

Love Marriage by Monica Ali review – a culture-clash engagement

An entertaining exploration of multicultural British modernity – love, sex, class, politics, faith and family – from the author of Brick Lane

[Lucy Atkins](#)



Strong storytelling ... Monica Ali. Photograph: Yolande De Vries

In the decade following her bestselling 2003 debut, *Brick Lane*, which was shortlisted for the Booker prize then turned into a film, [Monica Ali](#) produced three more novels. First came *Alentejo Blue*, loosely linked vignettes set in a Portuguese village that bore almost no relation in style, conviction or tone to *Brick Lane*. *In the Kitchen* followed, a meandering tale of a London chef in crisis, and then *Untold Story*, an odd novel in which Princess Diana fakes her death and moves to small-town America. Critical responses to all three were mixed (the *New York Times* called *Untold Story* “preposterously gimmicky”).

There was a 10-year gap. And now Ali is back with *Love Marriage*, a novel about the rocky engagement of Yasmin Ghorami, a 26-year-old trainee doctor whose parents are originally from Kolkata, and fellow medic Joe Sangster, the upper middle-class son of an outspoken feminist author.

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As the book opens, Yasmin is nervously anticipating an introductory family dinner at her future mother-in-law's huge Primrose Hill home. Although Harriet always uses caterers, Yasmin's mother, Anisah, an eccentrically dressed homemaker with "a talent for being herself", has spent 10 hours cooking ("shukto, alu dom, dal pakori, kachori ..."). Yasmin knows her parents will insist on driving from south London unfashionably early, clutching carrier bags stuffed with Tupperware. The elegant Harriet, who spends her life writing essays on liberal guilt while throwing lavish parties for the literati, will graciously "hide her amusement".

Harriet is, in fact, thrilled at the prospect of her new culturally diverse family ties. It's debatable whether the Ghoramis feel quite as enthusiastic. Harriet is famous for a photograph taken in the 1990s in which she posed naked, glaring defiantly at the camera. Yasmin's younger brother Arif, an unemployed sociology graduate, is delighted to have found this image online. He has also

spotted their mother reading one of Harriet's books over the kitchen bin, before hurling it in. The stage, then, is set for comedic culture clashes, generational tensions, embarrassment, misunderstanding, conflict and, we trust, resolution. Publishers fought to buy *Love Marriage* and the BBC is turning it into a drama. It isn't hard to see why. It is an exploration of multicultural British modernity, of love, sex, class, politics, faith and family. But how well does it work in literary terms?

Soon nobody is behaving as they should: there is a lesbian affair, a shock pregnancy, fist fights and family reckonings

Yasmin, who plans to specialise in geriatric medicine, is mild and kind, an appeaser who has spent her life trying to meet the expectations of her father

Shaokat, a south London GP who rose from orphaned poverty. "Baba" loves to spend his evenings puzzling over obscure medical cases with his daughter, who increasingly wonders if she ever really wanted to be a doctor at all. At the agonising introductory dinner both mothers, for very different reasons, hijack the wedding preparations; but then an unlikely companionship springs up between them. Fuelled by Harriet and her artsy friends, Anisah begins a feminist reawakening, abruptly – and this is a bit of a credibility stretch – moving into Harriet's house. Yasmin's growing bewilderment at her mother's behaviour is tempered by a personal crisis: her perfect fiance Joe admits to a one-night stand. Yasmin responds with her own sexual rebellion, and soon nobody

is behaving as they should: there is a lesbian affair, a shock pregnancy, two fist fights, a blood-stained bedroom, several racist incidents, and some deep family reckonings, including a particularly distressing revelation about how Yasmin's parents really met.

There are riches here. All the components of modern identity are laid out: race, class, gender, faith, sexuality. Ali explores generational and cultural tensions, as well as contemporary political issues such as Islamophobia, NHS underfunding and Brexit. There is a big cast and the chapters jump between several perspectives (we even, puzzlingly, get Joe's psychotherapist), but perhaps because we enter so many heads, often fleetingly, complexities begin to flatten. Joe, for instance, never quite emerges from the psychological diagnosis that defines him. It is therefore hard to invest too deeply in the engagement, or in Yasmin's feelings about it. Peripheral characters sometimes seem to exist to make a point. A performance artist called Flame, one of Harriet's friends, is no more than a plot device to fuel Anisah's journey, and Yasmin's best friend Rania, a would-be "Muslimah [Kim Kardashian](#)" who despairs about faith-based dating sites, tends to pop up as a sounding board, or to demonstrate a big cultural point. A scene in which Rania suddenly decides to drink alcohol initially feels odd. Later, when video footage of her drunkenness sparks a social media furore about feminism and faith, it is hard to ignore the authorial puppeteer tweaking at the strings.

One notable exception is Baba. Tormented by hang-ups, he is a fully realised and often moving character. He loves his children deeply but is so desperate for them to succeed, to prove to the world that he is worthy, solid and safe, that he risks alienating them entirely. He is also furious with his wife. The story goes that the two met in a library, a "love match". Anisah's well-to-do family grudgingly accepted him because he was bright – they even paid his medical school fees (he paid them back, he boasts, with interest). This journey from poverty explains why he is so harsh on his son. Arif feels hopeless, angry, unwanted and unconfident, but Baba sees only a lack of motivation. The tension between the two festers until, one day, it explodes. This is the kind of complex emotional authenticity that made *Brick Lane* such a hit.

This novel is largely engaging, entertaining and relevant and there will be lots of love for it, possibly prizes. Ali is a good storyteller, sometimes enlightening, but there is the feeling of a smaller, tighter, more devastating novel lurking here. As it is, the emotional punches can get a little lost amid the padding and point-making.

Love Marriage is published by Virago (£18.99). To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.