

**THE EAST LOOKS AT THE WEST,
THE WOMAN LOOKS AT THE MAN:
A STUDY OF THE GAZE
IN *BRICK LANE* BY MONICA ALI¹**

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The imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject. (Kaplan 1997: 78)

The question of *the gaze*, as an analytical framework within literary criticism, has been associated with and studied with regard to the narratological category of *point of view*, introduced by Henry James in his essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884). From the mid-twentieth century onwards, this concept of *point of view* has been revisited and revised by different scholars yielding to a plethora of alternative—not always equivalent—terms such as *focus of narration* (Brooks and Warren 1943), *vision* (Pouillon 1946) or Genette’s more widely accepted notion of *focalization* (Genette 1980). All these terms—including Genette’s coinage with which he unavailingly sought “to avoid the too specifically visual connotations of the terms *vision*, *field*, and *point of view*” (1980: 189)—metaphorically allude to the notion of *the gaze* or *look*. For, as Genette himself has conceded, a distinction might be drawn between the narrative entity which “speaks” and the one that “sees” (1980: 186). If looking implies power as Foucault has shown (1991), then an analysis of who looks and who is looked at within a literary text might prove useful in exposing how writers have, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuated or subverted power relations in their texts. Consequently, it is not surprising that literary critics have come to examine the focalizing entity/entities within a given

text *vis-à-vis* the broader subject-matter of the gaze, turning the presumably ideological-free analysis of narratology into a fertile field of exploration of cultural and power relations. Indeed, over the past years, scholars working under the rubric of (post)colonial and/or gender criticism have increasingly turned their attention to the imbrications between looking-relations and power-relations in literature. For, as Ann Kaplan suggests in the above epigraph, if the principles which have traditionally governed looking-relations between the East and the West reflect the centrality of the white western subject, those which have traditionally determined looking-relations between men and women reveal the centrality of the male subject. The purpose of the present contribution is therefore to examine the subversive implications of the narratological technique of focalization in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Relying on postcolonial and gender studies, I argue that in *Brick Lane* Ali uses focalization to subvert the prevailing centrality of both the white western gaze —the “imperial gaze” as defined by Kaplan (1997)²— and the male gaze. To this effect, Ali has created a narrative in which the main focalizer, Nazneen, is a Spivakian subaltern female character, a character who, moreover, is recurrently and deliberately *looking at* and *scrutinizing* western and eastern, dressed and undressed, male and female bodies.

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In a 1982 article in *The Times*, Salman Rushdie wrote that “the Empire writes [is writing] back to the Centre” (1982: 8) and, since the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*³ at Tilbury in 1948, we could certainly add that the Empire has also been writing *from* the Centre. Since the publication of such pioneering works as Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) or Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972), British Literature has witnessed the appearance of a considerable number of works which have sought to (re)write the Asian experience in Britain through what Prafulla Mohanti has called “brown eyes” (Mohanti 1985). Amongst these works would be, for instance, V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), and also Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). *Brick Lane* is Ali's first and most celebrated novel and is so far the only narrative which the British-Bangladeshi writer has devoted entirely to the Asian migration experience in Britain.⁴ Ali's *début* novel was received with great critical acclaim —it was shortlisted for the *Booker Prize* in 2003; it has been translated into more than twenty languages and was turned into a film in 2007 under the direction of Sarah Gavron. Nevertheless, recent criticism has come to question the extent to which Ali's *Brick Lane* might deserve —either in terms of form or content— its huge success.⁵ In this respect, I agree with Sara Upstone in highlighting that the main relevance of the novel lies in “re-imagining the migrant narrative from a female

perspective” (2010: 168). This constitutes a quantum leap since, as Papastergiadis has noted, “the driving motivation for contemporary migrants is rarely expressed in the masculinist narrative of the pioneer [...]. The experience of Third World women, a key force in the international labour market, cannot be described in such pioneering terms” (2000: 48). Furthermore, as I intend to demonstrate in the present work, the subversive female gaze offered by the novel also provides a counterpoint to previous narratives. For even in novels such as Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* or Syal’s *Anita and Me*, where the main focalizer or narrator is a female character, we do not detect such a subversive depiction and exploration of the male body, from a female perspective, as we do in *Brick Lane*.

Brick Lane revolves, mainly —albeit not exclusively—, around the character of Nazneen, a young Bengali woman who is brought to Britain as the result of an arranged marriage with a man “at least forty years old” (Ali 2007: 17). Although featuring a third-person narrator, *Brick Lane* is mostly rendered from Nazneen’s point of view. At first credulous and naïve, later on sophisticated and mature, Nazneen’s perspective dominates that of the narrator in a very palpable way at the beginning of the novel, merges with it almost imperceptibly towards the middle section and makes it almost unfelt towards the end. Consequently, as the novel progresses, the reader gets closer and closer to the protagonist, forgetting the presence of the narrator who mediates between them. In so doing, the novel creates a parallelism between the emancipation of Nazneen’s voice at the formal level and her process of self-empowerment at the diegetic level where Nazneen goes from being a submissive wife to becoming an independent woman and the breadwinner for the family.

Trapped inside her apartment for most of the novel, and particularly upon her arrival in London, Nazneen finds in the small window of her claustrophobic flat the first chance to come into contact with the external world. Nevertheless, the sight offered by this window is a limited one, restricting Nazneen’s field of vision to “the dead grass and broken paving stones” (17) as well as to the figure of the tattoo lady, an old white woman who, like Nazneen, also shares a place by a window, a window which in this case is curtainless. This naked window offers Nazneen a privileged position since she can observe the tattoo lady without being seen. As a result, Nazneen recurrently allows her gaze to prowl over the body of the mysterious woman, a body which is not dressed in clothes but in ink:

She [the tattoo lady] scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks [...]. At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink. Nazneen had never been close enough (never closer than this, never further) to decipher the designs [...]. They [the tattoos] were ugly and they made the tattoo lady more ugly than was necessary, but the tattoo lady clearly did not care. (18)

Nazneen seems impressed by the way in which this old woman makes her body the object of the public gaze, something which, as we shall see, Nazneen avoids at all costs. Given Nazneen's socio-cultural background, her recurrent references to the body of the tattoo lady (17, 18, 40, 53, 87) can be understood as evidence of her bewilderment at a new culture in which the exposure of the body is, to a certain extent, normal. But what seems more revealing for the purpose of the present essay is the fact that, filtered through Nazneen's perspective, western reality —of which the body of the tattoo lady is but an early exponent— comes to be presented as an exotic *Other*. In this way, Ali's novel plays with and subverts the prevailing paradigm of previous Raj fictions such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) where the white character of Kim, dressed in native garb, surveys India and transmits a vision of it as a feminized exotic *Other*. As Nazneen progressively ventures out of the domestic sphere, we also detect how the narrative subverts the figure of what M.L. Pratt has called the white western "seeing-man", "whose imperial eyes [...] look[ed] and possess[ed]" the newly annexed territories (1992: 7). In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali creates an eastern "seeing-woman" whose eyes progressively unveil and possess Britain. Through Nazneen's focalization, western readers come to experience how alien —and even risible— their own culture might appear when rendered from a different perspective, just as eastern readers might have felt detached from the reality portrayed through Kim's perspective in Kipling's novel. Thus, revealing the comic outlook which pervades the whole narrative, western women, as seen from Nazneen's point of view, have "strange hair [...] pumped up like a snake's hood" (57), and they walk in a bizarre way with their shoulders "padd[ing] up and out. They could balance a bucket on each side and not spill a drop of water" (43). But Nazneen's patronizing gaze also falls upon the male characters of the novel as in the case of the male ice-skater whose suit was "so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display" (36). In this way, Nazneen *returns* the gaze at the whites, subverting the looking paradigm which has traditionally repressed the subjectivity of the subaltern (hooks 1992). Nazneen makes the white characters of the novel feel what Sartre called "the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen" (1976: 7).⁶ For Nazneen, the streets of London become actual catwalks of exotic bodies dressed in exotic outfits which she *looks at* and *scrutinizes* from the position of a spectator:

But they [the people in the street] were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. *She enjoyed this thought. She began to scrutinize.* She *stared at* the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. (56, emphasis mine)

As the words in italics show, Nazneen does not simply *see*—an inevitable and even unconscious act— but rather she *looks, gazes* and *scrutinizes*, verbs which allude to a more conscious and intentional move than the mere act of seeing. Ali makes Nazneen’s continuous acts of looking go beyond mere gestures of observation and turns them rather into consciously and deliberately constructed processes aimed at placing Nazneen as the subject of the gaze with all its subversive potential. Like the Freudian voyeur, Nazneen even admits taking pleasure in scrutinizing other bodies —“*She enjoyed this thought. She began to scrutinize*”— provided that she can avoid being seen. What is more, the fact that she compares herself with a God who sees without being seen recalls Foucault’s “Panopticism” (1991). But, in *Brick Lane*, the “all-seeing” figure is significantly and subversively a female character; it is a woman who exerts control through her gaze, reiteratively defying and withstanding the male gaze and, by extension, male power. Thus, for instance, when she passes a group of young Bengali men whose eyes become fixed on her, she resists being reduced to a visual object: “When she passed a group of young Bangla men on the path, they parted and bowed with mock formality. One remained straight and still and she caught his look, challenging or denying [...] Nazneen pulled her headscarf over her face to hide her lips” (143). In a similar vein, on seeing a girl with a big camera in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen also “adjusted her headscarf [because] She was conscious of being watched” (254). Although a discussion of Nazneen’s use of the Islamic veil is beyond the scope of the present contribution,⁷ it is worth noting that, as the previous quotations show, Nazneen recurrently uses her veil as what K.H. Bullock has called a “gaze inhibitor” (2000), that is, as a sartorial strategy to avoid objectification. In this respect, Bullock (2000) has even argued that the western interest in unveiling the body of the Muslim woman underscores the desire of the white western male gaze to appropriate the body of the Muslim woman who can see without being seen.

If Muslim women have traditionally entered western literary representations as objects of *Otherness* or as sexualized objects of a western white male gaze (Zine 2002), in *Brick Lane* Monica Ali subverts this paradigm by creating a female character who is the bearer of the gaze and who explicitly condemns any action which might turn her into the object of anybody else’s gaze, including her husband’s: “I [Chanu] would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together [...]. Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children” (23). On overhearing this conversation, Nazneen engages in a dialectical struggle against Chanu’s objectification of her, and she immediately deprives him of his subject position and, therefore, of his power and self-command: “Narrow hips! You could wish for such a fault, Nazneen said to herself, thinking of the rolls of fat that hung low from Chanu’s stomach. It would be possible to tuck

all your hundred pens and pencils under those rolls and keep them safe and tight” (23). Like Medusa’s gaze which turns men into stone—and evokes the fear of castration—, Nazneen’s verbal reply fossilizes Chanu’s previous objectification of her. What is more, in line with Freud’s theories (1965), it could be suggested that Nazneen’s recurrent acts of looking at Chanu’s body metaphorically ‘castrate’ him since, in destabilizing the subject position of the male as the bearer of the gaze, the character of Nazneen is challenging one of the phallogentric relations by which men assert their dominance. For, as Audre Lorde has pointed out, “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession” (1984: 53). Thus, whilst Nazneen’s acts of gazing at white characters serve to destabilize the imperial paradigm which has traditionally dominated looking-relations between the East and the West, the fact that Nazneen recurrently looks at and scrutinizes male bodies also subverts the gender paradigm which has traditionally defined looking-relations between men and women. Although, as we have seen with regard to the tattoo lady, Nazneen does look at female characters, her objectifying gaze is, more often than not, directed at male characters. Furthermore, whilst Nazneen’s acts of looking at other female characters—mainly white women—seem to be mainly used for descriptive purposes, her fixation on male characters is conspicuously aimed at exposing male bodies in an unconventional, subversive way. Indeed, Chanu’s body becomes one of the first and most recurrent targets of her objectifying gaze throughout the novel. Through several instances of indirect thought, we observe how Nazneen exposes his most hidden defects without any sense of pathos:

After a minute or two in the dark when her eyes had *adjusted* and the snoring began, Nazneen turned on her side and *looked at* her husband. She *scrutinized* his face, round as a ball, the blunt-cut thinning hair on top, and the dense eyebrows that crawled across his brow. [...] She *looked at* him for a long time. It was not a handsome face [...] Now that they were closed she could see the way the skin puckered up across the lids and drooped down to meet the creases at the corners. (39-40, emphasis mine)

In a reversal of the male gaze which usually scrutinizes a female body, Nazneen bluntly scrutinizes and exposes Chanu’s body before the eyes of the reader—and this occurs repeatedly throughout the novel (144, 178, 181, 184, 202, 204, 295, 521, 366, 370). Unknowingly, Chanu ends up being on display in the same way as the tattoo lady deliberately lets her quasi-naked body be on show to the whole community. In this way, Ali reverses the scopic paradigm of men looking at women (Berger 1972; Mulvey 1997), conferring to the female gaze the subject position of which it has traditionally been deprived both in western and eastern cultures. If within a western imaginary the female gaze has been regarded as dangerous and threatening—something symbolized by the Greco-Roman myth of Medusa—,

in eastern cultures —and particularly in the Muslim world— the social order is considered to be challenged if a woman dares to look at a man (see Mernissi 2003). Although, as we have seen with regard to Nazneen’s use of the veil, the sartorial conventions of Muslim women might protect them from the objectifying male gaze —and, indeed, as Watson’s interview-based analysis shows (2002), many Muslim women do use their veils for this purpose—, the fact that they might use their veils as “gaze inhibitor[s]” (Bullock 2000) implicitly underscores their potential position as objects of the male gaze. In this respect, scholars such as Ahmed (1992) or Mernissi (2003) have argued that, in the name of Islam, patriarchy has enforced female veiling and has subsequently used this sartorial imposition to protect men from sexual temptation since, as Iman Ghazali noted in the twelfth century, “the look is fornication of the eye” (in Mernissi 2003: 141). Given that the subject of that fornicating gaze is assumed to be male, the idea of Muslim women as potential objects of the male gaze is reinforced. From this, it may be deduced that, if exposed, Muslim women are also likely to fall prey to the male gaze, a male gaze which, judging by Ghazali’s words, seems to assume phallic dimensions penetrating the female body like Draculanian eye-teeth. Thus, even though Muslim women might avoid becoming the object of the public gaze by covering themselves, they, like their western counterparts, have not traditionally inhabited the position of subject of the gaze, a convention which Ali reverses in *Brick Lane*.

Going back to Chanu, it could be argued that, to a certain extent, his body is feminized in the novel, not only because of his position as the object of Nazneen’s gaze, but also because his body is repeatedly described as being abject.⁸ The flaccid skin of his face “puckered [puckers] up across the lids” (39); “his lips parted [part] indignantly” (18); his stomach has the appearance of a “water-filled balloon” (202); and his clothes are always described as being stained by his “hair oil” (366), if not by food grease. At a certain point, Nazneen even defines Chanu’s stomach in relation to a pregnant woman’s womb: “His [Chanu’s] stomach no longer looked like a nine-month pregnancy. Now it was closer to six” (459).⁹ What is more, the fact that Nazneen is constantly working on Chanu’s body (39, 45, 91, 182, 183) —“She was always cutting bits off him” (91)— strengthens the idea of Chanu as an object. Therefore, Chanu’s body becomes more an area to work upon than a *locus* of desire, something which Nazneen will find in Karim, her middleman and future lover. The first image we have of Karim resembles a verbal translation of a cinematographic medium shot in which, through Nazneen’s perspective, Karim’s body is visually exposed:

She considered him. The way he stood with his legs wide and his arms folded. His hair. Cut so close to the skull. The way it came to a triangle at the front, and the little bit which stood up straight at the centre of his forehead. He wore his jeans tight and his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow [...]. He wore the phone at his hip, in a little

black leather holster. He felt the length and breadth of it and tested the surface with his thumb as if he had discovered a growth, this tumorous phone on his side. Then he refolded his arms. They looked strong, those arms. (210)

In passages such as this, Nazneen subverts the figure of the voyeuristic male spectator as theorized by Mulvey (1997). Paraphrasing Mulvey in reverse, we could say that Nazneen subjects Karim's body to her controlling and curious female gaze (Mulvey 1997: 16). In contrast to Chanu's plump and sloppy aspect, Karim is described as a well-built, attractive young man. Whereas Nazneen's portrayals of Chanu suggest feelings of repulsion, the visual impression that Karim leaves in Nazneen is flooded with sensuality and eroticism, something emphasized by the phallic dimension that Karim's phone seems to acquire. Only described in terms of its "length" and "breadth," Karim's phone, like the stereotypical phallic symbol of the pistol, is also placed "at his hip, in a little black leather holster" (210). Nazneen fixes her gaze on Karim's phone, going as far as sensing how he feels "the length and breadth of it" and how he "test[s] the surface with his thumb" as if representing an act of masturbation which culminates in "a growth" (210). Karim's phone becomes a fetish which Nazneen will recall on several occasions and, as a potential phallic symbol, it also serves to anticipate the future sexual encounter between the protagonist and the young man.

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Nazneen's descriptions of Karim's body are charged with voyeuristic and erotic overtones as when she focuses her eyes on Karim's lips and thighs: "He turned round. Sweat across the top of his lip [...] He got into position now. Legs wide, right leg working, and she saw the thigh strain inside the denim" (211). As Nazneen and Karim get closer, she is said to observe "him more openly now" (261). For "when he saw [sees] her looking at him she did [does] not look away immediately" (261). Nazneen's refusal to turn her gaze away when Karim catches her look might be suggestive of the growing intimacy between the couple, but it might also be understood as Nazneen's personal vindication of her right to look. Feeling even freer, Nazneen continues scrutinizing and, consequently, objectifying Karim's body either in their face-to-face meetings or in her musings: "she thought of Karim. She thought about his forearms and she rejoiced that they were not thin. She thought about the small flat mole on the left ridge of his jaw and how stunned she had been to discover it only this week" (264). If Nazneen describes Chanu as an unattractive man, she praises Karim's physical appearance, in particular, his strong arms—"They looked strong, those arms" (210). Similarly, whilst Chanu's fluids and segregations cause repulsion in Nazneen, she finds sensuality in the "sweat across the top of his [Karim's] lip" (211). This description confers on Karim an almost photographic aspect, much in keeping with the image of the man with a "sprinkling of sweat" (55) over his biceps whom Nazneen observes on a poster in Brick Lane. Nazneen

reifies Karim's body, turning it into a quasi-commodity and this, in turn, serves to reverse the paradigm of female objectification which has traditionally dominated visual culture and artistic representations in modern societies.

In *Brick Lane*, Ali's use of an eastern female character as the main focalizer of the novel represents a challenge to the position of conventional observers. In filtering western reality through the eyes of an eastern woman, Ali reverses the paradigm which has traditionally dominated looking-relations between the East and the West, a paradigm which has also governed the looking structure of previous accounts by imperial surveyors. Furthermore, by placing a female character as the main focalizing entity of the novel, Ali also subverts the gender politics of the gaze. In a reversal of the male gaze which usually scrutinizes a female body, in *Brick Lane* it is a woman who explicitly and deliberately *looks at* and *scrutinizes* other male bodies. This is so much so that theorizations on the dichotomy women/object and men/subject of the gaze such as Berger's (1972) or Mulvey's (1997), rather than serving as frameworks for critical analysis, seem to be subversively evoked in Ali's novel. What is more, from a literary perspective, Nazneen's recurrent acts of looking at male characters also serve Ali to challenge literary conventions for, as Peter Brooks has noted, "[w]hile the bodies viewed are both male and female, vision is a typically male prerogative, and its object of fascination the woman's body, in a cultural model so persuasive that many women novelists don't reverse its vectors" (1993: 88). In *Brick Lane* Ali does reverse the vectors, not only because in her novel the woman looks at the man, but also because the East looks at the West.

Notes

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². In *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (1997), Ann Kaplan defines the post-colonial concept of "imperial gaze" as follows: "By the 'Imperial Gaze', I mean a gaze structure which fails to understand that, as Edward Said phrases it, non-American peoples have integral cultures and lives that work according to their own, albeit different, logic (Said 1993/94, xxiii)" (1997: 78). Put differently, Kaplan's notion of the "imperial gaze" alludes to the fact that the colonized has often been

viewed and represented from the perspective of the colonizer. The white western gaze has deprived the colonized of their subjectivity, putting them in the position of objects and, consequently, "in the position of being mastered" (1997: 70). For Kaplan, the imperial gaze and the male gaze cannot be separated, not only because both are objectifying gazes, but also because the imperial gaze has often been a male gaze.

³. Literally, *Empire Windrush* is the name of one of the first ships which carried West Indian immigrants to Britain after World War II. Metonymically and metaphorically, the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in

1948 is often regarded as the beginning of post-war mass migration to Britain.

⁴. To date Ali has published three other novels, namely *Alentejo Blue* (2006), *In the Kitchen* (2009), and more recently *Untold Story* (2011).

⁵. In her article “Same Old, Same Old” (2007), Sara Upstone, for instance, argues that, despite their huge commercial success, both Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* continue to draw on postcolonial theoretical frameworks and, in so doing, they take a step back in the construction of black Britishness, above all, if compared to other, perhaps less successful, novels such as Diran Adebayo’s *Some Kind of Black* (1997), Atima Srivastava’s *Looking for Maya* (1999), Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism* (2006), Suhayl Saadi’s *Psychoraag* (2004) or Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* (2006). For a more comprehensive approach to the polarized critical reception of *Brick Lane*, see also Ruth Maxey’s “‘Representative’ of British Asian Fiction? The Critical Reception of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” (2008).

⁶. Sartre wrote these words in his introduction to the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie nègre et malgash de langue française*, edited by Leopold Sedar Senghor in 1948.

⁷. In a different study, entitled “El hiyab en *Brick Lane*, de Monica Ali” (2012), I

have explored, in depth, the politics of the veil in Ali’s novel.

⁸. As opposed to men’s contained, closed off and hard bodies, the female body has been regarded as abject, fluid and malleable because of processes such as childbirth and menstruation (see, Grosz 1994; Kristeva 1982).

⁹. Nazneen’s references to Chanu’s rolling stomach are recurrent in the novel (144, 178, 181, 184, 202, 204, 295, 521, 366, and 370) and they can be said to represent a somatic translation of Chanu’s psychological states. For the prominent stomach which Chanu exhibits at the beginning of the novel matches his great expectations for the future in Britain; when his failure as the family’s breadwinner begins to be evident, his stomach is said to have become “alarmingly small, puckered and loose, a depleted rice sack” (204); and his failure as a husband and father as well as his inability to find his place in Britain also finds a somatic echo: “He [Chanu] had shrunk. Not just his cheeks and his belly, but all of him. His voice, his words, his temper, his projects, his plans. He had shrunk [...] His stomach no longer looked like a nine-month pregnancy. Now it was closer to six” (459). Paralleling Chanu’s inability to cope with the western world, his stomach fails to adapt to excessive eating and Chanu eventually develops an ulcer.

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