as when Yasmin’s best friend Rania, a hijab-wearing political activist and immigration lawyer, gets drunk, to hilarious effect, in a hotel bar, and the whole spectacle is caught on camera and goes viral some time later, after Rania appears on television to defend women’s rights to wear religious dress. The resulting discussions on religion, authenticity and hypocrisy, both within Yasmin’s family circle and on social media, are at once extreme and familiar. Yasmin professes not to be “an expert” on such matters, yet she is drawn into arguments on an almost daily basis; like many of us, she is both reasonable and partisan.

The principal catalyst of Yasmin’s unravelling appears to be Harriet, Joe’s mother, a feminist “activist, writer and intellectual” in the mould of Germaine Greer. Harriet’s legendary reputation is founded on the twin achievements of a frank memoir, detailing her numerous bisexual relationships, and a portrait of her “naked on her back with her legs split wide, head raised to stare, challenging and defiant, straight into the lens”. *Love Marriage* opens with a delicious collision, the kind of extended set-piece that fleshes out the novel, and at which Ali excels, brimming with extremely funny moments of excruciating social comedy. For the first time, the Ghoramis, who never speak of sex, are visiting the Sangsters, who speak of little else. Initial signs are unpromising. In preparation for the meeting, Anisah, Yasmin’s mother, begins to read Harriet’s memoir, but is then seen dropping it ceremoniously into the bin. As ever, Anisah has prepared too much food and is about to embarrass Yasmin as she has done at previous formal dinners, with her idiosyncratic use of language and weak grasp of niceties. Harriet opines at length on a range of subjects, including her love of India (where she once campaigned for a women’s group on reproductive rights and went on an Ayurvedic retreat), and her loathing for liberal guilt; her feminist overtures to Anisah are met with a certain nonchalance. Yet, by the end of the evening, the two women have become friends, and it is their complicity, rather than their distance, that will soon be a problem for Yasmin.

Harriet’s closeness with Joe is another thorny issue, and probably one cause of his sex addiction, for which he is undergoing intensive pre-marital therapy. In all other respects, he is judged, by Yasmin and her family, to be a perfect match. The two seem to be deeply in love, though something isn’t quite right. In the course of the novel’s 500-odd pages, it transpires that the reason for the physically unexciting nature of Yasmin and Joe’s relationship is perhaps less that his sexual interests lie elsewhere and more that Yasmin is only just beginning to explore her own desires, including some transgressions that remain secret. Ali does not seek to simplify or demystify the web of intertwining emotional strands: neither Yasmin’s nor Joe’s affairs, nor those of Shaokat nor Anisah, is ultimately held responsible for the family’s disintegration.

For all its precise comic timing and consummate plotting, the novel’s real strength lies in its depiction of complex social encounters, leaving the reader to decide which side, if any, to take. Sometimes, the absurdity helps us to make up our minds. When Yasmin reacts tetchily but matter-of-factly to a patient who asks for “a doctor qualified in Britain ... I mean a British doctor”, she is accused of having called the patient a racist, and is handed an official reprimand. As Joe wryly observes, “*Calling* someone a racist is worse than *being* a racist”.

But there are other, subtler strands designed to make judgement more difficult to deliver. Is Yasmin, newly unfaithful to her fiancé, still a true victim of infidelity? What is the difference between Joe’s affair, which “just happened”, and hers, a more deliberate attempt to balance the books? Is Anisah, who has always seemed out of place in Britain, finally becoming a part of middle-class society, via her new friendship with Harriet? And what is the point of being integrated or non-integrated anyway, given that Shaokat’s lifelong dedication to the idea of the uncomplaining immigrant has brought him close to personal ruin?

The novel’s most dramatic moments are built on the excavation site of family secrets, on both sides of the Ghorami-Sangster divide, culminating in a long, heart-stopping revelation as the story draws to a close. Yet the more understated scenes are often the ones that stay with us the longest, and showcase Ali’s talents as a chronicler of modern Britain. At the end of the novel, Yasmin is in a new flat:

She flung the sash window open and leaned out into the street that was waking up. A woman walking by with a giant loaf of Greek bread in her hand, covered in nigella and sesame seeds. An old man dressed for Siberia, beetling along at an impressive pace. Two boys kicking a football across the road from one pavement to the other. A silver Audi slowing and then speeding off. A family in beautiful white robes making their way as they did every Sunday to the Eritrean Orthodox church.

Like so much else in *Love Marriage*, this brief portrait of the neighbourhood feels at once everyday and exceptional, a love letter to the richness of London life.

Tash Aw is the author of four novels, including, most recently, *We, the Survivors*, 2019

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