

Brick Lane

To the growing collection of telling films about immigrant life in the United Kingdom—films like *My Son the Fanatic*, *East Is East*, and *Bend It Like Beckham* (all reviewed by this writer) add *Brick Lane*. The story of a Bangladeshi woman torn between her sweetly remembered homeland and her growing family in contemporary London, this is a fine debut feature from Sarah Gavron from a well-received novel written by Monica Ali.

The film opens early in this century with the woman, Nazneen Ahmed (Tannishtha Chatterjee) living a drudging life with her husband and two school-aged daughters in a grim apartment block in the area of London called Brick Lane, a haven for thousands of transplanted Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Nazneen is one of the latter, a woman beaten down from her life. She suffers in an arranged marriage with an insensitive husband, Chanu (Satish Kaushik), who is twice her age, and she must cope, additionally, with her bi-cultural daughters' vagaries.

She often daydreams of her idyllic life back in Bangladesh and is envious of her sister, whose letters from home recount her romantic adventures. Determined to do something with her life, she decides to make some extra money by taking in sewing, and the move not only introduces her to the beginning of her independence but also to another Asian fellow, Karim (Christopher Simpson). He is far more the extrovert than the shy Nazneen and also younger than her, but when she is with him, she—slowly, slowly—begins to sense the possibility of real affection.

Then the September 11 events occur, and, in London, as elsewhere, Muslims in England come under harsh scrutiny and suspicion, and Karim, already a politically alert young man, becomes an activist in a local Islamic awareness group. His activism frightens Nazneen and is deemed nonsense by her conservative husband. She also comes to learn that her sister's life is not as serene as she has always thought. The pressures build on her from all sides, and she must face dilemmas that will change her life.

The film is well crafted by first-time director Gavron (known for her work in the theater). The location shooting in and around Muslim London is appropriately detailed and vivid—lush-colored saris amongst the gray concrete. The creation of the family's cramped apartment is convincing—you would want to daydream your way out of it too. The script, co-written by the novelist Ali and Laura Jones, is spare but effective, as are the images to match it. What really shines through in this production, though, is the acting.

Christopher Simpson as Karim gives a good account of himself as an acclimated Muslim in London, the contemporary type who contrasts nicely with the Ahmed family from “back home.” His is an attractive, even somewhat dangerous presence, as well as a sensual one who could appeal to the sheltered Nazneen. As the burly, shambling Chanu, Satish Kaushik gives off all the right—if pathetic—vibes of a petty bureaucrat wannabe, an inept breadwinner who has an outsized, if undeserved, opinion of his own competences. If, for most of the film, he seems a too easy villain to contrast with the long-suffering Nazneen, his character—and the actor—pull off a stunning declaration of faith near the end of the film which both redeems him and grants him dignity.

Yet, above all, *Brick Lane* is a tour-de-force for Chatterjee, an actor already of some repute in her homeland. As the modest, reserved Nazneen she doesn't so much communicate in speech as in glance and body language, and her soulful eyes describe her fate much more than her dialogue. Those eyes carry all the poignant weight of her plight yet also mirror the glimmer of her awakening to Karim. This performance, full of nuance and thoughtful detail, should introduce her to Western audiences as a real find. (*"Brick Lane" is rated "PG-13"; running time 101 minutes.*)

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