

The People You Don't See:  
Representing Informal Labor in Fortress Europe

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We are currently living through the greatest age of mass displacement in the world's history. According to the United Nations Population Division, at present there are almost two hundred million people – equivalent to the population of Brazil, the world's fifth most populous nation - living outside the countries in which they were born (Munck 1229). In addition to this exponential increase in scale, international population movements are also increasing in diversity, with new patterns such as temporary, circular migrations challenging established notions of place and identity (Rouse). Cultural representations of migration are, unsurprisingly given these statistics, at the center of many contemporary social and political debates. For prominent postcolonial writers such as Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie, and Pico Iyer, migrants are the celebrated symbols of globalization's fluid, mongrelized social forms. According to these writers, immigration promises to “transform the nation's architectures of belonging,” and thereby to reconfigure national identity in a novel, cosmopolitan frame (Baucom 23).

Particularly since 9/11 and 7/7, however, discourses about migration in the U.S. and the European Union have been overdetermined by concerns about the security of the nation-state. Reflecting on the history of European totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt once observed that the “full implication of the identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose elementary rights were not safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of the nation-state” (291). For Arendt, in other words, stateless peoples reveal the limits of Enlightenment models of citizenship and belonging. With the consolidation of the European Union, Arendt's words seem more prescient than ever. As Étienne Balibar has underlined in We,

The People of Europe?, the E.U. is constituted by acts of symbolic and juridical exclusion that have serious implications not simply for immigrant populations rendered stateless but for the entire project of European statehood (63). While internal borders have crumbled for the affluent citizens of Europe, the migrant Other has been used to legitimate forms of authoritarian populism that have implications that reach far beyond so-called “illegal” aliens (Brinker-Gabler and Smith 7). The conditions of extreme exploitation to which many non-European immigrants are subjected, for example, contribute significantly to the increasing flexibility and destructuring of the entire labor force (Wallerstein).

Whether they are seen as globetrotting cosmopolitans or as a threatening fifth column, the intense visibility of such one-dimensional representations of contemporary migration tends to obscure the complex and highly variegated lived realities of migrants themselves. Indeed, for recent critics, dominant paradigms of migration, overwhelmingly concerned with issues of security and governance, approach the topic in a decontextualized, highly ethnocentric manner that begs more questions than it answers (Munck 1228). Engaged aesthetic works have a vital role to play in offering more sensitive and multifaceted accounts of the lived experience of migrants. Unlike the often abstract and globalizing theories that undergird policies of “managed migration” today, such texts illuminate the specific factors that spur and sustain migration and, in doing so, challenge the xenophobic discourses that dominate the public sphere in the global North.

While there have been precious few attempts to focus on the real lives of contemporary stateless people, two recent British texts warrant particular attention: Stephen Frears’ film *Dirty Pretty Things* and Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane. Both works document the harrowing forms of exploitation to which contemporary migrants and refugees, both economic and political, are

subjected in Fortress Europe. Integral to these representations is a focus on the forms of informal labor in which immigrants almost by definition are engaged and on the disjointed interior life precipitated by economic and social insecurity. Both texts also focus on the particular experiences of women migrants, an important move since, as Ronaldo Munck explains, “the gendered dimensions of migration are barely understood today, despite the fact that about half of migrants are women” (1233). Women migrants are thus rendered invisible not simply by xenophobic public discourse but also by dominant academic accounts of migration, which have tended to represent migrants as male and as driven to pull up stakes solely by economic motives (Anthias and Lazaridis 2). If broader public discourse largely treats migrants as aliens and criminals, ciphers for the insecurities created by globalization, the empathetic portrayal of immigrants in Frears’ and Ali’s texts offers an alternative cognitive mapping of European apartheid that places the question of stateless people and their invisibility at the heart of the social today.

The generic difference between *Dirty Pretty Things* and Brick Lane makes for a significant contrast in the manner in which each text approaches the lives of migrants. Frears’ film emphasizes the fragmented, precarious character of daily life for the stateless using the tautly paced narrative drive of a thriller. Ali’s novel, by contrast, tracks the gradual internal transformation of a young immigrant woman as she struggles to overcome her condition of double invisibility. The more expansive narrative frame of Brick Lane also permits Ali to adopt a transnational purview, weaving an epistolary subplot into her novel that offers suggestive insights into the feminization of work at both ends of the international division of labor. Despite these significant differences, both *Dirty Pretty Things* and Brick Lane concentrate on the broad social conditions and ideologies that make migrants malleable workers in the super-exploitative

underground economy in some instances, and on the subjective transformations that catalyze their resistance and self-transformation in others.

*Dirty Pretty Things: Anatomy of the Underground Economy*

*Dirty Pretty Things* follows the struggle for survival of a Nigerian exile named Okwe, who meets Senay Gelik, a young Turkish woman, while working on the night shift at a London hotel. Senay and Okwe take turns using a one-room apartment, although they seldom see one another at home since they both work jobs with highly anti-social hours, a common fate of immigrants. Okwe, a doctor who has fled Nigeria after running afoul of the ruling regime as a result of his humanitarian principles, is forced to work two jobs, chewing addictive *khat* leaves in order to keep himself awake. Serving as the film's moral core, Okwe illuminates the trend for well-educated professionals from the underdeveloped world to work in unskilled, low-wage service jobs in the advanced economies. As a result of the uneven character of globalization and of the structural adjustment programs administered in many developing countries, increasing numbers of the former middle class in these countries have been forced into immigration and exile over the last quarter century. While Okwe is a relatively straightforward political refugee, in following his marginal existence in Britain *Dirty Pretty Things* sheds light on the often-overlooked complexities of class and race that characterize contemporary migration.

In addition to tracking the conditions that catalyze immigration, Okwe and Senay's beleaguered lives illuminate one of the constitutive contradictions of the contemporary economy. Despite the sanitized imagery that has accompanied the rise of the information economy over the last quarter century, today's global cities are dependent on sweated labor in the service sectors. While traditional manufacturing has been exported to low-wage countries, the advanced service

sector has – until quite recently - boomed, producing record profits and salaries in areas such as finance, real estate, and insurance. In tandem with this growth of the advanced service sector, however, there has been a massive expansion in low-wage service jobs, some of which are an integral part of the advanced sector and some of which simply involve catering to the inflated needs of the new elite created by the economically polarized information economy (Sassen 22). The discourse of sparkling clean high tech that characterizes the information economy obscures the proliferation of sweated labor and renders the immigrants who carry out the bulk of such labor invisible. *Dirty Pretty Things* works against this rhetoric by focusing on the lives of the workers whose labor is at the heart of the information economy.

Despite its serious subject matter, *Dirty Pretty Things* is scripted as a thriller. While this generic structure may seem nothing more than a cheap gambit to interest audiences in the otherwise obscure lives of global migrants, the film's thriller plot is an integral part of its depiction of the marginalized lives of Okwe, Senay, and their confederates. Early in the film, Okwe discovers a human heart that has been flushed down one of the Baltic Hotel's toilets. After some horrified investigation, he learns that his boss, the Spanish hotel manager known as Señor Juan or "Sneaky," is running a black market trade in human organs out of the hotel. In one of the film's most powerful scenes, Okwe protests to Juan that the police must be informed; his boss replies by dialing Scotland Yard and offering the phone to Okwe, telling him that he must identify himself while reporting the crime. Given Okwe's illegal status and the price on his head at home in Nigeria, he of course cannot do so. As one of Okwe's friends, the wry morgue attendant Guo Yi, comments, Okwe doesn't exist as long as he is illegal. To be illegal, in other words, is to be invisible and, of course, powerless. The thriller plot that drives *Dirty Pretty Things* is a powerful evocation not simply of the massive scale of exploitation to which

immigrants are exposed, but also of the odds they face in challenging the terms of this exposure as a result of their illegal status. Quite literally working their guts out in order to remain in the relative security of a developed and stable nation such as Britain, immigrants like Okwe cannot appeal to the state for help against abuse because of the law's role in rendering them juridically invisible.

Like Okwe, Senay's status forces her to work in hazardous and ill paid conditions. Although Senay is not in the country illegally, she is seeking asylum, which means that she cannot officially hold a job. As anti-immigrant sentiment has risen in recent years, successive British governments have cut benefits for asylum seekers, ensuring that they must take illegal jobs in order to survive during the extended wait before their cases are resolved (Bacon 46). Senay initially works as a chambermaid at the Baltic; however, after the menacing immigration police raid her apartment and discover a matchbook from the hotel, Senay is forced to take work in a sweatshop. Here, her boss threatens to hand her over to the authorities unless she regularly gives him blowjobs. Before she begins work in the sweatshop, Senay had ironically remarked to Okwe during one of the film's few moments of relative tranquility that she fled Turkey not because she aspired to be like her cousin, a successful waitress in a New York café, but because she didn't want to end up like her mother, a woman with little sense of her own agency. *Dirty Pretty Things* thus powerfully captures the vulnerability of female immigrants to sexual as well as economic exploitation. Like many of the women caught up in the global sex trade, Senay's rebellion against her destiny as a woman from an underdeveloped country places her in a position of extreme sexual exploitation and violation once she reaches London. Senay's rebellion against the sweatshop boss, whose cock she eventually bites, deepens her plight, for her

only recourse after this aggressive act of insurrection is to throw herself on the un-tender mercies of Señor Juan.

If the increasing desperation and entrapment felt by both Senay and Okwe are rendered with great insight and an increasingly vertiginous narrative pace, the film's conclusion offers a magical resolution of their problems that strains credibility. As Senay's desperation escalates, she volunteers to place herself under the knife and thereby win a European passport and, with it, her freedom. Faced with the disfiguration and possible death of this woman he has come to love, Okwe mobilizes the film's other immigrant characters. After telling Señor Juan that he will operate on Senay rather than have her submitted to a hack's blade, Okwe steals surgical implements with the help of the mortician Guo Yi and gets help in the operating room from Juliet, a sympathetic Black British prostitute who works the hotel's rooms each night. A master chess player, Okwe tricks the baleful Juan, who has forced Senay into surrendering her virginity to him in exchange for a passport, into drinking a drugged beer. When Juan collapses, Okwe operates on him rather than Senay, removing and selling his kidney to finance the group's escape. While this nail-bitingly suspenseful conclusion is rather far fetched, it nonetheless hints at the potential of anti-racist, feminist coalitional politics to challenge the exploitative machinations of the underground economy. As Saskia Sassen remarks in discussing the service economy, despite the high degree of exploitation found in this area, immigrant workers have great potential power when they organize since they are working in the most quickly growing sector of the economy (188). If *Dirty Pretty Things* captures the invisibility and consequent vulnerability of migrants to sexual as well as economic exploitation, it also suggests through its canny use of the thriller genre that immigrant networks may be successfully mobilized to overcome this invisibility (Grewal 234).

Brick Lane: Restoring Immigrant Agency

Through its spectacular cinematic representation of resistance, *Dirty Pretty Things* is clearly determined to restore agency to immigrants. While its thriller format allows the film a rousing conclusion directed to that end, Frears' work is not preoccupied with tracking the interior transformation that facilitates acts of resistance and agency among exploited workers in the informal sector. Depicting such a psychological metamorphosis seems, however, to be the main brief of Monica Ali's novel. Brick Lane traces the struggle of a young Bangladeshi woman named Nazneen to escape the condition of double invisibility to which the twin edifices of sexism and racism have consigned her. Nazneen begins her life under the sign of an implacable fate. She is born prematurely in a rural village. Her mother's decision to leave her child to destiny, both because of her own poverty and because of the child's gender, becomes an important symbol of women's self-abnegation and acquiescence throughout the rest of the novel (3). Nazneen accepts her mother's reading of women's lot, and resigns herself as an adolescent to marriage to a much older suitor, the oafish Chanu, who takes her with him to Britain, where he intends to make his fortune. Living in a public housing estate in London's impoverished East End, Nazneen suffers the extreme social isolation that tends to characterize women condemned to domestic servitude. Migrant women like Nazneen are the most likely to be trapped in informal labor since they lack the linguistic skills and social networks to enter the formal labor market (Munck 1232). Able only to say two things in English – 'sorry' and 'thank you' – Nazneen spends entire days completely by herself, cleaning the flat in which she and Chanu live, her only human contact being the sight of a mysterious tattooed lady who sits all day staring blankly out the window of one of the facing buildings (7). This transition is particularly jarring

given the collective character of rural village life in Bangladesh: Nazneen says that in her whole eighteen years, she can never remember having spent a moment alone until arriving in Britain (10).

Her isolation is exacerbated by her husband Chanu's condescending attitude towards Nazneen. Chanu is not a violent brute, but he is a classic mimic man, a figure who would be tragic in his hyperbolic hopes and illusions about Britain but for his own insufferable pomposity. Chanu's pretentious didacticism not only alienates Nazneen; in addition, Chanu insists that she not socialize with other Bangladeshis on the estate since he believes that they are uneducated country yokels (14). This hermetic sense of cultural superiority segregates Nazneen not only from the majority white English society, but, initially, from other immigrants as well. While Nazneen may not be a stateless person in a technical sense, the state and traditional migration theory has typically seen women like her simply as dependents, since men were taken to be the primary breadwinners (Clarence 21). This perception elides the fact that two-thirds of all part-time and flexible workers in developed countries are women (Anthias 25). The legal marginalization that follows from patriarchal assumptions concerning women's status is convenient, however, inasmuch as it constrains women to engage exclusively in the forms of flexible labor on which neo-liberalism depends. Indeed, as Francesca Scrinzi has remarked, the subordination of immigrant women within the underground economy has made their labor into a kind of laboratory of precariousness, where new evasions of employee rights are experimented with before being rolled out to the rest of society (80).

Despite Chanu's snobbish injunctions to stay pent up at home, however, Nazneen finds herself remorselessly drawn into the female society of the housing estate, particularly through the neighborly zeal of her anti-conformist friend Razia. Through Razia, Nazneen meets other young

Bangladeshi women immigrants and begins to learn about forms of domestic non-cooperation such as the withdrawal of labor and of sex (41). The initial pride she took in the material possessions with which the apartment is crammed curdles, and Nazneen refuses to do housework, allowing the place to go to seed. Nazneen's defiance of Chanu's authority grows more explicit when he refuses to aid her sister Hasina, who has fled her husband's household after he beats her. Chanu, Nazneen feels, sees nothing but potential in the world, except in her sister's case, and, by extension, in her own life.

Nazneen's exposure to resistant female role models reaches a comic acme when Chanu takes her on an unannounced visit to his friend Dr. Azad's home. Chanu worships Azad because of his academic credentials and his financial success as a medical practitioner. However, when the couple descends on Azad's house without prior notice, they find that his domestic life is far from the guise of earnest traditional propriety that he dons in public. Azad's wife is a beer swilling, foul mouthed, highly opinionated, and aggressively autonomous woman. Mrs. Azad takes the selective appropriation of British culture and femininity to an extreme, cutting Chanu off in the midst of a lecture about the tragedy of culture clash for the young by saying that he's talking "crap." "My daughter is free to come and go," Mrs. Azad says; "do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!" (78). Exposed to such expressions of overt defiance, Nazneen begins to slip loose from the grip of fate and her corollary submission to male authority.

This is not to say that Nazneen's development takes place in facile, linear fashion. The death of her son, whose life she had decided to fight for in defiance of her mother's resignation following her own birth, batters her nascent sense of agency. Despite this blow, however, her overall trajectory differs markedly from that of her husband. Filled with a sense of the potential for infinite self-transformation in the "motherland," Chanu's hopes are gradually whittled away

as he runs into the glass ceilings of institutional racism in the local bureaucracy where he is employed. His delusions that his ability to quote Chaucer will lead to quick promotion dashed, Chanu becomes embittered and turns inward as the novel progresses. Unlike Nazneen, then, who gradually opens up to the world around her, Chanu retreats into reading, burying himself alive in histories of colonialism that seem to him to explain his increasingly abject fate. Rather than increasing his capacity to transform his life, reading about the past almost completely enervates Chanu. In his case, consumption of politicized historical narratives becomes an excuse to avoid action in the present. As a result, Chanu largely abdicates his role of familial and cultural authority while Nazneen learns to assert her own agency.

Central to Nazneen's self-assertion is her labor in the textile industry. Like many immigrant women, Nazneen is employed by a fellow immigrant, a male entrepreneur who uses his access to super-flexible immigrant women's labor to carve out a niche in the remorselessly competitive world of textile production. Nazneen is employed at home after Chanu buys a sewing machine on credit in order to help raise funds for the family's transfer back to Bangladesh. Homeworking is generally the most exploited sector of the economy; unlike women employed in sweatshops or factory production in developing countries, there is very little possibility for the development of the forms of collective consciousness and solidarity that can lead to effective mass resistance (Wichterich 23).

Although Nazneen is paid very badly for her labor and must hand her hard-earned pay packet over to her husband, she nonetheless finds a significant social outlet through this work: the young man who brings bales of fabric to be sewn together, Karim, offers Nazneen an opening out into a broader world of contemporary events and politic struggle. Unlike Chanu, Karim employs his critical knowledge of world affairs to galvanize those around him, organizing a

youth group to oppose the rise of a white supremacist group named the Lion Hearts in the working class neighborhood where he and Nazneen live. For Karim, local anti-racist activism is part of a broader struggle against Islamophobia on a global stage (175). The breadth and engagement of Karim's vision makes Nazneen aware of the sclerotic borders of her own world and opens up possibilities for her self-assertion, as becomes clear when she casts the deciding vote that makes Karim president of the newly formed Bengal Tigers anti-racist group (175).

Karim's leadership of the Bengal Tigers offers an example of grassroots organizing among Muslims that challenges many of the Islamophobic stereotypes that dominate the public sphere following 9/11 and 7/7. Particularly important is the group's attempt to challenge representations of Islam as inherently violent and intolerant (Qureshi and Sells 5). Nazneen falls in love with Karim and eventually begins an affair that, of course, defies everything she has been taught about woman's place and fate. Indeed, it is not until after she begins this affair that Nazneen understands that her mother had herself defied the dictates of tradition, not by asserting her sexual desires, however, but by committing suicide in response to her husband's philandering (325). Ali treats her protagonist's politicization with gentle satire, suggesting slyly that Nazneen mistakes "the sad weight of longing in her stomach" for Karim for empathy with the victims of Western imperialism and Zionism (176). While Karim grows increasingly militant, that is, Nazneen is overcome with the feelings of sexual desire and emotional yearning that her arranged marriage to the much older Chanu precluded. This is not to say that Nazneen's political awakening is entirely ersatz, but rather that there are strong personal emotional and sexual factors that animate her transformation. Foremost among these is Karim's apparent self-certitude; unlike his father's generation, that is, Karim feels that second-generation Asians in Britain have to "stand our ground" in the face of racism (191). Nazneen assumes that her lover's

militant stance derives from his sense of having a place in the world, which is precisely what she lacks (191).

As their relationship develops, however, it becomes clear to Nazneen that she's just as invisible to Karim as she is to Chanu and to British society at large. For despite his apparent security, Karim is in fact searching for a sense of belonging that he finds not in contemporary Britain but rather in the imaginary Bangladesh to which he gains access through his affair with Nazneen. He loves her, Karim tells Nazneen, because she's the real thing, an authentic Bangladeshi village girl with none of the pretensions of someone who grew up in the West (284). Karim's failure to understand that this is precisely the identity that Nazneen is questioning intensifies as political events spiral out of control. Thus, as the political scene grows more tense following 9/11, Karim turns increasingly to radical Islam, abandoning his western clothing for traditional garb and reading Nazneen a passage from the *Koran* concerning the sin of adultery without a trace of irony (255). This ominous moment provokes Nazneen to question her affair with Karim long before he loses control of the Bengal Tigers during a riot in the London Bengali neighborhood that gives the novel its title. When she breaks off their affair near the novel's conclusion, Nazneen tells Karim that he has seen her as home but that they have both made one another up (339).

Nazneen's affair threatens her with exposure by the many members of the immigrant community, male and female, who do not sanction such behavior or who simply wish to use the affair in order to gain leverage on Nazneen and her family. Nazneen is blackmailed, for instance, by the ironically named Mrs. Islam, who lends money at exorbitant rates of interest in complete contravention of the *Koran*. Yet her travails are set in contrast with the far more perilous experiences of her sister Hasina, whose internal migration within Bangladesh from rural

Mymensingh to teeming Dhaka exposes her to the perilous moral economy of feminized industrial labor. Monica Ali conveys news of Hasina's experiences through a series of letters addressed to Nazneen. This epistolary subplot within Brick Lane underlines the extent to which transnational social networks are a factor in the lives of women who leave their natal lands. In addition, these exchanged letters demonstrate the continuities of women's exploitation across national borders as informal labor and the savage juridical and moral order that subtends it is spread around the globe.

As she enters the factory every day, Hasina must run the gauntlet past a group of irate male chanters who, led by a local mullah, attack the female factory workers as whores (107). As this scene suggests, the obstacles and priorities of working women are usually far different from those of male workers and the male-dominated trade unions. According to Christa Wichterich, women textile workers in Bangladesh state that their biggest problem at work is not the oppressive character of industrial labor but rather the journey home in the dark after hours of overtime work (32). Other major concerns of such women are job security, maternal rights, childcare, and protection from sexual harassment. None of these demands are recognized by international labor standards (Wichterich 32).

Brick Lane focuses in particular on the last of these issues, for Ali represents Hasina as a woman whose great beauty is the source of her deepest tribulations. In the letters that she sends to her sister, Hasina recounts her sexual victimization by her landlord and the opprobrium that this situation generates in the textile factory where she works. Afraid for their own besieged reputations, the other women stab Hasina with scissors, saying that they do not want to be exposed to a piece of "rotten fruit" like her (112). Hasina's life after she loses the slim autonomy that factory work brings her is a chronicle of poor women's vulnerability. Sexually

disgraced, she is even rejected by an albino man whose condition has made it impossible for him to take a respectable wife (124). She is ultimately “saved” by the wife of an elite Dhaka industrialist, who employs Hasina in her capacious household as an act of charity. During Hasina’s sojourn with her mistress Lovely, Ali treats her readers to a blistering satire of the fatuous lives of the postcolonial elite. Lovely, the woman who employs Hasina, spends her time complaining that she doesn’t have enough leisure time and lamenting her inability to best her friends in the philanthropic competitions through which distinction is achieved in Dhaka high society (163). Yet it is Hasina’s determination to struggle and to survive that remains foremost in Brick Lane. This strength has a strong impact on Nazneen, whose own travails are implicitly compared to those of her sister through the novel’s epistolary subplot. As Nazneen comments after learning that her sister has eloped with Lovely’s cook, Hasina does these things because she refused to give up despite her many trying experiences (366).

Hasina’s isolation offers a striking counterpoint to the increasing social solidarity found by Nazneen in Britain. Hasina’s sexual victimization leaves her an outcaste woman, isolated from the factory women whose reputations are just as important as their manual dexterity. Yet although Hasina’s story advances no sense of collective agency, the connection advanced in Brick Lane between her life and that of her sister Nasneen offers a living instantiation of the project of transnational solidarity that feminists have articulated over the last several decades. If the globalization of capital has led to unprecedented forms of exploitation, it has also provided the social matrix for novel forms of consciousness that knit women activists together across national borders. Immigrant women in the metropolis have been crucial in forging such transnational linkages and activist initiatives, for they bring their awareness of global conditions past and present with them to the metropolis. Such transnational feminist activists have stressed

the need for coalition building while challenging the elisions and Eurocentric assumptions in Western feminist models of global sisterhood (Grewal and Kaplan 17). While Nazneen never succeeds in actively intervening to aid her sister, her awareness of Hasina's situation stimulates her to challenge the forms of oppression to which she is expected to submit. Through this depiction of transnational sisterhood, Brick Lane implicitly conjures up the potential for correspondingly global forms of activism.

Ali's Brick Lane suggests, in addition, that immigration can catalyze successful self-transformation. Thus, near the novel's conclusion, Nazneen stands up to Mrs. Islam's attempts to extort endless interest payments from her family. Braving not only Islam's bullying sons, who smash up all her furniture, but also the possibility of social exposure and shame, Nazneen adamantly refuses to cough up more money (332). Nazneen also finds the strength to tell Karim that she will not marry him. Finally and most significantly, Nazneen defiantly informs Chanu that she will not accompany him back to Bangladesh. On a personal level, that is, Nazneen ultimately finds the strength to shape her own destiny. There are, however, structural material conditions which militate against the economic self-determination of a woman such as Nazneen. To cope with these forces, Ali suggests that her protagonist faces no easy liberation from sweated labor. The conclusion of the novel finds Nazneen and Razia joining forces to form a women's collective that fills orders from designer clothing boutiques around London (360). While such labor still involves highly exploitative piecework, Nazneen and her friend have nonetheless escaped the male ethnic entrepreneurs who control much of the sweatshop economy and may now be able to negotiate the terms of their work more directly with their employers. This image of immigrant women's autonomy and self-assertion may be a trifle wishful given the baleful economic and social situation confronted by many immigrants, but it plays an important

heuristic role in illuminating the possibility for self-transformation and empowerment through solidarity in even the most inimical conditions. The black and Asian British women's movement has, in fact, effected genuine transformations in the nation's institutions as well as developing significant autonomous traditions over the last three decades, suggesting that Ali's novel offers a historical tonic in the face of the spiraling polarization of the New Europe (Samantrai 21).

### Conclusion

Brick Lane and *Dirty Pretty Things* offer potent insights into the lived experience of displacement, isolation, and alienation generated by new forms of global inequality and the articulation of European apartheid. These two texts reveal the unique forms of invisibility suffered by contemporary immigrants, while also cataloguing the resources that immigrants draw on to challenge such marginalization. While immigration can open up fresh vistas for self-fashioning and assertion as suggested by Brick Lane and *Dirty Pretty Things*, under present conditions it also constitutes a traumatic experience for those who are not lucky enough to arrive on European shores legally. Moreover, both illegal immigrants and women immigrants are subjected to harsh new forms of labor discipline that places them in the forefront of the neo-liberal project of privatizing and dismantling the public sphere. Their fate is a harbinger of what is to come for the rest of society, and therefore their traumatic experiences and fleeting acts of resistance are of pivotal significance for society in general.

If Europe is to offer a true alternative to the world of Manichean, hermetically sealed, clashing civilizations outlined by Samuel Huntingdon and embraced to such destructive effect on both sides of the Atlantic over the past decade, it must adopt an open, non-exclusionary framework that recognizes the complexly contested history of borders throughout what Étienne

Balibar calls the Euro-Mediterranean ensemble (231). Crucial to developing such an open definition of citizenship will be a relaxing of the invisible but increasingly segregating borders that have sprung up as European citizenship has been codified along ethnically exclusionary lines. The policies of “managed migration” codified over the last decade by international bodies such as the E.U. acknowledge the need for migrant labor in developed economies, but do so in ways that privilege the affluent residents of the global North. What if we replaced such policies of protectionism to defend the interests of a global minority with a right to the free flow of labor? This would surely be a clear signal of developed nations’ determination to reverse decades of spiraling economic inequality between the North and the South. Another compelling argument for open borders is, as Ronaldo Munck argues, the fact that human rights are always weakest at frontiers (1239). As we have seen in the course of my analysis of *Dirty Pretty Things* and Brick Lane, some of the most perilous borders are not those inscribed in maps, but those created by the dual labor regime that increasingly characterizes and sustains developed nations.

The notion of democratizing borders advanced by critics such as Munck and Balibar seems highly utopian in the present context. Not only are there few maps for such novel forms of citizenship, but global political economy is patently moving in the opposite direction, towards a world order characterized by higher walls and novel forms of apartheid. Indeed, such a regime of inequality is highly productive to capital, which profits greatly from the wage differentials created by the artificial geographical barriers erected by states. Yet the alternatives to such a project of democratization are bleak indeed. As Hannah Arendt warned in The Origins of Totalitarianism, the conscious creation of stateless people threatens to place a police order at the heart of European identity. Such creeping authoritarianism ultimately affects not simply those

identified as internal outsiders, but all European citizens. As Arendt put it, “The clearer the proof of their inability to treat stateless people as legal persons and the greater the extension of arbitrary rule by police decree, the more difficult it is for states to resist the temptation to deprive all citizens of legal status and rule them with an omnipotent police” (290). As neo-liberal globalization generates ever-greater numbers of “surplus humanity,” the temptation described by Arendt in such clear and chilling terms is likely to become increasingly hard to resist. This trend must be reversed. After all, Europeans need not look far back in the historical record to see the appalling implications of creating a stateless people.

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## Endnotes