

# Love Marriage by Monica Ali — matrimony under the microscope

The author's fifth novel is a sweeping tale of intercultural love and family truths, bristling with domestic epiphanies and brutalities

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Novelists often despair of readers who clamour for "likeable" characters. These readers themselves are viewed as unlikeable, guilty of laziness, or under-reading, unwilling to engage in the demanding act of collaboration that literary novels can require. There's also an anxiety that likeable characters are the enemy of complexity, softening and sweetening, like gold-flecked light in a Bayswater Road painting.

*Love Marriage*, the fifth novel by Monica Ali, whose enormously successful first book *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize and translated into 26 languages, is filled with people who are not just likeable, but loveable. This contract of sympathy, which

flows between reader and characters, deepens and enriches the portrait of contemporary London that Ali creates with a confident Dickensian sweep.

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The Ghorami family, at the centre of this novel, is presented, at least at first, as a magnificent

institution. Its inmates are intelligent, conscientious and endearing. The Indian-born parents, in their prosperous suburban London home, are a legend to their children, having eschewed the expected arranged marriage route, opting bravely instead for a union born purely of romance — a love marriage. Shaokat, a GP, is proud and demanding — his family is destined to be a success, he insists — but it is done with care. His wife Anisah, a skilled homemaker and kind-hearted neighbour, has a weakness for amassing clutter and a fondness for mysterious consoling parables.

Twenty-six year-old Yasmin, a junior doctor on a geriatric ward, weaves among her elderly patients, checking they're still breathing, like the mother of a newborn. At home, she sits on her childhood bed studying, dreaming of her own imminent love marriage to Joe Sangster, a

fellow doctor at St Barnabas hospital, and only child of the outlandish and once iconic feminist, Harriet Sangster. Yasmin's brother Arif, meanwhile, seems a little out of sorts — he's not yet a high achiever — but he is still young.

Before long, however, Ali pulls the tablecloth sharply from under this feast of a family, sending quite a few of the dishes crashing. The Ghoramis are poised at the end of an era, clinging fast to enchanted beliefs about themselves, even as they realise they are not true. When the weight of long-hidden secrets threatens to reduce and stifle them to the point of suffocation, what is to be done?

Across town, the Sangster household, seemingly buffeted against disaster by its Primrose Hill splendour, is experiencing something of a comparable collapse. In the august consulting room of an American psychotherapist named Sandor — think Winnicott crossed with the Wizard of Oz — painful truths about the past are emerging.

Joe Sangster, Yasmin's fiancé, is straining at the edges of himself. He knows he is fortunate, but why does he hate the way he lives? He's started identifying with the drug-addicted mothers on his ward, whose babies are born with withdrawal symptoms. He's started identifying with their babies. Joe's mother Harriet maintains her son is her



best friend: she likes to wander into the bathroom when he's showering, putting her bare feet on his lap at the end of the day. She is busy negotiating her own delicate transition from enfant terrible to stately grande dame, writing her memoirs with a fat Montblanc. She is charmed by the coming union with the Ghoramis, although she wishes Yasmin were

"more Indian". Sandor, the psychotherapist, smells many rats in this set-up and doesn't hold back from saying so to Joe.

*Love Marriage* teems with domestic epiphanies and brutalities. There is dementia ward mayhem and suburban decorum; stacks of Tupperware crammed with Indian delicacies and excruciating metropolitan liberal shenanigans. Anxious shoes pace bright hospital corridors throughout. There are also heartbreaking, vividly drawn memories of early-life trauma in India.

Although a milder novel than *Brick Lane*, *Love Marriage* is wildly entertaining. As you read you're thoroughly immersed in the intricacies of Ali's characters. When Yasmin makes an ill-advised late night dash to a male colleague's house at Christmas, ringing the bell then diving behind the bins, you lay your head in your hands

and yelp. You google the ailments of her favourite patients and begin to worry when they fail to finish their meals. When your own doorbell goes you half-hope it's Yasmin or Anisah with a request for half a lemon, or better yet, a shoulder or an ear.

Can marriage to Yasmin help Joe with his demons? Can Yasmin's mother's blossoming friendship with Harriet, and a crash course in feminism, rescue her? Can Yasmin endure one more day at work where a patient asks for a British doctor?

This is a bold and generous book, with large portions set in a sprawling hospital — the perfect backdrop for asking powerful questions about what constitutes health in life and health in love, now.

[Love Marriage](#) by Monica Ali, *Virago* £18.99, 512 pages/*Scribner* \$27.99, 432 pages

*Susie Boyt is the author of 'Loved and Missed' (Virago)*

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