

Love Marriage by Monica Ali review — it's Brick Lane updated (but with more sex)

Fans of Monica Ali will lap up her frank, sexy and entertaining new novel, says
Melissa Katsoulis

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Anisah and Shaokat Ghorami moved to south London from Calcutta to seek their fortune and bring up two children who are now adults. Whereas Nazneen and Chanu in *Brick Lane* had an arranged marriage, the Ghoramis are proud that theirs was a love match, and despite Anisah's subservience and her GP husband's pompous formality, they seem content with their "little piece of heaven on earth" in a quiet suburban street. Certainly their children, Yasmin and Arif, don't see anything unusual about them, only the predictable favouritism that Shaokat shows his daughter, the hospital doctor, compared with his son, who floats about, directionless, with dreams of working in the media. But this is a novel about the real story that the Ghoramis — and every family — conceal beneath the one they tell the world.

BESTSELLING AND BOOKER-PRIZE SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF *BRICK LANE*

MONICA ALI



LOVE MARRIAGE

'Bold, compassionate,
big-hearted and unputdownable'

NEEL MUKHERJEE BOOKER-PRIZE
SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

The first sign of unravelling comes with Yasmin's fiancé,

the wealthy north Londoner Joe. "Her parents . . . liked Joe because as a doctor he was automatically suitable . . . If Anisah longed for her daughter to marry a good Muslim boy it was an opinion she kept to herself."

However, Joe's mother, Harriet, is harder to accept. Harriet is a controversial, sex-obsessed, famous feminist of a certain age who loves to shock and once, famously, posed for a photograph naked with legs splayed (one person who sided with the disgruntled British Bangladeshis who felt misrepresented by *Brick Lane* was Germaine Greer, who wrote: "How disturbing it is to have gobbets of your life sampled, digested and dished back up to you in unrecognisable form.").

Harriet is a monster, ordering about her maid in her glorious home in Primrose Hill and maintaining a peculiar intimacy with her son. Yet after inviting the Ghoramis for an excruciating dinner to discuss their children's wedding she insinuates herself into their lives in a way that will bring about unexpected and ultimately miraculous change. Thanks to Harriet, the truth about the Ghoramis' marriage is slowly revealed over a 500-page narrative that dives deep into the heart of multicultural Britain and finds some unsavoury truths there.

Ali has Yasmin and Joe working in a big hospital where every variety of prejudice is laid bare. You can't hide your racism when you're afraid for your loved one's life, as Yasmin discovers in an altercation with an angry white

woman. Nor can you conceal your misogyny and snobbishness like the ambitious, sleazy department head who insists Yasmin publicly apologise and undertake sensitivity training after she reacts to being racially abused at work. The subtleties of hospital hierarchy and the reality of life on an overstretched, underfunded (this is 2016) geriatrics ward are so vividly described you might wonder if Ali has spent the past ten years training to be a medic. But of course, as one of Harriet's novelist friends points out in one of the book's few moments of clunky meta-commentary, a fiction writer needn't write only about the things she has experienced.

There are many things Ali wants to talk to us about in this epic but easy to read book: Islamophobia, the specific rights of British hijab-wearing Muslims, babies, literary prizes, psychotherapy, lesbians, chutney, charity shops, sex, bodies, shame. These things flow through Anisah and Yasmin, who find that it's never too late to fully realise their carnal selves. Not for the faint-hearted is the scene where Ali maps Islam's menstruation taboo onto Yasmin's journey to erotic emancipation.

Love Marriage is *Brick Lane* for 2022 with nicer interiors and more sex, and will be lapped up by fans of Ali's debut. Yet it is also the work of a mature feminist author who is ready, after her novels about chefs and princesses, to return to the knotty problem at the heart of British family life: how can we bring up our children when we do not understand their world, nor they ours? Is love

enough? Yasmin and her family work together to answer this question, becoming dear friends to the reader along the way.

***Love Marriage* by Monica Ali, Virago, 512pp; £18.99**