

The Hidden Face of the New Millennium: Migrant Exploitation and Reader Expectations in Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*

Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez

This essay examines Monica Ali's third novel In the Kitchen (2009) and the ways in which it challenges reader expectations by focusing on migrant experience from an unconventional perspective which includes male focalisation, the use of genre fiction and the depiction of immigrant communities totally different from Ali's in terms of cultural background and time of arrival. In my analysis I argue that by offering a crime fiction plot and the exploration of a man in crisis the novel resists classification and provides a thought-provoking reflection on migrant exploitation in twenty-first century Britain.

Keywords: *Migrant, identity, exploitation, reader expectations, globalisation, crime fiction, Monica Ali*

Introduction

Since the 1980s writing produced by immigrant communities in Britain has experienced a shift from positions which were mainly marginal in previous decades to a central position in the British literary scene. This has been perceived as part of a renovation which has also included a growing centrality of writing from the geographical margins – Scotland, Wales – as well as feminist, gay and lesbian literature (Galván 2000: 35). In the new millennium this tendency has been accentuated as a consequence of an increasing interest in the literary portrayal of the cultural changes produced by immigration in the last decades and the new British identities they have generated. This can be observed not only in the high number of literary prizes which have been recently awarded to writers from ethnic minorities, but also in their important presence in overviews of contemporary British fiction published in the last years, which often incorporate sections devoted to their contribution.¹

In Volume 13 of the *Oxford English Literary History*, significantly entitled *The Internationalization of English Literature*, Bruce King highlights the fact that these authors initiated a change towards new literary concerns and sensitivities by offering a new type of literature focused on issues of identity with injustice, race and politics as prominent matters and exploring, often through autobiographical writing, personal, family or racial history (2005: 1, 4). This seems to justify the frequent deployment of the bildungsroman in narratives by these writers, as the bildungsroman or novel of formation has been since its appearance in the late eighteenth century a suitable form for the expression of the problematics of identity, which has evolved over time to include twentieth and twenty-first century concerns. In his influential 2004 study postcolonial critic Mark Stein defends the existence of a substantial body of immigrant narratives in Britain that can be included within the bildungsroman genre (2004: xiii), among which he highlights, to name only a few, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) by Hanif Kureishi, *Some Kind of Black* (1996) by Diran Adebayo, *Lara* (1997) by Bernardine Evaristo or *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith. By utilizing the bildungsroman these authors do not only explore diasporic identity, but they also vindicate a place in society for migrant communities and a space within the nation – understood in Benedict Anderson's terms as a

“imagined political community” –, thus claiming their right to experience the geographical and social spaces of Britain as their own.

Among ethnic minority writers today, Monica Ali (Bangladesh, 1967-) stands as one of the best-known as a result of the success of her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003). This narrative has been considered a perfect example of the so-called “multicultural” bildungsroman (see Perfect 2008, Valman 2009), since it focuses on the evolution of Bangladeshi immigrant Nazneen and her struggles in the Bengali community of London she, like the author herself, belongs to. The book received important literary awards at the time of its publication² although it was not free from controversy, as it was accused of not being accurate in its description of the communities living in the London area which gives its title to the novel,³ and of not “offer[ing] much in the way of complex formal strategy or challenging political vision” (Valman 2009: 3).⁴ After the success of *Brick Lane*, Ali’s second novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006) moves away from the typical focus on migrant experience to offer an exploration, through a polyphony of voices, of the interaction between the inhabitants of a small Portuguese village. The important shift in topic observed in this novel, which has been perceived as reflecting Ali’s versatility and the breadth of her interests (Schillinger 2006: 1), might be linked to its lack of commercial success (see Black 2010) as a consequence of what Kobena Mercer (1990) and others have called the “burden of representation”. This concept has been used to refer to the expectations of representativity placed by the audience on ethnic minority writers, according to which they are expected to represent through their writing their communities’ concerns in such a way that any deviation from this political act will result in a lack of interest on the part of readers and critics.⁵ In addition, postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan has explored in his book *The Post-Colonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins* (2001) the degree to which exoticist discourses are responsible for the marketing and “commodification” of postcolonial works in Western countries, a phenomenon which can certainly be connected to the so-called “failure” of Ali’s second novel to engage the audience, as it did not seem to fit into the pattern expected for it to be successful, that is, the exploration of migrant identities and of the author’s ethnic community.

The change of focus observed in *Alentejo Blue* announces in a way the kind of experiments Ali will carry out in her next novel, *In the Kitchen* (2009), which I intend to examine in some depth in this essay. This narrative portrays the daily bustle of the kitchen staff in an eminent, centrally-located London hotel which employs mainly recent immigrants, some of them living illegally in Britain and, though it returns to ethnic minority concerns, it is my contention that they are tackled from perspectives which are foreign to the expectations of readers in terms of characterisation, genre and topics approached. This can be attributed to several aspects. In the first place, its protagonist is the white, English, middle-class executive chef at the hotel, Gabriel Lightfoot, who offers his androcentric, Eurocentric viewpoint throughout the narrative. Having a male focaliser is very rare in fiction by women from ethnic minorities, which is usually mainly autobiographical and female-centred. However, this does not mean the novel does not focus on gender issues. In fact, it can be argued that *In the Kitchen* has at its core gender relations in the twenty-first century globalised world, as I will discuss later in this essay. Moreover, the immigrant communities depicted in the narrative – mainly African and Eastern European – come from areas on the globe which are culturally remote from that of the author and much of the plot deals with their problematics as recently arrived, and sometimes undocumented, individuals. As a matter of fact, hardly any

character belongs to Ali's ethnic community, which makes the plot more foreign to a readership ready to find South-Asian communities as the main focus of her writing.

Another unexpected feature of *In the Kitchen* is the fact that it can be included in the subgenre of crime fiction, as it shares many of its patterns and motifs. Thus, its opening bears a strong resemblance to those typically found in these narratives, as they often begin with a dead body found by the police; in Ali's novel, it is one of the undocumented immigrant employees that is found dead in the hotel premises. As the narrative advances, it gradually moves beyond crime fiction towards an exploration of present-day British multiethnic, globalised society, which is portrayed through the experiences and conflicts lived by the male protagonist. The novel only returns to its initial detective plot towards the end, when the rhythm accelerates and Gabriel becomes the main agent in the resolution of the mystery, with the discovery of a human trafficking and prostitution network. As a consequence of this, we can observe how the inclusion of the novel within genre fiction brings an unexpected dimension to *In the Kitchen*, particularly since the crime fiction genre is very rarely cultivated by women from ethnic minorities and not the form which readers associate with the literary production of this group.⁶

My aim in this essay is to explore the novel's aforementioned characteristics in order to show to what extent by playing with reader expectations, Ali is challenging conventional assumptions about the fiction produced by women from diasporic communities in an attempt to get rid of the so-called "burden of representation". In order to do so, I intend to examine the strategies through which this challenge is carried out in the narrative, focusing initially on the characterisation of the male protagonist and the way in which his focalisation shapes the narrative, as it conditions the reader's perspective and accounts for some of the most striking features of *In the Kitchen*. In a different section I will reflect on the specific immigrant communities portrayed in the novel and the extent to which this can be considered an innovative feature in recent diasporic fiction produced in Britain, as they condition the topics approached, which are largely different from those in previous narratives. Finally, I will turn to the crime fiction plot and its relevance not only within the narrative and within contemporary diasporic writing, but also in the context of the new forms of oppression found in twenty-first century society. This will lead me to my conclusion, where in the light of the arguments given I will offer an assessment of Ali's contribution to diasporic fiction in English.

Gabriel Lightfoot or a man in crisis

As stated above, a significant part of the novel's play with reader expectations is connected to the choice of protagonist and his characterisation. As several reviewers have highlighted, Gabriel Lightfoot is portrayed as a "deeply unlikeable" person (Sandison 2009), a "flawed man" (Arana 2009); indeed, he appears as a self-centred, 42-year-old English chef who goes through an identity crisis right after – and not by chance – the body of Ukrainian porter Yuri is found dead in the hotel cellar. His breakdown is linked to several related circumstances: his father, who lives in a provincial town, is dying from cancer; his long-term relationship with his fiancée deteriorates just as he feels attracted to a young Eastern European prostitute, Yuri's friend, who eventually becomes his lover; he discovers untold truths about his eccentric mother and, to make things worse, his plans to open a restaurant on his own start to fall through. It is no coincidence that his most salient personality trait is evoked by his own

surname, Lightfoot, since early in the novel we witness his tendency to run away from important decisions or compromise with others.

Although it could be argued that the novel, like *Brick Lane*, is a bildungsroman, as it focuses on Gabriel's development from total confusion to a new start in life,⁷ it is also true that this character provokes little empathy in readers, a most unusual feature in the bildungsroman genre not found in her debut novel's Nazneen. Be it a bildung or not, we can certainly say that Gabriel changes his attitude to life throughout the narrative, and particularly towards the end, and his relationships with women play an important role in his evolution. Indeed, Gabriel's conflicts with women – his secretary, his girlfriend, his sister, his lover – are to a great extent the trigger of his mental collapse and clear indications of the fragility of his personal relations. From the very first time these women are introduced, we become aware of Gabriel's perception of them: his girlfriend Charlie, who wants a family above all and to be asked to move into his flat (2009: 23); his patronising sister Jenny, who finishes all his sentences as if she knew his thoughts better than himself (2009: 38); or his Caribbean secretary Oona, who is the focus of his hostility for most of the narrative despite her being the one to support him later in his moment of breakdown:

There was something about Oona that infuriated him. [...] What offended him about Oona was simply this: her domesticity. When she blew into his office and sat down it was as if she had just got home with the shopping, looking forward to a cuppa and a chat. The way she talked, the way she walked, the way she pressed her bosom when she was thinking, all of it, at core, was irreducibly and inescapably domestic. In Gabe's experience, women who worked in kitchens – and there were a few – worked the hardest, swore the loudest and told the dirtiest jokes. It wasn't about being one of the boys, not necessarily – they could flirt like hell too – but it showed they knew the rules. (2009: 14-15)

This passage makes evident his androcentric perspective, as it shows to what extent he seems to reject the traditional association of cooking with the female, domestic sphere, while encouraging a masculine behaviour in women involved professionally in it. According to Jeremy Hawthorn androcentrism describes “a habit of mind and set of attitudes which are based upon a male perspective and which ignore female experience and interests” (1998: 7) and this is suggested in Gabriel's perception of Oona as an incompetent worker, since he is following conventional, male-centred views of the professional world – which belongs to the public sphere – as an aggressive domain where femininity must be invisibilised. By portraying an androcentric focaliser, the reader is soon made aware of its unreliability and the distance created by having a third-person narrator is reinforced, as the gap between the character's views and those of the implied author becomes more visible. This is further highlighted by a significant number of frivolous antifeminist comments on his part which are scattered throughout the narrative and constantly remind the reader of his androcentric attitudes.⁸

Gabriel's early obsession with Belarusian teenage prostitute Lena is the next element that characterises his behaviour, which can be interpreted as stemming from the desire for the racial Other explored by several theorists as a common occurrence in the white coloniser (see Young 1995; Bhabha 1992). Her ethnicity, her youth, her degrading profession and shattering experiences provoke in him a sexual attraction that leads him to total confusion in his life, particularly after he hides her in his flat and they start an affair. Lena is portrayed as a mysterious, tiny, surly young woman who, interestingly enough, stands in direct opposition to

his articulate, feminine, understanding girlfriend Charlie and it is significant that she appears to him as animal-like, a perception which evokes Edward Said's reflection on the traditional attribution of non-human features to the second element in the binary self/Other (1979): "Her face was thin and rigid and her hands, which she held twisted together at her chest, were fleshless claws" (2009: 25); "He approached her gradually, as he would a wild creature" (2009: 80); "She had a feline nose, small and snub, high, skinny eye-brows and a pale scar of a mouth. It was difficult to tell, Gabe could not decide, whether she was pretty or not" (2009: 83). What begins as a fantasy of possession is soon transformed into a reality even he is astonished at, in a physical materialisation of his desire which makes him perceive her body parts as separate, thus emphasising her subhuman nature:

Close to tears, he sat on the edge of the bed took and hold of her feet. He appraised each toe, the pearly nails, each little knuckle, the delicate articulation of each joint. [...] marvelling at how truly she was flesh and bone, *his Lena, his ghostly girl*. And the anklebones, they were real all right, the shinbones and the knees, and she raised her hips lightly so he could raise her dress. He worked slowly up her body, connecting every part of her, putting her back together again. (2009: 238; my italics)

As he gets to know more details about her frightful experiences – with her pimp and clients, on her migration journey – he realises his attitude to her is also that of the sexual exploiter, which makes his guilt grow despite the attempt to justify his behaviour as love:

She had come to him. Keep that in mind. He didn't keep her locked in the flat. He hadn't stolen her identity. She wasn't in his debt. There was no debt bondage here. And anyway, he loved her. Why shouldn't he? Was there a law against that?
He loved Lena. He loved that stupid girl. (2009: 257)

Thus, Gabriel's male-centred, Eurocentric perspective defies reader expectations of identification with the focaliser usually found in diasporic narratives and not even witnessing his identity crisis reverses the situation. Indeed, his approaching nervous breakdown is announced in subtle ways: on the one hand, through his recurrent nightmares about Yuri's dead body and the act of eating rotting food, which in Freudian terms can be read as a sign of his guilty feelings at his moral degradation; on the other, through the growing frequency of compulsive gestures such as tearing his hair out and scratching his head to the point of bleeding, which can also be interpreted in Freudian terms as symptomatic of his growing insecurity.

His interaction with his family contributes significantly to his breakdown: the discovery that his idolised mother had bipolar disorder and for that reason committed suicide confuses him deeply, whereas the conversations with his dying father and racist grandmother revive sad memories of childhood and reveal the changing landscape of provincial England, with the end of local industries, the settling of immigrant communities and the loss of national identity as it was traditionally perceived. In fact, through these and other characters contemporary British identity is often discussed in the narrative and eventually presented as a "neutral, value-free identity", "a non-identity", "a vacuum" (2009: 282), a topic which links the novel to others published in the last decade such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000).

Another relevant component in Gabriel's crisis is his perception that most of his employees at the hotel kitchen come from non-British backgrounds (2009: 10) – in fact, only one member of his staff is British – since, as the narrative advances, he discovers that most of

them have personal histories of suffering and survival which have little in common with his easy youth of high ambitions. His breakdown is thus connected to a growing alienation in him and a realisation that most aspects of his life have changed in unexpected ways. This also includes, significantly, the city of London, with its new social geography he does not recognise any more as a consequence of its position as one of the centres of twenty-first century globalised economy: “London was slipping away from him. The longer he lived here, the less familiar it became” (2009: 286).⁹

In his relationships with women, readers witness his failure at communication with them, which is symbolised in his failed attempt to explain to both his sister and his ex girlfriend the trouble he is going through (2009: 339; 373-377). What is more, his lack of sincerity and commitment first with Charlie and later with Lena – regarding his promise to find her much loved brother in London who turns out to be her boyfriend – brings a realisation of his failure as a man according to the old values of masculinity taught by his father: “The truth was, no avoiding it, that this was what he was like: weak-willed, unfocused, spineless” (2009: 270-271).¹⁰ His obsession to ask for the words to describe him – as he is shocked to discover few people know him well enough – marks the peak of his breakdown and suggests his outdated perception of identity as fixed and coherent, in contrast to Stuart Hall’s well-established theories on its incompleteness and constant state of transformation (1996: 110, 112):

He needed to know now, and he needed to know urgently, what he was. He grabbed at words. Fair. He was fair, oh yes, everyone said so, everyone knew it. He was fair and he was reasonable. That was him. A perfect description. Above all, he was a reasonable man. Maybe not this morning with Oona, no, that was out of character. He wasn’t really like that. [...]

What am I? he thought. What am I? The question pinged round and round plaintively until, firing faster and faster, it took on a sharper edge. What am I? What am I? A nobody? A zero? Am I a hollow man? [...]

What was he? Was he a man without qualities? A man about whom nothing could be said? (2009: 372)

After a long wandering through London under the influence of energising drinks, his identity crisis is finally overcome towards the end of the narrative when he is determined to change his life and become a contented, lonely, grateful man. It is only then that he gets involved into some action to solve the mystery surrounding Yuri’s death and the strange encounters at the hotel, when he goes through a cathartic experience working on a Norfolk farm with a group of illegal immigrants, which precipitates his discovery of the truth and the intervention of the police. Whether we consider the literary portrayal of his breakdown and recovery successful or believable, it certainly has philosophical implications in that it makes identity a central topic in the novel and, more specifically, androcentric, Eurocentric identity. All in all, we can say *In the Kitchen* explores to a great extent a masculinity in crisis as a consequence of the pressures exerted by twenty-first century Western culture, since Gabriel represents the struggle of contemporary British maleness to adapt to contemporary society and values, a struggle which is conveyed through focalisation despite the challenge this implies of reader expectations.

The new exploited immigrant of the twenty-first century

Another striking feature of *In the Kitchen* is the type of immigrant communities depicted in the narrative, as these include mainly recently arrived individuals from areas on the globe such as Eastern Europe or Africa, often with little historical connection with the British colonial empire. This means that they are culturally and linguistically distant not only from Britain, but also from the ethnic groups which migrated there after the Second World War from the British ex colonies, subject of most diasporic fiction in the 1980s and 1990s and of Monica Ali's first novel. In addition, since most of the plot takes place in Gabriel's work context, that is, the kitchen at the Imperial hotel, many of the characters portrayed are those working for him, whose profile is mainly – with the exception of Caribbean Oona – that of a young or middle-aged male who has travelled to Britain alone escaping from a country in turmoil or the poverty of post-communist Europe, sometimes even illegally and leaving his family behind. That is the case of the porter found dead in the cellar, Ukrainian Yuri, who is discovered to have university training as an engineer to Gabriel's surprise; Russian obstetrician Nikolai, who sought political asylum after being considered a spy for being concerned about public health, or Liberian Benny, a former child soldier who tells tales of horror in his war-ridden country.

Despite the difficult trajectories most of them have had, the protagonist's attitude to his employees is somehow tinted with a superiority which hides an important dose of Eurocentrism, as he calls them humorously "his brigade, a United Nations task force" (Ali 2009: 99) and even lacks the interest to know where they come from, though as he matures he develops a growing curiosity which leads him to establish a friendship with some of them:

Every corner of the earth was represented here. Hispanic, Asian, African, Baltic and most places in between. Oona had taken on a new dishwasher, from Somalia or somewhere pretty much like that. The other one was Mongolian and the third was from – where? – the Philippines? [...] The room-service guy was fresh from Chile and Gabriel doubted that his English extended beyond fries and burgers and whatever else was on the menu. He'd fitted in all right. It was touching, really, to watch them all, every race, every colour, every creed. (Ali 2009: 99-100)

The inclusion of these communities in the narrative seems to stem from the attempt to realistically depict Britain's globalised society at the turn of the new millennium, with the new immigration trends that can be observed since the 1990s. Indeed, recent studies have shown that the ethnic diversity of immigrants coming to Britain has grown in the last decade, particularly after important immigration policy changes began to favour the arrival of Eastern European workers as members of the EU (Somerville et al. 2009: 3). Furthermore, asylum seekers increased dramatically between the late 1990s and the mid 2000s, descending again after 2002 (Somerville et al. 2009: 6). All in all, net immigration is said to have contributed 1.8 million people to the British population between 1997 and 2007, which implies a rise in the arrival of immigrants with respect to previous decades and, thus, in the number of first-generation individuals, being the Polish community the biggest foreign-born group in the UK nowadays (Somerville et al. 2009: 3).

By focusing on first-generation migrants and ethnic communities which are not her own, Monica Ali is establishing a distance from her own autobiographical background – she is second-generation although born in Dhaka – and thus trying to break free from the expectations of representativity readers and critics might hold about the novel. In addition,

she is placing the new immigrant populations on the map and inscribing their experiences, which in many cases have little to do with those lived by her own family or relatives as they are the consequence of new political and social circumstances. As a matter of fact, the South-Asian community to which Ali belongs is depicted in the narrative only through very secondary characters like Gabriel's Indian employee Suleiman, through the description of London areas which are now peopled by this ethnic group (see Ali 2009: 136-138) or in a passage which interestingly shows the contrast between the new reality Gabriel lives and the immigrant communities he remembers from his childhood in a Northern England town,¹¹ where racist attitudes were generalised:

In Blantwistle there were only the Asians, or the Pakis as they were called then, maybe still were. They did only the night shifts as the mill, were just coming out as the morning shift went in. That was the way it was at first. Gabriel remembered the journey on the number 72, going down from the heights of Plodder Lane to the market square [...]. Michael Harrison's family lived there, 'marooned', said his father, among the Asians, and when the bus pulled in at the bus stop the conductor shouted 'Khyber Pass' and rang the bell. People said things about the Asians. They never scrubbed their doorsteps, the children pissed on the flagstones, they made curry with Pal dog meat. Gabriel played a game with Michael, walking behind them making monkey noises, he didn't know any better then. (Ali 2009: 100)

Hence, by reflecting on the forms of racism prevalent in 1970s Britain the protagonist is acknowledging British racist past and his own compliance to it, while suggesting that attitudes have changed in the 2000s and British society has now learnt to accept multiculturalism. However, the narrative itself contradicts Gabriel's perception, as he realises later on, by showing to what extent the exploitation of migrants is still a common occurrence, though in more subtle ways, and is even getting worse as a result of the global economy which rules a first world metropolis like London. As sociologist Saskia Sassen highlights, the corporate economy characteristic of twenty-first century society, whose greatest concentrations can be found in major Western cities, requires large concentrations of workers devoted to lowly paid nonprofessional and manual jobs and these are often held by women and migrants who are usually ignored and excluded from economic representation (Sassen 2003: 170). Eleonor Kofman adds that the important number of lower-wage jobs created in global cities has "supplied the opportunities for flows of immigration, both legal and – to a notable extent – undocumented and illegal" (Kofman 1998: 282) and it is at this point that migrant exploitation begins to play a role in global economy, a cityscape which is depicted in Ali's novel.

Indeed its title, *In the Kitchen*, is highly relevant if we consider the double meaning it contains: on the one hand, the plot deals explicitly with characters who spend most of their time in a kitchen; on the other, the kitchen is that part of a house which is not usually shown on a first visit, though many activities are performed there, and in a way symbolises all those hidden areas in a place whose function is vital for its existence but which are not pleasant to see nor devised for the gaze of visitors. In the context of the globalised world we live in, Sassen suggests that many of the low-paid and manual jobs held in corporate cities are invisibilised by the corporate economy and presented as "other" to it (Sassen 2003: 175). This can indeed be said of the work performed at the kitchen of the Imperial Hotel in Ali's narrative, as the hotel, whose name significantly evokes the past glory of the British Empire, becomes the background for important business meetings and exhibitions of the global

economy, while its kitchen and other premises, which employ – sometimes illegally – large numbers of immigrants, are deemed invisible and non-existent for its public image, a situation only disrupted when the corpse of the Ukrainian is found in the cellar.

Thus, the novel visibilises a face of globalisation which is usually hidden from view, that is, all the activities performed in the symbolic “kitchens” of global cities, while inscribing the experiences of their protagonists and the exploitation they are submitted to, though perceived through the eyes of a privileged character, Gabriel, who gradually develops an awareness of the situation. The dehumanisation of such cities is expressed in a passage which metaphorically likens London to the central part of a digestive system, always in constant motion and whose voraciousness disintegrates everything it takes in:

London wasn't the brains of the country, as people said; it certainly wasn't the heart. London was all belly, its looping, intestinal streets constantly at work, digesting, absorbing, excreting, fuelling and refuelling, shaping the contours of the land. (Ali 2009: 240)

As the narrative advances, we discover through Gabriel's investigation that the exploitation of migrants described in the novel hides an even darker side, since it involves specific criminal activities in which several members of the hotel staff are implicated. Firstly, a prostitution network which deceives young foreign waitresses at the hotel into becoming prostitutes; secondly, a human trafficking network which brings illegal Eastern European workers into Britain only to be forced to work under conditions of slavery on a Norfolk farm. The connivance or indifference of those around him, even London politician and benefactor Fairweather, exacerbates Gabriel's mental breakdown and leads him to question the moral fabric of twenty-first century society in such a way that this seems to explain the nature of his dreams about Yuri's death, as Nikolai suggests: “The significance of Yuri's death [...] is that it is insignificant. That is why it is so troubling. That is why you dream” (Ali 2009: 260).

However, it takes the protagonist some time to realise that in his behaviour towards Lena his attitude is also that of the exploiter, as he is always the one to decide when to have sexual relations while she “merely submit[s] to his claims” (Ali 2009: 238) following the pattern expected of a prostitute. His initial kindness by giving her shelter and listening to her sad stories of violent pimps and capricious clients – she is “his charitable cause” (Ali 2009: 88) – soon turns into a possessiveness in which he does not recognise himself to such an extent that his own sexual impulses become alien to him: “His desire was a foul creature that climbed on his back and wrapped its long arms around his neck. What did it want with him? He would cage it if he could. One day he would have the strength to kill it, for it was not part of him” (Ali 2009: 239). Though the novel focuses very little on female development and Lena appears as the most enigmatic of female characters, it is significant that she finally rebels against Gabriel's authority first by leaving the flat on her own to explore London, like a modern *flâneuse* ready to appropriate the urban space as an inhabitant of the city (De Certeau 1988: 97), and later by reminding him of the commercial nature of their relationship: “You keep me here like . . . like prison. Like animal in cage. [...] Why you don't pay me? Pay me what you owe” (Ali 2009: 341). Her rebellion is hence a turning point in the narrative which makes Gabriel reflect on his own attitude and accept his share of responsibility for the evils of twenty-first century society.

Prostitution, human trafficking and enslavement are some of the evils which are proliferating in the world as a consequence of global economy and it is no surprise that they

all affect migrants in a direct way, as they are usually the victims of these forms of exploitation. By making them part of the plot of *In the Kitchen*, and not secondarily but as a central topic due to the direct implication of the hotel staff and the protagonist's involvement, Ali is bringing to the forefront the fast spread and nearness of very lucrative forms of crime in the new globalised world which many people ignore or are indifferent to, thus making readers reflect on issues of moral responsibility and guilt. The recent emergence of these crimes and of organised criminal networks devoted to them gives an added value to the novel, as *In the Kitchen* can be said to be one of the first narratives to tackle in literature the social conditions of victims and perpetrators, and particularly the situation of migrant prostitutes in Europe, a topic only approached in a few other recent narratives such as *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) by Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe. Hence, by not offering readers the topics they expected to find Monica Ali is dealing with issues which go beyond her own ethnic community and autobiographical experience, but which are profoundly universal as they affect to a greater or lesser extent all individuals living in contemporary Western societies.

The crime genre at the service of diasporic writing

The denunciation of migrant exploitation found in the narrative is accompanied by another unexpected feature which is the presence of an important number of conventions from the genre of crime fiction. Some of them are related with the pattern the plot follows in its development while others are linked to specific motifs scattered throughout the narrative. Spanish critic Román Gubern argues that an essential element in the crime genre and its strictest convention is the presence of a violent death, which serves as the instrument and pretext for setting in motion the whole plot (1970: 14). In Ali's novel not only does the story begin with the violent death of the hotel porter, but there is also a consciousness in the protagonist that this meant the beginning of a new phase in his life, as the opening paragraph suggests:

When he looked back, he felt that the death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart. He could not say that it was the cause, could not say, even that it was a cause, because the events which followed seemed to be both inevitable and entirely random [...]. Nevertheless, he fixed the beginning at the day of the Ukrainian's death, when it was the following day on which, if a life can be said to have a turning point, his own began to spin. (Ali 2009: 7)

But even before reading the first passage we can perceive the link with crime fiction through an interesting extra-literary feature, as the first hardback edition of the book shows on its cover an image of a kitchen knife stuck in a white wall, with its evocation of the cooking industry but also, and probably more vividly to most readers, of murder and crime. Although in later editions the cover tends to be more neutral, with an image of an ancient restaurant kitchen with its staff at work or no image at all, the choice of front cover for the first edition cannot go unnoticed and might be interpreted as an attempt to connect the book in some way – even if playfully – with the long tradition of crime fiction in English, a very lucrative genre in popular literature today which can boast a faithful and devoted audience.

After these initial clues, another important convention we find in Ali's novel is the presence of a character who acts as the detective, that is, a person who investigates and

eventually discovers the truth about the events. According to Joan Ramon Resina, the absence of this character would imply the exclusion of the text from the crime genre, since without it even those narratives dealing with a crime and a criminal would be closer to other genres depending on the specific characteristics of the narration (1997: 109). Although Gabriel Lightfoot cannot be considered a detective nor a professional researcher and his personal crisis stands at the core of the plot, his wish to discover the circumstances surrounding Yuri's death and the actions he carries out for that purpose make readers associate him with the function of the detective in the crime plot. The detective instinct can be observed in Gabriel from the very beginning, when on the very first page, immediately after the Ukrainian's corpse is found, he perceives an unusual worry in the restaurant manager which awakens his curiosity and triggers his investigation (Ali 2009: 7). Hence, suspense is introduced early in the novel and will reappear at specific points in the narrative, though it loses force in numerous sections which are more focused on the protagonist's relationships and discussions of British multiculturalism.

Together with suspense, common crime-fiction motifs can be observed throughout the novel, such as the presentation of a hostile, sordid world which is Gabriel's work context: "In this business, until you could see all the angles, it was better to keep your mouth shut" (Ali 2009: 7); the tense questioning of suspects, mainly the restaurant manager Gleeson and Ivan, the grill man at the hotel kitchen; and Gabriel's detective-like reflections during his search for clues.¹² Another feature which links the novel to the crime genre is the inclusion of passages describing violent encounters between characters, often in connection with the criminal network under investigation. The presence of fights and violent confrontations is a common crime-fiction motif probably derived from the types of social backgrounds depicted in the genre – usually criminal –, as well as from the likings of a mostly male audience generally keen on action scenes.

But there is a recurrent element which lies at the heart of the plot, as it constitutes the reason why Gabriel continues with his investigation: his frequent nightmares about the Ukrainian's corpse and rotting food. In the middle of his breakdown he starts to interpret the nightmares as the clue indicating that a murder has been committed and that he is the one who must find the culprit, in the most purely crime-fiction tradition: "Why do I keep having [the dream]? Over and over again. It might mean [...] something significant, like Yuri's death was no accident. It might mean that the dream won't stop until the killer is caught" (Ali 2009: 343). However, in the end Yuri's death turns out to be not a crime but an accident, in an interesting reversal of the crime genre climax, although the protagonist's involvement leads to the discovery of two large-scale crime networks implicating many people. With Gleeson, Ivan the grill man and Branka the hotel chief housekeeper as the non-scrupled leaders of the gang, the narrative thus presents two forms of crime which are now getting more and more widespread as a consequence of global economic interests, and not the classical murder plot. Furthermore, this realism gives the novel a social dimension, particularly since it is closely linked to the problematics of immigrants, who are the most vulnerable group to human trafficking, a realism which is further supported by the fact that some of the criminals eventually run away from the police and are never arrested.

To conclude this section, we can say that by deploying easily recognisable patterns and motifs from detective fiction, Ali is exploring new ground and challenging the expectations of readers, as the genre has been scarcely cultivated by authors from ethnic minorities writing in English and, if so, then mainly by male authors such as Mike Phillips in the UK or Walter Mosley in the US, both important contributors to what has been called "the

black detective novel".¹³ Hence, Ali can be considered one of the first women writers in her ethnic community – if not the first – to publish a crime novel in what can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to widen her readership and get free from the burden of representation while still tackling topics which are of concern to her. Whether her attempt at the new genre can be considered successful or not is quite a different matter, as some critics do not seem to find coherence in her combination of a crime plot, the protagonist's identity conflicts and the discussion of multicultural Britain.

Conclusion

In this essay we have discussed the strategies used by Monica Ali in *In the Kitchen* to challenge the expectations of readers and thus break free from the so-called burden of representation. Whereas her first novel, *Brick Lane*, followed the conventions and clichés which have characterised female-authored immigrant writing in the last decades, in her next two novels Ali defies these conventions and constructs narratives which cannot be easily classified under that label, a task most interestingly carried out in *In the Kitchen*. This novel offers a deep reflection on the realities of twenty-first century globalised society but using perspectives, topics and genres that move away from those expected in British fiction by women from diasporic communities.

Firstly, the narrative introduces as the focaliser a white, male character who thinks himself politically correct but whose androcentric, Eurocentric ideology soon emerges in his relationships with others. The lack of identification the protagonist provokes in the reader is accompanied on the one hand by an exploration of contemporary masculinity and on the other by a criticism of Western indifferent, irresponsible attitudes towards the evils of global economy, particularly as we witness his exploitative relationship with the young Belarusian prostitute. If Gabriel can be considered a man in crisis, as most of the plot seems to confirm, it is also true that the whole narrative is perceived through his androcentric eyes and this raises the controversial issue of authenticity despite his eventual redemption after his cathartic experiences among immigrant slaves.¹⁴ By challenging expectations of authenticity through a white, male focalisation in a female-authored, ethnic minority text, Ali surprises readers and critics while drawing attention to issues which go beyond the representation of her own ethnic community.

The second unexpected feature in the novel is also related to the absence of autobiographical elements, which have been perceived in the last decades as a regular occurrence in ethnic minority writing. If *Brick Lane* was criticised for offering an unfair, unrealistic depiction of the South-Asian community in London, *In the Kitchen* can never be charged with a similar fault as Ali's community is barely depicted in the narrative. As a matter of fact, although the novel can be said to focus on migrant experience, the communities Ali depicts are totally alien to her own in terms of cultural background, period of arrival and problematics faced, since they do not experience the same forms of racism as 1970s migrants. Instead, they are subjected to more sophisticated types of marginalisation and exploitation often linked to criminal practices to which undocumented immigrants are particularly vulnerable nowadays. Hence, by offering a cityscape that is unrelated to her second-generation immigrant background, Ali is exploring new territory while escaping from the autobiographical, and not acting as a mouthpiece for her community as readers had come to expect after successful semi-autobiographical novels of the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁵

Finally, Ali's third, though equally interesting, challenge in the novel is its playfulness with genre fiction and, more specifically, with detective fiction. The crime plot which sustains the narrative is the most noticeable but not the only feature borrowed from the genre, as we can also find crime fiction motifs and conventions such as the investigation and reflections of the detective, the presentation of a sordid, violent world or the questioning of suspects, which intermingle with the exploration of complex ethical issues in twenty-first century society. The deployment of a popular fiction genre like the detective novel allows Ali to experiment with unknown forms and to defy the conventional categorisation of her writing within semi-autobiographical diasporic fiction, thus suggesting new ways to communicate with the audience.

All in all, we can say that by focusing on what is other to her in terms of gender, ethnicity and genre, Ali is exploring new thematic and formal possibilities and challenging previous critical appraisals of her writing in an attempt to resist classification. Furthermore, by reflecting on the phenomenon of human trafficking and the complicity of global economy in it, Ali is successful at raising the ethical issues of moral responsibility and guilt, which give the novel a more universal message not only addressed to those concerned about her ethnic community. In his essay "Extra Dimensions, New Routines. Contemporary Black Writing of Britain" postcolonial scholar John McLeod reflects on a recent shift in black fiction produced in Britain involving new concerns as well as changes in literary form such as the decreasing popularity of the so-called Black British bildungsroman (2010: 47). For him, the old paradigms employed to interpret late twentieth-century texts by authors from these communities cannot be used any longer, as this new writing is today "an important contributor to a broad series of debates about the identity of the nation in an international context, one that shadows a set of concerns much wider than solipsistic and exclusivist diasporic matters about 'myself'" (2010: 51). Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* can certainly be included among the new narratives to follow this trend, although coming from a South-Asian background. The polycultural, post-racial normality McLeod claims these novels reflect about British life (2010: 51) can even be found in one of the final scenes of *In the Kitchen*, where the protagonist and his sister joke about the possibility of opening a restaurant in their home town selling not only fish and chips but also kebabs (Ali 2009: 424). It is perhaps no surprise that Ali's most recent novel, *Untold Story* (2011), should continue in the same line, as it imagines in the form of a thriller a new life in the US for Princess Diana after her much-discussed, tabloid-ridden accident in Paris, a plot which confirms Ali's position as one of the boldest writers in the British literary scene today.

In *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* [online]. 2011, vol. 3, no. 2 [cit. 2011-12-05]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JLS04/pdf_doc/04.pdf>.

Notes:

¹ We can include here well-known overviews such as Dominic Head's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000* (2002), Philip Tew's *The Contemporary British Novel* (2004), James F. English's *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (2006) or Nick Bentley's *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008).

² *Brick Lane* received the *British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year* and the *WH Smith People's Choice Award*. It was also included in the *Granta Best of Young British Novelists 2003* and shortlisted for the *Guardian First Book Award* and the *Man Booker Prize for Fiction*.

³ Jane Hiddleston discusses in one of her articles the controversies generated by the realism of Ali's portrayal of her own community: "While some readers congratulated Ali for pulling back the curtains of the residences of Tower Hamlets and depicting the injustices and dissatisfactions suffered by their inhabitants, others were shocked by her boldness and offended by what they considered to be a gross misrepresentation of Bengali culture in London" (2005: 57). For an interesting discussion of this topic see Bentley (2008: 83-93).

⁴ According to Nadia Valman, *Brick Lane* insists too much on "conventionalities such as a linear narrative drive, the coherence and development of the central character's selfhood, and a dismissal of the broader and more demanding contexts of radical politics and religion in favour of the more limited theme of individual redemption" (2009: 3).

⁵ For an interesting discussion of this concept and the tensions it creates in some ethnic minority writers, see Procter (2006).

⁶ This is not the case of male writers from ethnic minorities, with well-known crime novelists such as British Mike Phillips or American Walter Mosley and interesting critical volumes devoted to their writing.

⁷ For some information on the main characteristics of the bildungsroman, see the list included in Marianne Hirsch (1979).

⁸ This can be observed, for example, when he jokes about the purpose of feminism and post-feminism today (2009: 69-70) or in the passage where he seems to envy the lack of decision-making in a woman wearing burka (2009: 304).

⁹ The geography of London is a frequent presence in the novel with some of its landmarks as the background for important episodes in Gabriel's life, such as the British Museum in the scene when he finally tells Charlie about Lena. Travelling on the tube or walking along its streets are also often described quite carefully.

¹⁰ His tendency to procrastinate decisions and his lack of commitment to others are features which place him far from traditional Western views of men as determined, fearless and protective, in accordance with the masculinity model taught by his father and often mentioned throughout the narrative.

¹¹ The fact that Gabriel's home town is given an invented name is probably due to its value as a symbol for any industrial town in Northern England whose industry and means of subsistence are slowly disappearing as a consequence of global economy.

¹² These reflections help the reader follow the focaliser's train of thought in his research, as in the following passages: "Maybe it would be better not to say anything about Gleeson and Ivan at the moment, better to wait until he had a solution, or at least knew exactly what the problem was" (Ali 2009: 332); "What he needed to do was act, force a confrontation, stop burying his head in the sand" (Ali 2009: 333).

¹³ Some of Phillips's best-known crime novels include *Blood Rights* (1989), *An Image to Die For* (1995) and *The Dancing Face* (1997). Mosley is the author of detective narratives such as *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), *Blonde Faith* (2007) or *The Long Fall* (2009).

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of cultural authenticity and ethnic autobiographical narratives, see Graham Huggan (2001: 155-176).

¹⁵ Apart from some of the novels mentioned earlier in this paper, we can include here others such as Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) or Diana Evans's *26a* (2005).

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Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez
Department of Spanish, Modern and Classical Philology
University of the Balearic Islands
Palma de Mallorca 07122. SPAIN
email: pbastida@uib.es