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# Love Marriage by Monica Ali review — a great return to form for the Brick Lane author

An astute tale of love, sex and culture clash

David Sexton | Sunday February 06 2022, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



Monica Ali  
MICHAEL CLEMENT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES CULTURE AT DULWICH PICTURE GALLERY

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For Monica Ali success came quickly. Her 2003 debut, *Brick Lane*, was shortlisted for the Booker prize. Three years later it was filmed, provoking resentment in the Brick Lane Bangladeshi community, exacerbated by Germaine Greer accusing her of lacking authenticity and practising caricature.

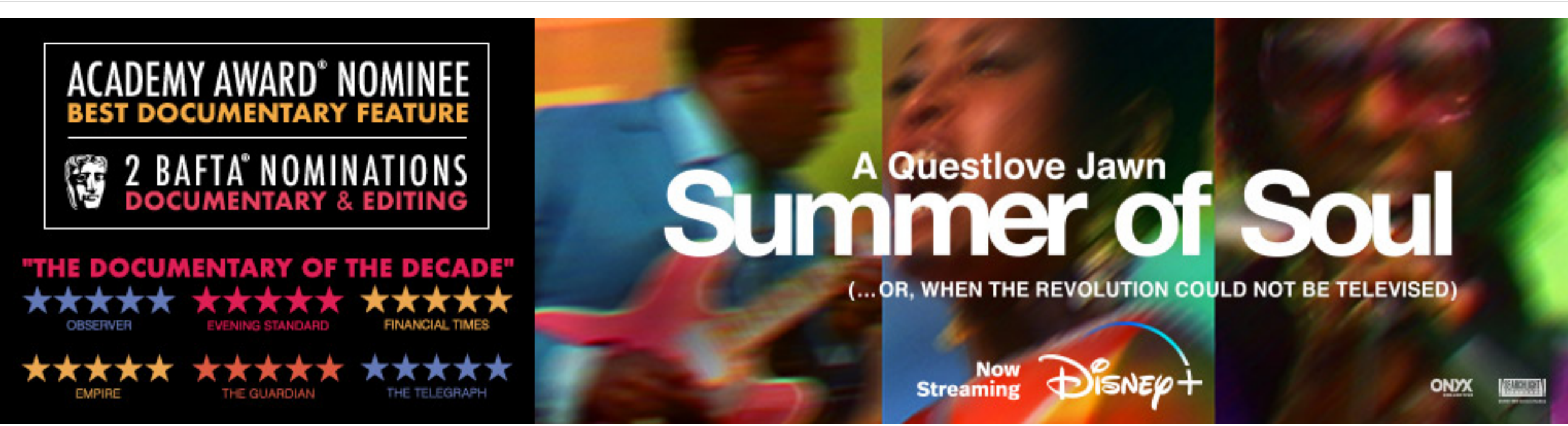
In *The Outrage Economy*, a 2007 essay, Ali defends her right to imagine other lives. “Is that not literature’s gift?” Her fear that the insistence on “authenticity”, taken to its logical outcome, would mean that men would not be allowed to write about women, or vice versa, seems very much on the button.

• [Read our extensive interview with Monica Ali](#)

Yet despite this strong stance, Ali’s confidence in her career as a novelist faltered. Her last novel appeared in 2011. In a remarkable radio talk in 2019, *Simply a Writer*, she described her “prolonged and pronounced sense of shame and failure” over the reception of her work since *Brick Lane*, to the extent that she hadn’t just stopped writing, but for several years couldn’t go into a bookshop.

Now she’s back. Set in London in 2016, *Love Marriage* brings together two families, the Ghoramis and the Sangsters, through an engagement.

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Monica Ali on the Sunday Times Culture Show

Yasmin Ghorami and Joe Sangster are junior doctors in south London, and their romance has followed an unusual course. After meeting in a pub, they didn’t kiss for a month but decided to marry after just five. He has had lots of sexual partners, he admits rather vaguely. She has slept with three men. Yasmin’s prudish parents are from Bengal, their union apparently an uncommon love match rather than an arrangement.

Her father, Shaokat, has escaped poverty to gain a medical education, sponsored by the well-to-do family of her mother, Anisah. Shaokat is immensely proud of the little piece of heaven he has secured in south London and of his daughter following him into medicine, while seeming content for Anisah to play a traditional role — religious and preoccupied with cooking.

Joe’s mother, Harriet, could not be more different. She is a Germaine Greer-like celebrity pundit, notorious for an ancient “feminist photo... naked on her back with her legs split wide”. Conceited, entitled and rich, she lives in a big house in Primrose Hill, doting on her son.

The novel opens with Yasmin’s parents meeting Harriet for the first time at a stressful dinner to plan the wedding. Entanglements ensue, gradually changing our understanding of their pasts.



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Joe, we come to realise, has been monstered by his narcissistic, quasi-incestuous mother and is struggling with sex addiction. Reacting to his infidelity, innocent Yasmin finds the Ghoramis too turns out to be far from the fairytale Yasmin had always believed.



In a book that is about how sex may be even more difficult to house within marriage than love, it is odd that these crucial episodes are described so abstractly — “She is disgraced, corrupted, debauched. Her back arches” — when the narrative is so generously specific about food, clothes, houses and so forth.

Never mind. *Love Marriage* is enormously satisfying in its inventions and observations, and its exploration of cultural diversity in Britain. At once touching and satirical, it’s a great return to form: as engrossing and enjoyable as *Brick Lane* itself.

Virago £18.99 pp499

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**Monica Ali**

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