



**Performing Femininity and Becoming Woman:
A Comparative Study of Monica Ali's Nazneen in
Brick Lane and Anisah in *Love Marriage* through
Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir**

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolving performances of womanhood in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and *Love Marriage* (2022) through the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Drawing on Beauvoir's concept of "becoming" in *The Second Sex* (1949) and Butler's idea of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), the study examines how Ali's female characters, Nazneen from *Brick Lane* and Anisah from *Love Marriage*, navigate patriarchal expectations, cultural boundaries, and personal desires. Both women live in societies that dictate how women should behave, yet each gradually begins to question and reshape those expectations. Nazneen's transformation from an obedient wife to an independent woman, and Anisah's journey from emotional silence to self-awareness, reveal how agency can emerge even under constraint. The analysis highlights Butler's argument that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (p. 179) and Beauvoir's claim that one "is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (p. 293). By placing these ideas in conversation with Ali's fiction, the paper shows how the author portrays womanhood as a performance capable of change and resistance. Through small acts of defiance and self-recognition, Ali's women demonstrate that identity is not fixed but continuously evolving. Ultimately, the study argues that both *Brick Lane* and *Love Marriage* affirm the possibility of freedom within the everyday acts of women who dare to live differently.

Keywords: Monica Ali, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, gender performativity.



Received: 28.10.2025

Accepted: 02.12.2025

Published: 31.12.2025

CJHSSC, Volume: 1

Issue: 2, December 2025

Page: 66 - 74

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18253289>

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Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.sjlangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

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Introduction

The entanglements of gender, migration, trauma, and cultural identity consistently thread through Monica Ali's fiction. Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), traces the life of the protagonist, Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who migrates to London after an arranged marriage with Chanu and grapples with the demands of patriarchy, cultural tradition, and the pressures of diasporic life. Nearly two decades later, Ali wrote *Love Marriage* (2022), a novel that revisits similar questions of gender, family, and social constraints but positions them in a more contemporary, multicultural London. Among the most striking characters in *Love Marriage* is Anisah, Yasmin's mother. As we dive into the novel, Anisah's seemingly ordinary life as a dutiful wife and mother is revealed to be shadowed by traumatic violence and a marriage that was less an act of romance than an economic transaction.

This paper will bring Nazneen from *Brick Lane* and Anisah from *Love Marriage* into critical discourse to examine how gender identity in Ali's novels is produced and constrained by cultural scripts, trauma, and social expectations. This paper contends that Nazneen and Anisah represent two modalities of female obedience. While Nazneen's obedience is cultivated through migration and cultural fatalism, Anisah's obedience emerges from sexual trauma and the perception of commodification in marriage. Both characters illuminate Judith Butler's (1988) contention that gender is not a natural substance but "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (p. 520). At the same time, they embody Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 293), revealing how patriarchal structures constitute womanhood through repetition and constraint.

In this paper, these two characters – Nazneen from *Brick Lane* and Anisah from *Love Marriage* are analysed critically to demonstrate how Ali portrays the embodied consequences of gender performativity across different generational and cultural contexts. While Nazneen's limited subversions emerge through her refusal to go back to Bangladesh and her tentative independence, Anisah's story suggests both the crushing weight of silence and the faint possibility of alternative intimacies, particularly in her ambiguous relationship with Flames. So in both cases, Ali shows that the performance of gender is constantly haunted by the possibility of rupture and re-signification, even when it is constrained by trauma or tradition.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper rests on the intersecting ideas of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's existential notion of becoming woman. Butler and Beauvoir write from different philosophical moments, but both challenge the perception of gender as fixed or biologically determined. They argue that womanhood is not a natural fact but a continuous process. For Butler and Beauvoir, womanhood is a performance shaped by culture, language, and power.

In her most important and famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir writes the famous quote, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 293), which has since become the keystone of feminist theory. Beauvoir's above statement dismantles the idea that femininity is an inherent quality. Instead, it proposes that "the whole of civilisation elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch which is called feminine" (Butler, 1949, p. 293). Woman, for Beauvoir, is constructed in relation to man, where she

becomes “the other”. She is defined not by her own essence but by what patriarchy demands of her. So from this viewpoint, gender is a social role performed so persistently that it appears natural.

Decades later, Judith Butler extended and radicalized this insight in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she argues that even the category of “sex” which was once thought to be purely biological, is itself a cultural construction. As Butler (1990) writes:

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. (p. 11)

Butler thus blurs the line between sex and gender. She claims that both are products of discourse. According to her, systems of language, norms, and repetition teach individuals how to “be” men or women. What Butler is trying to express is that gender identity is not something we are, but something we do. It is made up of our daily actions, gestures, and ways of behaving that, when repeated over time, start to look natural, creating the illusion of a stable identity. As Butler (1990) puts it, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). In other words, people become “men” or “women” by doing the same kinds of things again and again, behaving according to what society expects. Over time, these repeated acts make the roles of the obedient wife, the self-sacrificing mother, or the quiet daughter seem natural, when in fact they are learned performances shaped by culture and society.

Both Beauvoir and Butler believe that womanhood is something shaped by society’s expectations. For them, womanhood is a performance that women are taught to play. However, the views of Beauvoir and Butler differ in how they see the possibility of resistance. For Beauvoir, freedom comes through awareness and action. A woman can rise above the limitations placed on her when she becomes conscious of how society defines her as “the other” and chooses to live on her own terms.

On the other hand, Butler finds resistance within the performance itself. She suggests that change does not happen by escaping gender roles but by doing them differently. She writes, “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, 1990, p. 178). This means that by repeating gendered behaviours in new ways, women can expose how artificial those norms really are. Butler asserts that women will get liberation not by stepping outside of gender but by transforming it from within.

Thus, when we read Ali’s *Brick Lane* and *Love Marriage* from these lenses, the connection becomes evident. Both Nazneen and Anisah live in worlds that define femininity through silence, sacrifice, and endurance. Nevertheless, each of them finds small, quiet ways to resist by questioning what they have been taught to accept. Nazneen’s transformation from submission to self-definition and Anisah’s slow rediscovery of emotional warmth are not loud acts of rebellion. There are subtle shifts in how they perform womanhood. They might be small acts, but they carry great strength.

In this sense, Beauvoir and Butler’s theories help us see Ali’s women not as passive victims but as evolving selves. When these two women perform their roles with new awareness,

they begin to become “otherwise”. The smallest gesture of resistance they show whether it be a choice, a conversation, or a refusal, becomes an act of freedom.

Nazneen in *Brick Lane*: Performing the Script of Submission and Subverting it

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen’s story begins with her mother’s quiet but haunting injunction: “Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow” (Ali, 2003, p. 16). It seems like a simple sentence; however, this statement seals her destiny long before she begins to live it. Those words become the invisible thread that binds her to a life of submission, instilling in her the belief that endurance is the only virtue for a woman. Nazneen is married to Chanu, a man much older and far more self-absorbed. Even in London, her husband always tries to maintain a space that mirrors his imagined version of ‘home’ in Bangladesh. Thus, Nazneen’s world is defined by the four walls of her London apartment and the unending rhythm of domestic routine. She cooks, cleans, and cares, all the while performing what society and her husband expect of a ‘good wife’. Nazneen’s confinement within the domestic space profoundly influences how she sees herself and her body. She appears passive, detached, and voiceless, reflecting the internalization of her restricted life. Chanu reinforces this perception when he remarks that she is “an unspoilt girl from the village” (Ali, 2003, p. 24). He further adds, “What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt” (Ali, 2003, p. 25). Through his words, it becomes clear that Nazneen’s value is defined entirely by her domestic abilities and submissive demeanour, showing how physical confinement extends to shape her psychological and emotional identity. Ana-Blanca Ciocoi-Pop (2019) writes that “*Brick Lane* is a solid wall of existential and narrative continuity, built by piling up the individual bricks of female experience” (p. 21).

When we examine Nazneen’s femininity by applying Judith Butler’s insight in *Gender Trouble*, we realise that her femininity is not something she simply is, but something she performs. Butler (1990) writes that “Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (p. 11). We see that the supposed “feminine nature” of Nazneen is thus not natural but it seems to be discursively manufactured through the repeated acts of patriarchy that define her as submissive.

Nazneen begins to transform slowly but surely. Her transformation begins when she recognizes the artificiality of these acts. Nazneen starts to see the world beyond her apartment window. As she sees the bustling London streets, the immigrants struggling to find belonging, she begins to question the script that has been given to her. When she enters into an affair with Karim, it does not become just a romantic escape; rather, it becomes an act of self-reclamation. Though it is a socially condemned act, this affair becomes a crack in the mask of obedience for Nazneen. It turns out to be her first act of self-definition, the moment she realizes that the life she has been performing can, in fact, be rewritten. Moreover, by refusing to return to Bangladesh with her husband, Nazneen finally disrupts what Butler (1990) calls “the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 179). Butler (1990) reminds us that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). Nazneen’s decision towards the end of the novel, to live differently, to repeat differently, becomes her act of rebellion.

The above analysis is beautifully complemented by Simone de Beauvoir's idea in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir (1949/2011) writes that woman is not born but "becomes", she is shaped by what society tells her she should be: "the whole of civilisation elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch which is called feminine" (p. 293). Nazneen, who was once moulded into this product of tradition, begins to shed it through experience. She moves from passivity to participation, from being acted upon to becoming the author of her own choices. Nazneen's revolution is not grand but subtle. Her revolution lies in her courage to say no to Karim, in the decision to stay back in London rather than return to Bangladesh with her husband Chanu and in the quiet assertion that her life belongs to her. "She felt that power was inside her, and she was its creator" (Ali, 2003, p. 300). She gains freedom not from rejecting her identity but from performing it differently. She still cooks, still sews, still tends to her family, but now she does all these actions with self-awareness. These deeds that once symbolised submission now begin to embody choice. So this aligns with Butler's belief that repetition holds transformative power and performing the same acts differently can entirely alter their meaning. At the end of the novel, Nazneen has undergone a transformation, not through revolution but through recognition. In her steady defiance of fate, she exemplifies the idea, shared by Butler and Beauvoir, that womanhood is not an essence to be accepted but a becoming to be lived.

Anisah Ghorami: The Obedient Wife and The Silenced Self

In the novel *Love Marriage*, Yasmin's mother, Anisah Ghorami, embodies a complex mix of obedience, repression, and quiet endurance. Anisah's life has been shaped by cultural expectations, patriarchal demands, and traumatic experiences. Anisah's life is different from her daughter Yasmin's life. While Yasmin lives in a world of relative freedom and self-assertion, Anisah lives a life of submission and sacrifice, concealed behind the illusion of a dutiful wife and mother. Her marriage to Shaokat was far from being a romantic union; rather, it was a transactional arrangement. Their arrangement was a business deal rooted in patriarchal negotiations where her trauma of being raped became a bargaining chip. After being raped before marriage, Anisah's parents paid for Shaokat's medical studies in exchange for his marrying their "damaged" daughter. "She was damaged goods. Nobody would want her" (Ali, 2022, p. 478). Anisah's family perceives her as a burden and considers her "damaged", so they arrange her marriage to Shaokat Ghorami both to rid themselves of shame and to secure financial support for Shaokat's medical studies. This situation highlights how women's bodies are treated as commodities and how patriarchal structures restrict female autonomy. Marriage became a form of atonement for something that was never her fault. Beauvoir (1949/2011) writes:

The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution. (p. 451)

Thus, her identity as a wife is not founded on affection or choice, but on an act of social restitution.

Judith Butler's theory of gender in *Gender Trouble* helps us build a clear framework to read Anisah's constrained femininity. Butler (1990) argues that "

...gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the

stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (p. 179)

Anisah's repeated acts of obedience are seen in her cooking, serving, praying, and maintaining silence. These acts become performative rituals through which she upholds the illusion of being the "ideal Bengali wife". Her actions, movements, and tone are the mundane repetitions that construct the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 179), precisely as Butler defines it.

Monica Ali's portrayal of Anisah also shows how "sex itself is a gendered category", as Butler (1990) states that "gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (p. 11). In the story, Anisah's womanhood becomes defined by what society says a woman should be. Society says that a woman should be pure, loyal, forgiving, and accommodating, and that is precisely what Anisah is forced to do. Her biological womanhood is immediately inscribed with patriarchal meaning. She is expected to bear shame for her sexual violation. Her rape is treated as a stain that she must wash away through obedience instead of a crime against her. She is pressured by culture and society to redeem her 'polluted' femininity through marriage and to erase her individuality and identity under domestic servitude. Her "natural" identity as a woman becomes a socially produced reality.

Additionally, Anisah's relationship with her husband, Shaokat, is not built upon emotional intimacy. In the Ghorami family, Shaokat stands as the patriarchal figure whose intellectual superiority and moral rigidity overshadow Anisah's presence. Haydor Uddin (2025) writes, "Anisah's role in an arranged marriage exemplifies the sacrifices that many women make in the name of familial and societal expectations" (p. 268). However, as the story progresses in the novel, Ali subtly introduces moments of rebellion through Anisah's developing friendly bond with Harriet Sangster. Harriet Sangster becomes a turning point in Anisah Ghorami's transformation. The relationship between Anisah and Harriet symbolises cross-cultural female connection and empowerment. Through her interactions with Harriet, Anisah begins to question traditional roles and rediscover her individuality. Anisah's later relationship with Flames, Harriet's female friend, further deepens this journey. It allows Anisah to explore emotional intimacy and self-expression beyond the confines of marriage. It further helps her reclaim the parts of herself long suppressed by her role as a dutiful wife and mother. The quiet companionship between Anisah and Flames when they cook together, share glances, and confide in each other hints at a form of emotional bond and perhaps even something deeper, a bond beyond the boundaries of heteronormative marriage. This unspoken connection between them breaks the rigid boundaries of gender and desire. Butler's (1990) question resonates here: "Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?" (p. xxviii-xxix).

Anisah's emotional connection with Flames becomes a subtle but radical gesture. It is a silent undoing of her performative identity. Through this relationship, Ali makes us see a subtle glimpse of queer potentiality that is not overtly expressed but that quietly disrupts the normativity of heterosexual marriage. Anisah's awakening happens slowly and quietly. She does

not rebel openly, but she begins to realise, deep within herself, how emotionally unfulfilled she has been. Ali portrays Anisah's journey of self-discovery through this silence. As Butler (1990) notes, "[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (p. 178). Anisah's daily service routine repeats the lessons of submission she has been taught all her life. But by the end, her bond with Flames helps her find new meaning in those same acts. The path to her self-discovery is not through rebellion, but through closeness, care, and mutual understanding.

Simone de Beauvoir's concept that woman is made "the other" in relation to man aligns clearly with Anisah's life. Anisah has always lived her life in the shadow of others: first her parents, then her husband, then her children. But Ali shows us that even this shadowed existence has light. Through Flames, Anisah glimpses another way of being where she is seen, heard, and cared for.

Through Anisah, Monica Ali sets cultural obedience and internal resistance side by side for examination. Anisah becomes both a victim of patriarchal culture and a quiet agent of transformation. Butler (1990) asserts that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature" (p. 11), and this assertion especially relates to Anisah. We see that Anisah's gendered self is a cultural construct, performed under constraint, yet within those constraints, she begins to rewrite meaning through lived experience. From the surface, her life may appear to be governed by obedience, but underneath it lies a person, a self still yearning to be recognized, to exist beyond the repetition of norms.

Comparative Reading: Performativity, Becoming, and the Politics of Resistance

Nazneen and Anisah come from two different social worlds. While Nazneen is an immigrant woman negotiating cultural displacement, Anisah is a settled British-Asian mother. However, the journeys towards their self-discovery mirror each other in structure. Both begin their journeys as women performing prescribed femininities, but they gradually rewrite those performances through lived contradictions.

Judith Butler (1990) asks, "Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance?" (p. xxviii-xxix), and this question finds dual expression in Ali's novels. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's gendered body is disciplined by immigrant patriarchy, while in *Love Marriage*, Anisah's body is disciplined by cultural respectability and trauma. They adopt different ways of deviating from these established and accepted constraints. Nazneen refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband, Chanu, and Anisah develops an emotional bond with Flames. Their acts of deviation illustrate what Butler and Beauvoir both imply in their theory that transformation is possible only through awareness and repetition. Through Butler's theory of gender performativity and Beauvoir's concept of "becoming", their journeys reveal how performance can evolve into transformation, and how identity, though shaped by social control, can still be reimaged from within.

For both Nazneen and Anisah, gender is not an essence but something they have learned to act out and perform. Nazneen's quiet obedience at home and Anisah's emotional restraint highlight the same patriarchal idea that the ideal and virtue of a selfless woman lie in sacrifice and endurance, as Butler (1990) explains that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 179). Nazneen's daily life of sewing, cooking, and serving mirrors Anisah's well-maintained life and role as a wife and

mother. Both have internalized femininity as service, turning social expectations into habits that eventually define their identity.

Yet, it is through small breaks in these expected roles that both women find their sense of agency. When Nazneen refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband, and when Anisah forms emotional connections with Harriet and Flames, they quietly challenge the rules that define them. They don't completely reject their worlds, but they start to act differently — repeating the same roles with a new purpose. This reflects what Butler (1988) says "...then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style," (p. 520) where real change happens not by escaping social norms but by redoing them in ways that reveal their fragility.

At the end of the novels, both Nazneen and Anisah show how Monica Ali's women perform and unlearn the identities society assigns them. Their gradual growth and development do not dismantle patriarchy entirely, but they unsettle the core belief of patriarchy that gender is fixed, stable, and naturally ordained. Through their acts of care, awareness, and redefinition, they embody Butler's (1990) assertion that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (p. 33).

Conclusion

Through the journeys of Nazneen and Anisah, Monica Ali presents womanhood not as a fixed destiny but as something that is shaped and reshaped through life. Judith Butler's theory of performativity uncovers how gender is not stable but created through repeated actions, while Simone de Beauvoir's existentialism shows that being a woman is a process of continual becoming. Together, their ideas help us understand how Ali's female characters move from silence to self-expression and from submission to quiet resistance.

Nazneen's gradual independence and Anisah's emotional awakening show that change does not always happen through open rebellion. It can begin in the smallest shifts of everyday life, in moments when women start to act or think differently. Ali's novels reflect Butler's (1990) idea that gender identity is "tenuously constituted in time" (p. 179) and Beauvoir's belief that womanhood is something one becomes through experience and choice. In these subtle acts of courage and self-discovery, Nazneen and Anisah reveal that womanhood is not defined by biology or by society's rules. It is an ongoing process of becoming—one that allows space for transformation, growth, and freedom.

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