



that they involve an imam, contrary to secular Shaokat's and fuss-averse Yasmin's wishes, to navigate.

Ali's lightly satirical approach makes good use of comic stereotypes. Not only is Harriet, once a highly prized feminist intellectual whose star is on the wane, the perfect example of inclusion by steamroller, but Anisah travels nowhere without carrier bags stuffed with homemade pakoras and chutneys, while Shaokat is a restrained GP whose leisure time is spent drilling with Indian clubs and rehearsing his daughter in arcane medical case studies.

His weak spot is Yasmin's brother Arif, a drifter who has not only been chucked out of college but also impregnated a cheerful girl from a white working-class family. Meanwhile, he makes vague pronouncements about getting into telly via a YouTube documentary about Islamophobia.

But beneath this set-up, something far more delicate and disquieting emerges. The novel's short, vignette-ish chapters begin to include exchanges between a therapist and his patient. The patient is being treated for a sex addiction that is driving him to the point of breakdown. It soon emerges that he is one of the story's principal characters.

Yasmin herself begins to fumble her way towards her own sexual reckoning. Elsewhere, subplots with little flares of violence, co-dependency and abuse begin to accrete.

As wedding preparations dominate the narrative's superficial conversations, each character retreats into varying degrees of shame, silence and secrecy.

They are fuelled both by a sense of self-preservation and by the fear of inflicting pain on others they consider too fragile to endure it. It's a dynamic common, perhaps, to family cultures, regardless of nationality, race or religion.

One of the most compelling themes running through *Love Marriage* – the title refers to the match between Shaokat and Anisah, itself under scrutiny by the end of the book – is the link that binds the adult child to his or her parents.

Another is the extent to which all generations are invested in believing their family's communal, collaborative account of its genesis.

For Joe, brought up solely by his mother with what transpires to have been a disabling amount of licence, the result is social ease but personal disarray. For Yasmin, trained in polite concealment and hypervigilant for any sign of her parents' idiosyncrasies, the challenge is to let go of her need to control and smooth over.


Ali's talent, as demonstrated in her fizzing debut novel, *Brick Lane*, published in 2003 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is to blend these intractable questions of family and identity into broad-brush comedy.

It is hard not to laugh as Harriet takes up Anisah, parading her at her Primrose Hill salons. In the process, she inadvertently launches her into an entirely new phase of her life.

But the humour also sits beside an abandoned Shaokat, ineptly microwaving rice and vegetables and drinking miniatures of whisky, furious, proud and intransigent. His and Anisah's story, which finally unspools at the book's close, is an impressive example of a revelation that makes sense of what has gone before rather than invalidating the reader's experience.

There's been an interesting discussion in lit-crit circles of late about the effect of the 'trauma plot' on contemporary fiction. If characters are burdened by too elaborate a psychological back story, they have little room to manoeuvre. The writer becomes excessively preoccupied in excavating their past and isn't motivated in propelling them into the future.

It seems fairer and more accurate, though, to note that this is in the novelist's hands. People, in real life as well as on the page, are often held hostage by the stories they have inherited and created about their own lives.

The trick is to resist a sort of doomy portentousness and interleave darkness and light, as Ali ably does here. 

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OLDIE NOVEL OF THE MONTH

Tricky marriage vows

ALEX CLARK

Love Marriage

Monica Ali

Virago £18.99

Monica Ali's exuberant, entertaining novel opens with a marriage plot in which the deal appears already to have been sealed.

The obstacles lying in the way of Yasmin Ghorami, a junior doctor, and her fellow medic, Joe, have largely been cleared. Even one of the trickiest hurdles, the meeting of the parents, with which *Love Marriage* opens, is a success.

Anisah and Shaokat have run the gauntlet of Harriet Sangster's oppressively welcoming North London kitchen and survived.

Even her short speech about liberal guilt and memories of an Ayurvedic retreat in Kerala have been absorbed into a general sense of mutual benevolence:

"I see," said Shaokat. "Thank you for explaining this phenomenon."

There is only her forceful suggestion