



MUSLIM WOMEN DIASPORA IN THE WEST:  
A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST STUDY OF THREE  
POST-9/11 BRITISH LITERARY TEXTS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has left Muslims with traces of strong resentment and bitterness. Biased perceptions held by mainstream society have increasingly impaired the image of Islam, resulting in the ill-conceived apprehension of Muslims in the contemporary age. The negative portrayal of Muslims through stereotyping and misrepresentations are a common phenomenon due to an exponential rise of Islamophobia in the West. Misleading notions of Islam are propagated by Western media in an orchestrated attempt to denigrate Islamic teachings. Consequently, an array of Muslim women writers have embarked on a journey of literary works based on their own experiences and a shared 'Muslim consciousness', which have created a platform to present the deplorable facts surrounding the Muslim diaspora in the West. Three such authors are Monica Ali (1967–), Leila Aboulela (1964–) and Fadia Faqir (1956–). Their works in relation to the issues concerned are *Brick Lane* (2003), *Minaret* (2005) and *My Name is Salma* (2007). This study will examine these works in order to understand the Muslim experience after 9/11, specifically Muslim women's path, strewn with many challenges, towards integration in Britain. Muslims who migrate to the West seem to pose an equally challenging experience. These 'Third World' women encounter a set of ordeals and obstacles as they migrate from their countries of origin. As such, the possibilities of Islamic values and practices and indigenous cultures being accepted in a mainstream Western society are discussed in relation to the new environment in which these women live.

## ملخص البحث

إن هجمات ١١ سبتمبر ٢٠٠١ خلّفت لدى المسلمين استياء شديداً، وآثاراً بالغة المرارة. فالمفاهيم والتصورات المتحيزة التي يحملها التيار الرئيس للمجتمع أضعفت بشكل متزايد صورة الإسلام الناصعة، مما أدى إلى ظهور خوف غير مبرر تجاه المسلمين وسوء تصور لهم في العالم المعاصر. إن التصوير السلبي للمسلمين من خلال القوالب النمطية والمفاهيم الخاطئة هي ظاهرة شائعة بسبب النمو المطرد للخوف من الإسلام (الإسلاموفوبيا) في الغرب، فقد باتت تنتشر مفاهيم مضللة للإسلام من قبل وسائل الاعلام الغربية في محاولة منظمة لتشويه سمعة التعاليم الإسلامية. ونتيجة لذلك، فقد شرعت مجموعة من الكاتبات المسلمات في جولات من الأعمال الأدبية على أساس تجارهن الخاصة و"الوعي الإسلامي" المشترك، والتي خلقت منبرا لتقديم الحقائق المؤسفة المحيطة بحاليات الشتات المسلمة في الغرب. من بين هؤلاء، ثلاث من الكاتبات هن: مونيكا علي (١٩٦٧-)، ليلي أبو العلا (١٩٦٤-) وفادية الفقير (١٩٥٦-) إن مؤلفاتهن المتعلقة بالقضايا المعنية هي "الطوب البري" (٢٠٠٣)، "مئذنة" (٢٠٠٥) و "اسمي سلمى" (٢٠٠٧). ستتناول هذه الدراسة هذه الأعمال من أجل فهم تجربة المسلمين بعد ١١/٩، وتحديد مسار النساء المسلمات، الذي تنتشر فيها الكثير من التحديات نحو تحقيق التكامل مع المجتمع البريطاني. و يبدو أن المسلمين الذين يهاجرون إلى الغرب يواجهون تجربة صعبة على حد سواء. إن هؤلاء النسوة من 'العالم الثالث' يواجهن مجموعة من المشاكل والعقبات عند هجرتهن من بلدانهم الأصلية. كذلك، فإن احتمالات قبول القيم والممارسات الإسلامية مع ثقافات السكان الأصليين لدى التيار السائد في المجتمع الغربي تمت مناقشتها في هذا البحث بالإشارة إلى البيئة الجديدة التي تعيش فيها هؤلاء النسوة.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

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Rahmah Bt. Ahmad H. Osman  
Dean, Kulliyyah of Islamic  
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my dearest Pa & Ma, my husband, Adam Oh Teak  
Lin and my daughter Siti Aisyah Adrina.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Migration is a significant aspect of the global human experience and global human awareness. The increasing movement of people over long distances to settle in alien lands worldwide can either be enriching or filled with painful and bitter experiences. Often, migration promises people opportunities to gain lucrative income and live in comparative safety. People – irrespective of colour, creed, race and religion – migrate for various reasons; primarily, especially in the present era, due to political, social or economic circumstances. An integral part of migration is the inevitable interaction with and adaptation to new societies with different socio-cultural norms.

For centuries, historians have recorded the migration patterns of various groups of people and analysed the factors behind these events. It is hardly a new phenomenon in human history. For instance, being a prominent colonial power in its day, Britain is now home to a large number of Muslim migrants from diverse backgrounds. Thus, this positions the country as an ideal sample through which to examine the patterns and behaviours of Muslims who have and continue to migrate to Britain. Why have Muslims migrated to Britain?<sup>1</sup> Why did they choose to settle in a foreign land?

Phillip Lewis (1994, p. 11), in his book *Islamic Britain*, claims that Muslims arrived in Britain at least three hundred years ago where the majority of Muslim men worked for the East India Company and primarily served as sailors. As such, Humayun Ansari proposes that the Muslim migration was basically due to economic

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<sup>1</sup>This study will only examine Britain and diasporic writers from this country.

reasons (2004, p. 25). The wave of immigration expanded rapidly after the two major world wars as job opportunities increased in various big cities in the UK (Ansari, 2004, p. 40, Lewis, 1994, p. 16), such as Cardiff, Liverpool, Newport and London (Ansari, 2004, p. 40). The migrants were mostly employed as indentured labourers and filled various blue-collar positions needed after the “economic boom and development of the manufacturing industry” (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, p. 45). Citizens from Commonwealth countries were encouraged to come and rebuild “the mother country” (i.e., Britain) as increased man-power was needed for the country’s commercial activities a few years after India – which also included Pakistan and Bangladesh at the time – gained its independence (Hewer, 1996, p. 137). Apparently, better economic factors and standards of living were a major attraction to the formerly colonised.

The demand for labour drew more migrants into Britain from the 1950s to the early 1960s, where huge numbers of people arrived through the process of ‘chain migration’, or the subsequent migration of friends and family members convinced to come based on the experiences of pioneers. The influx of Muslim immigrants further increased with the arrival of women and children in the early 1960s (Hewer, 1996, p. 137-138; Lewis, 1994, p. 17). Ansari (2004, p. 254) posits that women mainly joined their spouses to keep the families together and for domestic support. This resulted in a large Muslim diasporic community in Britain. However, he claims that many Muslim women too from remote areas in Pakistan and Bangladesh had minimal freedom and were confined to their homes, often lacking emotional support and interaction. In other situations, Moroccan women experienced “depression and anxiety”, while women from Somalia suffered from “mental illness and some even committed suicide” (Ansari, 2004, p. 258-259). Hence, migration also led to losses.

From transient settlers to permanent citizens, immigrants formed close-knit communities dwelling in major cities such as Manchester, Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields, and the East End of London (Ansari, 2004, p. 25). Although being together helped maintain a sense of communal feeling – strengthening family bonds and sustaining traditional values and practices in respect to their Muslim identity – the migrants had to cope with and adapt to their new environment. However, despite facing various obstacles, the Muslim population gradually increased.

The 1970s brought an influx of Muslims from other countries as a result of political, social, and environmental upheavals in their respective motherlands (Ansari, 2004, p. 146). Muslims from Somalia arrived fleeing civil war and famine. An increasing number of refugees from other Muslim nations, namely Afghanistan, Iran, Algeria, Bosnia, and Kurdistan also migrated to the UK seeking asylum and sanctuary (Ansari, 2004, p. 159-161). Hence, this wave of Muslim migrants witnessed the formation of a heterogeneous Muslim community in contemporary Britain, spawning a diversified Muslim population. These Muslims were from different backgrounds, classes, cultures, and vocations ranging from semi-skilled workers to professionals (Ansari, 2004, p. 161-164).

By 1991, the Muslim population in Britain had grown to about 1 million with 80% of immigrants coming from the South Asian region (Lewis, 1994, p. 14). This number of Muslim migrants steadily increased (Seddon, Hussain & Malik, 2004, p. viii). From a survey conducted in 2001, *The Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life*<sup>2</sup> points out that the Muslim population in Britain was estimated to be at 1,647,000. By 2010, the census indicated that the population had increased to 2,869,000 (Thompson,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life* is a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre based in the United States. It is a research organization which surveys the demographic population in America and other countries worldwide.

2010). Within a span of ten years, the Muslim population in the UK has almost doubled. According to Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2010, p. 117), the significant increase in Muslim population “may be attributed to...immigration, the growing birth rate, some conversion to Islam, and perhaps also an increased willingness to self-identify as ‘Muslim’ on account of the War on Terror.” Thus, Britain became a melting pot for Muslims from all over the world; migrants and refugees, young and old, settling in Britain, a foreign land, to escape the tyranny and poverty of their homelands.

Despite their new country providing them with better opportunities, being culturally and geographically dislocated, the migrants often experience identity conflict, displacement, feelings of alienation, rootlessness and a longing for their ancestral land. These experiences are captured in the writings of authors who live in diaspora or share diasporic experiences themselves.

## **1.2 THE AUTHORS’ BACKGROUNDS**

This research examines three selected works of fiction by diasporic Muslim women, namely *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, and *My Name is Salma* (2007) by Fadia Faqir.<sup>3</sup> The novels revolve around the personal experiences of women protagonists and their challenges in dealing with the socio-cultural anomalies in their new environment, Britain. In the introduction to the book, *Women’s Fiction to Post-9/11 Context*, Childs, Colebrook and Groes (2015) claim that writers coming from the Muslim heritage “are emerging globally as a force in the literary imagination”, representing a new current in writing (xi). The Muslim sphere from the women’s perspective is significant as the issues addressed in the novels are a quest of authentic Muslim women’s voices on their own identities and issues.

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion of the respective novels in this research will be according to the year of publication.

In order to understand the experiences and various issues revolving around Muslim women's concerns, it is vital to know the authors' backgrounds before analysing the selected novels from a postcolonial feminist point of view. The authors discussed below are sequenced in order of chronology, i.e. their year of birth.

### **Fadia Faqir**

Fadia Faqir was born in Amman, Jordan in 1956. She studied at Lancaster University in 1984 doing her MA in Critical and Creative Writing. She received the Women in Publishing 1995 New Venture Award for her contribution as an editor to *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, which was published in 1998. Although Faqir has done some translation work, and written short stories and plays which have been presented in various countries including Britain and Denmark, she is best known as a novelist. In 1987, her first novel *Nisanit* was published and translated into Arabic. Her second novel *Pillars of Salt* was translated into five different languages. According to Claire Chambers, she was awarded the runner-up for the ALOA Literary Award in 2001 for the Danish version. Of all her works, Faqir gained the highest international recognition for her novel *My Name is Salma*, which also goes by the title *The Cry of the Dove* in the North American editions. *My Name is Salma* has been translated into 13 different languages (Chambers, 2011, p. 56-58).

Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* relates the story of Salma who seeks asylum in Britain for conceiving out of wedlock. Salma is a first generation migrant from a remote village in the Levant known as Hima in Jordan. As a naïve, young shepherdess, Salma gets involved with a teenage shepherd Hamdan and upon discovery of her pregnancy, her teacher Miss Nailah assists her to escape from an honour killing and she is imprisoned in Islah prison in the Levant under protective

custody. Her brother Mahmoud hunts her down to kill her, but fails. As honour killing is practised in Hima, and her safety is at stake, nuns by the name of Khairiyya and Francoise help her to migrate to Britain. In Britain she lives temporarily with Minister Mahoney in Branscombe before residing permanently with Liz, an English woman who is also her landlady in Exeter. Salma experiences conflicts as an Arab-Bedouin immigrant as she juggles between her jobs as a seamstress, a bartender and her studies while having to adapt to a new culture and environment. Although she tries to reinvent herself, she is torn between her Arab and Western culture. Years later, she pines to see her daughter Layla who is in the native land. Although her life is in jeopardy as she has dishonoured her family, she returns to her homeland, challenging the consequences of her past actions. When her brother learns of her presence in Hima, he shoots her to death.

### **Leila Aboulela**

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964, but was raised in Khartoum, Sudan. She studied for her Master's degree in Statistics at the London School of Economics. Later she moved to Aberdeen to join her husband. She has written short stories as well as novels. Her short story "The Museum" was awarded the first Caine Prize for African writing in 2000. Moreover, her first novel *The Translator* was longlisted for the IMPAC and Orange Prizes. Her book *Minaret* was first published by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2005 and was longlisted for the Orange and IMPAC Prizes (Chambers, 2011, p. 97-99).

*Minaret* portrays the life of the character Najwa, who comes from a wealthy, political Sudanese family. The novel is divided into two parts: Najwa's modern lifestyle in Sudan and her subsequent life in London, where she grows appreciation for

Islam. She progressively shifts her lifestyle from her modern Western outlook to an Islamic appearance where she begins to wear the hijab; the religiously ordained headscarf for Muslim women. This is a “riches to rags” tale of Najwa who later seeks refuge in London when her father loses his position and wealth. She becomes independent after her mother passes away and her brother is imprisoned, compelling her to work as a domestic servant for a wealthy Arab family and falling in love with her employer’s brother, Tamer.

### **Monica Ali**

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, Bangladesh to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother. Her father Hatem Ali was a History teacher and her mother Joyce a psychology counsellor in a hospital in Bolton, near Manchester (Haq, n.d.:21). She moved to Britain at the age of four and her family settled in Bolton when the liberation war broke out in their native land in 1971. Later, she pursued her studies at Oxford University and obtained a degree in PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics). Upon graduating, she worked in a marketing firm and shifted jobs before marrying and settling down with Simon Torrance, a management consultant (*Encyclopaedia*, 2007).

Her career as a writer began when she became a full time mother in the early 2000s. Her first book *Brick Lane* was published in 2003 and received both praise and criticism alike. The book was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2003 while *Granta* nominated Ali as ‘Best of Young British Novelists’ within a list of twenty writers in the same year. In 2007 *Brick Lane* was made into a movie. Following the success of her first novel, Ali has written *Alentejo Blue* (2006), *In The Kitchen* (2009),

and *Untold Story* (2011). All her novels were published under the Doubleday Publishing House (“Monica Ali”).

*Brick Lane* centres around Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi girl who marries a man almost twice her age and embarks on her journey to Britain as a young bride. Settling in the East End of London she meets other Muslims and begins a new life. She changes from a naive rural girl with minimal education and little knowledge of the western world to an enterprising woman. As her husband Chanu does not give her much attention, she befriends a young Muslim activist known as Karim and has an affair with him. Later, Nazneen emancipates herself and makes her own decisions for her future (Monica Ali Biography, 2007).

The immigration experience of Muslim women in the selected texts differ from individual to individual. Hence, this research examines how in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* and Fadia Fakir’s *My Name is Salma*, Muslim women as immigrants, postcolonial subjects become autonomous through their diasporic experiences in a new country.

### **1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

There seems to be a problem in the representation of Muslim women in literature, the media and literary criticisms. Muslim women are often portrayed as a monolithic group and categorized as homogenous in nature. Given that there is a problem in Muslim women’s representation, there is a dire need to give attention to this area. What is more, there is a lack of research on the integration and interaction of the diasporic Muslim women in Britain after 9/11. This study aims to rectify this monocular view of Muslim women and show their heterogeneity through the study of three selected post-9/11 novels by Muslim women of different national-cultural

backgrounds. It shows how their experiences as Muslim women in diaspora vary from one another depending on their upbringing, cultural orientation and outlook.

#### **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

A combination of the fiction of Monica Ali, Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir have never been studied before in the light of Muslim women's diaspora in the West. As such, this study will contribute to the study of culturally deracinated Muslim women and their diverse cultures.

Coming from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, it is interesting to explore the heterogeneous composition of these Muslim women writers writing about Muslim women characters and looking into their plights and endeavours, thus, adding another layer of understanding to the existing diasporic feminist writers.

Apart from this, writings of Muslim women post 9/11 have aroused interest in the Muslim world, particularly in regards to the journey of Muslim women across cultural, social and religious borders. It is also interesting to investigate the thematic concerns and issues depicted by Muslim writers after the 9/11 incident. Do the writers provoke the readers to rethink the roles of women in Western societies as opposed to their native lands? Do the writers see and present a different view of and treatment of women in both Muslim and Western societies? Or as in the words of Elaine Showalter (1977), do Muslim women possess "a literature of their own" where they exhibit experiences that only they can narrate? These are questions which have piqued the researcher's interest in trying to understand the central themes of these novels. Apart from this, Monica Ali, Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir are women from different nations, ethnicities and cultures, but share the same religion: Islam. Thus, the explication of these novels will provide a better understanding of these Muslim

women writers' purpose in portraying characters which articulate different experiences and cultures, but a shared religious identity.

Furthermore, a critical analysis of the novels is conducted through a combination of feminist discourses, mainly postcolonial feminism and its offshoot, Islamic feminism. The application of these feminist discourses is likely to enhance our understanding of Muslim women characters who encounter trials and tribulations in the hands of patriarchy both in their own culture and the culture of their host societies. This research seeks to investigate how the writers incorporate feminist principles in their respective novels. In the words of Miles:

[T]he task of interpret[ing] of women's experience cannot be left to male writers alone, however sympathetic they may be. The female perspective, expressed through women's writing of all kinds, is more than a valuable corrective to an all-male view of the universe. For women readers it is a lifeline (1987, p. x).

Hence, these selected novels from women's perspectives give a deeper insight into women's lives, experiences, challenges, struggles and their religious or cultural identities. They also convey strong messages, highlighting important issues regarding women, especially those who have left their homeland, thus opening a channel for readers to view things more empathetically.

## **1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This research intends to:

1. Examine the representation and construction of Muslim women in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* from the perspective of postcolonial feminism.

2. Investigate the divergent experiences and changes diasporic women encounter in these three novels, and how they negotiate their “native” culture with their host culture.
3. Address the literary and critical (mis-)representation of Muslim women as being homogenous and highlight their cultural heterogeneity.

## **1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How are Muslim women represented and constructed in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Leila Abou Lela’s *Minaret* and Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* from the perspective of postcolonial feminism?
2. What are the divergent experiences and changes diasporic Muslim women encounter in the selected narratives and how do they negotiate their “native” culture with their host culture?
3. How are Muslim women represented as not being homogenous while highlighting their cultural heterogeneity, going beyond the conventional understanding?

## **1.7 METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This study uses the qualitative approach to analyse three different fictional works by Muslim women living in diaspora. Supporting materials include books, journal articles, web journals, newspaper articles, published interviews and dissertations. Primarily, this research is library-based. It also includes scholarly works based on the Qur’an and Sunnah as a tool of study given that Islamic Feminism is employed to provide a deeper understanding of the Muslim characters. The online materials (e.g. journal articles) of this study will be retrieved from different data bases such as

ProQuest Research Library, Academic Search, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academic Search Elite (EBSCO), etc. The books are collected from local libraries while some are obtained from online database, especially from Google Books.

## **1.8 CHAPTER OUTLINE**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter will include the background of the study and a brief discussion of Monica Ali, Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir's backgrounds and respective narratives. It will also include the objectives, research questions, problem statement, significance of the study and a brief outline of the chapters.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Chapter 2 will provide reviews pertaining to the novels and the theoretical framework used for their analyses. The literature review will include the best and latest discussions on the selected texts. In the theoretical framework, I intend to discuss the main elements of postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism and diaspora and pave the way for their application on the selected novels.

### **Chapter 3: Portrayal of Muslim Women in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane***

Chapter 3 examines Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and I will analyse the Muslim characters and discuss the portrayal of Muslim diasporic women from the postcolonial feminist and Islamic perspectives. Their social interaction, religious practices and the values they hold while living in their host country will also be analysed. In addition, the position of the characters in terms of displacement, ambivalence, oppression and discrimination, will be explored.

#### **Chapter 4: Dismantling Stereotypical Images of Muslim Women in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret***

Chapter 4 analyses Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and the representation and experiences of Muslim diasporic women in the post-9/11 era. I will investigate the portrayal of Muslim women's identity, the challenges they go through as immigrants, and relate Leila Aboulela's narrative with the postcolonial and Islamic feminist perspectives.

#### **Chapter 5: The Heterogeneity of Muslim Women in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma***

Chapter 5 explores Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and the experiences Muslim women encounter both in their homeland and hostland. I will also investigate the representations of Muslim women's identity as depicted by Faqir in light of postcolonial and Islamic feminist theories.

#### **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Chapter 6 concludes the study and brings together the findings of the analyses on the respective narratives. The authors' portrayal of the representations of Muslim women will be compared and contrasted in depth and in relation to the theoretical framework. A close analysis of the characters as to how Muslim immigrants derive understanding through integration of culture and alienation is also elucidated. The findings in Chapters Three, Four and Five will provide a better understanding of the research questions and objectives.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter discusses the literature review and the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Both sections are dealt extensively. The literature review focuses on scholarly articles, journals and books that have been discussed by various scholars and critics on the specific subject area about Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*. The theoretical framework of the selected novels will be examined from the perspective of the theory of postcolonial feminism which is in line with the researcher's area of study. The feminist concepts of postcolonial feminism and Islamic feminism revolving around the selected novels are discussed as they are closely affiliated to the researcher's concern.

#### **2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literary works of Muslim women writers in diaspora, such as Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela and Monica Ali, have been analysed and examined in academic journals, articles, book chapters and dissertations. However, Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) has been reviewed the least. The materials have been organised based on the year of publication and the researcher has reviewed and discussed the materials, following the chronology of year of publication of the selected three novels.

In an article in *The Guardian*, "Brickbats Fly as Community Brands Novel Desplicable" (2003), Matthew Taylor contends that even though *Brick Lane* is criticised as a "despicable insult" for shamefully portraying the Bangladeshi community as "backward", "uneducated" and "unsophisticated", it is a work of fiction